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Virginia Woolf's China: Orientalism, Ornament, and Pictorial Morphology

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LLB (Hons) MLitt

Submitted in fulfilment for the requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

School of Critical Studies
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Abstract

This thesis examines Virginia Woolf's references to China and Chinese motifs across her literary oeuvre. Specifically, it explores the manner in which Woolf drew inspiration from artistic framings of Chinese material culture and integrated them into the thematic, formal, and political dimensions of her literature. The thesis makes the case that Woolf's engagement with China within her own writing was more sustained and extensive than has previously been recognised. Building on this observation, it further argues that her deployment of Chinese qualities and identities across her oeuvre is predominantly aesthetic, expressed through decorative objects and serving as markers of taste and style. The thesis contextualises its study of Woolf in the discursive practices of the Bloomsbury Group regarding Chinese art and literature. It then situates its investigation of Woolf and China within the aesthetic and philosophical influences of Bloomsbury and, in turn, demonstrates how Woolf's interest in these discourses contributes to self-reflexive projections of China within Bloomsbury and the wider British modernist sphere. The thesis maintains that Woolf's depictions of Chineseness ultimately function as a lens through which she interrogates notions of Englishness, which she extends to her critique of the British empire.

As indicated in its title, the thesis's reading of Woolf and China is informed by the guiding terms 'orientalism', 'ornament', and 'pictorial morphology'. The first term, 'orientalism', used here in the Saidian sense, refers to the fundamentally imaginative and essentialising representation of the East in Woolf's engagement with China. The thesis acknowledges the need to address Woolf's orientalism in her Chinese portrayals and positions her practice as a matter for postcolonial scrutiny. 'Ornament', meanwhile, which also draws on theoretical discussions of 'ornamentalism', highlights the creative ways in which Woolf's orientalism emerges. Her depictions of China often

appear through decorative, artificial descriptions and through the stylistic techniques of her narratives. Finally, the third term, ‘pictorial morphology’, speaks both to the productive impact of Woolf’s rendering of Chinese culture and to the method through which these representations can be constructively approached in the contemporary and increasingly globalised context. Woolf’s employment of Chinese imagery in her writing facilitates formal innovations that reorient the experimental methods of her literature. Concurrently, the intercultural representations in her literary texts create a pictorial space that fosters exchange across borders among her expanding readership.

The four discussion chapters of the thesis are organised chronologically around the stages of Woolf’s literary career, with some temporal overlap arising from thematic considerations. Woolf’s situational and ideological references to China throughout her oeuvre span issues of empire, race, eugenics, gender, and illness. The thesis draws on a wide range of materials from her novels, short fictions, essays, diaries, and letters to establish the creative, conceptual, and critical links at play within her treatment of such issues. Chapter One focuses on the formative years of Woolf’s development as a writer, during which she associates China with chinoiserie imagery within the context of British customs. It pays particular attention to her reviews of *The Call of the East* by Charlotte Lorrimer (1907), *Modes and Manners of the Nineteenth Century, as Represented in the Pictures and Engravings of the Time* by Max von Boehn and Oskar Fischel (1910), and *Strange Stories from the Lodge of Leisures* by Pu Songling (1913). Chapter Two studies Woolf’s incorporation of her reflections on Chinese aesthetics into her initial creative writing endeavours. It considers her novel *The Voyage Out* (1915) alongside its original manuscript, *Melymbrosia* (1912), as well as her novel *Night and Day* (1919). The chapter also analyses her short stories ‘The Mark on the Wall’ (1917), ‘Kew Gardens’ (1919), and ‘Solid Objects’ (1920), and those written in

relation to her novel *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), including ‘Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street’ (1923), ‘The New Dress’ (1924), ‘The Man who Loved His Kind’, and ‘A Summing Up’.

Chapter Three focuses on two of Woolf’s best-known novels, *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* (1927). The chapter explores Woolf’s visual strategies in the formal and thematic aspects of her more technically mature works. And, finally, Chapter Four moves to Woolf’s refinement of her ideas on prose form extending from her engagement with oriental Chinese motifs. It discusses ‘Java Head’ (1919) and ‘On Being Ill’ (1926), her writings on Thomas de Quincey, including ‘The English Mail Coach’ (1906), ‘Impassioned Prose’ (1926), and ‘De Quincey’s Autobiography’ (1932), as well as ‘Poetry, Fiction, and the Future’ (1927), ‘Foreword to *Recent Paintings by Vanessa Bell*’ (1930), and ‘Thunder at Wembley’ (1924). Ultimately, Woolf adopts an ambivalent attitude towards China, engaging with it as place, culture, and aesthetic in ways that render it at once ethically autonomous, ideologically monolithic, and socially vibrant. For Woolf and Bloomsbury, China functions as an ideational model through which their self-reflexive and cross-cultural projections materialise, a framework that remains significant in contemporary approaches to reading twentieth-century literature as shifting contexts inform new interpretive possibilities.

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Abbreviations

AROO	Woolf, Virginia, ‘A Room of One’s Own’. <i>A Room of One’s Own and Three Guineas</i> , ed. by Michèle Barrett (Penguin, 1993 [1929]), pp. 3-104
BA	— <i>Between the Acts</i> , ed. by Stella McNichol (Penguin, 2000 [1941])
CSF	— <i>The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf</i> , ed. by Susan Dick (Harcourt, Inc., 1989)
D 1-5	— <i>The Diary of Virginia Woolf</i> , 5 vols, ed. by Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie (Harcourt Brace and Company, 1979-85)
E 1-6	— <i>The Essays of Virginia Woolf</i> , 6 vols, ed. by Andrew McNeillie and Stuart N. Clarke (The Hogarth Press, 1986-2011)
F	— <i>Flush</i> , ed. by Margaret Forster (Penguin, 2018 [1931])
JR	— <i>Jacob’s Room</i> , ed. by Kate Flint (Oxford University Press, 2008 [1922])
L 1-6	— <i>The Letters of Virginia Woolf</i> , 6 vols, ed. by Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (The Hogarth Press, 1975-80)
M	— <i>Melymbrosia</i> , ed. by Louise DeSalvo (Cleis Press, 1982)
MD	— <i>Mrs Dalloway</i> , ed. by Stella McNichol (Penguin, 2000 [1925])
MoB	— <i>Moments of Being</i> , ed. by Jeanne Schulkind (Pimlico, 2022 [1985])
ND	— <i>Night and Day</i> , ed. by Suzanne Raitt (Oxford University Press, 2009 [1919])
O	— <i>Orlando</i> , ed. by Brenda Lyons (Penguin, 2000 [1928])
PA	— <i>A Passionate Apprentice: The Early Journals</i> , ed. by Mitchell A. Leaska (The Hogarth Press, 1990)
RF	— <i>Roger Fry: A Biography</i> (Vintage Classics, 2003 [1940])

- TL — *To the Lighthouse*, ed. by Stella McNichol (Penguin, 2000 [1927])
- VO — *The Voyage Out*, ed. by Lorna Sage (Oxford University Press, 2009 [1915])
- W — *The Waves*, ed. by Kate Flint (Penguin, 2000 [1931])
- Y — *The Years*, ed. by Jeri Johnson (Penguin, 2002 [1937])

Editorial Note:

First date of publication is given in parenthesis on first mention of text in each chapter. In footnoted entries and in the bibliography, first date of publication is given in square brackets.

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I have published some discussions from this thesis in a book chapter entitled 'Ornamental Woolf: A New Critical Perspective on Ornamentalism, Orientalism, and Virginia Woolf's "Chinese" Discourse', *The Edinburgh Companion to Virginia Woolf and Transnational Perspectives*

(Edinburgh University Press, 2025), pp. 333-349. Thank you to my editors, Elisa Bolchi, Maria Rita Drumond Viana, Alice Davis Keane, Monica Latham, Sayaka Okumura, and Mine Özyurt Kılıç for making this possible and for their belief in my scholarship.

Last but not least, I dedicate this thesis to my Mum and Dad, for whom words are not enough. Their love and care have been a constant source of strength throughout my writing of this thesis.

Introduction

i. An Overview of the Oeuvre, Through Chinese Eyes

Chinese Woolf: A Poem

1. Private (1903-1938)

	Chinese	lanterns hung in globes of different colours from all the bushes
the great questions of our time:	Chinese	Labour and Protection!
like a	Chinese	girl who has somehow gone astray, poor woman
it is a very bad thing to use	Chinese	white in water colours
And we discussed also	Chinese	poetry; Clive said the whole thing was too distant to be comprehensible.
Do you think you have any small	Chinese	coat or wrapper which I could wear
asked to read his	Chinese	play & gave hopes of producing it.
The high rooms are mostly panelled, or papered		
with	Chinese	papers.
because you are upset about the	Chinese	rice pickers and their famines and earthquakes.
in which were lit all the	Chinese	lanterns of Roger's garden party.
reminds me of a	Chinese	mountain, by my side,
the	Chinese	man would have come to him; & he thinks, killed him too.
with a head like the stopper of a	Chinese	scent bottle; one blob of crimson.
Guests: 4 French businessmen & one	Chinese	business man: a girl like Fredegond
& there is Ott's pug like a small	Chinese	lion on the chair in the hall
about the slave trade in H.K.; about James &		
his little	Chinese	destroyer, manned by ex-officers from England
	Chinese	planes come over very low down.
	Chinese	generals come to dine & stand rifles on each side of their chairs:
Then there was Saxon bowing & smiling in		
silence like a	Chinese	mandarin—
I caught the	Chinese	looking at us with horror—that we should be human beings!
Francis has half his head shaved and looks like		
a	Chinese	Idol
And our visit to Francis—the shaven	Chinese	Idol
Julian trying for a	Chinese	professorship; will hear today.
They acted very beautifully in	Chinese	clothes by the pond.
Julian came in to say that he has got the	Chinese	professorship.
it will mean being in the thick of	Chinese	Politics
what it means	Chinese	politics, I don't know, nor I suppose do you
And we wont try to make sentences that will		
seem to the	Chinese	models of what we ought to write, English prose.
thats what comes of teaching in a	Chinese	university.

I had thought of such a nice phrase for you, as		
the	Chinese,	of both sexes see you
over for the	Chinese	show
and then I must go to the	Chinese	again—
Nessa had trays of pure	Chinese	silk from Julian.
But you are I expect screened from those gnat		
bites in your august	Chinese	solitude.
What about the	Chinese	ladies?
do not mind how directly you translate the	Chinese	into the English.
I would advise you to come as close to the	Chinese	both in style and in meaning as you can.
And always do it as you would were you		
writing for the	Chinese.	

2. Public (1910-1941)

they imitate	Chinese	pagodas;
the influence of such light literature upon the	Chinese	mind 'is much greater than the whole bulk of the classics'.
translated from the	Chinese	by George Soulié,
Take, for example, the following description of		
a	Chinese	ghost:
no—not of the English at all, but of Russians		
and	Chinese.	
together with the foot of a	Chinese	murderess,
a	Chinese	pagoda and a crimson-crested bird;
brings to shore an unknown bride, a	Chinese	woman of the highest caste.
it is not merely jealousy that has killed the	Chinese	woman, but America,
a pond with a	Chinese	duck,
as ramshackle and fantastic as a	Chinese	pagoda,
the grayish-green image of a squat	Chinese	god,
presided over by the green	Chinese	image with the expression of placid and sneering lust.
the light of all these languages,	Chinese	and Russian, Persian and Arabic,
Including	Chinese	and Russian (but these Slavs aren't civilized),
until we feel that the old	Chinese	custom of fitting the foot to the shoe was charitable compared with the mid-Victorian practice of fitting the woman to the system.
and wrapped herself, round and round and		
round, in the	Chinese	cloak she had worn these twenty years.
the yellow and red fruit like	Chinese	lanterns wobbling this way and that –
the	Chinese	lanterns seemed hung like red and green fruit in the depths of an enchanted forest,
and squeezed a little blob of	Chinese	white on to her high light,
had	Chinese	eyes in a pale face; an Oriental mystery; was gentle, considerate, still.
It was expression she needed, but her eyes were		
fine,	Chinese,	oriental,
The	Chinese	must know better the sound of <i>Anthony and Cleopatra</i> than we do.
Miss Stern wants us to realise the beauty of a	Chinese	coat.
until the	Chinese	coat wobbles before our eyes and merges in one brilliant blur.
by which life becomes, like the	Chinese	coat, able to stand by itself –
With her little	Chinese	eyes and her puckered-up face she would never marry;

...thinking that Lily's charm was her	Chinese	eyes, aslant in her white, puckered little face,
But, she thought, screwing up her	Chinese	eyes, and remembering how he sneered at women,
with her little puckered face and her little	Chinese	eyes.
(she stood screwing up her little	Chinese	eyes in her small puckered face)
Mr. Arthur Waley's knowledge of	Chinese.	
can possibly mean to the English reader what it		
means for the Russian or the	Chinese.	
We may wander to a lake and watch	Chinese	geese
—rumour hints indeed that he has turned		
Moslem and had a son by a	Chinese	washerwoman—
While there is a	Chinese	proverb which says that the fisherman is pure at heart 'as a white sea-shell',
It was a blue pot on a	Chinese	stand with green brocade behind it.
through tortures compared with which the boot		
or the	Chinese	shoe is negligible,
with the green carpet and the red	Chinese	curtains.
Every ring, every necklace, every little	Chinese	box—she had a passion for little boxes—
The	Chinese,	you know, put a dagger on the table and that's a battle.

I created this poem by systematically gleaning from a digital word search of Virginia Woolf's writings her every usage of the word 'Chinese'.¹ This method of poetically mapping the oeuvre was proposed by Jane Goldman and first exercised in her publications, including "'I Grow More & More Poetic': Virginia Woolf and Prose Poetry" (2018) and 'Burning Feminism: Virginia Woolf's Laboratory of Intimacy' (2021).² Like Goldman, who worked with the respective word clusters 'poem/poetry/poetic/poet' and 'feminism/feminist' in the aforementioned essays, I chose to concentrate the poem on a word that matches Woolf's orientalist representations of China. The poem presented above records all instances of Woolf's deployment of the word 'Chinese' in her oeuvre. The first stanza records in chronological order Woolf's private usage of the word in her letters and diary from the first in 1903 to the last in 1938,³ while the second stanza similarly records

¹ *Major Authors on CD-ROM: Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Mark Hussey (Reading: Primary Source Media, 1997).

² Jane Goldman, "'I Grow More & More Poetic': Virginia Woolf and Prose Poetry", in *British Prose Poetry: The Poems Without Lines*, ed. by Jane Monson (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Goldman, 'Burning Feminism: Virginia Woolf's Laboratory of Intimacy', in *Modernist Intimacies*, ed. Elsa Högberg (Edinburgh University Press, 2021).

³ Lines 1-2: Virginia Woolf, 30 June 1903, in *A Passionate Apprentice: The Early Journals*, ed. by Mitchell A. Leaska (The Hogarth Press, 1990), p. 171; line 3: Woolf, 16 January 1906, Letter to Violet Dickinson, in *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, 6 vols, ed. by Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (The Hogarth Press, 1975-80), I, p. 217; lines 4-

in chronological order Woolf's public usage of the word in print (including those discovered and published posthumously) from 1910 to 1941.⁴ Consequently, the poem as a whole allows for a skeletal view of the word's arc of usage in Woolf's discourses on Chineseness, China, and more generally the East 'Orient'. It offers a helpful charting of the patterns that surface from these discourses and serves as a visual frame to which I will return, from time to time, throughout my

5: Woolf, 16 May 1913, Letter to Katherine Cox, in L 2, p. 27; line 6: Woolf, 24 September 1916, Letter to Vanessa Bell, in L 2, p. 119; lines 7-8: Woolf, 22 November 1917, in *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, 5 vols, ed. by Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie (Harcourt Brace and Company, 1979-85), I, p. 80; line 9: Woolf, 12 September 1918, Letter to Vanessa Bell, in L 2, p. 275; line 10: Woolf, 31 July 1918, in D 1, p. 176; lines 11-12: Woolf, 5 June 1920, in D 2, p. 46; line 13: Woolf, 30 October 1922, Letter to Dora Sanger, in L 2, p. 579; line 14: Woolf, 27 June 1925, in D 3, p. 33; line 15: Woolf, 15 September 1925, Letter to V. Sackville-West, in L 3, p. 207; lines 16-17: Woolf, 30 November 1929, in D 3, p. 268; line 18: Woolf, 14 May 1930, Letter to Quentin Bell, in L 4, p. 170; line 19: Woolf, 17 April 1931, in D 4, p. 19; line 20: Woolf, 8 February 1932, in D 4, p. 74; lines 21-25: Woolf, 16 July 1932, in D 4, pp. 117-118; lines 26-27: Woolf, 3 January 1933, in D 4, p. 141; lines 28-29: Woolf, 28 April 1933, in D 4, p. 152; lines 30-31: Woolf, 10 November 1933, Letter to Quentin Bell, in L 5, p. 245; line 32: Woolf, 12 November 1933, in D 4, p. 187; line 33: Woolf, 21 July 1934, in D 4, p. 227; line 34: Woolf, 18 September 1934, in D 4, p. 244; lines 35-37: 17 July 1935, Letter to Vanessa Bell, in L 5, pp. 415-416; lines 38-43: Woolf, 1 December 1935, Letter to Julian Bell, in L 5, p. 449-450; line 44: Woolf, 4 December 1935, Letter to Clive Bell, in L 5, p. 451; line 45: Woolf, 5 January 1936, Letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell, in L 6, p. 3; line 46: Woolf, 11 March 1936, in D 5, p. 15; lines 47-48: 11 March 1936, Letter to Julian Bell, in L 6, p. 19; line 49: Woolf, 14 November 1936, Letter to Julian Bell, in L 6, p. 58; lines 50-53: Woolf, 15 October 1938, Letter to Ling Su-Hua, in L 6, p. 290.

⁴ Line 1: Virginia Woolf, 'Modes and Manners of the Nineteenth Century', *Times Literary Supplement* (1910), in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, 6 vols, ed. by Andrew McNeillie and Stuart N. Clarke (The Hogarth Press, 1986-2011), I, p. 333; lines 2-6: 'Chinese Stories', *Times Literary Supplement* (1913), in E 2, p. 7-8; lines 7-8: Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, ed. by Lorna Sage (Oxford University Press, 2009 [1915]), p. 231; line 9: Woolf, 'The Mark on the Wall', in *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Susan Dick (Harcourt, Inc., 1989), p. 87; line 10: Woolf, 'Kew Gardens', in CSF, p. 95; lines 11-12: Woolf, 'Java Head', *Times Literary Supplement* (1919), in E 3, p. 48; lines 13-14: Woolf, *Night and Day*, ed. by Suzanne Raitt (Oxford University Press, 2009 [1919]), pp. 223, 237; lines 15-17: Woolf, 'The Pursuit of Beauty', *Times Literary Supplement* (1920), in E 3, p. 233; lines 18-19: Woolf, *Jacob's Room*, ed. by Kate Flint (Oxford University Press, 2008 [1922]), pp. 53, 101; lines 20-22: Woolf, 'The Chinese Shoe', *Nation & Athenaeum* (1923), in E 3, p. 390; lines 23-24: Woolf, 'The New Dress', in CSF, p. 177; line 25: Woolf, 'The Man Who Loved His Kind', in CSF, p. 198; lines 26-27: Woolf, 'A Summing Up', in CSF, p. 208; line 28: Woolf, 'The Lives of the Obscure', *London Mercury* (1924), in E 4, p. 135; lines 29-32: Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, ed. by Stella McNichol (Penguin, 2000 [1925]), pp. 134, 148; lines 33-34: Woolf, 'On Being Ill', *New Criterion* (1926), in E 4, p. 325; lines 35-38: Woolf, 'Life and the Novelist', *New York Herald Tribune* (1926), in E 4, pp. 403-404; lines 39-45: Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, ed. by Stella McNichol (Penguin, 2000 [1927]), pp. 21, 31, 99, 113, 171; line 46: Woolf, *Orlando*, ed. by Brenda Lyons (Penguin, 2000 [1928]), p. 9; lines 47-48: Woolf, 'A Room of One's Own', in *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, ed. by Michèle Barrett (Penguin, 1993 [1929]), p. 65; line 49: Woolf, *The Waves*, ed. by Kate Flint (Penguin, 2000 [1931]), p. 163; lines 50-51: Woolf, *Flush*, ed. by Margaret Forster (Penguin, 2018 [1931]), p. 88; line 52-53: Woolf, 'Fishing', *Mom* (1936), in E 6, p. 492; line 54: Woolf, *The Years*, ed. by Jeri Johnson (Penguin Books, 2002 [1937]), p. 164; lines 55-57: Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past', in *Moments of Being*, ed. by Jeanne Schulkind (Pimlico, 2022 [1985]), pp. 99, 112; line 58: Woolf, 'The Legacy', in CSF, p. 281; lines 59-60: Woolf, *Between the Acts*, ed. by Stella McNichol (Penguin, 2000 [1941]), p. 85.

thesis discussion. More word search poems pertaining to specific topics in the thesis can be found in the Appendices.⁵

At a glance, the length of the poem already illustrates the frequency and recurrence of Woolf's Chinese discourse in her writing. This might surprise even her most loyal readers, especially since academic criticism connecting Woolf with East Asia has until recently been rather limited. Indeed, there is an expanding body of work on Woolf and China in translation and comparative literary studies, which given the inherent nature of these disciplines finds heavier concern with the external, outward influence of Woolf's literature to a culturally foreign (Chinese) audience that is receiving and reacting.⁶ Such work is no doubt important; there is great value in examining the difficult processes that enable the transference of texts and ideologies from one culture to another. My project to trace Woolf's literary rendition of China, however, derives from a motivation to inwardly scrutinise within the original texts those inceptive complexities that precede, shape, and define the transference process. Not much has been said in existing criticism about the Chinese imageries that permeate Woolf's writing. And yet to the Chinese reader like myself, whose personal position necessarily comprises a reading experience that is sensitive to such representations, these imageries have been striking.

Reading Woolf through Chinese eyes, it is a curious coincidence, then, that the limited but existing criticism on Woolf's China-coded depictions precisely revolves around the image of 'Chinese eyes', which she uses in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927).⁷ Woolf's

⁵ See Appendix A and Appendix B for other word search poems.

⁶ Much of such discourse revolves around Woolf and Ling Shuhua. See, for example, Shu-mei Shih, 'Gendered Negotiations with the Local: Lin Huiyin and Ling Shuhua', in *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917-1937* (University of California Press, 2001), pp. 204-228; and Deyan Meng, 'Ling Shuhua and Virginia Woolf: Female Communion, Resistance, and Individuality', in *Virginia Woolf, Europe, and Peace: Vol. 1 Transnational Circulations*, ed. by Ariane Mildenberg and Patricia Novillo-Corvalan (Clemson University Press, 2020), pp. 203-218.

⁷ Woolf, MD, pp. 134, 148; Woolf, TL, pp. 21, 31, 99, 113, 171.

deployment of ‘Chinese eyes’ in these two novels makes up about a fifth of the lines in the second stanza of the poem, from lines 82 to 85 and 92 to 98. Without getting into the specificities of the imagery, which Chapter Three will discuss at length, the substantial distribution of ‘Chinese eyes’ across the texts and also proportionally in the context of Woolf’s fiction writing shows that her decision to use the image is a carefully calculated one. Some scholars have already noted the significances of Woolf’s ‘Chinese eyes’. Patricia Laurence, for example, whose book *Lily Briscoe’s Chinese Eyes: Bloomsbury, Modernism, and China* (2003) underlines in its very title the ocular image, has set out from the imagery of ‘Chinese eyes’ to trace the reciprocal influences between the English Bloomsbury Group and the Chinese Crescent Moon Society.⁸ Her reading of Lily Briscoe’s ‘Chinese eyes’ in *To the Lighthouse* particularly finds connection with aesthetic taste and creation in Bloomsbury, which Urmila Seshagiri has continued to explore in the context of racial politics in ‘Orienting Virginia Woolf: Race, Aesthetics, and Politics in “To the Lighthouse”’ (2004) and subsequently in ‘*To the Lighthouse* and the Art of Race’ (2015).⁹ Ira Nadel, in ‘Oriental Woolf’ (2016) and ‘Oriental Bloomsbury’ (2018), has too observed the ‘Chinese eyes’ image in both novels as generally contributing to an ‘Oriental style’ adopted by Woolf and other Bloomsburians in their art and writing.¹⁰ Essays including Karen Kaivola’s ‘Revisiting Woolf’s Representations of Androgyny: Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Nation’ (1999) and Helen Southworth’s “‘Mixed Virginia’: Reconciling the “Stigma of Nationality” and the Sting of Nostalgia in Virginia Woolf’s Later Fiction’ (2005), which instead consider in part Elizabeth Dalloway’s ‘Chinese eyes’ in *Mrs Dalloway*, have also offered discussions in a similar vein along the politics of aesthetics, race, and

⁸ Patricia Laurence, *Lily Briscoe’s Chinese Eyes: Bloomsbury, Modernism and China* (University of South Carolina Press, 2013).

⁹ Urmila Seshagiri, ‘Orienting Virginia Woolf: Race, Aesthetics, and Politics in *To the Lighthouse*’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 50.1 (2004), pp. 58-84; Urmila Seshagiri, ‘*To the Lighthouse* and the Art of Race’, in *The Cambridge Companion to To the Lighthouse*, ed. by Allison Pease (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

¹⁰ Ira Nadel, ‘Oriental Woolf’, *Affirmations: of the Modern*, 4.1 (2016), pp. 65-91; Ira Nadel, ‘Oriental Bloomsbury’, *Modernist Cultures*, 13.1 (2018), pp. 14-32.

gender.¹¹ And Donald Childs, in a chapter of *Modernism and Eugenics: Woolf, Eliot, Yeats, and the Culture of Degeneration* (2001) titled 'Boers, whores, and Mongols in *Mrs. Dalloway*', has further pushed the discourse on Elizabeth's 'Chinese eyes' to thinking about (anti-)eugenics.¹²

These critical texts form the foundation to my initial study on Woolf's use of the trope of 'Chinese eyes'. Given that current inquiries relating to Woolf and China, especially regarding her primary writing, still largely rest on the image, these texts are also important as materials instigating my investigation of Woolf's Chinese discourse at large. I will return to their discussions later in this introduction and more thoroughly in the chapters that follow. Nonetheless, at the outset, the repeated raising of aesthetic, racial, gender, and imperial politics in the aforementioned criticisms suggest an entailment of these themes - which the thesis picks up and builds on - to discussions about 'Chinese eyes' and other oriental imageries that appear across Woolf's oeuvre. There is certainly a double reference to 'Virginia Woolf's Chinese eyes' as this section is titled. Woolf's 'Chinese eyes' gesture to the facial feature that she has placed on the characters of Elizabeth Dalloway and Lily Briscoe. Yet the possessive form too points towards the writer's own; Woolf's 'Chinese' eyes encapsulates a vision of China that flows visually, in pictures, from imagination into writing. Turning back to the poem that opens this introduction, it can be observed that Woolf inclines to use the word 'Chinese' to ascribe an aesthetic style rather than a racial quality, though her Chinese aesthetics are often fundamentally racialised. She tends to circle around tropes, besides 'Chinese eyes', such as 'Chinese lanterns', 'Chinese pagodas', and the 'Chinese coat' - all decorative images, and portraying Chineseness as something aesthetic; ornamental; even

¹¹ Karen Kaivola, 'Revisiting Woolf's Representations of Androgyny: Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Nation', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 18.2 (1999), pp. 235-261; Helen Southworth, "'Mixed Virginia": Reconciling the "Stigma of Nationality" and the Sting of Nostalgia in Virginia Woolf's Later Fiction', *Woolf Studies Annual*, 11 (2005), pp. 99-132.

¹² Donald Childs, 'Boers, whores, and Mongols in *Mrs. Dalloway*', in *Modernism and Eugenics: Woolf, Eliot, Yeats, and the Culture of Degeneration* (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

performative. These tropic descriptions not only materialise as visual pictures in and by themselves but also congregate to paint a bigger picture of China, or the East Orient, as exemplified by the poem.

As mentioned, the opening poem acts as a visual frame to the thesis and to Woolf's discourse on Chineseness. Tiered in alternating rows of longer and shorter sentences, which by and by take on the formation of sloped roofs, the poem fixes and frames Woolf's 'Chinese' images in the structure of a pagoda, in the fashion of her pictorial inception of prose. 'The deft little sentences seemed to build up a pagoda;', writes Woolf in *The Years* (1937), 'sparely but accurately'.¹³ In *A Room of One's Own* (1929), too, Woolf demonstrates her envisioning of the novel form with a series of images that again contemplate the pagoda, which Chapter One will further discuss, among other objects that curiously echo the language in Clive Bell's *Art* (1914) with regards to his theorising of 'Significant Form'. In *Art*, Bell explicates that the base quality shared by all works provoking aesthetic emotions, including 'Sta. Sophia and the windows at Chartres, Mexican sculpture, a Persian bowl, Chinese carpets, Giotto's frescoes at Padua, and the masterpieces of Poussin, Piero della Francesca, and Cézanne', is the particular 'relations and combinations of lines and colours' that he coins as 'Significant Form'.¹⁴ In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf writes:

If one shuts one's eyes and thinks of the novel as a whole, it would seem to be a creation owning a certain looking-glass likeness to life, though of course with simplifications and distortions innumerable. At any rate, it is a structure leaving a shape on the mind's eye, built now in squares, now pagoda shaped, now throwing out wings and arcades, now solidly compact and domed like the Cathedral of Saint Sofia at Constantinople.¹⁵

¹³ Woolf, Y, p. 302.

¹⁴ Clive Bell, *Art* (Chatto & Windus, 1914), p. 3.

¹⁵ Woolf, AROO, p. 64.

Woolf here recognises the novel as a structure that, much like the progressively solid shapes expressed, holds an aesthetic quality akin to Bell's interpretation of artistic form. Roger Fry and other members of Bloomsbury went on to construe ideas of Formalism in art that are grounded in similar principles. Through alternative terms including 'design' and 'plasticity', they articulated an understanding of formal properties that seems to have translated into Woolf's thinking about literature. In a letter to Duncan Grant, dated 14 November 1938, she declared to her painter friend: 'Like all painters, your sense of words is plastic, not linear, and I am on the side of the plastic myself'.¹⁶ Woolf's eyes are hence not only Chinese, but also pictorial. She sees the novel with a vision of aesthetic plasticity that grasps the shifting shapes of its structures in lines, colours, rhythms and textures. For while she apprehends the novel as a reflection of life, she recognises as well that it is a creation of 'simplifications and distortions'; a construction that encloses what is more synthetic than real. If the content of the novel is a painted picture, then, the novel form is a frame, like the pagoda shape of the opening poem, that decides the boundaries of pictorial experimentalism within the novel-canvas. Woolf's fiction, and her writing more generally, reveals an approach that privileges visual effects and pictorial composition. Titles to Woolf's work across the years, including her essays 'Portraits of Places' (1906), 'Pictures and Portraits' (1920), 'Pictures' (1925), and 'Portrait of a Londoner' (1932), as well as short fictions 'Three Pictures', 'Scenes from the Life of a British Naval Officer', and 'Portraits', point to a grasping by the writer of her literary art as intrinsically an undertaking to frame and make visible obscure impressions in

¹⁶ Woolf, L 6, p.302.

the more solid structures of text.¹⁷ ‘The novelist after all’, states Woolf, in ‘Walter Sickert: A Conversation’, ‘wants to make us see’.¹⁸

It is therefore necessary to appreciate the merging of Woolf’s ‘Chinese’ and pictorial visions when examining, with our reader eyes, what she makes visible in her discourse of the East. ‘Three Pictures’, which centres on the family of a sailor homecoming from China, offers a helpful starting point to exploring Woolf’s integration of her ‘Chinese’ impressions with her aesthetic experimentation. I present below another poetic exercise that I did from the second paragraph of ‘The First Picture’ in this text.¹⁹ The paragraph, written in the form of prose, first introduces the sailor and is submitted in full below. Line breaks are my own:

So now at the turn of the road
I saw
one of these pictures.
It might have been called ‘The Sailor’s Homecoming’
or some such title.
A fine young sailor carrying a bundle;
a girl with her hand on his arm;
neighbours gathering round;
a cottage garden ablaze with flowers;
as one passed one read at the bottom of
that picture
that the sailor was back from
China,
and there was a fine spread waiting for him in the parlor;
and he had a present for his young wife in his bundle;
and she was soon going to bear him their first child.
Everything was right and good and as it should be, one felt about
that picture.
There was something wholesome and satisfactory
in the sight of
such happiness; life seemed sweeter

¹⁷ Woolf, the *Guardian* (1906), in E 1, pp. 124-128; Woolf, the *Athenaeum* (1920), in E 3, pp. 163-166; Woolf, *Nation & Athenaeum* (1925), in E 4, pp. 243-247; Woolf, *Good Housekeeping* (1932), in E 5, pp. 593-598; Woolf, ‘Three Pictures’, in CSF, pp. 228-231; Woolf, ‘Scenes from the Life of a British Naval Officer’, in CSF, pp. 232-234; Woolf, ‘Portraits’, in CSF, pp. 242-246.

¹⁸ Woolf, E 6, p.43.

¹⁹ Woolf, ‘Three Pictures’, in CSF, pp. 228-229.

and more enviable
than before.

The exercise is inspired by a similar one done for ‘Portraits’ in ‘Woolf Salon No.26: Faces and Voices’, an online salon from *The Woolf Salon Project* organised by Ben Hagen, Shilo McGiff, Drew Shannon, and Amy Smith.²⁰ This salon, as per the description found in its invitation email, aims to explore ‘that (in)substantial Woolfian territory between prose and poem and prose poem and sketch and draft and experimental collaboration’, particularly with reference to ‘Portraits’, ‘Uncle Vanya’, and ‘Ode Written Partly in Prose on Seeing the Name of Cutbush Above a Butcher Shop in Pentonville’.²¹ Participants were encouraged to work with ‘Portrait 3’ of the eight fragmentary portrait-texts in ‘Portraits’ and, like the above demonstrated exercise, break down the prose blocks into poetic lines. The purpose of the exercise, and more generally the salon’s discussion, is to investigate within Woolf’s textual frames the sensory and verbal patterns that make up the lyrical qualities of her writing. I would add to this premise that, in creating from Woolf’s text, those who read and produce from her work are also making in poetic shapes portraits of themselves.

I chose to work with this paragraph because of practical and illustrative reasons. Given the length of the three pictorial sections in ‘Three Pictures’, which are longer than the delicate units in ‘Portraits’, an excerpt from a full ‘picture’ serves well as a sizeable model for the purposes of the exercise. Furthermore, this paragraph is significant in that it relates the first instance of seeing; of being introduced to, through the unnamed narrator’s lens, the pictures that will continue to unfold in the processes of the narrative. The arrangement of lines in the created poem makes obvious

²⁰ For more information about *The Woolf Salon Project*, see its official page at <https://sites.google.com/view/woolfproject/about?authuser=0>.

²¹ The invitation email by *The Woolf Salon Project* was sent on 12 February 2024.

some isolated phrases on seeing and picturing that gesture to a ‘Chinese box’ framing of the text. The poem is enveloped, in lines 2 and 20, in clear markers of the narrator’s sight. Wrapping around the subjects seen within this lens are pictorial pointers in lines 3 and 18 that doubly frame the image, as well as a repeated signaling of ‘that picture’ in line 11 that functions to centre the structural context. Chinese boxes (套盒), known too as nested boxes, are by direct translation of their Chinese characters a set of boxes that is made to be put in each other; the boxes are graduating in size and, moreover, usually ornamental in nature. The arrangement of my created poem, which emphasises the narrative structure already present in Woolf’s writing, then replicates the design of the boxes. On the one hand, the poem’s text, which echoes words from Woolf, is richly decorative in form and expression. On the other, and perhaps more importantly to the current discussion, the text necessitates layers of seeing: via the narrator’s eyes, via Woolf’s, and ultimately via the reader’s own. Woolf has explicitly considered Chinese boxes elsewhere in her oeuvre. Notably, in ‘Kew Gardens’ (1919), another short fiction that hosts a plethora of oriental imageries including again ‘a Chinese pagoda’, she has compared in figurative, structural, and impressionistic terms the murmuring of a city, among other alluded things, to ‘a vast nest of Chinese boxes all of wrought steel turning ceaselessly one within another’.²² Chapter Two studies the fiction and device in detail, but the brief reference here continues to shine light on the ways in which oriental pictures simultaneously ornament both the content and stylistic form of Woolf’s writing.

Moving from frame to picture, and then, as abruptly added by the narrator, to the description found at the bottom of the piece, we find ourselves absorbing with our minds’ eyes additional impressions that underlie the surface of the picture. What should be known, suggests the accompanied information, even though not directly seen, is that ‘the sailor was back from

²² Woolf, ‘Kew Gardens’, in CSF, p. 95.

China'. Hence the celebratory atmosphere; hence the triumphal return of the sailor and the adoration of his wife and peers, which together make a rather patriotic image. The placement of China in this excerpt is typical to Woolf's general positioning of China in her texts. Her discourse of the country is more self-reflexive than external, for China, to Woolf, is distant enough that it serves as a space for testing the aesthetic imagination. China exists as a peripheral place to Woolf's pondering of England; in fact, the picture is one example of how she uses China as a means to contemplate the politics of the British empire. Like many of those in Bloomsbury, Woolf's aesthetics, though not without its problematics, is consciously political. One might want to scrutinise the occupation selected for her sailor protagonist. It points towards a familiarity with seafaring and, by implication, in the spirit of James Thomson's exhortation for Britannia to 'rule the waves', signals the naval activity that is crucial to expanding and sustaining the empire well into the twentieth century.²³ Like the sailor dominating the seas and faraway lands, Woolf takes charge of sketching out these foreign territories via the imagination. Yet the exotic space in which Woolf's China resides remains an obscure background for her staging of England and Britain. In any case, Chinese impressions and associations are materially realised onto the painted scene of the picture in rewarding forms of blazing flowers, gathering neighbours, a pregnant wife, an awaiting spread, and a bundled up present that serves as a token of the sailor's adventures in the East. Framed in the formal structures of its text, however, readers are invited not to join the scene but to observe it from the outside with discerning eyes.

An exercise of breaking up the lines of Woolf's prose is invasive and not without faults; in extracting, dismantling, and reassembling from her text, we may be culpable of containing her lyric prose within a diminished interpretive framework that is imposed by our own perspectives of

²³ James Thomson, 'Rule, Britannia!' (1740).

the text. But such creative engagement with the prose is also meaningful for exactly this reason. It makes more visible the lyrical qualities observable in Woolf's prose writing as could be seen in the afore discussed patterns of forms, devices, and impressions at work in the quoted paragraph. And, recalling Woolf's plastic picturing of the novel's shape in *A Room of One's Own*, which despite its structure is transformative and complex, the lyrical, poetic makings of her prose are from the outset intrinsic to her envisaging of its course. For it is strange, at first sight, that an essay so attentive to the novel should end on a note about poetry. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf has on the grounds of materialist reasoning presented to her readers the figure of 'Shakespeare's sister', who as a woman with a 'genius for fiction' and a 'poet's heart' would have died prematurely in the bard's time.²⁴ 'But she lives', concludes Woolf in her feminist manifesto, 'for great poets do not die; they are continuing presences; they need only the opportunity to walk among us in the flesh'.²⁵ This anticipation of a new poetics by woman writers to come is grounded on prose; the poetry of Shakespeare's sister, whose identity extends to all women with equal poetic calibre, is set out as different to the traditional verse poetry that characterises, for example, Shakespeare's sonnets. The poetry in question springs from prose and takes on the form of prose; it is a matter of prose writing with the instruments of poetry. Aligning 'fiction' with 'poetry', moreover, as did Woolf in her discussion of Shakespeare's sister, such poetics would be involved in Woolf's contemplation of, and mastery over, different lengths of fiction as could be observed from 'Three Pictures'. There are more discussions in *A Room of One's Own* that in making way for the genesis of 'Shakespeare's sister' likewise point towards this arc of progression from prose to poetry. Space prevents fuller treatment here, but these ideas will be developed in subsequent chapters. Anyhow, the establishment of Woolf's poetic grasp on prose is crucial to our understanding of her aesthetic

²⁴ Woolf, AROO, p. 44.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 102.

vision in that the pictures she paints are translated not only in the material content of her text but also in the very form of her writing. It is by the combination of her 'Chinese' images and her weaving of such imageries into her narrative structures that we can appreciate the full effect of Woolf's ornamental aestheticising of Chineseness, China, and the faraway 'Orient'.

The observations laid out necessitate some contemplation on Woolf as a writer of poetic prose and prose poetry, which albeit their seeming interchangeability in critical use at times gesture to nuancedly different modes of reading and writing. Fundamentally, both modes underline the lyrical qualities preserved in a composition that is written in prose form. There remains the variance, nonetheless, of whether the composition should be understood as prose with poetic features, or as poetry in the form of prose. Such consideration is important to interpreting Woolf's work, for despite her keen commentary on poetry her literary production almost exclusively takes on the form of prose. 'Ode Written Partly in Prose on Seeing the Name of Cutbush above a Butcher's Shop in Pentonville' (1934), to serve as an exception, is, as its title suggests, composed with qualities of the lyric poem, though again the piece is composed upon an ideal to merge poetry with prose. It is also interesting to observe from this rare display of Woolf's poetic writing, in the formal sense, that she would once more choose to include orientalist imageries in her fiction. Of particular note is her evocation of 'China where the mandarins go, mute, cruel; delicate;/ past the gold pagodas; and the houses have paper/ walls; and the people smile wise inscrutable smiles' in 'Ode'.²⁶ In spite of the poetic prose and prose poetry focus, however, this thesis is uninterested in establishing superiority between the forms, nor does it demand that Woolf's fiction must be read as one against the other. Its attention lies in the orientalist discourses in Woolf's writing as well as how these tropes, which often take shape pictorially via rich imageries, emerge in the narrative,

²⁶ Woolf, 'Ode Written Partly in Prose on Seeing the Name of Cutbush Above a Butcher's Shop in Pentonville', in CSF, p. 238.

formal, and semantic structures across the page. It is by force of these attentions that the thesis admittedly leans towards a reading of Woolf's hybrid writing as prose poetry.²⁷ In recognising that the ornamentality of her Chinese images transpires both physically and stylistically, it has become necessary to acknowledge the structural methods that have gone into the incorporation of such images into the fabric of Woolf's writing. The intensity of rhythmic considerations, poetic devices, and emotional effects that are packed into Woolf's literary pictures, which sustain the whole length of her books, propound that the core to her prose form is poetic. This reading also reverberates with her proposition in *A Room of One's Own* on a new poetics that progresses from prose writing.

In the same year of publication as *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf puts in print another essay, 'Phases of Fiction' (1929), which in its similar outlook on the progression arc from prose to poetry offers a discussion that may more decidedly outline her vision of prose poetics in the novel. 'Phases of Fiction' maps out in an apparently chronological, albeit not necessarily fixed, order the different stylistic phases of novel writing in Western literary history. These phases ostensibly develop from the first phase, 'The Truth-Tellers', to the second phase, 'The Romantics', to the third phase, 'The Character-Mongers and Comedians', to the fourth phase, 'The Psychologists', to the fifth phase, 'The Satirists and Fantastics', and to the sixth and final phase, 'The Poets'. This concluding section, in which Woolf pulls on examples from writers including Laurence Sterne, Leo Tolstoy, George Meredith, Thomas Hardy, Emily Brontë, Herman Melville, and Marcel Proust, poses the modes of poetry that Woolf has identified in her novel reading. Of interest to my initial observation are her discussions on the 'poetry of situation' and the 'poetry of language'.

²⁷ See also Goldman, "'I Grow More & More Poetic': Virginia Woolf and Prose Poetry", which positions Woolf as a prose poet by arguing that she extended the prose poem to book length form in at least every novel from *Jacob's Room* to *Between the Acts*.

The concluding section of the essay sees Woolf consolidating her vision of the way in which prose and poetry combine and unify. She discusses the modes of poetry that emerge in the novel. Drawing on episodes from Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd*, and Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Woolf determines that the poetic quality in these works resides more in 'the poetry of situation rather than of language'.²⁸ She describes the kind of poetry in these novels:

And it is significant that we recall this poetry, not as we recall it in verse, by the words, but by the scene. The prose remains casual and quiet enough so that to quote it is to do little or nothing to explain its effect. Often we have to go far back and read a chapter or more before we can come by the impression of beauty or intensity that possessed us.²⁹

Woolf understands the 'poetry of situation' to lie not in words but to be evoked 'by the scene'. She gestures towards a quietist style of poetic writing in which the power of the text derives from its overall descriptive context. The emotional beauty and intensity that the text conveys, therefore, arise not from tightly structured phrases but from the wider impression of the story's events that the text leaves on the reader. Continuing with observations on *Wuthering Heights* and *Moby Dick*, Woolf identifies that 'there is poetry in novels both where the poetry is expressed through the characters and again where the poetry is expressed [...] by the whole mood and temper of the book'.³⁰ The 'poetry of language', however, resides in the linguistic matter of the novel. It can be found in the verbal techniques that display a self-conscious awareness of the poetic effect created

²⁸ Woolf, 'Phases of Fiction', *Bookman* (1929), in E 5, p. 77.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 78-79.

through the craft of language itself. Woolf posits a ‘poetry of a different kind’ in Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*,³¹ in his work:

The analysis of emotion is carried further by Proust than by any other novelist; and the poetry comes, not in the situation, which is too fretted and voluminous for such an effect, but in those frequent passages of elaborate metaphor, which spring out of the rock of thought like fountains of sweet water and serve as translations from one language into another.³²

The open acknowledgment of its own metaphoricity in Proust’s writing aligns the poetic effect of his novel more closely with the ‘poetry of language’ than with the ‘poetry of situation’. To Woolf, his metaphoric prose emphasises the material plasticity of language and positions the literary device as itself a productive means of translating emotions and thought. Woolf’s reading of Proust in this way offers a window into her idea of a new form of literature. She envisages the combining of prose and poetry in the descriptive, atmospheric elements of the text, but places even greater consideration on the role of linguistic patterns and verbal techniques in shaping literary imagery.

The connection between picture and poetics as could be found blossoming in Woolf’s oeuvre forms the last part to this thesis’s titular preoccupation with reading the Chinese vision in her work. Pictorial morphology, in short, surveys the visually illustrative aspects of the author’s literary experimentalism. To reinstate the three theorising ideas that run through my reading, the thesis has in its conceptual framework aligned notions of orientalism, ornament, and pictorial morphology into a blended paradigm. While the next section further expands on the ideological intersection of the Orient and Ornament, what has been presented already suffices to foreground decorative elements as foundational to making sense of Woolf’s interaction with China and

³¹ Ibid., p. 79.

³² Ibid.

Chineseness. Woolf's approach to the 'Orient' is an aesthetically creative one, and this thesis responds to her practice by partially returning, through creative methods that combine textual and visual work, the ornamental dimension of Woolf's aesthetic experiments. Referring back to 'Three Pictures', and to make a motif out of its triptych structure, the two poems displayed above put in view a first and second picture that call to see the patterns involved in Woolf's orientalist exercises. The below, a third picture, ends this section by contextualising Woolf's attitude in that of her time and surrounding conversations, and by setting in context too the imperative demand for a study of her Chinese discourse in the contemporary, postcolonial age:

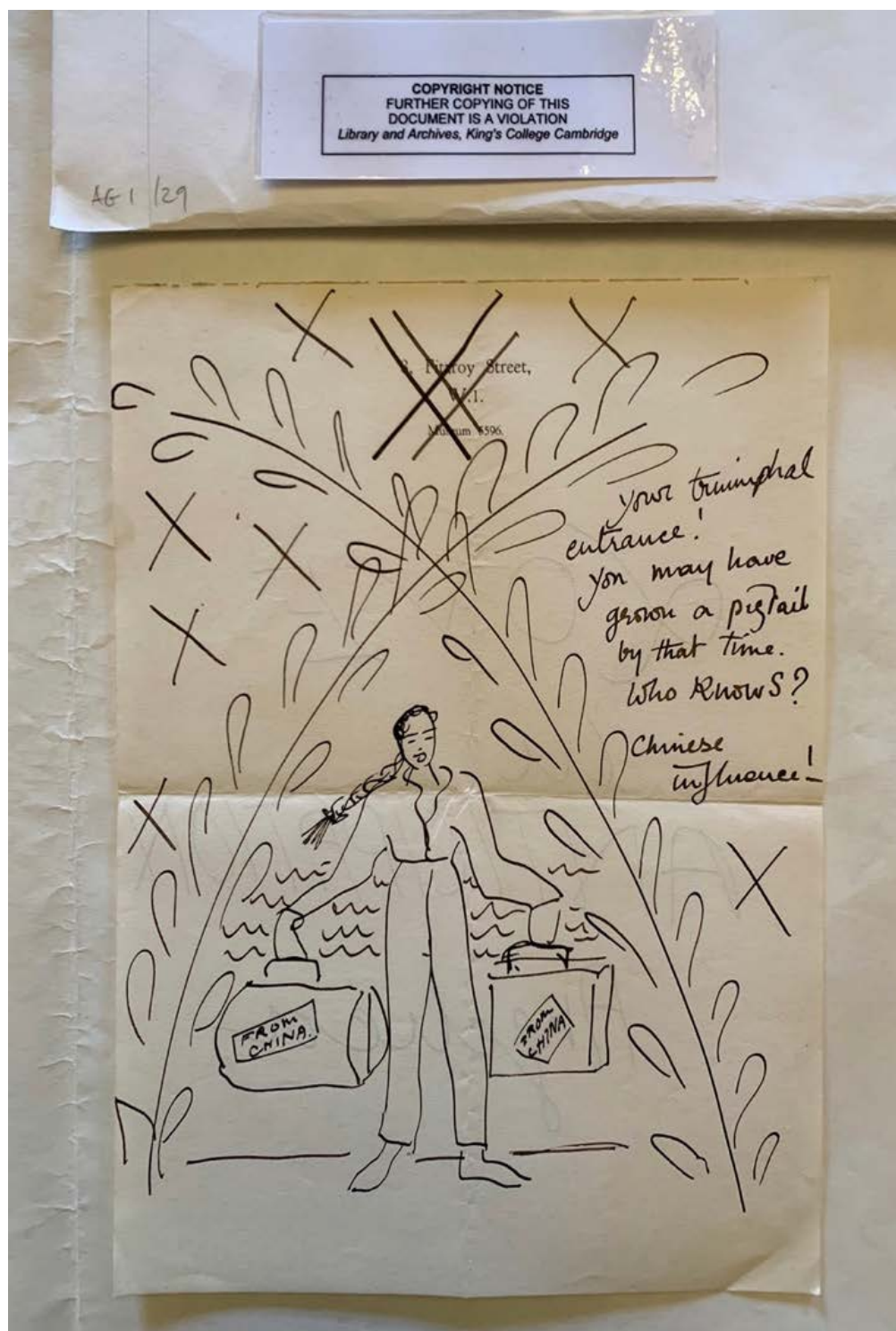


Figure 1. Angelica Garnett, sketch in a letter to Julian Bell. AG/1/29 - The Archive Centre, King's College, Cambridge.

I found this sketch (Figure 1) on an archival trip at the Archive Centre in King's College, Cambridge, among some letters that Woolf's niece, Angelica Garnett, sent to her family and friends. The particular letter in which this sketch was drawn was sent to Julian Bell, Angelica's half-brother, and is undated, though it would have been sent around early 1937 just before his return to England from China. Angelica's message to Julian is a short but euphoric one that welcomes his soon arrival home. On the page, Angelica depicts Julian in loose shirt and trousers, with slanted eyes, and wearing a Manchu queue. Each hand holds a travelling bag with the label 'FROM CHINA' printed on. Julian appears to be entering a decorative arch, with his back towards the sea, which denotes his travels. And completing the sketch is a caption that Angelica adds as she sees fit for the occasion: 'Your triumphal entrance! You may have grown a pigtail by that time. Who knows? Chinese influence!' The sketch forms the last page of Angelica's letter; the other pages of her letter are also shown below.

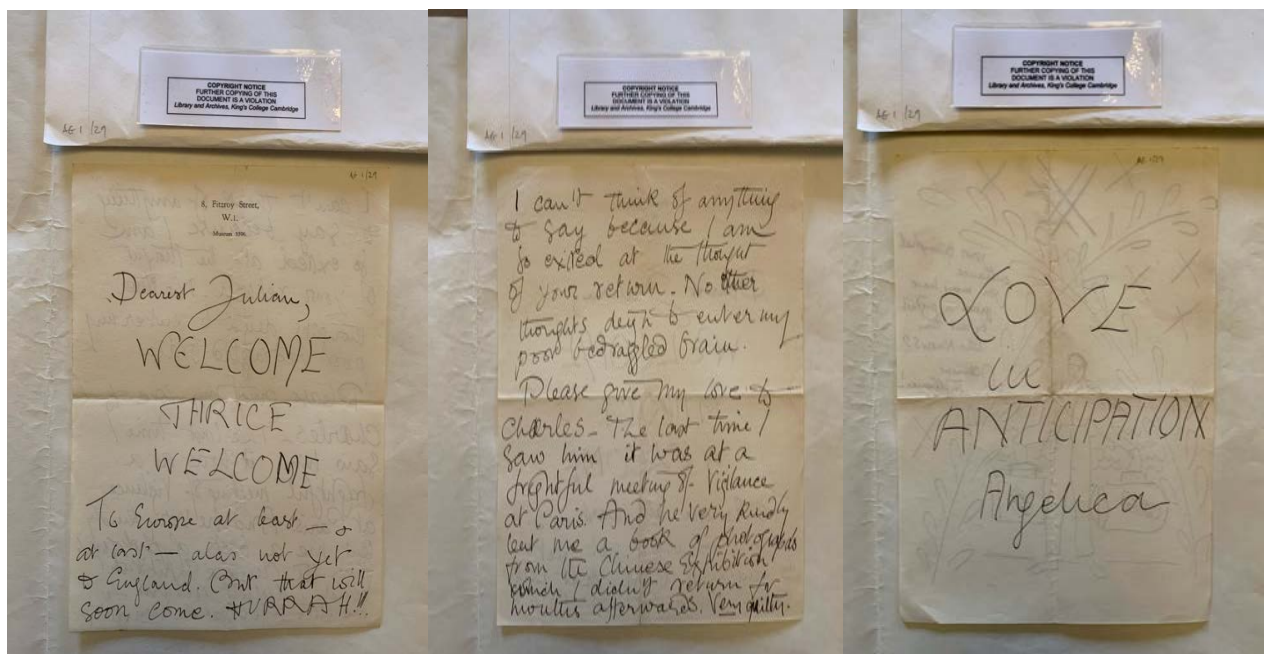


Figure 2. Angelica Garnett, letter to Julian Bell. AG/1/29 - The Archive Centre, King's College, Cambridge.

Concentrating on Angelica's epistolary gesture for Julian's return, it is easy to recognise now, in the current day and age, the racist problematics that support Angelica's envisioning of her brother's transformation upon involving himself with 'Chinese influence'. The sizeable bags that Julian carries indicate an abundance of goods and gifts from his overseas travels. To be sure, Angelica's picturing of China is markedly tied to ornamental, material things. The country is imagined as a place of possessable objects – along a line of thinking that jarringly echoes ideas of imperial plunder – and, in support of such musing, as a site of infinite curiosities. But Angelica's imagined China does not stop at the material; the decorative aspects of her visualising turn as well to the physical body and merges cosmetic impression with human identity. The loose garments that Angelica dresses Julian in perhaps emulate the flowing, robed garments of many traditional Eastern attires. Yet the more pronounced issues of Angelica's sketch immediately fall on her depiction of Julian with slanted eyes and a Manchu queue, both of which operate as symbols that embody and perpetuate stereotypical, racist, and hostile sentiments against the Chinese 'Oriental'.³³ It is all the more ironic that Angelica's image would have been considered outdated by Chinese standards at the time. The Manchu queue is a hairstyle originating from the Jurchen tribes, officially named the Manchus by Emperor Hong Taiji in 1635, which was enforced on all Chinese men after the beginning of the Manchu Qing dynasty in 1644. It is thus a complex practice enforced under the Qing rule to a predominantly Han Chinese population that compels, culturally and politically, a customary obedience to an ethnically foreign power from the perspective of most people in the country. In brief, and with the caveat of oversimplification, a large population in

³³ Features including narrow, slanted eyes and the Manchu queue are often used in illustrations that promote xenophobic sentiments and the racist ideology of the 'Yellow Peril'. Note, for example, the literary supervillain Fu Manchu, invented by English author Sax Rohmer, which first saw its appearance in 1913.

China does not even view the Manchu queue to be ‘Chinese’ at the time. By 1937, after the 1911 Xinhai Revolution that led to the fall of the Qing dynasty and the establishment of the Republic of China, clipping off the Manchu queue was not only seen as fashionable among Chinese men but also as a pledge of loyalty to the new state. There is hence historical ground to Angelica’s assumptive rationale, but her sketch of Julian with ‘a pigtail’ further accentuates an insensitivity on her part towards the modern development of China.

Angelica’s (mis)interpretation of China and Chineseness forms just one outlook on the topic in Bloomsbury. Her attitude, nonetheless, also inevitably reflects much of the general opinion made within her social circle. The sketch in Angelica’s letter consequently typifies what Woolf would have been influenced by – and would have to confront – as she constructs her own notions about the East over the course of her writing career. Undoubtedly, as expounded throughout this introductory section, there are clear racist overtones in such discourses, which were produced in an era when imperial ideals remain consciously and subconsciously potent among their beneficiaries. In the postcolonial now, and on the score of orientalist examples laid out at the thesis’s outset, there is vital importance in undoing the violent power relations that these narratives have caused against those they oppress. Particularly, Woolf’s Chinese discourse, given her canonical position in the present-day landscape of literary and modernist studies,³⁴ becomes a subject matter that commands careful scrutinisation in conjunction with the post-Cold War world order. Woolf, Angelica, and much of Bloomsbury’s discussion of China is arguably non-malicious by intention; though often made in ignorance or twisted for artistic appeal, their remarks on Chineseness are usually hinged on aesthetic innovations and experimental principles for their own

³⁴ The thesis still employs the term ‘modernism’ as a periodising category given its dominant usage, but with awareness of its incapacity to define the aesthetic movements that it supposedly contains. Like most if not all periodising categories, ‘modernism’ as understood in the thesis is unable to force the vibrant and often incompatible ideologies of the era into a neat and linear narrative.

creative pursuits. The decorative nature underpinning their language and scene-making is thus resultant from imitative practices of what they could see with the restricted access they have to Chinese sources. A detail in Angelica's letter substantiates this reflection; the message that includes her 'Chinese' sketch of Julian articulates in tandem her possession of 'a book of photographs from the Chinese Exhibition'.³⁵ In wrapping up the tripartite relationship between the thesis's titular subparts to go about a contemporary seeing of Woolf's Chinese vision, the intrinsically ornamental nature of her orientalist discourse accordingly ties in with approaching her writing through a pictorial lens.

ii. Ornamentalism: A Theory of the Orient and Ornament

In setting up the richly visual and decorative core of Woolf's Chinese orientalism, the theoretical terms that underpin this argument also require more thorough consideration at this point. Foremost, 'Orientalism' – emerging first as a European academic discipline in the late eighteenth century, and then as a critical theory from the late twentieth century onwards – is a layered model of enquiry that even in the field of postcolonial studies still submits to revaluations and redefinitions.³⁶ Like most scholars now engaging with the term, however, this thesis, unless stated otherwise, essentially draws on Edward Said's landmark interpretation of orientalism that articulates the Western world's stereotypical and often condescending invention of the East 'Orient'. In placing Woolf's discourse of the East and especially her discourse on China under an

³⁵ The exhibition in question here is the 1935-36 International Exhibition of Chinese Art, held at the Royal Academy of Arts in Burlington House.

³⁶ Criticisms against Saidian orientalism often find problem with, for example, its lack of gendered considerations, discursive tendency to homogenise, and limited focus on the Middle East. See Said's response to such criticisms in his 1995 Afterword for *Orientalism*.

‘ornamental’ framework, which the previous section has sought to show, another key concern within the study’s theoretical structure would thus be the merging of orientalism with critical notions of ‘ornament’. For this reunion of the terms hangs between a fine balancing act. On the one hand, it recognises the exotic ornament as channelling the orientalism in Woolf’s time, achieved through formalist principles of aesthetics. On the other hand, it explores Saidian orientalism as a reaction against the current of high formalism in the domain of literary criticism at its time of conception. To give a name to this critical melding of the Orient and Ornament, the thesis uses the vocabulary of ‘Ornamentalism’ to identify this theoretical frame that forms the foundation of its study.

Said’s polemical book *Orientalism* was published in 1978, during an era of literary studies still dominated by ideas of structuralism and poststructuralism of thinkers such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Jonathan Culler. Though the book attracted attention upon its initial publication, it would not be until about ten years later with the decline of textualism, and a shift towards political criticism and activist theory in humanistic disciplines, that Said’s magnum opus would reach iconic status. Said’s arguments generally attack formalism’s rejection of authorial intention and practical referentiality, which the aforementioned schools of thought incline to support. Despite Foucault’s influence over his work, which Said in several instances admits to and credits in *Orientalism*,³⁷ Said is keen to insist as ‘a humanist whose field is literature’ that the study of literary texts must not be isolated from the social world.³⁸ That is to say, Said’s humanist disposition towards reading literature, which also calls for a return to more historicist perspectives, is positioned against propositions for self-contained systems of production. Given his preoccupation with critical theory in *Orientalism*, Said’s disapproval of high-formalist

³⁷ See, for example, Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Penguin, 2003 [1978]), pp. 3, 23.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

practices explicitly and foremost presents itself in discussions of linguo-textual structures. Extending his logic to the structures of aesthetics, however – which he indeed does in parts of his discussion – and especially of that spearheaded by Fry and Bell in early twentieth-century Bloomsbury, it is plain that the Said who stresses that ‘society and literary culture can only be understood and studied together’ would too find fault with artistic comprehension and exercises that disregard historical and cultural context.³⁹

The specifics with regards to Said’s harmonizing of theory and history, in other words, his Foucauldian conception on discourse with his humanist and historicist perspectives on cultural construction, have been addressed by other scholars and will be passed over here given their tangential contribution to the discussion of the thesis and its more concentrated focus on Woolf’s representation of the exotic.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, it should be recognised that at the heart of Said’s political formulation is an effort to map the nexus between knowledge and power in contestation against systems of oppression. Said’s main interest within his Orientalist framework is to assert the workings of power in exchanges of discourse that, because of unequal dynamics in context, necessarily become a method of domination. The social world is part and parcel of his model of understanding (literary) culture:

Yet never has there been such a thing as a pure, or unconditional, Orient; similarly, never has there been a nonmaterial form of Orientalism, much less something so innocent as an “idea” of the Orient [...] In other words, my hybrid perspective is broadly historical and “anthropological,” given that I believe all texts to be worldly and circumstantial in (of course) ways that vary from genre to genre, and from historical period to historical period.⁴¹

³⁹ Ibid., p. 27.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Robert Doran, ‘Edward Said, *Orientalism*, and the “political turn” in literary and cultural studies’, in *The Ethics of Theory: Philosophy, History, Literature* (Bloomsbury, 2017).

⁴¹ Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 22-23.

To Said, it is impossible for the invented Orient to be an innocent idea. The Orient has always been complicit with an intention to dominate by the culture that produces it, and accordingly responds more to that culture than to the homogenised ones it supposedly represents. This complication of power with discursive knowledge seeps into apparently ‘innocent’ systems of scientific, ethnographic, and imaginative writing. In the paragraph preceding the above-presented quote, Said has illustrated the application of such a power/knowledge nexus by way of example in artistic practices with the observation that ‘William Beckford, Byron, Goethe, and Hugo restructured the Orient by their art and made its colors, lights, and people visible through their images, rhythms, and motifs’.⁴² His methodology of situating cultural productions in political and historical conditions reflects a shrewd sensitivity to the mediated nature of all creative processes. As expressed, since production require acts of framing and thus inclusions of intention, which necessarily impart on it an empirical function, the Orient cannot simply be a harmless concept.

Orientalism as needing to take on a material form, moreover, which Said connects to the circumstantial character of texts, is an arresting detail that echoes back to my interest in ornamental criticism. There is a presumption of materiality in notions of ornamentation. At the baseline level, the ornament is a physical vessel for an intangible impression. The idea of the Orient, for instance, is conveyed through the visible, material entity of text. Yet ornament also carries with it an immaterial, conceptual sense of position; of what is superfluous, peripheral, and at the margin of a centre state. Reviewing ornament in terms of politics, it embodies things and persons at the edge of empire, which especially from postcolonial perspectives confer to it a paradoxically focal importance. Ornamentation, though oftentimes perceived as an extra embellishing element, inherently holds functional value. It is by itself a force that though appearing as excessive could

⁴² Ibid., p. 22.

take up core significance. The shifting nature of ornament then potentially induces an erroneous grasp of (structural) context:

Lastly, for readers in the so-called Third World, this study proposes itself as a step towards an understanding not so much of Western politics and of the non-Western world in those politics as of the *strength* [italics in original] of Western cultural discourse, a strength too often mistaken as merely *decorative* [emphasis added] or “superstructural.” My hope is to illustrate the formidable structure of cultural domination and, specifically for formerly colonized peoples, the dangers and temptations of employing this structure upon themselves or upon others.⁴³

Said concludes his study of orientalism as a step towards understanding ‘the *strength* of Western cultural discourse’. It is an understanding that entails a destabilisation of this strength by subverting the seemingly *decorative* to reveal what has essentially become ‘the formidable structure of cultural domination’. Ideas of strength and *décor* – or dominant power versus ornamental influence – are posited in contradiction here but on a level paradigm. The peripheral can potentially transform to occupy the centre, but central constitutions can also appear to be deceptively trivial. Said’s play on the confusion of this dynamic, which in his particular argument operates along the latter logic that positions of central power may seem deceptively insignificant, thus underlines the formidability of structural domination through culture.

Notably, Said’s assessment offers with it the caveat that the power of such structures of oppression intensifies through the internalisation of these discourses by their receivers, who if accepting the discursive tools to dominate have more or less internalised the West’s cultural colonisation over themselves. In specifically addressing the ‘formerly colonized’, Said is reminding that colonisation not only takes on geographical forms but also occurs culturally, in the spirit, which is much more difficult to recognise and resist. Clearly, Said’s orientalist scholarship

⁴³ Ibid., p. 25.

is a project to spotlight such colonial structures to which his work calls for resistance against. His effort is not wasted; now known as a founding figure of postcolonial studies, Said has successfully inaugurated with *Orientalism* a new methodology for studying the consequences of colonial and imperial politics. The popularity of his book has caused a prolific response from readers, academics, and critics alike in multiple fields of thought and research, which are only expanding in development in the contemporary, ever-globalising age. The methodology and substance of this thesis are accordingly too a response to, as well as a continuation of, these previous endeavours to push back against the uneven structural systems that govern exchanges of knowledge.

The rest of this section builds on the basic tenets in postcolonial studies to devise the aforementioned theoretical framework of ‘Ornamentalism’. The term as part of a critical vocabulary, though yet to gain wide currency, has been used before in art history scholarship and then in the field of postcolonial studies by David Cannadine and Anne Anlin Cheng. My formulation of ornamentalism thus references as a starting point their interpretation of the term along with the ornamental and oriental theories by respectively Deborah Longworth and Sara Ahmed, who have in their particular areas of academic pursuit also offered invaluable perspectives to my thinking of ornamental criticism in oriental studies. At the outset, ornamentalism as theory in the thesis is a method to contemplate colonial behaviours through the ontological and imaginative roles of ornament in aesthetic and cultural practices. It therefore takes on the Saidian historicist approach in its embracing of intention and contextual circumstance, against the formalist appreciation for pure and self-contained manners of understanding creative production. Nonetheless, my ornamental model is also deeply concerned with the formal properties in Bloomsburian aesthetics and specifically Woolf’s literary orientalism, which, at *prima facie*, might appear to contradict the historicist postcolonial critique associated with Said’s orientalism. Despite

the inherent problematics in Bloomsbury's orientalist practices, however, it is undeniable that the aesthetics and innovativeness of its work still repays attention. And even if there is indeed conflict between its methods of art and the Saidian methodology of evaluating aesthetics, Bloomsbury's creative projects are almost always political. As already demonstrated in the preceding section, Woolf's orientalist discourse often intersects with a firmly anti-imperialist outlook that resonates with contemporary postcolonial perspectives. The decision to employ the critical vocabulary of ornamentalism, then, as opposed to the more traditional framework of orientalism, is moreover established from the standpoint of the thesis's interest in also examining the process and form of such aesthetics that, in point of fact, contribute to my undertaking of translating early twentieth-century orientalism. Ornamentalism as theorised in the thesis ultimately sets out to harmonise the postcolonial distrust of aesthetic formalism with a respectful appreciation for the formalist experimentations in orientalist aesthetics.

Returning to the few existing critical formulations on Ornamentalism, Cannadine, in his 2001 book *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire*, outlined an understanding of the term that at its centre posits ornamental constructions and visualisations as the connecting base of the British imperial enterprise. According to Cannadine, the public ceremonials of the British empire, including its coronations, weddings, jubilees, funerals, and other imperial occasions that with a common style of banners, flags, speeches, and processions celebrate the elevated status of its administrators, were what sustained the empire's influence over its colonies. In short, and with the reinforced system of spectacles and titles exported from the metropolis to the periphery, Cannadine finds it essential to view '*imperialism as ornamentalism*' (italics in original).⁴⁴ Alternatively, 'ornamentalism was hierarchy made visible, immanent, and actual'.⁴⁵ Cannadine's

⁴⁴ David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire* (Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 122.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

perception of ornament, which similar to my analysis in the first section encompasses both a consideration of its physical form and abstract function, also recognises ornamentation as playing a significant part in the empire's substantiation of its own power. Importantly, his concept of ornamentalism adds to the already offered discussion that acts of ornamental imperialism and colonialism, prior to their consumption of the exotic for the British domestic, can simply arise too as propagandic projections from the empire's metropolitan centre.

Yet Cannadine's book, which even in its very title underscores an internal view of imperialism by the British, adopts an ideology of empire that fundamentally diverges from the position of this thesis. Cannadine in the setting up of his theoretical framework deliberately assumes an outlook that is openly antithetical to Saidian orientalism. In the preface of his book, Cannadine writes:

pace Edward Said and his 'Orientalist' followers, the British Empire was not exclusively (or even preponderantly) concerned with the creation of 'otherness' on the presumption that the imperial periphery was different from, and inferior to, the imperial metropolis: it was at least as much (perhaps more?) concerned with what has recently been called the 'construction of affinities' on the presumption that society on the periphery was the same as, or even on occasions superior to, society in the metropolis.⁴⁶

Cannadine's brand of ornamentalism refuses to acknowledge the empire's othering gaze in the fabric of imperial social structures. While undermining the centre/periphery model of power relations that is central to Said's orientalist framework, Cannadine instead puts forward a theoretical belief that endorses the generosity of the empire. His ornamental theory is developed upon a conviction of the empire's impartial treatment towards peripheral communities. Though he admits to unequal hierarchies within the structures of imperial Britain, Cannadine finds the

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. xix.

manifestation a display of the empire's concern with its 'construction of affinities', which he breaks down as a fixation to do 'with rank than with race':

For when, as they usually did, the British thought of the inhabitants of their empire (as they usually thought about the inhabitants of their metropolis) in *individual* (italics in original) terms rather than in collective categories, they were more likely to be concerned with rank than with race, and with the appreciation of status similarities based on perceptions of affinity.⁴⁷

According to Cannadine, imperial Britain does not incline to consider its people in racially homogenised groups. In placing the inhabitants of the empire's periphery and metropolis on parallel grounds, the quoted extract above posits the hierarchal dynamics in the colonies as simply mirroring the class systems inside the metropolitan hub. Cannadine's proposition of ornamentalism, which further into its argument raises examples of 'dark' royalties in British India and Africa, emphasises that the hierarchal vision of Britain was never about race. To Cannadine, the empire was about an effort by the imperial dominators to create a unified, interconnected social structure between the metropolis and periphery, which in turn becomes a project to have home be replicated as close as possible overseas.

Despite Cannadine's venture to gain sympathy for the empire, which I find unpersuasive, there is some value to be found in his theorising of ornamentalism. Again, his foregrounding of ornament as a tool for imperial domination is a useful perspective that shares common ground with the thesis's observations. His development of this principle through notions of visualisation, moreover, expounded by ideas of mirroring between the periphery and centre, also helpfully reinforces the prominence of framing gestures in acts of imperialism and colonialism that the thesis has set out to study with its ornamental framework. The fundamental fault of Cannadine's

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 123.

ornamentalism is that it is offered as a methodology to study the history of empire via the history of Britain. Though the method may bring to light some rationale that explains the empire's operative mechanisms, the fact remains that the mimetic uses of ornament at the periphery are set by the standards of the empire. There is then also the abundance of racialism in the empire's discursive narratives, as explored in the body of this thesis, which negates Cannadine's denial of race as a major consideration in imperial constructions of hierarchy. Rather than seeking to recover the outlook and presuppositions of those who ruled the empire, the thesis remains concerned with interpreting and theorising ornament from a position that looks into the empire from outside its structures. My model of ornamentalism is therefore much more inclined towards that of Cheng's, which instead renders the term as an approach to study the history of race and race-making.

Cheng's formulation of ornamentalism in her eponymously titled book *Ornamentalism*, published in 2019, is constructed upon an intent to 'formulate a feminist theory of and for the yellow woman'.⁴⁸ Engaging with the term 'yellow woman' rather than, for instance, the term 'Asian woman (in the West)', Cheng uses this designation in her theory to name the processes of racialisation that women 'of colour' from East Asia endures. For the yellow woman's exception from the terminological genealogy that generally makes up 'woman of colour' – 'we say black women, brown women, white women, but not yellow women'⁴⁹ – epitomises the precariousness of her injury that makes her invisible. Ornamentalism as articulated by Cheng is therefore a yellow feminist theory that takes on the material conditions upon which the yellow womanhood has been built:

I propose *ornamentalism* [italics in original] as a conceptual framework for approaching a history of racialized person-making, not through biology but through

⁴⁸ Anne Anlin Cheng, *Ornamentalism* (Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 17.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

synthetic inventions and ornamentations... ornamentalism describes the peculiar processes (legally, materially, imaginatively) whereby *personhood is named or conceived through ornamental gestures* [italics in original], which speak through the minute, the sartorial, the prosthetic, and the decorative.⁵⁰

Cheng studies the critical notions of object and personhood in tandem within her ornamental framework. Historically and culturally aestheticised, Asiatic femininity in the West, to Cheng, is a state of being fused between ‘thingness and ‘personness’. Her theory of ornamentalism is thus a theory of ontology with regards to the racialised yellow woman; the objectified oriental female has always emerged *as* ornament and *through* ornament. Ornament then becomes flesh and is flesh. Presenting her view on this critical fusing between synthetic objecthood and organic personhood as a reconceptualisation of Frantz Fanon’s ‘racial epidermal schema’,⁵¹ Cheng argues that the ornamental supraflesh is what yellow femininity has persistently come to be known by.

In line with the propositions already conveyed throughout this chapter, Cheng emphasises that Asiatic femininity as traditionally conceived in the Western racial imagination is essentially connected with the idea of style. The oriental female, while recognised by her racial difference, is principally processed by her Western spectators in terms of aesthetics; as a manifestation of fashion or expression that reflects an imagined ideal. The condition of her synthetic personhood then effects her aesthetic presence:

To speak of Asiatic femininity, then, is to speak of a *style* [emphasis added], which claims specificity but lends itself to promiscuous transferability. It designates a specific racial category but can be applied to different racial subjects. It can be enlisted by those wielding power and, more disturbingly, by those deprived of it. *It is an abstraction that materializes* [italics in original]. To recognise racial difference and ontology as style does not trivialize either but instead acknowledges that formalist abstraction can be a precondition for, not just a side effect or

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 17-18.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 1.

obfuscation of, the perception of embodiment. Race is a dream of embodiment that speaks, paradoxically, through abstract forms.⁵²

Asiatic femininity is an abstraction that materialises. In pointing out that racial difference and ontology can both be construed as style, Cheng, along an argument that echoes back to Said's scepticism of formalist practices, asserts that racialist expressions often emerge from racialist impressions, which pivot on inventive associations with homogenised cultures and their people. The Asiatic female becomes racially visualised through ornament and is herself ornamental. In turn, the generalised conceptions attached to ornamental objects may inform the opinions about her actuality and being.

Cheng's ornamental model also explicitly situates itself as stemming from and responding to the theories of orientalism prompted by Said. From the beginning of her book, Cheng has outlined the lacuna in oriental studies that her project seeks to bridge: 'Saidian Orientalism and the Foucauldian critique that it entails have not been able to focus on the peculiar materiality of Asiatic, female flesh, its impossibilities and possibilities.'⁵³ Noting Said's considerable omission of East Asia and the female figure in his theorising, Cheng deliberately makes the yellow woman the focus of her enquiry on orientalist practices. This feminist twist to the application of orientalism towards East Asia is a welcomed and lauded supplementation to the thesis's study; my formulation of ornamentalism, in a comparable manner, also deems important the role of women in the Western racial imagination of East Asia.⁵⁴ Nonetheless, there are differences between Cheng's position and my own. Cheng is reluctant to include in her theorising a self-reclaiming view of ornamental gestures:

⁵² Ibid., p. 14.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 4.

⁵⁴ For example, the two bearers of 'Chinese eyes' in Woolf's writing are women. Chapters Two and Three will discuss this further.

This account of ornamentalism differs conceptually from an existing body of scholarship on sartorial performance or self-decoration as intentional or redemptive acts of self-affirmation... Ornamentalism for me poses less a dilemma of identity than a problematic about the imbrication of personhood and materialization.⁵⁵

Her theory of ornamentalism firmly grounds itself in the ontological concerns of the aestheticised Asiatic female. Subsequently, her account of the model declines to discuss the liberating potential of decorative acts, which is a possibility I argue merits further consideration, despite her concern that it would take away from the gravity of the yellow woman's oppression. In an essay that precedes her book, titled 'Ornamentalism: A Feminist Theory for the Yellow Woman', Cheng has further expounded on her reason for the approach: 'This is not a project about retrieving human agency, because the subject under discussion here (the yellow woman) is a seriously compromised subject and, in many instances, not a subject at all.'⁵⁶ Her ornamental theory thus exclusively presses on the aesthetic consecration and desecration of the yellow woman's being.

My theorising of ornamentalism largely takes inspiration from Cheng's ornamental framework. It is likewise rooted in a postcolonial perspective against imperial and colonial violence, and motivated by a mission to place and demystify the oriental figure in Western cultural production. Yet my model of ornamentalism is not markedly a feminist theory, though it does highly regard the condition and construction of the female gender in its reflection on orientalism. It is also not purely concerned with the ontological nature of the Asiatic woman that has been aestheticised, though again this forms an important part of its enquiry. Ornamentalism as considered in the thesis more broadly associates itself with the total culture and people of East

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 19.

⁵⁶ Anne Anlin Cheng, 'Ornamentalism A Feminist Theory for the Yellow Woman', *Critical Inquiry*, 44.3 (2018), p. 429.

Asia, and in narrower terms studies the Western rendering of East Asia, especially China, that necessarily materialises via ornamental motifs and modes. The model subsequently explores as well the active function of ornament in such manifestations, which possibly diverges from Cheng's refusal to scrutinise in her theory the productive character of ornament in orientalist aesthetics. This development in my approach, however, does not need to contradict Cheng's essential interest in securing the solemnity of the yellow woman's precarious being. The scrutinisation of ornamental functions in the thesis ventures not to impart on ornament a positively redeeming quality in the context of contemporary response, but is rather an attempt to discern the logic of orientalism in early twentieth-century production. Woolf and the wider Bloomsbury circle, to return to the primary subject of the thesis, would employ oriental styles in their creative expressions to communicate the finer nuances of their political beliefs. Regardless of the problematics in their orientalist practices, therefore, there is use in understanding the formal and literal workings of ornament as materialised in such discourses. And it is only with this understanding of ornament's function, including its effective role and character in the involvement of orientalist practices, that we can bridge cultural productions of the past with international exchanges in the present on relatively fair, dynamic, and amicable grounds.

While identifying orientalism by its ornamental grammar, the modernist movements of the early twentieth century are also integrally ornamental. Given the varied nature of the period that is now contracted as 'modernism', movements within this epoch had different levels of engagement with the ornamental aesthetic. Yet borrowing from Deborah Longworth's classification of an 'ornamental modernism' in the 1920s, of which she names the Sitwells as figureheads, the modernist period indeed embraces aesthetics that are far from the classicist standards of

impersonality, restraint, and formal order by which it would later come to be known.⁵⁷ Longworth's discussion of literary modernism in her essay 'The Sitwells and Sitwellism: An Ornamental Modernism' (2017) revolves around the productions of Edith, Osbert, and Sacheverell Sitwell. She observes: 'The Sitwells loved ornament. They surrounded themselves with it, bedecked themselves and their homes with it, and filled their writing with it.'⁵⁸ Elaborating on their artistic experiments, Longworth continues to explain the aesthetic of her detected 'ornamental modernism': 'Bright, bold, and decorative, the *modus operandi* of this aesthetic was ornamentation rather than functionality. It valued extravagance over simplicity, the theatrical over the natural, and the sensual over the rational.'⁵⁹ What she presents is a movement that inclines towards urges of extravagance, performance, and eccentricity as conceptually embodied – and ultimately accomplished – by ornament. The ornamental framework is extended; ornamentalism not only nods to the decorative dimension of orientalist representation but also motions to the characteristically decorative nature of modernist movements, of which their enthusiasm for the exotic Orient forms in part their ornamentality. Though Longworth remarks on the hesitation by some of Bloomsbury's members about Sitwellian aesthetics, she suggests too that ornamental modernism can still be found in many of their projects, such as with Fry's Omega Workshop interiors, along with the general fashion for chinoiserie and the exotic at the time.⁶⁰ Fundamentally, the ornamental model intertwines with orientalist studies; nevertheless, it finds independent application as well in studies of modernism.

⁵⁷ I have in mind here, for example, the New Critical formulation of modernism.

⁵⁸ Deborah Longworth, 'The Sitwells and Sitwellism: An Ornamental Modernism', in *The Many Facades of Edith Sitwell*, ed. by Allan Pero and Gyllian Phillips (Florida Scholarship Online, 2018 [2017]) <<https://academic.oup.com/florida-scholarship-online/book/24211>> [Accessed 10 February 2025], p. 8.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.2.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

The Sitwells' manner of loving ornament – by using it in both physical demonstration and literary creation – resonates with the display of ornamental aesthetics in Bloomsbury. Indeed, the Sitwells had close social contact with the Bloomsbury circle. In her above explication on the technique of Sitwellian aesthetics, however, Longworth has posited its ornamentation in contrast to its functionality, which seems to contradict Bloomsbury's imbuelement of politics in their decoratives. Yet her claim likely denotes the classicist understanding of these ideas; modernist functionality is typically linked to an analytical approach that aspires to eliminate the superfluous. Longworth in fact also recognises the political feature of ornamental modernism: 'Postwar ornamentalism was more eclectic, fanciful, and knowing than its prewar counterpart.'⁶¹ In the uncertain scene of 1920s England, where sentiments of fear and grief still reign, '[o]rnamant was the antithesis of all that was functional, philistine, and serious in the postwar scene.'⁶² It is with this emphasis on ornament's symbolic alternative, which the previous ornamental theories have too implied, that I now turn to the utility of ornamentalism in considering the spaces in which the Orient has been ornamentalised.

The spaces in question chiefly refer to the Occident and especially the centre of the British empire where Woolf resides. It is from this space that she and other Bloomsburians, in managing their ideas of the East through ornamental production, offer their creative and intellectual discourses of the Orient to the world. As aforementioned in the previous paragraphs, the thesis's model of ornamentalism encompasses an effort to explore the cognitive and practical approaches of Bloomsbury's orientalising, which allows for contemplation on their practice. Such a consideration is more precisely an undertaking to comprehend the Occident through its imagination of the Orient, and to also reflect in this process on the ornament's position in between

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 9.

⁶² Ibid., p. 13.

spaces of foreignness and familiarity. The theories on ornamentalism by Cannadine and Cheng, as well as Longworth's ornamental view of modernism, have to varying extents suggested this intricate relation between ornament and space in their conceptual work. To peer closer into this aspect of the theorising about ornamental objects, I include as a last reference to my thinking about ornamentalism Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006).

Ahmed's queering of phenomenology develops in two senses. She conventionally takes the term 'queer' to describe sexual practices, but she interprets the term too as a way of describing what is 'oblique' or 'off line'.⁶³ Asserting 'orientation' as a core concept to her thinking about queer phenomenology, the third chapter of Ahmed's book follows both definitions to contemplate on 'the Orient' in 'orientation'. Orientation includes the perception of direction and the registration of the proximity between oneself and others; it is subsequently involved as well in the racialisation of space. Similar to Cheng's formulation of ornamentalism, Ahmed's theory partially works from Fanon's analysis of racialisation structures to suggest that 'spaces are like a second skin that unfolds in the folds of the body.'⁶⁴ Particularly, in noting the Occident's desire for the Orient, Ahmed suggests that orientalism can be considered in relation to the politics of occupation and domestication, which revolve around activities to reach the Orient that is already available as an object of perception. The alignment of race and space in her model accordingly raises the question of how these two ideas, along with the distinctions of the 'East' and the 'West', materialise to extend each other:

[O]thering can be redescribed as a form of extension, which extends bodily reach through acts of incorporation. Such processes of othering can now be described as habitual. Objects that we "tend toward" become habitual insofar as they are taken into the body, reshaping its surface... When bodies are orientated toward objects,

⁶³ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Duke University Press, 2006), p. 161.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 9.

those objects may cease to be apprehended as objects, and instead become extensions of bodily skin.⁶⁵

Proposing that whiteness takes shape through orientation towards the other, Ahmed's claim in the above discusses the reproduction of whiteness via its practice of othering. If the Orient is a racialised space, then, and if it is made up of things to be desired, it provides the object and instrument in which the Occident takes shape. Proximity to the oriental other can even confirm the whiteness of the occidental body.

Whiteness in Ahmed's theorising is thus understood as an orientation rather than a bodily characteristic. Her model on queer phenomenology goes on to link this interpretation of whiteness with ideas of inheritance regarding cultural systems, familial formations, and compulsory heterosexuality, which the thesis will refrain from specifying for now given its current concentration on formulating ornamentalism. Nonetheless, the opposite positioning of occidental and oriental spaces in Ahmed's model is explicitly presented with an explanation that is helpful to the thesis's reflection on the Orient. Ahmed expounds on the motivation for orientalism:

The Orient is not an empty place; it is full, and it is full of all that which is "not Europe" or not Occidental, and which in its "not-ness" seems to point to another way of being in the world – to a world of romance, sexuality, and sensuality. In a way, orientalism involves the transformation of "farness" as a spatial marker of distance into a property of people and places. "They" embody what is far away.⁶⁶

The Orient is full of things that are not of the Occident; to put another way, the Orient is what the Occident is not. Its fantastic character denotes what the Occident lacks but craves. To think of whiteness as an orientation is to therefore also consider the things that the Occident faces towards,

⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 131-132.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 114.

that is, its objects of love and desire. In this habit of craving, the things that are within reach of the Occident – no matter in terms of bodies, styles, or material things – become points of contact for its operation to turn the far and foreign into objects that are near and familiar. This dynamic of orientation reinforces habits of proximity and desirability; similarly, Woolf's literary orientalism unfolds not just as representational tropes but as orientations that shape her affective investment.

In closing the theorising work of this section, ornamentalism as posited in this thesis is a method to study the ornamental techniques in the orientalist productions of the early twentieth century. Asserting that the period's orientalism was largely and essentially expressed through ornament, ornamentalism is concurrently interpreted as an approach to review the orientalist representations that such ornamental constructions have conveyed. The framework of my ornamental model, which finds partial foundation upon the afore-cited theories about orientalism and ornamentalism, thus considers ornament along its principal strategies of materiality and identity. Ornamental gestures are widely available in both intellectual discourse and creative practice; the thesis, nonetheless, in particularly seeking to examine Woolf's Chinese orientalism in her literature, especially applies its formulation of ornamentalism to codes that closer suit the evaluation of literary production. Woolf's ornamentalism occurs in her description of decorative things and in the stylistic form of her texts. This manifestation of the theory includes an understanding of ornament by its role in Britain to reinforce imperial sentiments as well as to domesticate colonial objects. Ornament, moreover, in both material and discursive demonstrations, importantly contributes to aspects of modernist experimentalism that are connected with Bloomsbury. By recognising the experimental aesthetics of Woolf's writing as ornamental, ornamentalism is then too a way of exploring the political character of modernist expressions. The exotic, oriental ornament is consistently set in a liminal position between conceptual foreignness

and familiarity; the ornamental aesthetics in modernist constructions are consequently almost always entangled with motivations that engage self-reflexively with the politics of empire. And last but not least, ornamentalism entails a reflection on the necessary tie between things and persons that transpires from such processes of orientalism. The Chinese personhood is inevitably associated with the racialist representations of its identity that habitually emerge via ornament. Fundamentally, therefore, ornamentalism is above all a postcolonial theory to dismantle these synthetic gestures in the contemporary global age.

Ornamentalism is not simply a theory applied to Woolf's writing. The inherently decorative nature of Woolf's discourses on China and Chineseness establishes that ornamentalism jointly stems from her writing and develops as an inevitable approach to scrutinising such discussions across her oeuvre. Apropos of the thesis's titular components, it is a method to see from present perspectives her ornamental framing of the Orient in literary and creative practice. The urgency of this exercise is additionally boosted by Woolf's increasingly canonical status in modernist studies and the existing scholarship on twentieth-century literature, which both reflects and brings about a global expansion of her readership that is still rapidly growing. To situate ornamentalism as a postcolonial critical theory is to hence also recognise its arrival as a reaction to Woolf's work from outside the geographical and cultural scopes of her original audience; the proposed model is contextualised in global exchanges of rethinking literary narratives and heritages in the twenty-first century scene.

iii. The Postcolonial Turn, Chinese Modernity, and Global Woolf

In connecting ornamentality with orientalism, and in pinpointing orientalism as key to the founding and development of postcolonial studies, which essentially emanates from an identification of the need to consider wider international perspectives in the age of rapid globalisation, the thesis's occupation with Woolf's Chinese orientalist discourse is at root bound with the ongoing conversations in studies of world literature. In particular, the conception of this project, as touched upon in the first section of this chapter, springs from a parallel observation of the scarce attention to Woolf's discussion of China and the present academic trend of reading Woolf and China, which largely concentrates on the reception of her work. Current explorations on Woolf's relationship with China tends to either examine her influence over Chinese figures, especially of that in her exchanges with Chinese painter and writer Ling Shuhua (see Shih, Laurence, and Meng),⁶⁷ or the Chinese translations of her work, which clusters on the translated versions of *To the Lighthouse* by, respectively, translators Qu Shijing and Ma Ainong (see Zhang, Chan, and Li).⁶⁸ By way of mapping and scrutinising the discourses on China and Chineseness that could be found in Woolf's work, this study intervenes in the trend to discuss reception in the field to bring about textual materials that also demand careful inspection in scholarship on the subject. It sees the discourses on China and Chineseness that could be found in Woolf's writing as posing a direct point of contact, particularly in the context of global approaches, between Woolf's narratives and Chinese responses. Considering Woolf's now internationally canonical status in studies of twentieth-century literature, it is all the more crucial that her readers also actively question the literature that has in part inspired the shaping of their local ideas and texts. It is by

⁶⁷ Fn 6 Shih; Fn 8 Laurence ; Fn 6 Meng.

⁶⁸ Mingli Zhang, 'Empowering Mrs Ramsay: Chinese Feminist Translations of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*', *4th International Conference on Research in Humanities and Social Sciences* (2021); Leo Tak-hung Chan, 'Lily Briscoe's "Chinese Eyes": the Reading of Difference in Translated Fiction', *Quaderns: Revista de traducció*, 15 (2008), pp. 197-209; Ziyuan Li, 'Comparative Study of Two Chinese Versions of *To the Lighthouse* from Eco-feminism's View', *Journal of Education, Teaching and Social Studies*, 7.1 (2025), pp. 53-61.

tackling such discourses in the global circulation of literary works that we can continue to seek for more respectful, equal, and productive exchanges of ideas across borders.

The efforts from the limited but existing scholarship on Woolf's discussion of China are generally helpful and informed, but not without their faults. Perhaps on grounds of their entrenchment in methods that are interconnected with Western academia and its perspectives, these studies lean on lenses that view Woolf's Chinese discourses mostly from the basis of cross-cultural appreciation. In the name of keeping with global frameworks, they are inclined to step back from challenging the more nuanced problematics that are involved within Woolf's practice. What comes to mind is Laurence's *Lily Briscoe's Chinese Eyes*, which is the most extensive book in current scholarship on Woolf and China. Laurence is possibly aware of her delicate position as a white scholar on the subject; she is careful to outline her work as an attempt to map out the interrelated developments between Chinese and British modernisms in the early to mid-twentieth century. With Bloomsbury at the centre of her inquiry, therefore, her project is one that, while exploring the influence of China in Woolf's writing, also turns predominantly to the reception of Woolf in China. The book's title carries the premise of her reasoning for the approach; Laurence relates to Lily Briscoe as an English artist who, casting her eyes, travels across oceans with 'Chinese discernment'.⁶⁹ Laurence interprets Lily's 'Chinese eyes' as suggesting 'the new aesthetic voyaging in the East during the modernist period'.⁷⁰ In crediting her approach to Susan Stanford Friedman's method of a 'geopolitical thinking', which seeks to rethink modernism as centre-less, Laurence considers her reading of Woolf as contributing too to the development of this conceptual method.⁷¹ Other scholars have responded positively to Laurence's geopolitical approach to Woolf.

⁶⁹ Laurence, *Lily Briscoe's Chinese Eyes*, p. 9.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 10.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 12.

Seshagiri, who has written at least two essays on racial politics in *To the Lighthouse* that complement the concerns of my project,⁷² commends Laurence in a review of the book for the ‘critical openness’ of her arguments, noting that they ‘remain admirably free of formulaic statements about the West’s exploitation of the East’.⁷³

This motivation to study Woolf’s Chinese discourses along an understanding of pluralised modernities, away from Eurocentric formulations of modernism, could be traced to the strand of global literary study that is indeed developed by Friedman under the term of ‘planetary modernisms’,⁷⁴ and which has also been advanced by critics including Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz with, for example, the revamped concept of a ‘New Modernist Studies’.⁷⁵ In her book *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity Across Time* (2015), Friedman defines the modernisms of modernities to be in ‘the creative expressivities in all media’ across broad landscapes of time and space,⁷⁶ against the linear periodisation of modernism as a fixed movement. By expanding the context in which modernisms and modernities could occur, Friedman posits her model as a method for unthinking Euro/American centrisms in studies of the field and also as a way of including Europe as another common counterpart in historical evaluations of global interculturalism. She suggests that once we grasp modernities on a planetary level, ‘Europe becomes something of a latecomer to the world system, able to dominate by the nineteenth century for a complex of reasons [...]’.⁷⁷ Mao and Walkowitz, noting the expansive tendency in modernist scholarship, have also explained their enterprise of reframing modernist studies as driven by a need

⁷² See fn. 9.

⁷³ Urmila Seshagiri, ‘Lily Briscoe’s Chinese Eyes: Bloomsbury, Modernism, and China by Patricia Laurence’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 50.3 (2005), pp. 699-703 (p. 700).

⁷⁴ Susan Stanford Friedman, *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity Across Time* (Columbia University Press, 2015).

⁷⁵ Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, ‘The New Modernist Studies’, *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 123.3 (2008), pp. 727-748.

⁷⁶ Friedman, *Planetary Modernisms*, p. 4.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

to expand its scope temporally and spatially.⁷⁸ Their project pushes for a global view of modernism that will then shift the centre of the term away from Europe; ‘New Modernist Studies’, too, thus appears primarily interested in systematising the various discursive efforts emerging at the intersection of modernist studies and world literature.

Such theorising about the global expansion of modernist studies comes from admirable intentions. The attempts to de-centre the West in studies of modernism(s) consciously aspire to generate a more balanced power dynamic in cultural discourses on the phenomenon, and to increase attention to the modernities outside of Europe in global discussions on the subject, which my project too approves. However, the issues that remain centrally present in these formulations of planetary/global/world modernism(s) mean that my work struggles to agree with their propositions as a whole. Mao is aware of the criticisms that follow such attempts of extending ‘modernism’; in his introduction to *The New Modernist Studies* (2021), he has laid out the entangled and unresolved questions of the field’s development, that first, whether ‘modernism’ ceases to have analytical purchase, second, whether modernist studies has operated imperialistically and appropriatively, and third, if the widening of the scope of modernism is a repackaging of an honorific term as a descriptive one.⁷⁹ My response to the global extending of modernism echoes these questions and can be recast into two points of hesitation. To start with, the dilution of modernism’s scope to reach all temporal and locational spaces not only weakens its denotative meaning, but also opens doors to interpretations that reinforce the problematics of its practice. Discussing from the perspective of the thesis’s interest, for example, Friedman’s exemplification of Chinese modernity in the Tang Dynasty comes across as reinstating the

⁷⁸ Mao and Walkowitz, ‘The New Modernist Studies’, p. 737.

⁷⁹ Douglas Mao, ‘Introduction: The New Modernist Studies’, in *The New Modernist Studies*, ed. by Douglas Mao (Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 1-21, p. 8.

orientalism of the modernist habits that conceptually trap China along notions of antiquity and stagnation. Next, and perhaps more significantly, a global view of modernities, understood as processes of technological development and/or philosophical enlightenment, and modernism(s), understood as the aesthetic symptom of modernity, remains inevitably caught in an uneven discursive system. Borrowing from Rey Chow, globalisation can be understood as a form of Western imperialisation, so that talk about the global 'is more of the same old ongoing Western modernist narrative in which the enlightened beliefs in universals (inclusionism being one such universal) proceeds hand in hand with, or is the mere flip side of, the perpetuation and enforcement of cultural boundaries (that is, practices of exclusion).'⁸⁰ Even with intentions to de-centre the West, the 'global' study of modernism(s)/modernities conforms to definitions and standards that are set by those nations and institutions dominating its academic practice. It may be the case that modernist studies (or more befittingly in the global context, studies of twentieth-century literature) will one day meet a point where more balanced interactions between cultures are possible. Until that day comes, however, and to make happen the arrival of such a day, the rubrics of the study should not bypass the perspectives of those less influential in the network for the sake of constructing an artificial sense of unity.

Hence while I accept the occurrence of multiple modernities in tandem, my study draws to the traditional conclusion of a singular modernism that is located around early twentieth-century Europe as a cultural, philosophical, and artistic movement. Accordingly, my understanding of modernity too gravitates towards this notion of modernism and locates the term to denote a historical period of socio-cultural modernisation in proximity to the initial modernist movement. My propositions are principally informed by China's discourse of its own modernity in relation to

⁸⁰ Rey Chow, 'How (the) Inscrutable Chinese Led to Globalized Theory', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 116.1, pp. 69-74, p. 69.

European modernism; though the modernist project is political for everyone involved, the idea of modernism is shaped differently in Western and Chinese societies. For the West, including members of Bloomsbury, modernism signifies a search for new forms of expression, and primarily concerns itself with the aesthetic and decorative. For the Chinese, the sense of China's 'modernism' is largely associated with modernisation (i.e. modernity) in Republican China. It is in part an attempt to borrow from the West methods of reforming the Chinese nation, and is popularly viewed as both a derivative and reactionary movement against Western imperial powers. The history and complications regarding China's consideration of its own modernity can be traced to the very term that is first used to describe 'modern' or 'modernist' in Chinese. The term 'modeng' (摩登) only emerged in 1930s China and is a clear, syllabic transcription of the English word. This cultural practice of employing a transcriptive term for the idea demonstrates the profound embeddedness of the notion of Western originality in the conception of Chinese modernity. Even with the switch to the translated term of 'xiandai' (現代) in later Chinese discourses on the subject, a periodising and geographical logic of the 'modern' thus evidently exists in China's reflection on its codes of modernity and modernism.

Given the specific conditions of Chinese modernity, it is imperative to dive deeper into the nuances behind the narratives of a different but fair knowledge exchange that Laurence, for example, among others, has put forward with regards to the West and China during the modernist era (and beyond). There are certainly Chinese scholars who have also chosen to refrain from challenging the dynamic in their analysis of modernism's interaction with China; Zhaoming Qian, in his work on Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, has presented a policy of reading modernist orientalism with the model of 'instinctive affinity', which puts emphasis on the Self in

the Other in cross-cultural attractions of literature.⁸¹ This strategy is reasonable when applied solely to the modernists' formal interests, but it does not appear to have deliberated on the positional privilege inherent in engaging with another culture on the basis of pure aesthetics. Qian's strategy might even have succumbed to what Chow has called a 'coerced mimeticism', which gestures to the desire to imitate the narratives, styles, and standards of a powerful other so as to attain the recognition of that other in the global system. Chow also notes the symptom of this mimetic effect on China's writing in modernity:

From the standpoint of the Chinese state, it was as if Chineseness had, in the twentieth century, become the burden of an ethnicity that was marginalised to the point of unintelligibility – and the only way to be intelligible, to regain recognition in a world perpetually ignorant of and indifferent to Chinese history, was by going realist and mimetic: to institute, officially, that writing correspond faithfully to the life of the Chinese nation as an ethnic unit.⁸²

According to Chow's observation, therefore, the process of mimeticism in the context of Chinese modernity may occur from the internal, as the Chinese writer asserting representative authority of China to the 'global', or from the external, as the non-Chinese scholar proclaiming expertise about China and its literature. In Eric Hayot's extension of Chow's mimetic theory to the aesthetics, he similarly points out that in the modernising culture, which often sees a separation of the aesthetic from the political, social, or even technological, the arts and aesthetics occupy an especially significant position in China's desire to gain an international recognition of its own modernity. This is because the aesthetic arena is capable of demonstrating the contemporary legitimacy of China's tradition that success in other arenas dominated by West at the time, such as military

⁸¹ Zhaoming Qian, *Orientalism and Modernism: The Legacy of China in Pound and Williams* (Duke University Press, 1995), p. 6.

⁸² Rey Chow, 'Introduction: On Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem', *boundary 2*, 25.3 (1998), pp. 1-24, p. 19.

technology, cannot.⁸³ In turn, the temporal burden of mimetic desire becomes a question that scholars concerned with China's modernity find themselves grappling with; the heavy influence of Anglo-European modernists over the output of Chinese literature in the 1980s, for instance, seems to suggest that the literary development of China is 'behind the times' from a formal perspective. I do not intend to suggest here that Chinese modernity is thus simply an imitation of European modernism; the literary production of China's attempt to modernise itself in the early twentieth century materialises through a culturally dynamic and hybrid process that I will refrain from getting into the specifics of in this thesis, considering the thesis's principal focus on Woolf's Chinese orientalism. Nevertheless, it is noticeable that discussions about modernity and modernist literature in China are intimately entangled with a notion of comparability with the West, and are rooted in a historical understanding of Chinese modernisation. It is true that imitative practices did occur between the West and China – and more generally between all core and peripheral cultures – in reciprocal directions. Even so, the motivations and power dynamics between these acts of imitation are different and require distinct approaches to reading.

In my thinking about the methods to be used for approaching Woolf's writing on China, therefore, I find some critiques of the 'global' field by Chinese scholars who are less implicated, methodologically and institutionally, in the narratives of Western theory immensely helpful. My fascination with these critiques is also a reflection of my position as a scholar who is, given my educational training and current institution, on the one hand undeniably entangled with Western discourses whilst, on the other hand, reading with 'Chinese eyes' from an ethnic and cultural viewpoint. This perspective is also exposed in the positionality of my thesis, which, rather than seeking a global expansion of modernist studies in *content* (that is, to boost the inclusion of non-

⁸³ Eric Hayot, 'Chinese Modernism, Mimetic Desire, and European Time', in *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, ed. by Mark Wollaeger and Matt Eatough (Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 149-172, p. 154.

Western works in the canon), is more occupied with the *form* of its disciplinarity within the expansion (that is, the historical and political forces that are driving our reassessment of the canon). The analysis above already shows that Chow has been one such influence on me. Chow's contemplation in *Ethics after Idealism: Theory-Culture-Ethnicity-Reading* (1998) on the hierarchisation of cultures, which she relates to the tradition of idealism, has also contributed to my methodology of reading. Her theoretical framework is set against the idealism at the heart of identity politics; to reject the idealisation of the non-West, Chow suggests, is to make known its particularities, complexities, and even negativities to the point of bringing it out of its mythologised condition 'known perfunctorily as an "alternative" to the West'.⁸⁴ Essentially, Chow's approach works consciously from a non-Western, and ultimately Chinese, outlook that she then exercises towards institutionalised accounts. More significant to the formulation of my methodology, and more recent, is Kuan-Hsing Chen's call in *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (2010) for East Asian-specific approaches towards cultural studies and the study of imperial histories. Chen's theoretical model 'puts the history of colonialism and imperialism back into globalization studies'. Like Chow, he recognises that global concepts in the present are moulded by attempts 'to replace the anticommunism-pro-Americanism structure' and are masquerading behind the same system.⁸⁵ His engagement with academic discourse lies in a concern with the social world; he finds it necessary 'to ground ourselves in the cultures of our own' when interacting with intellectual practice.⁸⁶ If Asian studies in Asia are simply studies, Chen notes, all studies are in fact done in relation to one's own living space, and it is only on this basis that we can begin to properly address the issues arising from our explorations of other discourses. Hence

⁸⁴ Rey Chow, *Ethics after Idealism: Theory-Culture-Ethnicity-Reading* (Indiana University Press, 1998), p. xxi.

⁸⁵ Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Duke University Press, 2010), p. 9.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

to read Woolf with my Chinese eyes implies a demand to also reflect on her narrative from the cultural space(s) that have formed my perspective and identity. This naturally includes a celebration of the elements, and especially the formal particularities, that have brought about the now world-wide praise for her work. Despite Woolf's achievements, nonetheless, there is a genuine need to challenge and revise as well the problematic nuances in her (racialist) portrayals if we are to sincerely extend global reading practices.

The emphasis on visual arts in the discourses that choose to prioritise the features of Chinese modernity over global theory is too a source of encouragement for my methodological framework. Christopher Bush's discussion on the role of images in East Asia's impact on Euro-American modernism, which he expounds in his chapter 'Modernism, Orientalism, and East Asia' (2013), has been particularly valuable to my deliberation on the decorative and pictorial aspects of Woolf's orientalist discourse about China. Noting that aesthetics have always been more accessible through art than through literature, Bush attributes 'the supposed universality of the visual' to the direction of oriental emulations in modernist projects.⁸⁷ He suggests, moreover, that the omnipresence of 'Asian aesthetics' in the art, craft, and commodity of the twentieth-century West was understood to embody another worldview pointing to 'the undeniable contemporaneity of East Asia'.⁸⁸ Sought as the latest style, 'East Asian' influence thus inevitably made its way to the aesthetic form of literary texts. While Bush helps to explicate the development of the visual in modernist literary innovations, Chow again takes on a more confrontational approach to this visual observation in modernist activities. Chow's criticism finds common ground with Bush's analysis in its attention to the ideogram. Locating the replication of ideographic ideas specifically in

⁸⁷ Christopher Bush, 'Modernism, Orientalism, and East Asia', in *A Handbook of Modernism Studies*, ed. by Jean-Michel Rabaté (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2013), pp. 193-208, p. 197.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

Derrida's deconstruction of Western logocentrism, Chow points out that the perpetuation of stereotypes, which she frames as 'always implicated in visuality by virtue of the fact that the other is imagined as and transformed into (sur)face',⁸⁹ operates through enduring notions of inscrutable Chineseness that are long embedded in so-called intellectual climates. The face of Chinese writing and the face of the Chinese person then converge to become in the Western consciousness a mere exterior that is impenetrable. Such evaluations on the centrality of visuals in modernist orientalism will continue to be made throughout the thesis. There is no doubt, as has been established in the chapter's first section, that Woolf's orientalist discourse on China and Chineseness predominantly materialises through visual imagery. Nonetheless, it is important to indicate that my tripartite model of reading Woolf's China – in terms of the Orient, ornament, and pictorial structure – is congenial with the considerations that have begun to emerge in the burgeoning scholarship on modernism's relationship with East Asia.

Building on the considerations discussed in this Introduction, the thesis proceeds to examine Woolf's portrayals of China and the ways in which she constructs the notion of Chineseness in her texts. While its four discussion chapters are largely organised according to the chronological stages of Woolf's literary career, thematic emphases within each chapter necessitate a degree of temporal overlap between them. The thesis, therefore, offers a synchronic reading of Woolf's literature and concurrently observes diachronically the development of her writing interests and style. Chapter One focuses on the formative years of Woolf's development as a writer. Drawing on her early reviews, letters, and diary entries, the chapter looks at the common motifs and impressions that Woolf connects to the East Orient and especially China. In particular, the chapter explores Woolf's association of China with pagoda, porcelain, and sartorial imageries

⁸⁹ Chow, 'How (the) Inscrutable Chinese Led to Globalized Theory', p. 73.

within the context of British customs, which she demonstrates in her reviews of Charlotte Lorrimer's *The Call of the East* (1907), Max von Boehn and Oskar Fischel's *Modes and Manners of the Nineteenth Century, as Represented in the Pictures and Engravings of the Time* (1910), and Pu Songling's *Strange Stories from the Lodge of Leisures* (1913). The chapter's discussion of relevant chinoiserie tastes and practices also extends to texts that slightly exceed the temporal scope of Woolf's early stage as a writer, including her short fiction 'A Society' (1921) and her reflections on the formalist views of Roger Fry and Clive Bell.

Continuing with such observations on Woolf's engagement with Chinese aesthetics, Chapter Two studies the incorporation of related reflections in her initial creative writing. In Woolf's early novels, her references to China typically support the situational and ideological content of her work. The chapter particularly examines these manifestations in relation to Woolf's developing politics of empire, race, and gender in *The Voyage Out* (1915), alongside the original manuscript for the novel, *Melymbrosia* (1912), as well as in *Night and Day* (1919). Her connected discussion of eugenics in these early novels prompts the chapter to also extend slightly into her later novels, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927), in order to follow her treatment of similar politics. In Woolf's early short fictions, where she adopts a more formally experimental approach, her engagement with China materialises more prominently in the stylistic and structural design of her narratives. Linking the notions of race and object at the intersection of mixed lineages, the chapter hence also conducts close readings of her short fictions 'The Mark on the Wall' (1917), 'Kew Gardens' (1919), and 'Solid Objects' (1920). The chapter then further connects the conceptual ideas of objects with those of fiction forms in Woolf's short stories composed around *Mrs Dalloway*, including 'Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street' (1923), 'The New Dress' (1924), 'The Man who Loved His Kind', and 'A Summing up'.

Chapter Three focuses its analyses on two of Woolf's most popular novels, *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. Taking as a departure Woolf's trope of Chinese eyes, which appears in both novels and has become her most widely cited example of Chinese orientalism in contemporary scholarship on Woolf and China, the chapter explores her visual strategies in the formal and thematic aspects of these technically mature works. It demonstrates how Woolf's portrayals of appearance, race, and aesthetics shape her articulation of artistic and political visions, which reinforces and elaborates on earlier discussions of eugenics and gender in the thesis. The chapter also examines the textual history of these novels by observing their manuscript drafts to reveal the process through which Woolf arrives at her use of Chinese imagery in the final versions of the books. The chapter, moreover, studies the cultural context of Woolf's writing through contemporary reviews of the novels. Within the prevailing narratives of her time, Woolf's search for alternative modes of expression through Chinese depictions thus constitutes a notable attempt towards cross-cultural interaction and understanding.

Lastly, Chapter Four moves from an emphasis on figurative motifs to form, which the chapter discusses through Woolf's references to opium, race, and illness. Covering a broader temporal scope, therefore, the chapter scrutinises the extension of Woolf's opium discourse to her ideas about sensory description and, finally, prose poetry. The chapter opens with an examination of these topics in 'Java Head' (1919) and 'On Being Ill' (1926). Identifying the opium-eating Thomas De Quincey as a key influence on Woolf's prose form, it goes on to study her reflections on the writer in 'The English Mail Coach' (1906), 'Impassioned Prose' (1926), and 'De Quincey's Autobiography' (1932), a connection that also informs her creative characterisation of Augustus Carmichael in *To the Lighthouse* (1927). The chapter further examines Woolf's developed formulations on the features of prose poetry in 'Poetry, Fiction, and the Future' (1927) and

‘Foreword to *Recent Paintings by Vanessa Bell*’ (1930). Turning to the historical implications of opium on Sino-British politics, the latter part of the chapter subsequently considers Woolf’s engagement with Hong Kong in her writing. It reads the dynamics of her relationship with the occupied region in ‘Thunder at Wembley’ (1924), as well as through her research notes for Leonard Woolf’s *Empire and Commerce in Africa* and in her letters and diary entries. This final chapter closes the discussions of the thesis on a personal note – it positions my own heritage in Hong Kong as a lens through which to complete my study of Woolf and China.

Chapter One

1882-1914: Early Chinese Fantasies

Adeline Virginia Woolf (née Stephen) was born into an affluent and typically Victorian household in Kensington, London, in 1882. Consequently, and like many of her peers from the same generation, Woolf found herself grappling with the transition from late Victorianism to early twentieth-century modernity between her formative years and early adulthood. This chapter's periodisation of Woolf's initial activities, from the year of her birth until 1914, follows the broader definition of the Victorian era (encompassing the Edwardian reign) up to the outbreak of the First World War. My decision for this cut-off point is also guided by Woolf's publication of three reviews during this initial stage of her writing career, which together form a helpful source for studying Woolf's earliest reflections on China and Chineseness. These three reviews, respectively titled in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf* as 'The Call of the East' (1907), 'Modes and Manners of the Nineteenth Century' (1910), and 'Chinese Stories' (1913), will be explored in the body of this chapter's discussion; the first and third reviews are further given substantial consideration in the latter sections of this chapter. Before turning to analyse these texts, however, it is important to recognise that long before Woolf began writing about China, she was already surrounded by Chinese presences in things and conversations. After all, by the turn of the twentieth century, oriental styles had taken up a ubiquitous influence on the cultivation of British aesthetics and taste.

1.1 Pagodas, Bloomsbury, and Woolf's Formalist Aesthetics

My delving into Woolf's Chinese tropes, which I have executed by the same mapping method as demonstrated in my Introduction, has brought me to observe more closely her mention of pagodas during this early phase of her writing.⁹⁰ This is not to suggest that Woolf only uses the trope in the beginning of her career; her reference to pagodas can be found throughout her oeuvre, though it is true that pagodas are depicted more frequently in Woolf's early works when her impression of China was still shaped by the more prevalent signs of the place as embedded in the Western consciousness. Nor, despite my focus on her writing of China, am I implying that Woolf's employment of the pagoda trope is necessarily and simply associated with her ideas of Chineseness. Even in the context of her early writing, her discussions of pagodas point too to other Eastern locations, including Japan and Turkey.⁹¹ Nevertheless, it is indeed the repeated specification of 'Chinese pagoda(s)' in her early publications that has sparked my examination of the trope.⁹² In 'Modes and Manners of the Nineteenth Century', for instance, Woolf's figurative inclusion of pagodas comes with an instinctive supposition that they are Chinese. I will soon expound on this detail in the paragraphs to follow. More generally, however, the pagodas referenced in Woolf's discourses are oftentimes either without clear cultural identification, or, in a similar spirit with her stylistic usage of the trope, gesture to the decorative pagodas in Britain that were built from efforts to artistically imitate a blend of Eastern traditions. Ultimately, it could be understood that Woolf's interpretation of pagodas, which in her wider oeuvre serves as a characteristic example of her exotic experimentalism, derives from a local habit of orientalism that precedes her time.

⁹⁰ See Appendix A for my 'Pagoda Woolf' poem, which I have created with the same method as laid out in my Introduction.

⁹¹ See, for example, line 3 of 'Pagoda Woolf' in Appendix A; Woolf has also written on her visit to St Sophia in PA, p. 247.

⁹² See lines 18, 21, and 22 of 'Pagoda Woolf' in Appendix A.

In East, South, and Southeast Asia, a pagoda is a sacred structure characterised by a tiered tower form with multiple projecting eaves. The structure usually consists of progressively diminishing storeys, each with an ornamented roof. In the West, a pagoda becomes an ornamental building in imitation of such temple structures.⁹³ One of the earliest recorded appearances of the word ‘pagoda’ occurs in *The First Booke of the Historie of the Discoverie and Conquest of the East Indians* (1582), translated by Nicholas Lichefield: ‘All the Kings doe dye in one Pagode, which is the house of praier to their Idolls.’⁹⁴ In a British architectural context, an early usage of the word could also be found in Lady Eleanor Butler’s 1789 journal: ‘He wanted to ascend the Pagoda at Kew which being too publick they would not permit him.’⁹⁵ Notably, Woolf herself would later refer to the Pagoda at Kew in her writing, a subject that the present and following chapters will continue to examine. Woolf’s engagement with pagodas can be traced as far back as the entries in her early journals. The Royal Pavilion in Brighton, in particular, was for a while one such structure that Woolf observed. On 21 April, 1897, Woolf made a passing remark about the pavilion that would become her first recorded mention of pagoda towers: ‘Father took Nessa and me for a walk along the Parade to the Steine or someplace of that kind – near the Pagoda at the other end of Brighton’.⁹⁶ On 5 June, 1922, in a letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell, she would further make a more intentional comment relating to the pavilion: ‘We are just in from hearing Margaret Davies address 1600 cooperators in George 4ths pagoda at Brighton – a great success.’⁹⁷ The Brighton Pavilion that Woolf saw was initially constructed as a seaside retreat for King George IV.

⁹³ See also ‘pagoda’, *Oxford English Dictionary* (2005)

<https://www.oed.com/dictionary/pagoda_n?tab=meaning_and_use> [accessed 9 February 2026]. The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides a history of the word ‘pagoda’ and traces its entry into the English language.

⁹⁴ Fernão Lopes de Castanheda, *The First Booke of the Historie of the Discoverie and Conquest of the East Indians*, trans. by Nicholas Lichefield, Book 1, Ch. xiv, p. 34.

⁹⁵ Eleanor Butler, *Journal*, 4 February, in E.M. Bell (ed.), *Hamwood Papers* (1930), vii, p. 180.

⁹⁶ Woolf, in PA, ed. Mitchell A. Leaska, (London: Hogarth Press, 1990), p. 73.

⁹⁷ Woolf, in L 2, p. 532.

The structure evolved from his time as Prince of Wales; though its exterior took on a more neo-classical direction under Henry Holland's supervision of the construction in 1787, John Nash transformed the building into a lush Indian design when he took over the project in 1815. Nonetheless, the final design of the pavilion, which George took a keen interest in, would have aligned with the King's orientalist taste. Even in 1801, Holland was called to design a Chinese exterior for some additional wings of the pavilion, though this assignment never went through.⁹⁸ Nash's subsequent renovation of the pavilion's exterior, while largely Indian-inspired, then mixes a variety of Eastern elements into its construction to achieve the pavilion's eclectically luxurious look. Notably, the two upswept roofs on either side of the pavilion's central dome are influenced by Chinese architectural styles.⁹⁹ The interior of the pavilion also holds a largely chinoiserie decorative scheme owing to the talents of Nash and John Crace, an artist-decorator who specialised in Chinese and Asian artefacts. To recapitulate on the design of the Brighton Pavilion, therefore, it is the result of a vision drawn decoratively from several Eastern traditions to create a magnificent oriental fantasy. Woolf would go on to occupy her thoughts with other domestic pagodas; Chapter Two continues by examining her writing on the Chinese-inspired pagoda at Kew Gardens.¹⁰⁰ In any case, it is undeniable that Woolf's gaze towards the East in her early life would have been informed by such artistic manifestations of the faraway Orient.

This notion of the East as an aesthetic concept can be seen to emerge in Woolf's expressions. Returning to her review of Max von Boehn and Oskar Fischel's *Modes and Manners of the Nineteenth Century, as Represented in the Pictures and Engravings of the Time* (1909), which was

⁹⁸ David Beevers, *The Royal Pavilion: The Official Guide to the Palace of King George IV* (Jarrold Publishing, 2020), p. 11.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁰⁰ The Great Pagoda at Kew Gardens, designed in 1757 by Sir William Chambers, was inspired by his observation of architectural builds during his time in China.

published in the *Times Literary Supplement* on 24 February, 1910, Woolf uses the phrase ‘Chinese pagodas’ as part of her discourse to describe Victorian fashion. In her essay, Woolf mulls over the significance of knowing history via modes and manners, which she interprets as ‘how we feel and dress’.¹⁰¹ Going through the ‘innumerable coloured pictures’ in the book,¹⁰² Woolf reflects on the connection between dress and character, and eventually on the progression of women’s clothes:

Now the skirt begins to grow, until it trails for six feet upon the ground; suddenly the spirit leaps to the throat, and creates a gigantic ruff there, while the skirt shrinks to the knees; then it enters the hair, which immediately rises in the pinnacles of Salisbury Cathedral; a slight swelling appears beneath the skirt; it grows, alarmingly; at last a frame has to support the flounces; next the arms are attacked; they imitate Chinese pagodas; steel hoops do what they can to relieve them. The hair, meanwhile, has subsided. The lady has outgrown all cloaks, and only a vast shawl can encompass her. Suddenly, without warning, the entire fabric is pricked [...]¹⁰³

This extract creatively describes the development of women’s clothes from the early nineteenth century to the turn of the twentieth century. Considering the illustrative nature of Fischel and von Boehn’s book, Woolf’s reflection on *Modes and Manners* is likewise exceedingly visual. Her pictorial portrayal of the clothes in this passage, achieved through a string of figurative expressions, appears to mimic the illustrative images found in the book. It is then within this sequence of description that Woolf brings up Chinese pagodas.

Here, in this descriptive sequence, Chinese pagodas are used by Woolf to construct in part her vision of the Victorian dress. Specifically, the sleeves of Victorian dresses are compared to Chinese pagodas. This literary decision, which offers one of Woolf’s earliest printed references to Chineseness, therefore also reveals the aesthetic foundation to her comprehension of exotic things.

¹⁰¹ Woolf, ‘Modes and Manners of the Nineteenth Century’, *Times Literary Supplement* [1910], in L 1, p. 331.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 333.

The pagoda trope provides a vivid point of reference in Woolf's visual narrative. And yet, evidently, Chinese pagodas are not the only source of architectural suggestion in this extract. In her hyperbolic account of Victorian fashion, Woolf also refers to 'the pinnacles of Salisbury Cathedral' that could be described of Victorian hair. Her combining of Chinese pagodas and the Salisbury Cathedral into the same imagery becomes a particularly intriguing arrangement. Both structures, though of different cultural locations, gesture to ideas of the ancient. The figurative nuances in this sequence thus encourage layers of political reading that I will continue to elucidate in the below. In brief, through her pairing of the pagoda and the cathedral, Woolf appears to be 'domesticating' the exotic while also 'exoticising' the domestic – her placing of both structures on the same plane suggests that while she associates East Asia with notions of the primitively decorative, she also implies that Victorian England is as theatrical and primitive as the Orient. Woolf's feminist position comes through clearly in her contemplation of nineteenth-century modes and manners; nevertheless, the extracted description further reveals her attitude towards China in relation to her thinking about both British history and modernity.

Woolf's syntactical ambiguity in her depiction of Victorian sleeves warrants some attention. When the meaning of 'arms' is extended to include the notion of weapons, her connection of arms with Chinese pagodas may be read as an allusion to the martial attacks against China under the British imperial project. In this context, Chineseness as seen from Woolf's Western perspective, and especially during the early twentieth century, could be associated with China's military defeats since the 1839 Opium War. Significantly, the Opium Wars were landmark events to the Victorian era's expansionist ambitions. Even at the beginning of her pondering on China, then, Woolf's text seems to allow for a reading that alludes to the ideologies of the British empire. Her opening contextualisation of history in the essay, which connects the spectral nature of '[w]ars and

ministries and legislation' with the performative quality of fashion, also bolsters the political dimension of this interpretation.¹⁰⁴ The reflections in Woolf's writing would increasingly transform into a stronger anti-imperial sentiment in her future narratives, which the next chapters will continue to examine. At the moment, however, to scrutinise the immediate premise of Woolf's discourse in 'Modes and Manners', her discussion of Chineseness is curiously and inevitably linked with the restrictive structures of Victorian dresses. To be sure, Woolf's politics in this review more noticeably conveys her criticism against the Victorian patriarchy and its codes of conduct for women. It is consequently all the more compelling that she has in this discourse aligned Victorian dresses and Chinese pagodas along similar impressions of repression and violence.

In making this connection between Victorianism and Chineseness, which Woolf groups in contradiction to the newer practices of her contemporary age, she is pitting these two concepts against her budding ideals of modernity. Woolf's discussion of Victorianism and Chineseness in 'Modes and Manners' inclines towards the aesthetic; both concepts operate in her review on primarily decorative terms, as exemplified by the flamboyant Victorian dress and the ornamental Chinese pagoda. Her alignment of Victorianism and Chineseness on a shared paradigm, furthermore, suggests a correlation between Victorian outmodedness and Chinese primitivism in her discursive logic. While this correlation operates within such a framework, however, the image of Chinese pagodas in the extract simultaneously functions as part of her criticism against Victorian aesthetics and values. The pagodas, typified by their Chineseness, are for this reason also valuable to Woolf in her narrative. Chineseness hence occupies a different role from ideas of Victorian outmodedness in Woolf's attempt to distinguish her own position from the previous century. In her review, the notion of Chineseness gestures towards both ideas of antiquity and renewal;

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 330.

Chineseness, as an aesthetic ideal, thus occupies a liminal position between temporal backwardness and formal innovation in Woolf's imagination.

Woolf, considering Chineseness in aesthetic rather than racial terms, has in 'Modes and Manners' imagined Chineseness to be a quality that is decorative and wearable. Yet, and referencing back to Anne Anlin Cheng's ornamental theorising of the yellow women,¹⁰⁵ such practices of rendering Chineseness into an aesthetic style is ultimately intertwined with acts of racialising Chinese personhood. More widely, the romanticising of whole cultures through stereotypical impressions causes insensitive performances of race that thrive on imagining the other as a consumable thing. Woolf's reference to Chinese pagodas in 'Modes and Manners' would not be her last instance of converting a culture into a performative costume. Her participation in two additional events that took place around the same period, namely, the Dreadnought Hoax and the Post-Impressionist Ball, similarly demonstrates her exploitation of other cultures as decorative attires.

Just seventeen days before the publication of 'Modes and Manners', on 7 February, 1910, Woolf and her friends in the Bloomsbury Group dressed up as Abyssinian royals to access the HMS Dreadnought battleship. Masterminded by Horace de Vere Cole, the Bloomsbury Group executed the practical joke by decking themselves in elaborate robes and darkening their faces with makeup. Quentin Bell would later recall in his biography of Woolf that she on that day 'wore a turban, a fine gold chain hanging to her waist and an embroidered caftan. Her face was black. She sported a very handsome moustache and beard'.¹⁰⁶ The following year, in 1911, Woolf likewise showed up to the Post-Impressionist Ball with her sister, Vanessa Bell, in an oriental costume. The ball, staged at Crosby Hall, was held to celebrate the end of Roger Fry's exhibition

¹⁰⁵ Cheng's theory of 'Ornamentalism' has been discussed in my Introduction.

¹⁰⁶ Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography* (Pimlico, 1996 [1972]), I, p. 157.

Manet and the Post-Impressionists. The Stephen sisters' appearance at the ball was thus inspired by the painted displays shown at the art exhibition. Vanessa remembers dressing in the style of a female figure from one of Paul Gauguin's paintings: 'We wore brilliant flowers and beads, we browned our legs and arms and had very little on beneath the draperies'.¹⁰⁷ Quentin, too, later writes about the sisters' sartorial parade in an echoing description of the event: 'Vanessa and Virginia had gone to the Post-Impressionist Ball as bare-shouldered bare-legged Gauguin girls, almost – as it seemed to the indignant ladies who swept out in protest – almost naked'.¹⁰⁸ Both Vanessa's and Quentin's accounts reflect the combined affront of nudity and primitivism that has prompted the sisters' choice for their evening wear. Woolf, in a letter to Molly MacCarthy, dated March 1911, further took obvious glee in her own masquerading as one of Gauguin's Tahitian girls: 'Was I less alarming as a savage – or as bad as ever?'.¹⁰⁹

Woolf's behaviours in the Dreadnought Hoax and the Post-Impressionist Ball are undoubtedly racist performances. Despite the inherent problematics in her mimicking of orientalist stereotypes, however, these two racial masquerades are at their centre driven by the politics of Bloomsbury to challenge the fabric of imperial British society. Woolf's political motivations for both events do not imply that her insensitive decisions should thus be excused, though her orientalism in these early activities could be understood as misjudged endeavours to poke fun at the empire's artificial establishments. The Dreadnought Hoax was more than a prank; it was orchestrated by the Bloomsbury Group to ridicule the rigid hierarchies and ceremonial grandeurs underpinning Britain's naval confidence.¹¹⁰ Similarly, Woolf's display of sexual

¹⁰⁷ R.S. Koppen, *Virginia Woolf: Fashion and Literary Modernity* (Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 25, qtd. in Hermoine Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (Vintage, 1997), p. 291.

¹⁰⁸ Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography* (Pimlico, 1996 [1972]), I, p. 170.

¹⁰⁹ Woolf, in L 2, p. 455.

¹¹⁰ At the time, the recently launched HMS Dreadnought battleship was intended to showcase the supremacy of the British Royal Navy.

freedom at the Post-Impressionist Ball was intended to cause discomfort in the same public that had been outraged by the primitive subjects of Fry's Post-Impressionist exhibition. Her and Vanessa's bold attires were hence worn to expose the classist, sexist, and artistic snobbishness of the British public. In both cases, Woolf's personal engagement with primitive aesthetics also becomes a public proclamation of her political convictions for British modern society. The exotic, oriental aesthetic is again grasped by Woolf along visualisations of primitivism, yet the aesthetic also takes on a significant role in her innovations with ideology and expression.

Such sartorial gestures would moreover make their way into Woolf's literary writing. Woolf later writes about the Dreadnought Hoax in fiction form; the plot in her short story 'A Society' (1921) centres on a society of women who, eager to understand the world as 'civilised' by men, vow not to bear children until they are satisfied with this knowledge. One member thus pursues her quest by going aboard a Royal Navy ship dressed as 'an Aethiopian Prince'.¹¹¹ Another camouflages herself as a male reviewer to examine literatures at the London Library, and a third disguises herself as a charwoman to access the professorial houses of Oxbridge, etc. The issue at heart in this story concerns the ceremonial nature of British civilisation, which Woolf mocks through a strategic appropriation of social modes and manners in the events of her short fiction. The identities of important men are boiled down to the ornamental signifiers that support their statuses and lifestyles. Rose, for example, who visits the Royal Navy ship, returns to the society with notes upon 'Honour', which she announces is attained between men through the cane. Her attention alludes to the ceremonial 'punishment' imposed on Cole by naval officers following the Dreadnought Hoax, during which he received six symbolic taps on the hindquarters with a stick

¹¹¹ Woolf, 'A Society', in CSF, p. 126.

and was permitted to reciprocate, thus producing a curious exchange.¹¹² Rose's dressing up as an Ethiopian prince also becomes a necessary approach to her discovery of British civilisation. The Ethiopian costume, in all its theatricality, is a carnivalesque match to the ceremonial principles that are approved by the British Navy; importantly, the costume further grants her admission to places that she, as a woman, cannot freely cross. Rose's Ethiopian wear, together with Woolf's Abyssinian (i.e. Ethiopian) and Tahitian dresses, consequently function as symbols that enable societal, gender, and cultural crossings. R.S. Koppen, in her book chapter 'Modern Clothes-consciousness' (2009), usefully encapsulates a similar position in her summary of Woolf's (and Bloomsbury's) sartorial politics: Woolf has with her exotic clothes performed a 'sartorial crossing of boundaries of "civilised" and "primitive", man and woman, English and Oriental'.¹¹³ While 'A Society' reveals Woolf's conscious reflection on the politics of her costumes, Woolf's lessons from the hoax and the ball would stick with her for much longer. Notably, in her 1928 novel *Orlando: A Biography*, Woolf also alludes to these themes via the Chinese robe: Orlando, exploring the fluidity of her identity, could be found 'spending her morning in a China robe of ambiguous gender'.¹¹⁴ Woolf's inclusion of the Eastern attire in this scene, which adds an orientalist flourish, allows her to explore the gender fluidity inherent in a garment that, though 'exotic' in cultural origin, was already circulating in the West as an alternative to Britain's entrenched codes of dress and gender.

¹¹² See *The Bloomsbury Group: A Collection of Memoirs and Commentary*, ed. by S.P. Rosenbaum (University of Toronto Press, 1995). Woolf's younger brother, Adrian Stephen, wrote about the hoax in 1936: 'The evening before my cousin and another naval officer had arrived at his house and asked to see him. Cole received them in his sitting-room, and they announced that they had come to avenge the honour of the Navy [...] Eventually Cole made a proposal: he would agree to be beaten if he was allowed to reply in kind. This was agreed to, and the whole party adjourned to a quiet back street. Here they were safe from interruption, either from Cole's manservant or from the public, and here six ceremonial taps were administered to Cole's hindquarters, and six ceremonial taps were administered by him in return.'

¹¹³ R.S. Koppen, *Virginia Woolf: Fashion and Literary Modernity* (Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 25.

¹¹⁴ Woolf, O, p. 153.

Nevertheless, Woolf's aesthetic abstraction of racial and cultural identities invites critical reproval. Her orientalist practices are admittedly typical of her time; the Dreadnought Hoax and Post-Impressionist Ball were organised and also participated in by other members of the Bloomsbury Group. The popularisation of formalist art theory in Bloomsbury, of which Fry's Post-Impressionist exhibitions stand as both symptom and reinforcement, would have accordingly influenced Woolf's habit of engaging with other cultures in largely aesthetic terms. Fry and Clive Bell, close friends of Woolf's, were key developers of aesthetic Formalism in early twentieth-century Britain. Their arguments on the subject fundamentally posit a formal approach to all works of art by purely visual and materialist values. The influence of these deliberations can also be detected in Woolf's own imaginative ideals of Chineseness. This exercise of incorporating Chinese aesthetics into her work, furthermore, will last until the rest of her writing career, as my thesis continues to show. To study more comprehensively Woolf's interaction with Bloomsbury's Formalism, it is useful here to fast forward temporarily and observe from my Introduction the last part of the 'public' stanza of my 'Chinese Woolf' poem, from lines 114 to lines 131, which displays Woolf's mentions of the word 'Chinese' in her biography of Fry. Her complete deployment of the word in *Roger Fry: A Biography* (1940) significantly makes up about a fifth of the stanza. This biography was the last book that Woolf saw to publication before her death in 1941; it is clear, therefore, that Bloomsbury's formalist activities – including with, but not limited to, ideas of Chineseness – were still on her mind to the end of her life.

Given Fry's significant impact on Woolf's thinking about Chinese aesthetics, his prose on the subject serves as an important source to her contemplation of the matter. In particular, I look at his essays in *Vision and Design* (1920) and *Transformations* (1926), which Woolf reviewed in her biography of Fry under two chapters eponymously titled after the essay collections. Turning to

the former, which Fry compiled from old articles that he had previously published,¹¹⁵ ‘An Essay in Aesthetics’, collected in *Vision and Design*, provides a helpful starting point to understanding his formalist approach to Chinese aesthetics. The essay, first published in *The New Quarterly* in 1909, is an important statement of the aesthetic principles that will go on to support Fry’s taste in his curation for the Post-Impressionist exhibitions. ‘An Essay in Aesthetics’ argues that art is the primary expression of one’s imaginative life, which is separate from one’s actual life. In his elaboration on the two modes of living, Fry contrasts the highly specialised vision of the actual life, driven by practical concerns, with an arresting explanation of the objects that are included in the imaginative life:

It is only when an object exists in our lives for no other purpose than to be seen that we really look at it, as for instance at a China ornament or a precious stone, and towards such even the most normal person adopts to some extent the artistic attitude of pure vision abstracted from necessity.¹¹⁶

Objects of art, according to Fry, must exist ‘for no other purpose than to be seen’. My attention lingers on the ‘China ornament’ that Fry foregrounds as an example. In his discussion on formalist abstraction, the China ornament is epitomised as something purely aesthetic and without functional use. It is upon this condition, furthermore, that objects such as the China ornament are thus given appreciative value. The China ornament is purely ornamental; it exists passively to be seen. Fry’s choice of example consequently also reflects the conception of Chineseness in early twentieth-century Britain. His ambiguous diction, as with his capitalisation of ‘China’, is jarring in this train of discourse. The ‘China’ modifier in Fry’s illustration could be read as a reference to both the

¹¹⁵ Woolf, RF, p. 226.

¹¹⁶ Roger Fry, ‘An Essay in Aesthetics’, in *Vision and Design* (Dover Publications, Inc., 1998 [1920]), p. 18.

porcelain and the country. China, which is ornamental, is thus presented as something to be stylistically and culturally consumed in the British empire.

Fry's argument on formal unity in 'An Essay in Aesthetics' also draws my attention. In his essay, Fry mulls over the visual structures of good art, and concludes that aesthetic emotions are conveyed to the viewer through the harmony of forms within an art piece. His contemplation on artistic forms is discussed in tandem with the structural arrangement of Chinese paintings:

In certain Chinese paintings the length is so great that we cannot take in the whole picture at once, nor are we intended to do so. Sometimes a landscape is painted upon a roll of silk so long that we can only look at it in successive segments. As we unroll it at one end and roll it up at the other we traverse wide stretches of country, tracing, perhaps, all the vicissitudes of a river from its source to the sea, and yet, when this is well done, we have received a very keen impression of pictorial unity.

Such a successive unity is of course familiar to us in literature and music, and it plays its part in the graphic arts. It depends upon the forms being presented to us in such a sequence that each successive element is felt to have a fundamental and harmonious relation with that which preceded it. [...]¹¹⁷

Fry is concerned with the 'successive unity' of Chinese paintings. There is an intellectual justification to his interpretation: Chinese paintings, traditionally, are indeed painted on (silk) scrolls, and often feature scenic depictions that continuously unfold from right to left. The spectator is thus offered a panoramic view of the landscape, which could be further observed from the visual angles of height, depth, and level-distance – that is, what meets the eye at the multiple points of the painting's foreground,¹¹⁸ as opposed to the convention of a vanishing point in Western notions of art. With the centrality of brushwork in traditional Chinese paintings, the painting's form, composed by the melodious strokes of the brush, arguably takes precedence over the painting's

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 23.

¹¹⁸ A prime example of this technique could be found in Wang Ximeng's painting 'One Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains'.

content, which is the literal subject being represented by the artist. There is therefore a reasonable basis to Fry's epitomising of artistic forms with the Chinese painting. His connection of this formal unity with expressions in literature and music, additionally, reveals his intention to apply the principle to all creative endeavours. Fry's ultimate linkage between forms and emotions is a critical detail to his thinking about art and artistic practices. Curiously, in the context of Chinese paintings, this formulation bears a resemblance to the classical aesthetic concept of the 'imprint of the mind' (心印).¹¹⁹ The 'imprint of the mind' posits that all paintings are reflections of their artists' inner states; a well-executed painting, subsequently, means that the artist has successfully conveyed their emotions through the brush. Fry may have taken a formalist approach to studying Chinese objects, but it is undeniable that the traditional philosophies of Chinese art have in this process also jointly informed his formulation on modern aesthetics.

There are other essays collected in *Vision and Design* that likewise show Fry's criticism of aesthetics via Chinese art. Three years after his initial publication of 'An Essay in Aesthetics', Fry wrote an essay for the catalogue to his second Post-Impressionist exhibition, which he would later reprint in *Vision and Design* under the title 'The French Post-Impressionists'. In this essay, Fry again considers the art from Post-Impressionist painters in terms of Chinese aesthetics. He discusses Matisse's achievements:

Matisse aims at convincing us of the reality of his forms by the continuity of and flow of his rhythmic line, by the logic of his space relations, and, above all, by an entirely new use of colour. In this, as in his markedly rhythmic design, he approaches more than any other European to the ideals of Chinese art. His work has to an extraordinary degree that decorative unity of design which distinguishes all the artists of this school.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Some Chinese artists associated with this aesthetic concept include Mu Qi, Huang Gongwang, and Shitao.

¹²⁰ Roger Fry, 'An Essay in Aesthetics', p. 168.

Fry assesses Matisse's paintings with artistic principles that once more point to 'the ideals of Chinese art'. Gesturing to ideas of rhythm, space, and colour, Fry explains that Matisse's work is extraordinary because the artist has accomplished a sense of formal unity in his painting that so characterises Chinese art. In short, Fry is praising Matisse for his mastery of expressive forms. And this emphasis on expressive forms, moreover, would go on to influence Clive Bell's own interpretation of artistic Formalism, which Bell formulates along ideas of 'Significant Form'. Fry and Bell would have exchanged their opinions on aesthetics prior to the Post-Impressionist exhibitions; their views on formalist aesthetics in general are largely similar and tend to support each other's positions. In the aforementioned catalogue for the second Post-Impressionist exhibition, however, Bell officially introduces his theory of 'Significant Form' to the world, which he would then continue to expound on in his other writings on art and aesthetics. 'Significant Form' is Bell's most important contribution to art criticism. His groundbreaking book, *Art* (1914), offers a more complete explanation of this aesthetic theory.

My Introduction has already discussed in part Bell's theorising of 'Significant Form'. To briefly reiterate, Bell in the first chapter of *Art* defines the term to mean the base quality of objects that can trigger aesthetic emotions. He demonstrates, by way of example, that things such as the Sta. Sophia and Chinese carpets possess this quality, since they with their arrangement of lines and colours are able to emotionally move their viewers. In the following chapter of *Art*, Bell elaborates on this relationship between forms and emotions in an argument about design, which he interprets as 'the organisation of forms'. While clarifying the significance of design in provoking aesthetic emotions, he makes a distinction between 'architectural design' and 'imposed design' through instances that include Chinese art:

The difference between ‘architectural design’ and what I call ‘imposed design’ will be obvious to anyone who compares a picture by Cézanne with a picture by Whistler. Better still, compare any first-rate Florentine of the fourteenth or fifteenth century with any Sung picture. Here are two methods of achieving the same end, equally good, so far as I can judge, and as different as possible. We feel towards a picture by Cézanne or Masaccio or Giotto as we feel towards a Romanesque church; the design seems to spring upwards, mass piles itself on mass, forms balance each other masonrywise: there is a sense of strain, and of strength to meet it. Turn to a Chinese picture; the forms seem to be pinned to the silk or to be hung from above. There is no sense of thrust or strain; rather there is the feeling of some creeper, with roots we know not where, that hangs itself in exquisite festoons along the wall.¹²¹

Bell outlines that both modes of design are equally good, but different. The ‘architectural design’ of European art, exemplified by the works of Whistler, Masaccio, and Giotto, is on the one hand intricately achieved through applying layer upon layer of paint onto the canvas, much like masonry building from its very foundation. The ‘imposed design’ of Chinese art, on the other hand, which is also used by artists of the Post-Impressionist school such as Cézanne, is accomplished through calligraphic strokes of the brush that immediately express the final forms to be painted. The artist, then, already knows the structure of their picture before it is painted, which results in the harmonious smoothness and cohesiveness of the picture’s forms. Bell’s formal arguments here echo that of Fry’s; Bell, in his positioning of Chinese art as an aesthetic ideal, also assumes an interpretation of Chineseness that is based on artistic principles. His raising of the silk scroll in his figurative description of Chinese forms further merges the composed style of Chinese art, as understood by Bell, with the silk material that is typically associated with China and its culture. Like Fry’s discourse in ‘An Essay in Aesthetics’, therefore, Bell is presenting an

¹²¹ Clive Bell, *Art* (Chatto & Windus, 1914), p. 85.

appreciative tribute to Chinese art in his discussion while concomitantly assigning a decorative nature to the idea of Chineseness.

Lastly, against the backdrop of my observation on Bloomsbury's Formalism, an essay collected in Fry's subsequent book, *Transformations*, is noteworthy as a concentrated commentary on his view of Chinese art. This essay, which resumes Fry's exploration of Chinese aesthetics in *Vision and Design*, offers a more developed account of his study on the subject. In 'Some Aspects of Chinese Art' (1926), Fry distinguishes the features of Chinese art from a formal perspective. He proceeds to consider Chinese aesthetics in relation to the European taste:

Chinese art is in reality extremely accessible to the European sensibility, if one approaches it in the same method of attentive passivity which we cultivate before an Italian masterpiece of the Renaissance, or a Gothic or Romanesque sculpture. [...] Chinese art is nothing like so difficult of access as Hindu art. It has, to begin with, colour schemes that are pre-eminently harmonious to the European eye; it has the same general notions of logical and clear co-ordination of the parts within the whole; it aims at a similar equilibrium, and it does not allow the elaboration of detail to destroy the general structure; whereas in Hindu art and in some of the art of the Near East, we must, I think, abandon some of these demands and content ourselves with other and, to our feelings, less important qualities, with mere diversity, multiplicity and intricacy.¹²²

Chinese art, claims Fry, is 'extremely accessible to the European sensibility'. Its resemblance to British aesthetic values makes it more intelligible to the European/British viewer, in comparison with Hindu art and other artistic productions of the Near East. Fry again deliberates on Chinese forms along notions of colour and structure, of which in their harmony he finds aesthetic pleasure. In this argumentative framework, Chinese art is then less foreign to the European spectator than those of the above-listed cultures, the latter of which Fry declares must be regarded by abandoning

¹²² Roger Fry, 'Some Aspects of Chinese Art', in *Transformations* (Chatto & Windus, 1927), p. 68.

European standards of taste. Chineseness, specifically, is thus singled out to occupy an independent position in Fry's mapping of oriental art. As with Woolf's inclusion of Chinese aesthetics in 'Modes and Manners', Chinese aesthetics then arrives at a liminal position between 'us' and 'other' in Fry's understanding of expressive forms. Along the same line of discourse in his assessment on Chinese art, moreover, Fry intriguingly decides to make an explicit connection between art objects and the people of those cultures in which the objects are produced. In short, Fry connects Chinese objects with Chinese people. He writes of the Chou bronzes:

These Chinese objects have an air of belonging to people who were polite, traditional and sophisticated, and that brings to them near to our own ways of living and feeling, more so, I think, than is the case with those odd athletic beings who drank out of the black and red Greek vases. With them we hardly know what Epicurean habits might not suddenly give way to explosive irruptions of passion. But with the Chinese, I feel sure that even if one had been put to death at the end of a feast with a dignitary of the Chou Empire all would have been conducted with reassuring decorum to the very last, for the Chinese have something very safe and comfortable about them which even the grinning monsters' faces on their bronzes do little to dispel. It is this, surely, that makes their objects, even those of the remotest antiquity, fit so comfortably into our own homes.¹²³

Fry presumes from the forms of Chou bronzes that their makers, in their ability to produce such forms, therefore possess a corresponding sensibility. The Chinese people, imagines Fry, are hence 'polite, traditional and sophisticated', which are traits shared with the European observer. Curiously, Fry contrasts the aesthetic feelings of the Chinese with that of the Greeks, whose vibrant vases suggest their explosive passions. In a later part of his essay, Fry expands on this contrast with a simultaneous reflection upon European practices of artistic perspective. Assuming the Greeks as the foundational civilization to European cultural identity, Fry recognises that '[w]e [the Europeans] inherit from the Greeks a peculiar arrogance' that renders Western art

¹²³ Ibid., p. 69.

anthropocentric,¹²⁴ as opposed to the Chinese emphasis on a harmonious interconnection between humanity and the natural world. In ‘An Essay in Aesthetics’, as shown above, Fry has demonstrated a comparable grasp of this ideal of natural and formal harmony in Chinese paintings. Consequently, Fry understands that his European position is different from that of the Chinese; while the Europeans and Chinese overlap in similar sensibilities, the Chinese remains other in Fry’s European comprehension of aesthetic culture. Within this sequence of reflection, furthermore, Fry’s imagined Chinese are positioned in ancient history, which ascribes to their geographical and cultural distance an additional element of historical and temporal separation. The Chinese, therefore, are given a passive and illusory sense of existence; their removal from the immediate concerns of European civilisation makes them a ‘very safe and comfortable’ group. Chinese people become objects. They merge with the objects that they produce. In Fry’s European imagination, they are then aestheticised into things of silence and romantic charm, whose composure, decorum, and passivity persist even in extreme or dramatic circumstances. Chineseness is thus comfortably consumed as an ornamental thing in the British domestic space.

Woolf was evidently fascinated by Fry’s and Bell’s discussions of artistic Formalism. Given her writerly mind, she seems to use these reflections to ponder the intertwining of art and literature. In her biography of Fry, Woolf carefully underlines that Fry’s formalist theory is not just limited to paintings; his ideas of Formalism extend far beyond to encompass the study of literature as well as other creative practices. Woolf remembers of the second Post-Impressionist exhibition:

When the galleries were shut to the public he would open them again to bring people together – people from many different worlds, ladies of fashion, painters, poets, musicians, business men. The new movement was not to be restricted to the

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 77.

art of painting only. Some French poets were invited to read aloud from their work. He lectured both upon poetry and upon painting himself. He arranged concerts.¹²⁵

According to Woolf's recollection of the event in *Roger Fry*, Fry would encourage performances of poetry and music to support the formalist ideals put forward in his exhibition show. Notably, Fry also lectured on both poetry and painting, and seemed to have found a close affinity between these two disciplines in terms of formal properties. Woolf furthers this observation by inserting into her writing a letter that Fry addressed to G.L. Dickinson in 1913, which outlines Fry's development of his aesthetic theories after the second Post-Impressionist exhibition. In this letter, Fry explicates the connections between poetry and painting within his formulations of aesthetics:

I'm continuing my aesthetic theories and I have been attacking poetry to understand painting. [...] I think that in proportion as poetry becomes more intense the content is entirely remade by the form and has no separate value at all. You see the sense of poetry is analogous to the things represented in painting. I admit that there is also a queer hybrid art of sense and illustration, but it can only arouse particular and definitely conditioned emotions, whereas the emotions of music and pure painting and poetry when it approaches purity are really free abstract and universal.¹²⁶

Fry proposes that the pure forms of poetry, painting, and music are capable of provoking emotions that are universal to all. Though his discussion on forms remains rather vague, it is clear from his argument in the letter that he puts great importance on the relationship between poetry and painting. Fry posits that an understanding of one requires an understanding of the other. While the beauty of both practices depends on their common forms, there is, however, also a shared and overlapping logic to grasping their communicated content. The sense of poetry, claims Fry, is analogous to the

¹²⁵ Woolf, RF, p. 180.

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 183.

things represented in painting. This view would go on to influence Woolf's contemplation of her own literary endeavours.

A mealtime conversation between Woolf, Fry, and Bell on 'literature & aesthetics' offers significant insight into Woolf's initial consideration of such formalist theorisations, which she applies to her own writing. Woolf recorded this conversation in her diary on 22 November, 1917:

I dined with Roger & met Clive. [...] Then, taking a splendid flight above personalities, we discussed literature & aesthetics.

"D'you know, Clive, I've made out a little more about the thing which is essential to all art: you see, all art is representative. You say the word tree, & you see a tree. Very well. Now every word has an aura. Poetry combines the different aura's in a sequence – " That was something like it. I said one could, & certainly did, write with phrases, not only words, but that didn't help things on much. Roger asked me if I founded my writing upon texture or upon structure; I connected structure with plot, & therefore said "texture". Then we discussed the meaning of structure & texture in painting & in writing. Then we discussed Shakespeare, & Roger said Giotto excited him just as much. This went on till I made myself go precisely at 10. And we discussed also Chinese poetry; Clive said the whole thing was too distant to be comprehensible. Roger compared the poetry with the painting. I liked it all very much (the talk I mean).¹²⁷

Woolf's recorded conversation sees Fry gesturing again to the formal connections between poetry and art. He makes to Bell an argument that is similar to the abovementioned proposal in 'Some Aspects of Chinese Art'. The aura of words, Fry lays out, is obvious when considered upon the logic that all art is representative; the arrangement of words into poetry is akin to the presentation of (tree) symbols on a painted canvas. Woolf finds herself chiming into Fry's discussion by adding, too, that the same aura could be effected with written phrases. And notably, the conversation extends once more to Chinese poetry and painting, which Fry in particular would have contextualised in his Post-Impressionist formulations as aesthetic ideals. Bell in this specific

¹²⁷ Woolf, in D 1, p. 80.

episode takes on a directly orientalist sentiment towards Chinese artistic productions; here, he makes a suggestion of their incomprehensibility along notions of distance. Fry, however, seems enthusiastic to compare the aesthetic forms of Chinese poetry with that of Chinese painting, which he likely relates back to his own revolutionising of British modern art.

Significantly, in this entry, Woolf explicitly shines light on her contemplation of literary ‘structure’ and ‘texture’, which she would continue to develop in her writing career. Woolf connects plot with structure and consequently, especially in the context of this formalist discussion, associates aesthetic forms with the texture of her writing. When asked which model she anchors her writing in, Woolf moreover gives a clear and certain answer – she builds her writing upon the texture of texts. Inspired by Fry and Bell, she thus also principally conceives her literature upon aesthetic forms and feelings, which she manifests through visual and abstract expressions. Woolf’s formal construction of expressions – with words and phrases – is noticeable even in her early works; her depictions of Victorian modes and manners in the previously discussed texts already display a careful consideration of both sensory experience and stylistic composition. Her textural, formal considerations, furthermore, are evidently affected by the discussions of Chinese aesthetics that Bloomsbury includes in its own design of aesthetic Formalism. Woolf’s decorative employment of the pagoda motif is just the beginning of her invocation of stylistic Chineseness. Her use of the pagoda image as a stylistic symbol, moreover, would take up a recurring presence across the rest of her oeuvre. In her 1931 novel *The Waves*, for example, Woolf likewise draws on the shape of pagodas to describe Britain’s fashion. Twice, she portrays women with ‘pearl pagodas’ hanging from their ears.¹²⁸ Woolf would also more boldly employ an aesthetic, sartorial idea of Chineseness that openly connects with orientalist characterisations of Chinese personhood. In a

¹²⁸ Woolf, W, p. 113; 208.

letter to Katherine Cox, dated 16 May, 1913, she writes of her friend James Strachey: ‘We meet James [Strachey] floating down the Strand at midnight, rather like a Chinese girl who has somehow gone astray, poor woman – His cheeks are a lovely pink.’¹²⁹ This pictorial description of Strachey relies on the evocation of a ‘Chinese girl’ as an illustrative aesthetic whose cultural resonance is further complicated by the fetishising tendencies of orientalist practices. Woolf therefore shows a consistent use of Chinese styles in her creative expressions; her literary aesthetics, however, are inevitably complicated by the political undertones of her practice. Woolf’s sartorial and aesthetic constructions of Chinese personhood are examined in greater depth in Chapters Two and Three.

Returning to Woolf’s emphasis on the texture of her writing, it is plain, moreover, that the influence of oriental aesthetics on her construction of texture persists beyond a superficial application of stylistic, symbolic images. Oftentimes, the ideals of Woolf’s imagined Orient seeps also into the structural fabric of her writing. Returning to her discourse on pagodas, Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), under the possible influence of Clive Bell, posited a vision of the novel form that takes on the shape of a pagoda. My Introduction has already discussed the broader details of Woolf’s proposal. I include here again the relevant quote:

If one shuts one’s eyes and thinks of the novel as a whole, it would seem to be a creation owning a certain looking-glass likeness to life, though of course with simplifications and distortions innumerable. At any rate, it is a structure leaving a shape on the mind’s eye, built now in squares, now pagoda shaped, now throwing out wings and arcades, now solidly compact and domed like the Cathedral of Saint Sofia at Constantinople.¹³⁰

The novel, visualises Woolf, is a structure that imprints on the mind a shape that with increasing solidity becomes the Cathedral of Saint Sofia. It is at foundation ‘pagoda shaped’. Woolf’s analogy

¹²⁹ Woolf, in L 2, p. 27.

¹³⁰ Woolf, AROO, p. 64.

ascribes to the form of the novel this oriental image; subsequently, her formalist vision of the novel suggests an impression of the literary art as built upon structural tiers. These tiers could allude to the layers of ideology or narrative that might be found in a novel; Woolf appears to have further expounded on this particular vision in relation to notions of linguistic expression in *The Years* (1937). In the 'Present Day' section of this book, Edward, North, and Eleanor meet and engage in conversation. Edward introduces a friend to North:

"That's Chipperfield, the great railway man," he explained to North. "A very remarkable fellow," he went on. "Son of a railway porter." He made little pauses between each sentence. "Done it all off his own bat... A delightful house... Perfectly restored... Two or three hundred acres, I suppose... Has his shooting... Asks me to direct his reading... And buys old masters."

"And buys old masters," North repeated. The deft little sentences seemed to build up a pagoda; sparsely but accurately; and through it all ran some queer breath of mockery tinged with affection.

"Shams, I should think?" Eleanor laughed.

"Well, we needn't go into that," Edward chuckled. Then they were silent. The pagoda floated off. Chipperfield had vanished through the door.¹³¹

Woolf offers a playful arrangement of phrases in this short episode. Within it, the conversational paragraphs are tiered like a pagoda. The 'little pauses' that Edward makes between each sentence, moreover, translates onto the literal page. With repeated uses of ellipses, Woolf breaks apart Edward's introduction and produces a rhythm that fragments his account, which invites the reader to participate in a formalist assembling of Woolf's presented narrative. And this exercise, Woolf elaborates, could be grasped as building a mental pagoda with 'deft little sentences', which gives a spare but accurate configuration to its structure. The pagoda exists, yet it floats off. The transience of its impression not only echoes the shifting nature of Woolf's novel-pagoda in *A Room of One's Own*, but therefore also reinforces the ephemerality of communications in everyday life. Woolf

¹³¹ Woolf, Y, p. 302.

underpins this sense of ephemerality with the formation and movement of phrases. In *To the Lighthouse* (1927), she experiments with the temporary materialisation of rhyme through Chinese aesthetics.

Mrs. Ramsay, while waiting for her family and guests to finish their dinner, eavesdrops on her husband's conversation with Augustus Carmichael. She hears her husband repeating poetry:

She waited. Her husband spoke. He was repeating something, and she knew it was poetry from the rhythm and the ring of exaltation and melancholy in his voice:
Come out and climb the garden path,
Luriana Lurilee.
The China rose is all abloom and buzzing with the yellow bee.
The words (she was looking at the window) sounded as if they were floating like flowers on water out there, cut off from them all, as if no one had said them, but they had come into existence of themselves.¹³²

Although Mrs Ramsay does not identify the poem, the lines she hears are extracted from Charles Elton's 'A Garden Song'. Of interest to me is its imagery of the 'China rose', which signals the blooming of spring. The China rose, despite with origins in China, does not necessarily nod to Chinese aesthetics; Elton is describing in his poem a traditionally British scene. Woolf, however, might have been inspired by the Eastern signifier in her writing of this episode. Mrs Ramsay considers the materialisation of the poem's words, which sound 'as if they were floating like flowers on water out there'. Her analogy alludes to the typically oriental trope of water lilies. To reinforce this supposition, additionally, in the same chapter, and just a few pages before, Mrs Ramsay has contemplated Lily Briscoe's Chinese eyes. Woolf thus appears to be experimenting with the connections between word compositions and exotic imageries when working on her novel. Specifically, in this episode, the impressions and movements of the uttered words, aligned with the

¹³² Woolf, TL, p. 120.

(Chinese) aesthetic of water lilies, importantly characterises Mrs. Ramsay's isolation from the other people in her home. Woolf has hence merged the 'texture' of her writing with the 'structure' of her work.¹³³

I close this section with Woolf's famous declaration on modernity in 'Character in Fiction': 'on or about December 1910 human character changed.'¹³⁴ Written in 1924, Woolf's statement in the essay forms in part her argument for a fresher approach to creating fictional characters against rubrics of tradition; her claim, subsequently, looks back at the events surrounding 1910 as constitutive of a significant moment of transformation in twentieth-century Britain. Woolf's claim suggests the arrival of a new modern age that is distinctly different from the previous Victorian and Edwardian eras. Her designated year of change, moreover, is selected with good reason. Retrospectively, 1910 could be understood as signalling the major political and cultural upheavals that would culminate and continue into the Second World War.¹³⁵ Of more immediate interest to this chapter, 1910 also saw the escalation of aesthetic formalism in Britain that would be most prominently associated with the ideas of Bloomsbury. Woolf's designated date of change could hence be read as gesturing furthermore to a transformation, spearheaded by Roger Fry and Clive Bell, that occurred primarily in the history of art with the landmark 'Manet and the Post-Impressionists' exhibition of 1910. In any case, like her friends, Woolf was certainly attempting to push for modern(ist) breakthroughs in her writing around the year of 1910. She was then already

¹³³ See also Jane Goldman, 'floating like flowers on water': lyric activism, textual editing, translation and the politics of otium', *The 8th Symposium in the 'Literary Activism' Series: The Writer-Critic and Literary Studies* (Ashoka University, forthcoming). In her paper, Goldman further discusses Elton's poem in *To the Lighthouse*, as well as the imagery of floating flowers used in Woolf's *Jacob's Room*, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, et al., alongside John Coyle's essay 'Pulp Fiction or, Proust and Joyce's Rhetorical Flourishes'. The image is often culturally associated with the East.

¹³⁴ Woolf, 'Character in Fiction', *Criterion* [1924], in E 3, p. 421.

¹³⁵ See, for example, Jane Goldman's discussion on the developments of the period in *Modernism, 1910-1945: Image to Apocalypse* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2003), pp. 26-47. These upheavals include the Russian Bolshevik Revolution (1918), the establishment of the Irish Free State (1922), the General Strike in Britain (1926), Hitler's chancellorship of Germany (1933), and the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939).

thinking of China. Chinese aesthetics considerably inform the experimental methods to her literary art. My close readings of ‘The Call of the East’ and ‘Chinese Stories’ in the following sections continue to establish Woolf’s engagement with Chinese aesthetics towards the beginning of her literary career.

1.2 Calling to the East

On 26 April, 1907, the *Times Literary Supplement* published an unsigned review by Woolf of Charlotte Lorrimer’s *The Call of the East* (1907). There is little known about Lorrimer; her book has also not been widely recognised. *The Call of the East*, however, contains a collection of short stories about China and Japan that are typical of the orientalist sentiments at the time. The Far East, in Lorrimer’s book, is portrayed through narratives of idyllic beauty and charm. Underlying these narratives are also allusions to oriental primitivism and violence, which are gentled and made endearing by distance. Lorrimer’s impressions of the East are neatly enfolded into the pages of her book; the stories she tells, though presented as true, are sealed off from the reality of her readers through gestures to Eastern stasis and mysticism. Consequently, Lorrimer positions herself as a bridge between Eastern and Western cultures. In her stories, she often exists as a silent observer to the events that she describes. As a receiver of Lorrimer’s orientalist project, Woolf was clearly impressed by the author’s accounts of the East. Woolf’s review of Lorrimer’s book in 1907, accordingly, is immensely valuable as one of her earliest compositions on her thoughts regarding China, Japan, and more broadly the Far East.

Lorrimer’s collection not only bears ideas of oriental idealism, but also shows, despite its generally Eurocentric perspective, signs of awareness and even mockery of the political dynamics

that underlie Western interactions with the East. In ‘The Bishop’s Loot’,¹³⁶ for instance, which is set against the backdrop of the Boxer Rebellion, an armed uprising in primarily Northern China around 1900 against foreigners and colonial encroachment, Lorrimer tells the story of a devout Anglican bishop who assumes a moral high ground to justify his looting of Chinese people. In ‘Barton’s Eurasian Wife’,¹³⁷ the British protagonist, Barton, regrets marrying his Eurasian wife. He deems her an obstacle to his potential obtainment of a better government post, which would bring him from Canton back to Britain. And lastly, in ‘The Faith of Chun Tai’,¹³⁸ Chun Tai visits a mission doctor who is widely mistrusted by the locals, only to be given an ointment that leads to the death of his young son. In this last story, the white man is innocent; a miscommunication occurs because of Chun Tai’s lie about his actual reason for needing the medication. Lorrimer’s narratives can be political. ‘The Faith of Chun Tai’ is a statement about the hostilities against both sides of the East and West, which are more often than not rooted in misunderstandings. Yet, undeniably, Lorrimer also bases her stories upon orientalist stereotypes. Chun Tai, for example, is clearly ill-educated and deceptive. Even in the other two stories, which present imperfect white characters, there is necessarily fault with the local populace as well. Barton’s Eurasian Wife, Chee Toy, is selfish and cunning. The bishop, too, could justify his own looting because he was first looted by the Chinese Boxers. These stereotypes likely shaped Woolf’s early impressions of the East, though she appears oblivious to the deeper political considerations of Lorrimer’s book. At the youthful age of twenty-five, Woolf’s interest in the East rests less on political and formal rigour than on a romanticised vision of its aesthetic idleness. Her review of Lorrimer’s book thus gravitates towards the stories that bring to the fore notions of Eastern simplicity.

¹³⁶ Charlotte Lorrimer, *The Call of the East* (Gay and Bird, 1907), pp. 99-112.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 247-265.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-26.

Woolf begins her review on *The Call of the East* by identifying Lorrimer's authorial position. Her review opens with the following reflection:

In *The Call of the East*, by Charlotte Lorrimer the author is inspired by the point of view expressed in her introduction – that we have forgotten the precious knowledge which is still current in the East, though we can recollect it and desire it in silence. We have lost the power to 'enjoy simple things – the shadow of the trees at noon and the insect humming on a summer's night.' This is the usual and may be the proper spirit in which Europeans of culture approach the mysteries of China and Japan; it lends their words a certain pathos; they seem so able to enjoy, and so powerless to understand.¹³⁹

From the outset, Woolf conceives the East and West as exclusive opposites. In this binary formulation of Eastern and Western worlds, Woolf – and Lorrimer – posits the natural simplicity of the East against the technological development of the West. What has been lost by Western civilisation, therefore, could still be found in the East; there in the East remains primitive wisdom, untouched by societal and scientific advancements. A more elaborate rendition of these ideas could be found in Lorrimer's Introduction to her own book, from which Woolf has directly quoted. Writes Lorrimer:

It has lately become the fashion to speak of the East as the Scholar of the West. Because Japan has learned from us many things about guns and battleships, because China has studied our system of finance, we are pleased to imagine ourselves missionaries of civilisation and builders of nations.

Builders in one sense we may be, but destroyers also – destroyers of the simple old-fashioned virtues of faith and patience and unselfishness, for which there is no time in this strictly utilitarian age of ours. Our scheme of living no longer has any place for them. Already we have forgotten in a fierce struggle for individualism the duty of mutual giving and sacrifice [...] and now we are fast losing through our artificiality the power to enjoy simple things – the shadow of the trees at noon and the insect hummings on a summer night.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ Woolf, 'The Call of the East', *Times Literary Supplement* [1907], in E 6, pp. 323-324.

¹⁴⁰ Lorrimer, *The Call of the East*, pp. v-vi.

Lorrimer demonstrates again a vague awareness of the imperial attitudes that come with Western progression. 'We', the West, have become confident as 'missionaries of civilisation' and 'builders of nations' to those in the East. There is then some irony to her superficial interpretation of the West as also 'destroyers'. Lorrimer, perhaps convinced by the West's apparent assistance to Japan and China, is unable to recognise the full extent of the imperial violence that had been imposed on these places; the destruction that she recognises to have resulted from Western progression is simply located in the West. Western civilisation, argues Lorrimer, has led to the destruction of 'the simple old-fashioned virtues of faith and patience and unselfishness', which modern schemes of living cannot accommodate. Principles of 'mutual giving and sacrifice', for example, could therefore be only found in the East. Lorrimer's articulations here follow the myth of the Noble Savage.¹⁴¹ The people of the East, being in their natural, primitive state, possess the key to the simpler joys of life. The Eastern people, furthermore, hold moral superiority over their Western counterparts, who are exposed to the corrupting influences of modern civilisation. Thus is the fashion, albeit inauthentic, 'to speak of the East as the Scholar of the West'. Lorrimer's logic has an obvious caveat. The East can only be good if it is uncorrupted by civilisation. Once it modernises itself, like the West, its charm will be replaced by threat. In Lorrimer's narrative, as with that of many others in her time, the Far East is imagined as remaining indefinitely in a static state.

¹⁴¹ Across Western philosophy, anthropology, and literature, the myth of the Noble Savage denotes a recurring figure imagined to represent the uncorrupted state of humanity prior to civilisation. The idea is traced back to *De origine et situ Germanorum*, a first-century Roman text written in 98 AD by Publius Cornelius Tacitus. The earliest recorded use of the term 'noble savage' in English literature appears in John Dryden's 1672 play *The Conquest of Granada by the Spaniards*. See also Terry Jay Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage* (University of California Press, 2001), pp. 249-323. In 1860, the physician John Crawfurd and the anthropologist James Hunt revived the term 'noble savage' to criticise advocates of racial equality. Although they identified the figure as a racial stereotype within emerging scientific racism, they deployed it rhetorically to attack their opponents, accusing them of romanticising non-European peoples.

Woolf carries similar convictions when writing her review. To long for Eastern simplicities, claims Woolf, is the 'usual' and 'proper spirit' of approaching China and Japan by 'Europeans of culture'. The 'precious knowledge' of living with ease and virtue, as laid out in Lorrimer's Introduction, is moreover believed by Woolf to be 'still current in the East'. Woolf's imagination of the East, via Lorrimer's stories, envisions it as fixed in a picture of tranquillity; this serene framing, nevertheless, would have sat alongside other and often contradicting cultural associations of war and violence that also shaped British perceptions of the East at the time. Woolf's assumptions about a tranquil, contemporary China here contrasts sharply with the political instability that characterises China during the period in which she wrote. Between 1906-1907, against the backdrop of existing political dissatisfaction with the Qing government, Northern China experienced a devastating famine. The mishandling of the natural disaster by the Qing government further angered the general public, which accelerated the emergence of political uprisings across the country. In 1907 alone, the Tongmenghui arranged for up to five uprisings; these events directly led to the Xinhai Revolution in 1911 that would end the reign of the Qing.¹⁴² The escapist vision of the East by both Woolf and Lorrimer is thus inconsistent with its realities. Woolf's imagined East in her review, in particular, which sees China and Japan as possessing what has been lost in the West, is ultimately a self-reflexive pondering on Britain. What Woolf suggests as desirable is not necessarily the China that is contemporary to her time – indeed, she has never visited China, and hence cannot recollect the actual place. Her imagined East simply stands as a foil to her understanding of the West. China is for Woolf a romanticised inversion of British struggles, which she can fancifully immerse herself into without needing to forego the benefits of

¹⁴² The Tongmenghui (同盟會) was an underground revolutionary society founded by Sun Yat-sen and others. In 1907, just two years after its establishment, the society organised five uprisings. These include the Huanggang Uprising (黃岡起義), the Huizhou Qinhuh Uprising (惠州七女湖起義), the Anqing Uprising (安慶起義), the Qinzhou Uprising (欽州防城起義), and the Zhennanguan Uprising (鎮南關起事).

Western civilisation. Later, in her closing commentary of the book, Woolf again underlines this notion: ‘anyone who wishes to refresh the memory of the East, or to dream remote dreams could hardly do better than spend an hour or so in turning the pages of this book’.¹⁴³ The East, to Woolf, and to most of Lorrimer’s readers, is thus a mental place of temporary escape to idealised impressions of both China’s and Britain’s ‘past’.

Woolf’s early discourse of East Asia, moreover, explicitly relies on the stock tropes of oriental inscrutability and mystery. This can already be observed in the above-quoted paragraph that opens her review; Lorrimer’s book, suggests Woolf, offers a way to ‘approach the mysteries of China and Japan’. Woolf would repeatedly evoke such enigmatic atmospheres of the East as she furthers her review. When commenting on Lorrimer’s position as a silent observer, Woolf likewise ponders on the makings of her stories: the most that Lorrimer could do as a writer, Woolf asserts, is ‘to notice all that is fair and quaint and different’ in her Eastern surroundings.¹⁴⁴ Consequently, Lorrimer’s accounts of the East depict places, events, and people that are all exotically charming: ‘the simple tales which relate how the people are used to meet the crises of their lives have the charm – perhaps it is a little of a hot-house fragrance – of all that is rare and exotic’.¹⁴⁵ A few lines after making this observation, Woolf additionally elaborates that the crises of the men and women in Lorrimer’s stories are a ‘cryptic drama’.¹⁴⁶ These recurrent mentions of mystery, quaintness, exoticism, and charm in Woolf’s review confirm a conventionally orientalist outlook in her thinking of the East. It is obvious from her narrative that Woolf’s aesthetic appreciation of China and Japan foundationally lies in her comprehension of the East as impenetrable. At this early stage of her life, Woolf is uninterested in directly involving herself with the East; certainly, to Woolf, the

¹⁴³ Woolf, ‘The Call of the East’, p. 324.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

crises of the Eastern people are but simple, charming tales. By believing in the essential impenetrability of China and Japan, Woolf is free to adopt a superficial gaze at the East that reaffirms its fictional nature in her imagination.

It is not only the atmosphere of the East that Woolf finds mysterious. In her review, Woolf's discussion of oriental mystery extends to the people of China and Japan. She applies to her writing the same aesthetic logic that the previous section of this chapter has discussed; her homogenised impressions of Eastern cultures are combined with her grasp of the exotic personhood. Woolf's discourse of the inscrutable Oriental is evident in her particular commentary on the protagonist of 'The Honourable Guest of the Mother Heart'.¹⁴⁷ In this story, Lorrimer writes about her neighbour, a young mother, who mourns the loss of her child. Woolf summarises the affair:

So Miss Lorrimer, sitting at her window in Japan, watches the mother who has lost her child, and sees her decorate herself for burial, and arrange her lips in the set sweet smile which is to hide her sorrow.¹⁴⁸

The mother is an enigmatic figure. It is difficult to access her sorrow. Instead, as per the etiquette of Japan, the mother hides her emotions with a considerate 'set sweet smile'. Such customary appearances, moreover, are not limited to the expression of her face; the mother is also careful to 'decorate herself' for the burial of her child. Woolf's summary closely conveys the gist of Lorrimer's description about this mother's mourning, which I include below:

Early next morning the professional hairdresser was in the house arranging the mother's hair with gay pins as if for festival [...] The mother followed (the coffin) carefully dressed in a clean though coarse blue cotton kimono. As custom

¹⁴⁷ Lorrimer, *The Call of the East*, pp. 55-67.

¹⁴⁸ Woolf, 'The Call of the East', p. 324.

demanded she kept her face sweet and serene, even smiling, but it was easy to see that the smile must end in a burst of wild weeping when she could be alone.¹⁴⁹

Even in Lorrimer's account, the character of the mother is elusive. The spectator knows not what the mother is thinking, though the intensity of her sorrow nearly seeps through her smile. Rather, she can be recognised by the things that deliberately ornament her, which extends and artificially makes visible her identity. The mother's hair is professionally arranged in gay pins. She is dressed in a clean though coarse blue cotton kimono. Her expression, too, is sweet and serene, even smiling. These decorative features may not authentically reflect the mother's inner state, yet, externally, they compose a curated image of the mother to present to her spectators.

There could be some cultural truth to Lorrimer's portrayal of the mourning mother. In several East Asian cultures, and notably in Japan, expressions of grief are traditionally expressed in a private and restrained manner. There are also meticulous codes of sartorial and ceremonial practices to honour the deceased; ultimately, the emphasis on such ornamental gestures of grieving in East Asian cultures is often guided by ideas of respect and dignity for both the living and the dead.¹⁵⁰ It is therefore not immediately questionable for Lorrimer and Woolf to observe the mother by her mourning gestures. Problematics would arise, however, if they consider her gestures without a conscious deliberation on the cultural significances that make these manners meaningful. In the case of Woolf, her grasp of the mother's mourning appearance is purely aesthetic. This attitude unfortunately cements in another description, which follows Woolf's previous portrayal of the mother's self-imposed adornments. Woolf continues to write in her review: 'And the Eastern face keeps its mask-like serenity; the almond eyes are vague and the oval face is smooth as stretched

¹⁴⁹ Lorrimer, *The Call of the East*, pp. 61-62.

¹⁵⁰ See, for example, Megumi Kondo-Arita and Carl B. Becker, 'Changing Funerals and Their Effects on Bereavement Grief in Japan', *OMEGA – Journal of Death and Dying*, 91.3 (2025), pp. 1548-1560 and Joshua A. Irizarry, 'Signs of Life: Grounding the Transcendent in Japanese Memorial Objects', *Signs and Society*, 2.1 (2014), pp. 160-187.

silk.’¹⁵¹ Here, Woolf’s orientalism clearly translates into her representation of the mother. With an Eastern face that holds a ‘mask-like serenity’, and almond eyes that are ‘vague’, the mother is pictured along the similar notions of oriental inscrutability and mystery that Woolf has envisioned of the Eastern atmosphere. To be sure, the mother as a character melds in with the exoticism of the book’s Japanese atmosphere. She exists in Woolf’s narrative as more of an aesthetic thing than an actual, full person. The mother is perfectly composed in serenity; her face, which is ‘smooth as stretched silk’, is also discerned by Woolf in stereotypically material terms. This artificial portrayal of the mother significantly paves the way for Woolf’s experimentation with Eastern aesthetics in her later building of fictional characters. In particular, and which Chapter Three will specifically expound on, such features are transferred to the cryptic characters of Elizabeth Dalloway and Lily Briscoe in respectively *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. For a large portion of Woolf’s writing career, her concern with the East and its people is predominantly aesthetic. In her review on *The Call of the East*, Woolf does not seek to interact with the realities of the East; instead, she frames Eastern scenes and people as sources of aesthetic contrast to Western life. Her review of ‘The Call of the East’, therefore, importantly marks her early engagement with orientalism and her creative turn towards East Asian aesthetics through this lens. In this context, Woolf is not merely responding to the call *of* the East, she is also calling *to* the East in her active exploration of its aesthetic and cultural possibilities.

Woolf’s creative engagement with the East is not confined to imageries and tropes. These indeed contribute to the texture of her writing; her inclusion of Eastern imageries adds to her work aesthetic details that are valuable to the sensory and atmospheric compositions of her texts. From since the conception of her oriental aesthetics, however, Woolf is also thinking of the East in terms

¹⁵¹ Woolf, ‘The Call of the East’, p. 324.

of stylistic literary forms. In her review, this contemplation is already revealed in her opening lines when she suggests, along her established notions of oriental mystery, that the words in European accounts of the East are associated with a certain sense of pathos. Her connection between forms, sensibilities, and Eastern impressions is expanded when she further discusses Lorrimer's approach to the mysteries of the East. Woolf observes Lorrimer as a spectator of events in the Eastern context: 'The most she can do is to write down the actions in the little drama reverently, to notice all that is fair and quaint and different, and to believe that beneath the decorous surface there is the "deep underlying poetry" of the Oriental faith.'¹⁵² Woolf's interpretation of Lorrimer's activities pays attention, on the one hand, to the superficially decorous nature of the East, and on the other hand, to the asserted poetic nature underlying the East's artificial appearance. Woolf is in part quoting from a statement made in Lorrimer's Introduction:

Very strange to us are many of these Oriental beliefs and superstitions with their deep underlying poetry. Because of the barriers of race feeling standing between we cannot always understand them – yet unconsciously we feel their charm. It calls to us in the deep voices of old temple bells, in the plaintive notes of bamboo flutes and violins, in the shrill song of the semi (cicada). We feel it when, on long, blue summer day, the perfume of the lotus floats across the ricefields, no less than in autumn, when the sound of hand-flails comes from threshing floors – and we cannot explain it any more than we could explain a rose.¹⁵³

Lorrimer alludes to the idea of Oriental mysticism in her narrative of the East. Elaborating from the previous paragraph in her Introduction, she attributes the virtues of Chinese and Japanese civilisations to their 'faith in the kindly gods' and 'gratitude to the dead',¹⁵⁴ which while strange to the West are practices that she deems poetic. Lorrimer highlights the differences between the

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Lorrimer, *The Call of the East*, pp. vi-vii.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p. vi.

East and West, which she concludes are due to racial (and, perhaps more aptly, cultural) barriers. She, however, is untroubled by such barriers; the increased incomprehensibility of the East makes it all the more charming. The poetry of the East precisely lies in what she could not completely comprehend. Lorrimer goes on to elucidate this poetic charm of China and Japan with a range of sensory imageries that are typical of describing the East Orient. Though these imageries – of temple bells, for instance, and of bamboo flutes, cicadas, lotuses, and rice fields – mostly point to the East, it is worthy to note that Lorrimer also suggests the possibility of a similar appeal in things that are more common to cultures of the West. A rose, for example, likewise holds this quality of poetic, indescribable loveliness. Lorrimer, then, appears to be discussing an aesthetic ideal that while obvious in the Eastern atmosphere has a universal existence. Her oriental project is thus but a way to grasp hold onto and make solid the forms of this aesthetic, which holds appreciation value across both Eastern and Western hemispheres.

As with Fry's and Bell's influence over Woolf in her approach to Eastern aesthetics, Lorrimer's portrayal of the East, too, steers Woolf to consider the sensory visualisation of such aesthetics in the context of her own literary form. In her review of Lorrimer's work, Woolf consciously combines imagery with syntactic patterning to develop her study of textual texture. This aspect of her aesthetic discourse is especially noticeable in her discussion of the stories that finds Lorrimer 'expound[ing] on the face of the land'.¹⁵⁵ Woolf claims that Lorrimer is most successful with her writing when she turns to describe the natural scenes of the East; it is then that Lorrimer could truly flaunt her 'gift of matching hills and water with words which keep their shape in print'.¹⁵⁶ Again, Woolf is careful to deliberate on the formal relation between pictures and words in the design of literary imageries. She understands that it is the arrangement of words across the

¹⁵⁵ Woolf, 'The Call of the East', p. 324.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

page that sustains the descriptions being conveyed. Woolf epitomises Lorrimer's writing success with the stories 'The Inland Sea on a Grey Day' and 'The Blossoming Peach Orchards of China',¹⁵⁷ which are hyper-descriptive pieces about specific scenic spots. In an observation that is comparable to Fry's connection between formal aesthetics and the traditional Chinese ink wash painting, Woolf follows up on her linking of words and shapes with the comment that the images of these two stories are 'painted in the mind like bright water colours'.¹⁵⁸ There remains a pictorial sensitivity in Woolf's contemplation on Lorrimer's Eastern aesthetics. Woolf, moreover, like Lorrimer, is also attentive to the cultural transferability of such aesthetic forms. Woolf's review of *The Call of the East* hence anticipates her future orientalist methods of experimenting with the formal aesthetics of her literature. As she matures in her writing, Woolf goes on to reinvent her interpretation of oriental aesthetics in her narratives about Britain, which the later chapters of this thesis will repeatedly show.

Woolf's review on *The Call of the East* is her first public exposition of her impressions regarding East Asia. Although it is but a short book review, this essay significantly lays out the manner in which Woolf interacts with the East during the early days of her literary career. Woolf undeniably carries an orientalist outlook that is typical of her time; her visual framing of the East, while carefully aesthetic, is a superficial representation of China, Japan, and the wider Orient that is detached from their realities. There is no doubt, however, that Woolf was earnest in her artistic involvement with Eastern aesthetics. She was inspired as a writer by not only its exotic imageries, but was also attracted to the potential of such aesthetics in the formal aspects of her experimental writing. Woolf's literary contact with East Asia thus moves beyond her reading of Lorrimer's book. Though *The Call of the East* is about the East, Lorrimer's Eurocentric perspective adds to her own

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

book a filtered narrative that is inauthentic to the East's cultural discernment of itself. Woolf would go on to familiarise herself, instead, with translated literatures that are directly written by authors from East Asia.¹⁵⁹ In the context of Chinese literature, six years after her review on Lorrimer's book, Woolf would continue to extend her thoughts on China in her evaluation of Pu Songling's *Strange Stories from the Lodge of Leisures*.

1.3 Chinese Stories in a Willow Pattern Plate

In May of 1913, *The Times Literary Supplement* published what would be Virginia Woolf's only found review of a Chinese literary work. Titled 'Chinese Stories' in *The Collected Essays of Virginia Woolf*,¹⁶⁰ this review discusses Pu Songling's (or P'ou Song-Lin, as spelt in Woolf's essay) short story collection *Strange Stories from the Lodge of Leisures*. The original collection, known as *Liaozhai Zhiyi* (聊齋誌異) in Mandarin, comprises close to five hundred stories composed from the late 1600s to the early 1700s during China's Qing dynasty. The English version that Woolf reads from was translated by George Soulié in 1913, who was then of the French Consular Service in China; Soulié's translated version contains twenty-five of Pu's short stories.

The stories in *Liaozhai* are supernatural tales and usually feature fantastic characters, including Chinese spirits, fairies, ghosts, and demons. Often, these stories are structured in the style of folk lores, and contain satirical critiques of Chinese society that are reflective of China's cultures, customs, and philosophies. It is then no wonder that Woolf's fascination with oriental mysticism would turn her interest to Pu's work. There has been some academic attention to Woolf's

¹⁵⁹ Additional to her review of Pu Songling's short story collection, which the next section will discuss, Woolf in 1925 published a review on *The Tale of Genji* by Lady Murasaki Shikibu in *Vogue*.

¹⁶⁰ Woolf, 'Chinese Stories', *Times Literary Supplement* [1913], in E 2, pp. 7-8.

reading of Pu; Xiaoqin Cao, in her essay ‘Walk[ing] over the Bridge in a Willow Pattern Plate’, has in part observed Woolf’s affiliation with exotic landscapes via the bridge trope in ‘Chinese Stories’, though Woolf’s actual review remains largely unexplored in Cao’s piece.¹⁶¹ Yet Woolf’s review of *Strange Stories* is a remarkable source on her early engagement with China that calls for more thorough analysis. Albeit limited by Soulié’s translation, Woolf communicates a clear delight in her initial taste of Chinese literature. This 1913 review, written in the budding phase of Woolf’s literary career, is therefore important in its setting up of her discourse on Chineseness and China.

When reading ‘Chinese Stories’, I was inspired by Woolf’s narrative to combine my ornamental theorising of her orientalism with a practical, ornamental adaptation of her text through crafting. The closing line to Woolf’s review of *Strange Stories* is a peculiar one that augments the orientalist outlook of her narrative. It reads:

So queer and topsy-turvy is the atmosphere of these little stories that one feels, when one has read a number of them, much as if one had been trying to walk over the bridge in a willow pattern plate.¹⁶²

In framing her impression of Pu’s stories with a metaphorical willow pattern plate, Woolf has fixed her idea of China in a richly decorative but static space. The primary characteristics of the chinoiserie style, moreover, which fundamentally imitates ‘Chinese’ designs, ironically adds to the imaginativeness of her conclusion. As a way of visualising Woolf’s visual reflection on the short stories, and to imitate the imitation from a perspective stemming from within the culture aestheticised, I have with friend and artist Joanne Ning executed a project to comparably frame

¹⁶¹ Xiaoqin Cao, “‘Walk[ing] over the Bridge in a Willow Pattern Plate’: Virginia Woolf and the Exotic Landscapes”, in *Virginia Woolf and the Natural World*, ed. by Kristin Czarnecki and Carrie Rohman (Clemson University Press, 2011).

¹⁶² Woolf, ‘Chinese Stories’, p. 8.

Woolf's review on a physical willow pattern plate.¹⁶³ Our venture to interpret the narrative of 'Chinese Stories' via this method is in parallel an attempt to merge literary reading with creative practice. Woolf's observations on Chineseness, her weaving of such observations into the technical craft of her writing, and the realising of this process through aesthetic technologies – in this case, the decorative chinaware in both literary and physical terms – completes the ornamental model to our study of modernist cultural consumption. Our experiment with creating chinoiserie art is also carried out with an intent to reclaim the style that has culturally been used to dominate our Chinese personhoods.

¹⁶³ My discussion of the plate in this chapter section has also been published as a conference paper for the 33rd Annual International Conference on Virginia Woolf: Woolf, Modernity, Technology. See Serena Wong, 'Reading with the Willow Pattern Plate: Virginia Woolf's Review of Pu Songling's *Strange Stories from the Lodge of Leisures*', in *Woolf, Modernity, Technology*, ed. by Ashley Foster and Evelyn Malinowski (Clemson University Press, forthcoming).



Figure 3. Serena Wong and Joanne Ning, 'Walking Over the Bridge in a Willow Pattern Plate', painted pottery plate, 2024. Photo by the author.



Figure 4. Late 19th century plate, the white body decorated with chinoiserie scene in terracotta, from Monk's House. Photo by National Trust / Charles Thomas, 2009.



Figure 5. Chinoiserie jug from Monk's House. Photo by the author, 2024.



Figure 6. Cabinet at Charleston. Photo by the author, 2024.



Figure 7. Chinoiserie plate from cabinet at Charleston. Photo by the author, 2024.

The design of our painted plate (Figure 3) is created to echo in style with the chinoiserie ware that would be familiar to Woolf and her family. Using the colour scheme of blue on white that is traditional to the willow pattern believed to be developed by Thomas Minton, we are careful to include in our rendition the set characteristics of its design, which involves a pagoda structure, a bridge, a boat, and, as the name implies, a weeping willow tree. Much of the chinaware archived at Monk's House and Charleston follow this colour and pattern scheme, which Figures 5 to 7 demonstrate. The willow pattern was based on the cobalt blue pigmented ceramics from China primarily associated with the Ming dynasty. As demand for the product gained prevalence overseas, including in the period of 'Chinamania' that swept Britain in the 1870s, blue-and-white ceramics were both made specifically for European export by the Chinese and locally copied by the English. It is then no surprise that the chinaware collected by the Woolfs are largely of this blue-and-white willow pattern. The key reference for our design (Figure 4), however, is the sole Chinese style plate kept and preserved by the Monk's House collections archive. Though the archive holds no information about the manufacturing origin of this plate, its vibrant colour scheme of mainly reds, pinks, and greens reflect the wider array of colours used in domestic Chinese porcelain across the dynasties. With the possibility of Woolf's knowledge of such alternative patterns, we have therefore also taken the liberty to add other dabs of colour to our plate design.

Returning to the line that inspired our chinoiserie project, it is imperative to explore the elements that incite Woolf's desire to capture the 'queer and topsy-turvy' atmosphere of Pu's 'little stories' with a willow pattern plate. Woolf's use of the word 'little' is moreover intriguing, for though the term may point to the length of Pu's stories it also appears to 'be-little' these stories that remain as a pinnacle example of classical Chinese literature. The stories in *Liaozhai* often present otherworldly beings as protagonists; these stories also tend to blur borders between the

supernatural world and everyday life. There is thus, before the urge to jump onto Woolf's orientalism, indeed some basis for her reading the stories as fantastical pieces of writing. Nonetheless, Woolf's understanding of *Strange Stories* would be tied as well to her consideration of Chinese taste, which the rest of this section will explicate with our created plate.

The border rim of our plate is designed with butterflies as a frame to the image at its centre. While the butterfly has indeed long been a popular symbol in Chinese culture – usually of romance, freedom, and beauty; epitomised, perhaps, in the classic legend ‘The Butterfly Lovers’ – it has also become a tropic one in the Western consciousness. Woolf was thinking of the trope as she describes Pu Songling's stories; in fact, she uses the butterfly to frame their atmospheres. As quoted:

To give any idea of the slightness and queerness of these stories one must compare them to dreams, or the airy, fantastic, and inconsequent flight of a butterfly. They skim from world to world, from life to death. The people they describe may kill each other and die, but we cannot believe either in their blood or in their dissolution. The barriers against which we in the West beat our hands in vain are for them almost as transparent as glass.¹⁶⁴

There are in this excerpt repeated notions of the fantastical that place the stories in a dream-like, inconsequential realm. Woolf here draws a binary line between ‘we’ in ‘the West’ and ‘them’ in China as encapsulated in the stories. Her connection of Chinese atmospheres with the idea of inconsequence is particularly notable, for it confirms China, as rendered by Woolf, to be occupying a space that is distant from her realities. The place then becomes a space for thought and aesthetic experimentation. It is fertile with hypotheses of mysticism and spiritual transcendence. China is to Woolf aesthetically visible but not physically reachable, like chinoiserie plates in locked cabinet shelves.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 7.

The people in Pu's Chinese stories, to Woolf, resultantly take on a similar mode of existence. They are more imaginary than real, and hence their suffering is unconvincing, for they exist as make-believe characters in a world that hinges on infinite resurrections and possibilities. The pattern of our plate is pieced from events in the four short stories that Woolf has gestured to in her review. The first is from 'Through Many Lives', in which a boy of the Yellow-peach-blossom city recalls his previous reincarnations, including his life as a donkey. Stories like this one, comments Woolf, are 'like the stories a child will tell... lacking in point where we expect the point to come, suddenly breaking off and done with, but somehow memorable'.¹⁶⁵ Then there is the scene from 'The Spirit of the River', which depicts a fisherman drinking wine with his River Spirit companion. To the bottom of the plate's design is another scene from 'The River of Sorrows' that Woolf discusses in tandem, which portrays a bloodied river of the underworld in need of cleansing. These stories, remarks Woolf, have 'a quality of fantasy and spirituality... [that] becomes of real beauty'.¹⁶⁶ Finally, to underline the beauty of scenes that are 'enhanced by the unfamiliar surroundings and exquisite dress', Woolf brings up 'The Ghost in Love', in which a student meets his tragic fate by getting lured into love with a ghost woman. Again, seeping through Woolf's interpretation of the Chinese people and atmosphere is a sense of primal fantasy – they are underdeveloped, and therefore wonderfully child-like, and beautiful, though this beauty is of artificiality and stasis like pictures on a chinoiserie plate. They are beautiful because the images they represent are protected in fixed time and space. Going back to the idea of inconsequentiality, one might suggest that they are especially beautiful to their Western observers because their stagnation makes them safe.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 8.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

These orientalist images, which albeit important in and by themselves especially from postcolonial perspectives, also nod to some ideas of novel writing that Woolf was already forming at this early stage of her career. The beginning paragraphs of ‘Chinese Stories’, which repeat and respond to Soulié’s preface in his translated book, attempt to introduce Pu’s work to a Western audience by way of positioning it between contexts of Chinese and English literary taste. Soulié’s preface to *Strange Stories* opens with the following claim:

The first European students who undertook to give the Western world an idea of Chinese literature were misled by the outward and profound respect affected by the Chinese towards their ancient classics. They have worked from generation to generation in order to translate more and more accurately the thirteen classics, Confucius, Mengtsh, and the others. They did not notice that, once out of school, the Chinese did not pay more attention to their classics than we do to ours: if you see a book in their hands, it will never be the “Great Study” or the “Analects,” but much more likely a novel like the “History of the Three Kingdoms,” or a selection of ghost-stories. These works that everybody, young or old, reads and reads again, have on the Chinese mind an influence much greater than the whole bulk of the classics.¹⁶⁷

Woolf’s ‘Chinese Stories’ begins in reference to Soulié’s discussion. In a similar line of observation, the review outlines Woolf’s orientalist grasping of Pu’s work:

According to Mr George Soulié, the translator of these stories, we seriously mistake the nature of the ordinary Chinaman if we imagine him any more exclusively occupied with the great classics of his literature than we are with ours. If we see him with a book in his hand it is likely to be ‘a novel like the History of the Three Kingdoms or a selection of ghost stories’. Like us they have a hunger for novels and stories, which they read over and over again, so that, although in the West nothing is known about it, the influence of such light literature upon the Chinese mind ‘is much greater than the whole bulk of the classics’. They may resemble us in their craving for something lighter, nearer to the life they know than the old and famous books, but in all else how different they are! The twenty-five stories in *Strange Stories* from the *Lodge of Leisure*, translated from the Chinese by George Soulié, were written in the second half of the eighteenth century by P’ou Song-Lin,

¹⁶⁷ George Soulié, ‘Preface’, in *Strange Stories from the Lodge of Leisures* (Warbler, 2021), p. VII.

at a time, that is, when with Fielding and Richardson our fiction was becoming increasingly robust and realistic'.¹⁶⁸

The 'ordinary Chinaman' as posited in both Soulié's and Woolf's narrative – a term that given its origins in racism is now on contested ground – is presented as aforementioned along the us/them divide; as an almost unbelievable figure whose tastes and habits are to be curiously observed. Oddly, however, this archetypal Chinaman is also discussed by Woolf as resembling a collective English 'us'. According to Woolf, Chineseness seems to assume a liminal position between exoticism and familiarity in the English context. The Chinese taste is close to the changing sensibilities of Woolf's modernising England and hence stands against the previous standards from which her society was transitioning. Naming Henry Fielding and Samuel Richardson as contemporaries of Pu, Woolf pits the Chinese taste for so-called 'light' novels against the Augustan appetite for 'robust and realistic' ones. She thus uses Chinese stories as a tool for her thinking about developments of the English novel. Woolf's idea of the novel to be 'nearer to life' in terms of substance and language, for example, and her challenge against the need for plot in novel writing, which would continue to reveal themselves in her future discourses such as in her essays 'Modern Novels' and 'English Prose',¹⁶⁹ can be seen as connected with her approach of processing the Chinese literary taste. And one might also want to think about the cultural liminality of Chineseness between the collective 'us' and the othering 'they' in imperial Britain through the chinoiserie plate. Aestheticised ornamentally through objects and as style, as with the chinoiserie plate, Chineseness is consumed by the empire in the everyday context and in relation to the empire's views of itself. The familiarity of Chineseness hence lies in its ornamentality, for it

¹⁶⁸ Woolf, 'Chinese Stories', p. 7.

¹⁶⁹ Woolf, 'Modern Novels', in E 3, pp. 30-36; Woolf, 'English Prose', in E 3, pp. 171-175.

becomes an exotic instrument for looking self-reflexively into developments of England and the wider empire, as could be observed from Woolf's attentions in 'Chinese stories'.

Despite my criticisms of Woolf, however, I do not wish to undermine the importance of her contribution to broader discussions of literary and political ideologies in the contemporary context. If anything, confronting the nuanced problematics of now canonical writers such as Woolf is the beginning of more equal exchanges in reading experiences, especially in the present age where communication and translation technologies have made much more extensive the passing on of literary discourses, among other things, to unintended but still indispensable audiences of reception. Woolf is a product of her time as we are of ours. Albeit the problematics in her writing as discussed above, her interest in Chinese literature and other foreign texts reflects an eagerness to reach out beyond the confines of her own culture, which is admirable. It must be reiterated that this gesture is constrained by the tools and technologies concerning transfers of knowledge in her time. Her repeated echoing of Soulié's preface in the review shows that the information she receives of Chinese literature, at least at the time of her writing, depends largely on the former's introduction on the topic, which is sometimes unreliable – particularly in terms of temporal lapse. Pu Songling's stories, as mentioned, were written not in the second half of the eighteenth century but completed by the early first. And Soulié's examples of light Chinese novels against the Chinese classics, which Woolf restates in her review, is also immensely interesting. Indeed, besides *Strange Stories*, Soulié is successful with his raising of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* in presenting an example of a popular Chinese novel.¹⁷⁰ Yet this novel by Luo Guanzhong was written in the 14th century; by 1913, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* had long been considered another classic in China. Though its novelistic nature differs from the Confucianism texts of the pre-Qin

¹⁷⁰ For more on the Chinese novel, see 'Romance of the Three Kingdoms', *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (2026) <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Romance-of-the-Three-Kingdoms>> [accessed 11 February 2026].

period, there are certainly more contemporary examples that Soulié could have given of the light, modern Chinese novel. Thus, although Woolf displays a desire to understand the Chinese, she would have been reaching out to China via the bridge of the willow pattern plate that leads to stagnated impressions of the country.

As I contemplate again on the chinoiserie plate produced from my reading of Woolf, however, I cannot help but wonder if my motivation for making the plate is in fact much closer to that of Woolf's aesthetic visualising than meets the eye. Woolf wrote 'Chinese Stories' in 1913, the year before the outbreak of the First World War, when the political scene in England and the world was becoming increasingly turbulent. Her romanticising of China comes across as having less to do with a sustained interest in the country than with a desire to imagine an alternative to her own realities. And Woolf was mistaken to think that *Strange Stories* lacks point. Pu Songling's masterpiece is also a search for escape and alternative. His exploration of the supernatural is a way of criticising the natural – of governmental corruptions, human nature, and his personal disappointments in Chinese society. *Liaozhai* centrally offers the postulation that humans can be scarier than ghosts.

In my mulling over contemporary circumstances, and in my thinking about technologies as generating both the beauty and violence that humanity can exert, I began to understand my desire to engage with the chinoiserie plate, despite recognising the apparent self-orientalising nature of the crafting project. For the slow, concentrated, and gentle technologies involved in creating a painted chinoiserie plate also serve as an alternative to the technological hyper-advancements of our age. The beauty of the chinoiserie plate is a shared language; it is familiar to and admired by people of the West and the East. Perhaps, then, the chinoiserie plate as a concept

offers ground for cross-cultural communication, negotiation, and peace in the world outside of its porcelain frame.

This chapter has shown the ways in which Woolf interacted with China during the early stages of her life. Her outlook towards the East at this juncture is undoubtedly orientalist. Her intentions, nevertheless, are mostly innocuous, and even display an enthusiasm to learn about foreign cultures. The result of these clashing attitudes is a decorative, superficial regard of the Orient by Woolf, which while useful to her initial gaze at the East is limited in facilitating an authentic understanding of Eastern cultures, including China, for the author. Woolf's grasp of China for most of her literary career, and especially during her early writing days, thus leans on ideas of the aesthetic. In the days prior to 1914, her understanding of Chinese aesthetics is largely developed from her reading of the place, which she would then articulate on paper with smaller writing projects such as book reviews and short essays. Yet, as she grows as a writer, Woolf's aesthetic discourses of China also seep into the works that would later be regarded as central to her oeuvre. The next chapter will continue to study Woolf's Chinese aesthetics in the ensuing phase of her career.

Chapter Two

1915-1927: Fictionalising China

Following Woolf's initial written output, which, apart from the passages in her diary and letters, was primarily composed of analytical reviews and essays, this chapter considers her writing between 1915 and 1927, a period marked by the emergence of her creative literature. Woolf's first published novel, *The Voyage Out*, was issued in 1915 by Duckworth Books; correspondingly, Woolf's first published short fiction, 'The Mark on the Wall', was printed in 1917 by the Hogarth Press as part of its debut collection, *Two Stories*. If Woolf was already studying the textural, stylistic potential of artistic expressions in the period prior to 1915, this stage of her writing career, in which she begins to explore the application of her aesthetic observations to her creative projects, is thus the time in which she establishes her authorial voice with such means. This chapter picks up, in terms of temporal progress, from the publication of 'Chinese Stories' (1913) and follows the stretch of years in which Woolf brought two of her now most celebrated novels, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927), into print. There is much evidence in Woolf's works of this period, as this chapter will show, to suggest that she was utilising notions from her education in foreign aesthetics that would continue to emerge and develop in her more mature writing, including in *Mrs Dalloway*. Nevertheless, this period is not just a phase of transition in Woolf's writing career; it is a significant phase in which she actively develops ideas that communicate her early aesthetic and political attitudes. Though it is true that many of these ideas will become foundational to Woolf's expressions in her later works, this initial stage of Woolf's creative output provides a valuable lens through which to examine the thematic and formal patterns that she employs in her

literary discourses. Compared with the earlier and later stages of Woolf's writing, there are relatively fewer references to China in her writing of this period. Yet Woolf's allusions to China and Chineseness, albeit more subtle, remain present in her writing from this phase of her career. A recognisable example of Woolf's allusion to Chinese aesthetics from her early attempt at creative writing is her inclusion of the Chinese pagoda at Kew Gardens in her eponymously titled short story of the botanic park.¹⁷¹ More will be discussed of this architectural imagery in the body of this chapter, among my analyses of Woolf's other works.

The three sections of this chapter follow a roughly chronological structure. The first section turns to Woolf's political discourse on the British empire in *The Voyage Out* (1915) and *Night and Day* (1919), and further connects her politics with her consideration of racial and genetic inheritance, which extends to her narrative construction of *Mrs Dalloway* surrounding Elizabeth Dalloway's 'Chinese eyes'.¹⁷² I will add to this discussion my analysis on Lily Briscoe's 'Chinese eyes' in *To the Lighthouse* (1927),¹⁷³ which is relevant to such observations on politics and eugenics in the aforementioned texts. In this section, I also draw upon *Melymbrosia* (1912), Woolf's earlier draft of *The Voyage Out*, to tease out the relevant nuances that demonstrate her process of negotiating with the political and aesthetic discourses in her published novel. The second section concentrates on Woolf's short fictions, particularly her stories 'The Mark on the Wall' (1917), 'Kew Gardens' (1919), and 'Solid Objects' (1920). This section focuses its study on Woolf's development of her formal aesthetics, which she in part renders from her grasp of oriental, Chinese things. Written around and during the Great War, Woolf's budding experimentations with style and form in her literary practice of this period inexorably entwine with her contemplation on

¹⁷¹ Woolf, 'Kew Gardens', in CSF, p. 95.

¹⁷² Woolf, MD, pp. 134, 148.

¹⁷³ Woolf, TL, pp. 21, 31, 99, 113, 171.

Britain's imperial politics; this section therefore continues from the previous section my connection of Woolf's exotic aesthetics with her reflections on the empire. The third section of this chapter looks at some of the short stories that Woolf composed in the proximate period when she was writing *Mrs Dalloway*, namely 'Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street' (1923), 'The Man Who Loved His Kind', 'The New Dress' (1924), and 'A Summing up'.¹⁷⁴ In this section, I similarly examine Woolf's reworking of typical oriental imageries into her literary aesthetics, as well as her political expressions that emerge from such writing exercises. To some extent, this third section moreover sets up the stylistic discussion in my next chapter on *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. At heart, my argument intends to show the consistent progression of Woolf's literary innovations from the previous period to the next. Her aesthetic and political adaptations of Chinese designs at this stage of her life form a notable part to her initial creative endeavours.

2.1 The Voyage East

In *The Voyage Out*, Woolf's portrayal of the foreign and exotic pivots on decorative, ornamental things. Through these details, she constructs South America in ways that shape her cultural conception of the region. Rachel Vinrace's introduction to the native civilisation of the (fictitious) colony of Santa Marina begins with Mrs Flushing's demonstration of the goods that she has exploited from the place. Mrs Flushing, persuading Rachel to travel with her to the native camps, tosses out from her wardrobe 'shawls, stuffs, cloaks, embroideries' that she has purchased

¹⁷⁴ These stories are respectively published in *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Susan Dick (Harcourt, Inc., 1989), pp. 153-159, 195-200, 170-177, and 208-211. To note, two of these stories were published during Woolf's lifetime. 'Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street' first appeared in *The Dial*, vol. LXXV (1923), pp. 20-27; 'The New Dress' also made its first appearance in the May 1927 edition of *The Forum*.

from the local people;¹⁷⁵ she further displays to Rachel ‘a quantity of beads, brooches, earrings, bracelets, tassels, and combs among the draperies’ to illustrate the potential value of this trip.¹⁷⁶ Consequently, this scene, steered by the perspective of Mrs Flushing, identifies the South American natives by the things that they wear and produce. Equally important to this discourse is Mrs Flushing’s economic valuation of these ornamental items that supposedly represent the native’s long-standing traditions. Mrs Flushing, after showing off her exotic collection to Rachel, boasts of her economic exploitation:

‘The women wore them hundreds of years ago, they wear ’em still,’ Mrs Flushing remarked. ‘My husband rides about and finds ’em; they don’t know what they’re worth, so we get ’em cheap. And we sell ’em to smart women in London,’ she chuckled, as though the thought of these ladies and their absurd appearance amused her.¹⁷⁷

What the natives consider to be common, everyday objects are seen by the Flushings and the wider British market as unusual, precious goods. There is moreover a compelling link between class and race under Mrs Flushing’s exchange model of these decorative things. The exotic items, which her customers associate with the identities and practices of South America’s native race, become sartorial markers of the affluent, ‘smart women in London’ who by their purchasing power and imperial tastes seek to possess these goods. The Flushings’ trade project is a condensation of the empire’s structural workings. Their business depends on the vulnerability of the natives who reside within the global political and economic systems that preserve the colony of Santa Marina. In turn, Mr and Mrs Flushing embody the typical spirit of the colonialists in their proud exploitation of the local economy, which ultimately operates to benefit Britain’s domestic interests. Woolf’s satirical

¹⁷⁵ Woolf, VO, p. 272.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

description of the Flushings' commercial enterprise, which she inextricably attaches to ornamental things and gestures, shows her awareness of these uneven dynamics. Her portrayal of their trading activities is certainly politically charged.

Shortly after Mrs Flushing's flaunting of her collected goods, Woolf accentuates her satire of the Flushings' colonialist outlook in a following scene that further highlights Mr Flushing's grasp of aesthetic culture. As the Flushings head to lunch, Mr Flushing gives Rachel 'a sketch of the history of South American art'.¹⁷⁸ His vivid speculation on the continent's hidden objects indeed offers an illustrative sketch of its yet-unexplored treasures. Curiously, and following my discussion on Bloomsbury's formalist vision in the previous chapter, Woolf's descriptions in this scene show signs of echo with Clive Bell's and Roger Fry's respective formulations on foreign, exotic art. Mr Flushing reflects on the subject in conversation with Rachel:

He had formed the opinion, so he told Rachel, that wonderful treasures lay hid in the depths of the land; the things Rachel had seen were merely trifles picked up in the course of one short journey. He thought there might be giant gods hewn out of stone in the mountain-side; and colossal figures standing by themselves in the middle of vast green pasture lands, where none but natives had ever trod. Before the dawn of European art he believed that the primitive huntsmen and priests had built temples of massive stone slabs, had formed out of the dark rocks and the great cedar trees majestic figures of gods and of beasts, and symbols of the great forces, water, air, and forest, among which they lived. There might be prehistoric towns, like those in Greece and Asia, standing in open places among the trees, filled with the works of this early race. Nobody had been there; scarcely anything was known. Thus talking and displaying the most picturesque of his theories, Rachel's attention was fixed upon him.¹⁷⁹

Mr Flushing infuses a sense of mysticism in his opinion on South American art. What he and Rachel have seen of it, he suggests, is merely the tip of its treasures; the depth of its history goes

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 275.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

back to before the dawn of European art. Mr Flushing, to support this theorisation, further attributes the origins of South American art to a primitive, prehistoric race, from which springs civilisations and settlements that are similar to those in Greece and Asia. There is little to prove Mr Flushing's speculation; the towns and productions of this race have long been lost. Yet, there is a charming, picturesque appeal to his interpretation of South American art, which clearly captures Rachel's interest.

The propositions in this scene deepen Woolf's satirical characterisation of the Flushings as colonialist perpetrators. Yet Woolf's playful gloss on South American art would have also been informed by the critical opinions of Bloomsbury. In particular, Clive Bell, whom Woolf closely consulted when drafting *Melymbrosia* and then *The Voyage Out*,¹⁸⁰ had around the time of Woolf's writing published his critique on Central and South American art, among his critique on other foreign aesthetic cultures, in his book *Art* (1913). In the first chapter of *Art*, 'The Aesthetic Hypothesis', Bell formulates his titular theory around the idea of an aesthetic emotion that is moved by the Significant Form of an art piece. Bell believes that Significant Form is a common quality among all great art across different times, spaces, and cultures. He thus discusses the aesthetic impact of worldwide 'primitive art':

Most people who care much about art find that of the work that moves them most the greater part is what scholars call "Primitive". [...] As a rule primitive art is good – and here again my hypothesis is helpful – for, as a rule, it is also free from descriptive qualities. In primitive art you will find no accurate representation; you will find only significant form. Yet no other art moves us so profoundly. Whether we consider Sumerian sculpture or pre-dynastic Egyptian art, or archaic Greek, or

¹⁸⁰ Woolf gave Bell about a hundred pages of *Melymbrosia* to read and review in the October of 1908. She had also referenced this event in her letter to Bell at around the same time: 'Will you think me a great bore if I turn to the dreary subject again, and ask you whether you have anything to say about that unfortunate work?' See Letter 451, in *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, 6 vols, ed. by Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (The Hogarth Press, 1975-80), I, p. 371. See also Monica Girard, 'The Conversation of Conversations from *Melymbrosia* to *The Voyage Out*', *Études britanniques contemporaines* (2005), < <https://doi.org/10.4000/12cwj> > for more about the exchanges between Woolf and Bell on *Melymbrosia* and *The Voyage Out*.

the Wei and T'ang masterpieces, [...] or, turning far afield, we consider that mysterious and majestic art that flourished in Central and South America before the coming of white men, in every case we observe three common characteristics – absence of representation, absence of technical swagger, sublimely impressive form. Nor is it hard to discover the connection between these three. Formal significance loses itself in preoccupation with exact representation and ostentatious cunning.¹⁸¹

Bell claims that the most moving works of art are from the 'Primitive' category. To Bell, primitive art is usually good because it noticeably embraces Significant Form. Drawing on the art of ancient civilisations, which includes that of 'Central and South America before the coming of white men' and the 'Wei and T'ang masterpieces' of China, Bell then establishes three common characteristics that could be found in all types of good primitive art – 'absence of representation', 'absence of technical swagger', and 'sublimely impressive form'. In short, and as Bell has earlier framed in the passage above, primitive art is good because it is 'free from descriptive qualities'. Bell's assessment of good art consequently values the emotional response of the viewer over the illustrative and technical accuracy of the art piece.

Bell's aesthetic idealisation of primitivism operates between contradiction and convenience. In identifying other cultures as primitive, and therefore crude, underdeveloped, and anchored to ancient practices, Bell is also reinforcing the imperialist notion of a modern and civilised West. Notably, he recognises the primitive state of Central and South America as before 'the coming of white men'. This distinction is remarkable. While benefiting from the securities and comforts of Western progression, Bell recognises, too, that the practical developments of his people thrive upon the colonial destruction of other places. From Bell's perspective, primitive art is hence good; the things of the primitive people are free from the rational and technological

¹⁸¹ Clive Bell, *Art* (Chatto & Windus, 1914), pp. 8-9.

approaches of the Western world. Woolf's language in *The Voyage Out* on a 'primitive' race, which is capable of wonderful, majestic art, is thus most probably influenced by Bell's ideals.

Bell has in fact contrasted the emotional sensibilities of foreign aesthetics with the realist techniques of Western art prior to his publication of *Art*. In his 1911 review of Laurence Binyon's *The Flight of the Dragon: An Essay on the Theory and Practice of Art in China and Japan* in the *Athenaeum*, which he later collects in *Pot-Boilers* (1918), Bell has already praised the expressiveness of Chinese and Japanese art along similar principles of abstract, aesthetic form. In his review, Bell notes the harmonious rhythmic movements of Chinese and Japanese art, which he associates with the spiritual sensibilities of primitive artists. He then considers the diverging essences of Asiatic and European art:

The emotional life has never been in the East what it has become in the west, the rare possession of a fortunate few. There the practical life has been kept subordinate, a means to supporting the emotional. In China men still go about their business that they may purchase leisure in which to contemplate reality. In Europe we are practical; and reality is banished from the life of the practical man who regards all things as means instead of contemplating them as ends. He sees just what is of use to him, and no more.¹⁸²

Positioning the concepts of 'emotional life' and 'practical life' as opposite terms, Bell juxtaposes the spiritual practices of the Chinese with the materialist attitudes of the Europeans. He proposes that the Chinese are more in tune with the natural, emotional ways of life. In Europe, however, the general approach to life is more rational; emotional sensibilities are sacrificed for modern progression. Chinese art, which exudes primitive styles of aesthetics, are thus to Bell better than European art on account of their authenticity with expressing the inner life. Bell would continue to discuss his formalist assessment of Chinese art in his following writings. In 'An Expensive

¹⁸² Clive Bell, 'The Flight of the Dragon', in *Pot-Boilers* (Chatto & Windus, 1918), p. 141.

“Masterpiece”, another essay collected in *Pot-Boilers*, and which Bell first published in the *New Statesman* in 1914, he similarly proposes an ‘aesthetic’ rather than a ‘scientific’ method of judging the artistic worth of a decorative piece.¹⁸³ The thing that catches Bell’s attention in this essay is a purchase by the British Museum – a Chinese Tang pottery figure – which Bell finds artistically insignificant. He argues that not all ancient art is moving; the piece in question, for instance, impresses its viewers by dramatic instead of plastic qualities.¹⁸⁴ Bell therefore posits that good art is ultimately dependant on the formal arrangements of its aesthetics. Woolf would have been aware of Bell’s discourse on formalism when writing *Melymbrosia* and *The Voyage Out*. Her descriptive scene in the previously extracted passage surrounding Mr Flushing’s romanticisation of ancient South American art especially echoes Bell’s connection between primitive, foreign aesthetic cultures and grand, significant displays of formalist expression. Particularly, Woolf’s imaginative rendition of primitive treasures is tied to mystic, spiritual, and hence intensely emotional practices. Her portrayal in *The Voyage Out* thus presents an adaptation of Bell’s formalism that is further reshaped to fit the literary configurations of her novel.

Woolf’s depiction of South American art through Mr Flushing’s narrative interestingly also resembles Roger Fry’s discourse on the wider subject in his essay ‘Ancient American Art’, which could be found in *Vision and Design* (1920). Fry’s essay was first published under the title ‘American Archeology’ in *Burlington Magazine* in 1918. His ideas on American art could very much have influenced Woolf’s imagination on the subject; though the original essay was published two years after the initial publication of *The Voyage Out*, the close time frame between Fry’s and Woolf’s writing of their respective works suggests a possible exchange between them on the subject of American art prior to the publication of their pieces. In ‘Ancient American Art’, Fry

¹⁸³ Clive Bell, ‘An Expensive “Masterpiece”’, in *Pot-Boilers* (Chatto & Windus, 1918), p. 189.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

discusses the art history, influence, and designs of the ancient civilisations of America, particularly those of the Mayans and Aztecs. In part, he brings up Thomas A. Joyce's argument against the supposition of Eastern Asiatic influence in ancient American art,¹⁸⁵ and Walter Lehmann's opposite views on the matter,¹⁸⁶ which supports the suggestion of cultural influence in American art from Eastern Asia. Fry offers his opinion on the hypothetical debate:

My own bias in favour of the theory of Eastern Asiatic influence is, I confess, based on what may seem very insufficient grounds, namely, the curious likeness of the general treatment of naturalistic forms and the peculiar character of the stylisation of natural forms in early Chinese and American art. It is of course impossible to define a likeness of general character which depends so largely on feeling, but it consists to some extent in the predilection for straight lines and rectangles – a spiral in nature becoming in both early Chinese and American art a sequence of rectangular forms with rounded corners. What is more remarkable is that the further back we go in Chinese art the greater the resemblance becomes, so that a Chou bronze, or still more the carved horns which have survived from Shang dynasty, are extraordinarily like Maya or Tiahuanaco sculpture. Again, it is curious to note how near to early Chinese bronzes are the tripod vases of the Guetar Indians. All these may of course be of quite independent origin, but their similarity cannot be dismissed lightly in view of the long persistence in any civilisation of such general habits of design. Thus the general habits of design of the Cretan civilisation persisted into Greek and even Roman and Christian art; the habits of design of Chinese artists have persisted, though through great modifications, for more than three thousand years.¹⁸⁷

Fry, along similar lines as Woolf's depiction of ancient American art in *The Voyage Out*, proposes an early, primitive civilisation behind the designs of ancient American art that goes back to even before the emergence of Maya society. Fry argues in favour of Eastern Asiatic influence in ancient

¹⁸⁵ See *South American Archaeology: An Introduction to the Archaeology of the South American Continent with Special Reference to the Early History of Peru* (1912), *Mexican Archaeology: An Introduction to the Archaeology of the Mexican and Mayan Civilizations of Pre-Spanish America* (1914), and *Central American and West Indian Archaeology: Being an Introduction to the Archaeology of the States of Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama and the West Indies* (1916).

¹⁸⁶ See *Ergebnisse einer Forschungsreise in Mittelamerika und México, 1907-1909* (1910) and *Zentral-Amerika*, Volume 1 (1911).

¹⁸⁷ Roger Fry, 'Ancient American Art', in *Vision and Design* (Dover Publications, Inc., 1998 [1920]), p. 79.

American art, though he implies suspicion of an even earlier root that brought about the similar designs in, for example, a Chou bronze and a Maya or Tiahuanaco sculpture. He is careful to suggest that such traditional designs could be from independent origins; Fry is not trying to insist that the art of one culture is necessarily indebted to another. Yet it is true, nevertheless, that Fry posits in his essay the likelihood of Eastern Asiatic influence in ancient American art and beyond, including in the design habits of the Cretan civilisation, which persists into those of Greek and even Roman and Christian art. Fry bases his formalist hypothesis on his observation of the comparable naturalistic stylisation in early Chinese and American art, especially in their mutual predilection for straight lines and rectangles. Though Fry himself admits that his interpretation of formal likeness is difficult to define and prove, he recapitulates in this extract that albeit with significant modifications, the habits of design across many ancient civilisations could have been influenced by the Chinese, whose aesthetic traditions have persisted for over three thousand years. Recalling the discussions in my previous chapter, Fry's arguments here overlap with some of his propositions in his later essay 'Some Aspects of Chinese Art' (1926). Perhaps given his increased maturity as a critic at the time of his writing this essay, Fry's considerations in 'Some Aspects of Chinese Art' are relatively more cautious. He still expresses a sense of formal resemblance between Chinese and Greek art, for instance, but he also adds to this premise the notion of a reciprocal influence between these two cultures. Ultimately, in 'Some Aspects of Chinese Art', Fry points towards activities of artistic and cultural exchange across civilisations, both in the past and present.

As mentioned, Fry continues his study on the cross-influence of aesthetics between the East and West in 'Some Aspects of Chinese Art'. He observes in his essay:

This peculiarly subtle sense of rhythmic continuity is made evident in a curious way in some objects of the T'ang dynasty in which certain Alexandrine or Roman

models have been followed so closely that in the case of certain silver vases one would be inclined at first sight to say that they had come from excavations at Pompeii. But when we look closer we find that everywhere the Chinese feeling has subtly modified the original. It is characteristic of a great deal of later-Greek design that it accepts willingly circular curvature. It is this fact that give to these objects that peculiarly tight, mechanical elegance which was so dear to our ancestors a hundred years ago. An elegance which now appears to us to be distressingly devoid of vitality and elasticity. And so, though perhaps all unconsciously, the T'ang silversmiths must have felt, for, by innumerable minute readjustments of proportion and modifications of the galb they have given to their vases just those qualities which the Greek craftsman lacked. Again, in those T'ang dishes, which so strangely anticipate our rococo, the complex bracketed curves are always slightly flattened out as though the finer sensibilities of the artist had shunned the effect of rollicking self-confidence which, centuries later, European craftsmen gave to almost identical designs.¹⁸⁸

Fry shows the same obsession with stylised natural forms in 'Some Aspects of Chinese Art' as he did in 'Ancient American Art'. In 'Ancient American Art', Fry identifies a common character between Chinese art and American art in their shared fondness for 'straight lines and rectangles', which he epitomises in their mutual expressions of a spiral that materialise as 'a sequence of rectangular forms with rounded corners'. In 'Some Aspects of Chinese Art', Fry reestablishes his grasp of a 'Chinese rhythm' in Chinese art, which he explains as the cause of its harmonious forms and movements. Again, he proposes 'the square with rounded angles' as a basic manifestation of this rhythmic concept, and gestures to the pattern of 'spiral lines' in Chinese art to support this claim.¹⁸⁹ It is in this context that Fry explains his ideas on 'rhythmic continuity' in the above extracted passage.

In this particular passage, Fry highlights the similar designs and overlapping roots of certain art objects from cultures in China and Europe. He points out, for example, that some silver vases of the Tang dynasty would have been modelled after Alexandrine or Roman ones, and also

¹⁸⁸ Roger Fry, 'Some Aspects of Chinese Art', in *Transformations* (Chatto & Windus, 1927), p. 74-75.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

influenced by later-Greek styles. In turn, he gestures to some Tang dish designs, which appear to have anticipated the rococo styles of the French. Fry is thus suggesting aesthetic connections – even reciprocal global lineages – in the productions of art across the East and West. Given his enthusiasm with Chinese art and the topic of his essay, Fry's statements in 'Some Aspects of Chinese Art' decidedly hold a stronger regard for Chinese over European aesthetics. The silversmiths of the Tang dynasty, for instance, have in their design adjustments of the vases added to them qualities that those of the Greek craftsman lacked. The Tang dishes, too, with their slightly flattened out edges, reflect 'the finer sensibilities of the artist'. Consequently, Fry's critical language associates the rhythmic continuity of Chinese art with a sense of elevated sophistication that he is unable to find in many European objects. It is important to note, nonetheless, that Fry's comparative exercise does not work to centre his study on Chinese things; rather, he looks to the aesthetics of Chinese art as alternative and complimentary methods of further improving on European productions. The 'Chinese feeling' modifies. Aspects of Chinese aesthetics, Fry believes, when incorporated into the arts of the West, can cause positive and innovative breakthroughs.

Fry's formalist discussions on art would have affected the creative sensibilities of Woolf's literature. Returning to the extract by Woolf in *The Voyage Out*, her imaginative description of South America's ancient treasures, which includes her curious association of prehistoric American towns with those in Greece and Asia, could then be also associated with Fry's discourses on aesthetics. In Woolf's account of America's native art, there are thus suppositions of cross-cultural influences in primitive habits of design. And later, in another scene that sees the Flushings determining the value of their purchases, Woolf moreover extends a playful nudge at the notion of European influence in the goods that the Flushings obtained from the indigenous peoples of Santa Marina. Standing in the native camp, Helen Ambrose finds the Flushings by her side: 'They were

talking about the things they had bought and arguing whether they were really old, and whether there were not signs here and there of European influence.’¹⁹⁰ Woolf’s portrayal of the Flushings here, as with the whole of her novel, hinges on a satirical note; their preoccupation with the primitive and exotic qualities of their plunder puts emphasis on the empire’s equation of economic gain with superficial renderings of the other. Woolf may have been inspired by Fry’s cross-cultural connection of aesthetics as well as his incorporation of such visuals in his own modern formulations of art. Her own translation of these aesthetic, ornamental cross-influences in cultural productions, however, further serves a political twist that supplies originality to her use of Bloomsbury’s formalist sense in her literature. In *The Voyage Out*, the mixed lineage of objects could be understood as also alluding to the mixed lineage of race, which would refute ideas of white supremacy that sustain the workings of the empire. Woolf’s novel undoubtedly articulates an anti-imperialist worldview. In this scene of discussion, Helen, who becomes caught up in the Flushings’ argument, shows clear discomfort in their colonialist business:

Helen was appealed to. She was made to look at a brooch, and then at a pair of earrings. But all the time she blamed them for having come on this expedition, for having ventured too far and exposed themselves. Then she roused herself and tried to talk, but in a few moments she caught herself seeing a picture of a boat upset on the river in England, at midday.¹⁹¹

Helen is aware of her invasion into the natives’ space. The returned gaze of the village women at the British group conveys a manner of resistance that makes Helen feels exposed. In her uneasiness with the expedition, which is escalated by the Flushings’ reckless trading, Helen sees a hallucinatory image – an overturned boat on an English river – that can be read as suggestive of

¹⁹⁰ Woolf, VO, p. 333.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

the empire's downfall. 'It was morbid', Helen knows, 'to imagine such things',¹⁹² but she cannot help but recognise the faults in the imperial practices of her people, which she believes will cause them and herself trouble in the long run. There is furthermore much contextual activities in Britain to fuel Woolf's biting connections between 'primitive' persons, ornamental objects, and the economic display of the nation. The 1911 Festival of Empire, held at the Crystal Palace in London, markedly includes in its attractions exhibits of architectural models and indigenous produce from across Britain's overseas territories.¹⁹³ The adjacent Pageant of London that is integrated with the Festival of Empire moreover staged performance scenes by people of colonial birth to reinforce the grandeur of Britain's imperial history. Specifically, as shown on the pageant's souvenir book, part four of the pageant perform ethnic scenes that position the native peoples of Newfoundland, Australia, South Africa, and New Zealand as primitive spectacles.¹⁹⁴ Woolf's narrative in *The Voyage Out* is then also a reaction against such exhibitions of the empire. Her discourse on Helen's fear not only expresses discomfort at these imperial practices of ornamenting the other, but further articulates the agency and ubiquitous presence of the other within the very structures of Britain.

Woolf's anti-imperialism permeates the complete narrative of *The Voyage Out*; the image of the boat echoes the wider imageries of the novel, which essentially rest on the South America-bound ship, the *Euphrosyne*, upon which Rachel and her companions embark. Clarissa and Richard Dalloway, better known as characters from *Mrs Dalloway*, also appear as guests on the *Euphrosyne* in *The Voyage Out*. Readers familiar with Clarissa and Richard as embodiments of English upper-class society in *Mrs Dalloway* will recognise that their brief but notable presences in *The Voyage*

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ See Jeffrey Auerbach, 'Empire under glass: The British Empire and the Crystal Palace, 1851-1911', in *Exhibiting the Empire: Cultures of Display and the British Empire*, ed. by John McAleer and John M. MacKenzie (Manchester University Press, 2015) for a helpful elaboration on the specifics of the Festival of Empire's display pieces.

¹⁹⁴ The digitised version of the souvenir book can be found on the Internet Archive <<https://archive.org/details/festivalofempire00lomaiala/page/n3/mode/2up>>.

Out deliver as effectively their imperial identities. Woolf initially conceives the Dalloways as semi-comical protectors of the British empire. This is especially obvious in a scene from *Melymbrosia*, which Woolf would eventually remove from *The Voyage Out*:

‘We *must* have a son Dick’ she said.
‘Good Lord, what opportunities there are now for young men!’ said Dalloway, for his talk had set him thinking. ‘I don’t suppose there’s been so good an opening since the days of Pitt.’
‘And it’s yours!’ said Clarissa.
‘To be a leader of men’ Richard soliloquised. ‘It’s a fine career. My God – what a career!’
The chest slowly curved beneath his waistcoat.
‘I can’t stop thinking of England’ said his wife, leaning her head against his waistcoat. ‘Being on this ship seems to make it so much more vivid – what it really means to be English. One thinks of all we’ve done, and our navies, and the people in India and Africa, and how we’ve gone on century after century, sending out boys from little country villages – and of men like you Dick, and it makes one feel as if one couldn’t bear *not* to be English! Think of the light burning over the house Dick! When I stood on deck just now I seemed to see it. It’s what one means by London.’¹⁹⁵

Woolf decides to cut this episode from her final novel;¹⁹⁶ perhaps, after receiving Bell’s advice against her fierce critique of imperialist and sexual politics, she has wanted to tone down the more radical, outspoken parts of her writing in the published version of her book. Nevertheless, Clarissa’s assertions here in *Melymbrosia* not only completes Woolf’s ship analogy, but moreover epitomises the Dalloway’s political vision for Britain. Clarissa, putting to words her experience on the ship, connects her voyage on the passenger vessel with the accomplishments of the Royal Navy. For Clarissa, her being on the ship allows for a fanciful illusion of her ruling over the waves, which

¹⁹⁵ Virginia Woolf, *Melymbrosia*, ed. by Louise DeSalvo (Cleis Press, 1982), p. 58-59.

¹⁹⁶ See also Monica Girard, ‘The Conversion of Conversations From *Melymbrosia* to *The Voyage Out*’, *Études britanniques contemporaine*, hors série (2005). Online since 9 July 2024
<<http://journals.openedition.org/ebc/15024>> [accessed 5 July 2026]. In her essay, Girard explores Clive Bell’s role in Woolf’s editing process from *Melymbrosia* to *The Voyage Out*, noting his influence on her editing decisions for reasons of narrative concision and style.

makes vivid her ideals of Englishness. To be English is to dominate and colonise; Clarissa, while ‘thinking of England’, automatically entertains herself with thoughts of the navies and ‘the people in India and Africa’. She also considers the role of men in the empire and her own position as a woman within the nation’s military, machine-like operations. ‘We *must* have a son’, Clarissa exclaims to Richard, not out of familial desires, but for the sake of England’s imperialist workings: century after century, the English has been ‘sending out boys from little country villages’ to fight and rule. Richard is equally thrilled with this sentiment; he contemplates on the political opportunities for young men in the country, and finds pride in his own career as a (former) Member of Parliament. Yet the irony with the Dalloways is that they only have daughters, not sons. Clarissa unquestioningly assumes her position as a mother of the empire; while she is unable to birth male workers for England, she expects her daughters to carry on with this mission. Woolf’s subversion of Clarissa’s expectations in *Mrs Dalloway*, then, which I will elaborate on in this section and in the following chapter, continues to mock the imperialist narrative which the Dalloways embody.

In *Mrs Dalloway*, the racial inheritance of the Dalloways’ daughter, Elizabeth Dalloway, is peculiarly enigmatic; her appearance, values, and behaviours are moreover challenges to her parents’ imperialist conformity towards (Victorian) England. Before I approach Elizabeth’s character, however, I would like to lastly draw on another scene in *The Voyage Out* that restates Woolf’s consideration of race. In this novel, Woolf already toys with the idea of varied cultural roots to aesthetic and art objects; similarly, she has also begun to deliberate on the increasing diversification of the English race. Helen, observing the party before her in Santa Marina, and thinking particularly about St. John Hirst, reflects:

‘And the future?’ she reflected, vaguely envisaging a race of men becoming more and more like Hirst, and a race of women becoming more and more like Rachel.

‘Oh no,’ she concluded, glancing at him, ‘one wouldn’t marry you. Well, then, the future of the race is in the hands of Susan and Arthur; no – that’s dreadful. Of farm labourers; no – not of the English at all, but of Russians and Chinese.’¹⁹⁷

Woolf’s gendered separation of race is an interesting addition to her racial discourse in this scene. Here, Helen imagines – and rejects – a future full of Hirsts and Rachels. Hirst and Rachel has in her mind become prototype personalities of the English, which she refuses to accept; Susan and Arthur emerge as alternative models, which she also finds uncomfortable to embrace. Helen explicitly rejects Hirst for his looks: ‘He’s ugly’.¹⁹⁸ While this may serve as an important reason to her somewhat eugenic thinking, it is very probable that his temperament also contributes to Helen’s conclusion in her imaginative exercise. Hirst exists as a stereotype of the Cambridge intellectual who struggles with emotional intelligence, Rachel, meanwhile, though an expressive pianist, is sheltered and naive. To add, Susan and Arthur, conventionally upper-middle class, are people that stick to the socially approved paths of the English life. Helen is pessimistic about a future in which such people thrive. Woolf, through Helen, hence teases the personalities of those who hold positions of privilege and power in the empire.

There is a curious connection between race, gender, and class in Woolf’s discursive paradigm. In Helen’s mental grouping of her companions, the ‘race of men’ and the ‘race of women’ coexist in amicable but distinct terms. Her exercise, moreover, is propelled by an undertone of class structure. Helen appears to eliminate her prototyped characters from top to bottom in terms of class. She first rejects Hirst from the intellectual elite class, and then the lawyer Arthur, who though more plain in manner is also a privileged member of English society. Helen, nevertheless, does not see them as good inheritors of the future. She turns to the idea of farm labourers leading

¹⁹⁷ Woolf, VO, p. 231.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 230.

the English race. If to be English is to rule, dominate, and colonise, as Clarissa Dalloway has outlined, then perhaps the honest work of the labourers would make them less characteristically English and, subsequently, better people for the future of England. Yet Helen remains unsatisfied with this thought; the future of humanity should not be in the hands of the English at all, ‘but of Russians and Chinese’. Helen’s conclusion is amusing; Woolf’s comical twist to Helen’s reflection, however, conveys a political point. Woolf is suggesting the inevitability of a future – if not already a present – in which foreign lineages are combined with that of the pure, white English. Helen’s fleeting thought thus nods to the fated dissolution of the empire and its expansionist, racist structures.

In *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf revises the Dalloway’s familial composition; Clarissa and Richard only have one child, a daughter, whom they name Elizabeth. Elizabeth is about seventeen years old when she makes her first appearance in the novel. From the outset, Woolf’s description of Elizabeth is striking:

The door opened. Elizabeth knew that her mother was resting. She came in very quietly. She stood perfectly still. Was it that some Mongol had been wrecked on the coast of Norfolk (as Mrs. Hilbery said), had mixed with the Dalloway ladies, perhaps a hundred years ago? For the Dalloways, in general, were fair-haired; blue-eyed; Elizabeth, on the contrary, was dark; had Chinese eyes in a pale face; an Oriental mystery; was gentle, considerate, still.¹⁹⁹

Woolf depicts Elizabeth in exotic, oriental terms. She is dark, has ‘Chinese eyes in a pale face’, and is overall ‘an Oriental mystery’. Her mother, Clarissa, further ascribes her physical difference to a racial mixing in the family: ‘Was it that some Mongol had been wrecked on the coast of Norfolk (as Mrs. Hilbery said), had mixed with the Dalloway ladies, perhaps a hundred years ago?’.

¹⁹⁹ Woolf, MD, p. 134.

Woolf's portrayal of Elizabeth's 'Chinese' features demands attention from her readers; when reading this passage in conjunction with Helen's reflection in *The Voyage Out*, Woolf's ideas of Chineseness especially becomes a point of interest to her racial discourse. The 'Russians and Chinese' serve as foils to the English in Helen's mind; they are, ethnically and culturally, the epitome of distinct and distant groups from her Western-rooted viewpoint. Woolf would have followed a similar logic in her portrayal of Elizabeth; her addition of an Eastern lineage to Elizabeth's genetic inheritance puts emphasis on the foreign difference of this character.²⁰⁰ There is, moreover, an aesthetic function to the Chineseness of Elizabeth. Her 'Chinese eyes' not only gesture to her ambiguous racial lineage, but also signal a certain narrow shape of the eyes that is stereotypically associated with the East Asian races.²⁰¹ More will be discussed of Elizabeth's oriental disposition in the next chapter. At this juncture of my analysis, however, it is enough to recognise that Woolf's exotic depiction of Elizabeth serves to undermine the imperialist outlooks of her parents. Woolf could have been particularly influenced by Fry's aesthetic discourse when writing her novel; her choice of a possibly Chinese ancestry for Elizabeth could be attributed to Fry's conviction in China's ubiquitous influence over various affairs of global history, development, and culture. Elizabeth's Chinese eyes, then, symbolise and suggest a mixed heritage in even the Dalloway family, whose members are generally fervent defenders of the empire.

Woolf's reference to Mrs Hilbery in the above quoted description further substantiates the political undertone of this scene. Here, in this narrative sequence, Mrs Hilbery appears in parenthesis as a side note to Clarissa's contemplation of the Mongol. Mrs Hilbery, who serves as

²⁰⁰ See also *Flush: A Biography* (1933). In this novel, Woolf similarly explores conceptions of British aristocracy in relation to mixed ancestry and genetic lineage.

²⁰¹ Early racial science and typology treated physical features such as skull shape, complexion, and eye form as markers of essential racial difference. Influential eighteenth- and nineteenth-century works, such as Johann Friedrich Blumenbach's *On the Natural Varieties of Mankind* (1775), Petrus Camper's lectures on the facial angle (1770), and Arthur de Gobineau's *The Inequality of Human Races* (1853-1855), helped establish hierarchical classifications of 'race' that were widely taken for granted by Western intellectuals at the time.

a notable character in *Night and Day*, takes on a less significant role in *Mrs Dalloway*. Woolf's curious inclusion of Mrs Hilbery in this scene, therefore, suggests a deliberate intention from the author to recall the themes of her previous book in her discourse on Elizabeth. Mrs Hilbery in *Night and Day* ties much of her identity to the Victorian past; she dedicates her energy to preserving the poetic legacy of her father, and unwittingly pressures her daughter to continue the family's heritage in marriage. Her concern with the Dalloways' familial lineage is thus consistent with the traditional interests of her character. Yet Woolf's insertion of Mrs Hilbery in her discussion of Elizabeth's genetic inheritance also points more widely towards her discourse on eugenics with regards to the Hilberys. In *Night and Day*, Woolf explicitly demonstrates her familiarity with the eugenic debates of her time. Ralph Denham, at one point, cites Francis Galton to argue on his theory about the hereditary history of Katherine Hilbery's family:

Denham had accused Katherine Hilbery of belonging to one of the most distinguished families in England, and if anyone will take the trouble to consult Mr Galton's *Hereditary Genius*, he will find that this assertion is not far from the truth. The Alardyces, the Hilberys, the Millingtons, and the Otways seem to prove that intellect is a possession which can be tossed from one member of a certain group to another almost indefinitely, and with apparent certainty that the brilliant gift will be safely caught and held by nine out of ten of the privileged race.²⁰²

As Linden Peach points out, '[t]he eugenics debates with which Woolf was familiar rested on the arguments spelled out by Galton, particularly that mental and moral characteristics and intelligence are, like physical characteristics, inherited'.²⁰³ Peach, through Hermione Lee, has further observed

²⁰² Woolf, ND, p. 32.

²⁰³ Linden Peach, 'Woolf and Eugenics', in *Virginia Woolf in Context*, ed. by Bryony Randall and Jane Goldman (Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 440.

that Galton in fact cited the Stephens family in his *Hereditary Genius* (1868) as an example.²⁰⁴ Woolf's reference to Galton in *Night and Day* plainly imitates the strands of argument in his study on eugenics; her discussion of inherited intelligence among England's prominent families also alludes, in turn, to Galton's deliberation on that of her own bloodline. In this quoted episode, Denham identifies Katherine to be from 'one of the most distinguished families in England', and connects her Hilbery background with her possession of an intellect that would have been passed down from her ancestry line. His reflection on 'the privileged race' here echoes Galton's hereditary grouping of English families and, as significantly, exposes Woolf's insecurities about her own intellectual disposition as a Stephen. The concept of heredity has an importance place in Woolf's thinking about her family; Lee, extending on this point, has further specified that Woolf 'often described herself in terms of inheritance, whether in reference to her mental condition, her "genius", or the split in her character between different tendencies'.²⁰⁵ Woolf's knowledge of her own Anglo-Indian heritage through her mother's side of the family would have also contributed to her contemplation on such eugenic theories. It is possible that this detail of her familial lineage would have served as a cause to Woolf's sporadic nervousness about her own mental capabilities, as well as her design of Elizabeth's racially mixed lineage. I will expand on the racist assumptions that underlie the general eugenic discourse in Chapter Three of my thesis. At present, nonetheless, and refocusing back on Denham's hereditary theory in *Night and Day*, his notion of the privileged race can thus be variously grasped by Woolf's readers along biological, social, and ethnic perceptions.

Woolf has gestured to the eugenic and hereditary discourses in other parts of *Night and Day*; Cassandra Otway's hobby of keeping silkworms, in particular, offers another instance of

²⁰⁴ Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (Chatto and Windus, 1996), p. 55, as quoted in Linden Peach, 'Woolf and Eugenics', in *Virginia Woolf in Context*, ed. by Bryony Randall and Jane Goldman (Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 439-440.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

Woolf's ponder on these subjects. Cassandra's bedroom encapsulates her passion for the hobby: her mother, upon entering her bedroom one day, 'found the ceiling hung with mulberry-leaves, the windows blocked with cages, and the tables stacked with home-made machines for the manufacture of silk dresses'.²⁰⁶ Cassandra's tending to her silkworms, which includes her making from their silk, displays her attraction to aesthetic, ornamental materials and desire for a decorative life. Yet the implications of her hobby reflect more than just her soft, feminine ideals. Cassandra's hobby requires active labour and, additionally, an extensive knowledge on the genetic science behind the breeding of silkworms for silk. By the time of Woolf's writing, the keeping of silkworms is not an unheard of hobby even among the English aristocratic class; Barbara Lounsberry suggests that Cassandra's hobby may have been inspired by Lady Dorothy Nevill's love of the sericultural practice.²⁰⁷ Lady Nevill bred silkworms. She also kept notebooks and scrapbooks, which Woolf would review a few years before writing *Night and Day*.²⁰⁸ Yet it is likely that Woolf would also have been aware of sericulture's origins in ancient China. When conceiving Cassandra's character, Woolf could have wanted, too, to assign to the character an expertise with recognisable foreign, Chinese roots, which would further underscore the hereditary contemplations of her novel. It is thus possible that Woolf had intended to incorporate ideas of multicultural and racial mixing even in the discourses of her early novels, including *Night and Day*.

The eugenic debates of her time offered a vocabulary for Woolf's thinking about heredity, which she employs in the discussions of her work. During the earlier stages of her career, such as when she was writing *Night and Day*, Woolf's engagement with hereditary ideas tends towards an attitude of simple and occasionally unquestioned acceptance. Her portrayal of Denham's

²⁰⁶ Woolf, ND, p. 217.

²⁰⁷ Barbara Lounsberry, 'Embracing the Unconscious', in *Becoming Virginia Woolf: Her Early Diaries and the Diaries She Read* (University Press of Florida, 2014), p. 109.

²⁰⁸ See Virginia Woolf, 'The Memoirs of Lady Dorothy Nevill', *Cornhill Magazine* (1908), in E 1, pp. 178-183.

suspicions about Katherine's familial lineage, for example, presents a version of the hereditary discourse that is close to the arguments of its original debate. By the time that Woolf was writing *Mrs Dalloway*, nevertheless, she certainly expressed more skepticism towards the ideas in such eugenic and hereditary discourses. As I have previously touched on, Elizabeth's possible mixed lineage in *Mrs Dalloway* emerges as a challenge to the configurations of white superiority within the British imperial hierarchy. Importantly, as I have also discussed, it appears that Woolf was already considering a variant of this challenge even as early as her writing of *Melymbrosia*. In *To the Lighthouse*, furthermore, Woolf would continue to develop her anti-imperial politics upon positions of mixed identities. Woolf's characterisations of Rachel Vinrace, Elizabeth Dalloway, and Lily Briscoe in respectively *Melymbrosia/The Voyage Out*, *Mrs Dalloway*, and *To the Lighthouse* hold resembling racial codes. In the remainder of this section, I will lastly trace Woolf's connecting portrayals of these characters to illuminate the development of her politics and aesthetics throughout this period of her writing.

Several criticisms on *The Voyage Out* have already expounded on Rachel's outsider status as an 'other' in the novel. Andrea Lewis, for example, has noted Rachel's position as a subject of the empire in view of her class and gender.²⁰⁹ Julia Kuehn, more substantially, has interpreted Rachel's encounter with the South American natives as a moment of her internalising the exotic other, in which she is left with an awareness of the patriarchal expectations that the empire has imposed upon her identity.²¹⁰ Kuehn establishes that Rachel is no different from the native women; whether in 'nature' or in 'culture', she will be restricted to the roles of wife and mother in both parallelling societies. Rachel's death in the novel, therefore, is her escape from such a destiny. My

²⁰⁹ Andrea Lewis, 'The Visual Politics of Empire and Gender in Virginia Woolf's "The Voyage Out"', *Woolf Studies Annual*, 1 (1995), pp. 106-119.

²¹⁰ Julia Kuehn, '"The Voyage Out" as Voyage In: Exotic Realism, Romance and Modernism', *Woolf Annual Studies*, 17 (2011), pp. 126-150.

observation of the following scene is found upon such understandings of Rachel's identity as an English, white other. In *Melymbrosia*, Clarissa initiates a conversation with Rachel:

“I can quite imagine you walking alone” said Clarissa; “and thinking – in a little world of your own. But how you will enjoy it – some day!”
“You mean, I shall enjoy walking with a man” said Rachel.
“I wasn’t thinking particularly of a man” said Clarissa. “But you will.”
“I shall never marry” said Rachel.
“I shouldn’t be so sure of that” said Clarissa. Her side long glance told Rachel that she found her attractive.²¹¹

Here, Clarissa gazes at Rachel, and finds the young woman attractive. As the embodiment of Victorian and imperial ideals, Clarissa decides for Rachel at this moment that she will be a wife and mother of the empire, like herself. Rachel, however, shows resistance against her fate. In comparison with her attitude in *The Voyage Out*, Rachel expresses more explicitly and firmly in this scene her rebellion against the empire's social conventions, and declares to Clarissa that she will ‘never marry’. Rachel's statement will not make it into *The Voyage Out*; instead, her verbal protest is simply realised in her death.

Woolf modifies her solution to the white other in *Mrs Dalloway*. Woolf resurrects Rachel in the character of Elizabeth, whose racially foreign lineage marks her conspicuous otherness among her peers. Elizabeth's otherness is therefore physical as well as mental; she is more in tune with her outsider identity, which adds to her endurance in her protest against the empire's ideals. I will continue to discuss *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* in the following chapter of this thesis. My present analysis of Elizabeth Dalloway and Lily Briscoe hence only focus on the aspects that are relevant to Woolf's connection of their characters with Rachel. In any case, Clarissa's

²¹¹ Woolf, M, p. 69.

assessment of Rachel is repeated with Elizabeth in *Mrs Dalloway*. Elizabeth remembers an interaction she had with her mother:

She inclined to be passive. It was expression she needed, but her eyes were fine, Chinese, oriental, and, as her mother said, with such nice shoulders and holding herself so straight, she was always charming to look at; and lately, in the evening especially, when she was interested, for she never seemed excited, she looked almost beautiful, very stately, very serene. What could she be thinking? Every man fell in love with her, and she was really awfully bored.²¹²

Clarissa, scrutinising Elizabeth's oriental features, notes her daughter's charm. As with the above episode in *Melymbrosia*, Clarissa assesses Elizabeth, and in the process positions her daughter as a subject of her own imperialist, orientalising gaze. Yet Elizabeth's racial deviance also gives her agency; Elizabeth owns the narrative in this scene, and is thus able to contradict her mother's voice in this sequence of reflection. The extracted account suggests that Clarissa has associated Elizabeth's charm with her marriage prospects. Elizabeth, however, knows that she is 'really awfully bored' with the attention she has been receiving from men. As opposed to her mother's wishes, she is in no hurry to get married. Elizabeth, with her Chinese eyes, sees an alternative path for her future that does not require her to necessarily reproduce for the empire.

Woolf would continue to forge a similar future for Lily upon the trodden paths of Rachel and Elizabeth. Lily, like her predecessors, refuses to serve as wife and mother for the empire. Significantly, as with Elizabeth, Lily has 'Chinese eyes'. In *To the Lighthouse*, the Chineseness of Lily's eyes is not stated explicitly to be tied to a racial lineage; rather, her 'Chinese eyes' are presented foremost as an aesthetic quality that gestures towards the stereotypical shape of her features. Woolf, after writing *Mrs Dalloway*, might have decided that 'Chinese eyes', as an

²¹² Woolf, MD, p. 148.

embodied aesthetic, are sufficient to signal an alternative vision. Lily's Chinese eyes remain symbolic; she is a resourceful character who sees clearly – especially when 'screwing up her Chinese eyes' – the value of her independent selfhood, notwithstanding the empire's pressure upon her identity. There are instances in *To the Lighthouse* that recall the gaze dynamic between Clarissa and her racially-coded subjects. Mrs Ramsay, who in this novel replaces Clarissa's position as the feminine embodiment of Victorian ideals, similarly evaluates Lily's appearance with her prospects of marriage in mind:

Mrs. Ramsay smiled. With her [Lily's] little Chinese eyes and her puckered-up face she would never marry; one could not take her painting very seriously; but she was an independent little creature, Mrs. Ramsay liked her for it, and so remembering her promise, she bent her head.²¹³

Mrs Ramsay considers Lily's oriental features in this scene. Her opinion here diverges from the previous episodes with Rachel and Elizabeth; Mrs Ramsay does not find Lily conventionally attractive, and concludes that it will be difficult for her to marry. Lily, however, remains unperturbed by Mrs Ramsay's judgement. Unlike Clarissa and Mrs Ramsay, she does not hold an automatic adoration for men and the imperial system that they represent. Instead, such as with Mr Tansley, Lily considers her response to men according to how they carry themselves:

But, she [Lily] thought, screwing up her Chinese eyes, and remembering how he [Charles Tansley] sneered at women, 'can't paint, can't write', why should I help him to relieve himself?²¹⁴

²¹³ Woolf, TL, p. 21.

²¹⁴ Ibid., p. 99.

Lily, screwing up her Chinese eyes, remembers Mr Tansley's misogynistic remarks about women. In turn, she develops an unfavorable impression against Mr Tansley, and decides that she will not interact with him at lunch. Lily's vision, however, determines more than just her relations with the opposite sex. She seeks fulfilment in her work, and recognises herself as a painter. Again, screwing up her Chinese eyes, Lily plans her painting:

There was something (she [Lily] stood screwing up her little Chinese eyes in her small puckered face) something she remembered in the relations of those lines cutting across, slicing down, and in the mass of the hedge with its green cave of blues and browns, which had stayed in her mind [...].²¹⁵

Woolf finalises her idea of white otherness in Lily. Lily may be white, but her intellectual and creative independence renders her an outsider of the empire. Lily resists the social conventions of her times. Like Rachel and Elizabeth, and against the imperial narrative of Clarissa, she refuses to be the mother of boys who will continue to fight and rule for the empire. Unlike Rachel, however, who dies, or Elizabeth, who returns home to her domestic duties after her walk, Lily thrives in her rebellion against the patriarchal ideals of the empire. She is able to secure her identity in her creative labour. Lily, then, becomes the final model to Woolf's visualisation for women in the modernising age.

Woolf's discourses of the foreign and exotic, which include her discussions on Chinese things, ultimately point back to her self-reflexive interests in the empire. Woolf is aware of her delicate position as a white woman within the British imperial structure; she is also attentive to the transitioning circumstances of her time from Victorian to modern ideals. It is no wonder, then, that her politics tend to align the notions of race, gender, and class on an inextricably connected

²¹⁵ Ibid., p. 171.

paradigm. Her inclusion of China and Chinese objects into her narrative discourses, which especially enhances her consideration of race, thus adds to the operation of this paradigm that works to express Woolf's anti-imperial politics. In this period of Woolf's writing, her employment of Chineseness is predominantly stylistic; Chineseness offers to Woolf thematic and formally aesthetic impressions that assist her political language. In the context of her early novels, Woolf's references to the idea of China usually propel the situational and ideological suggestions of her books. With her early shorter fictions, however, to which Woolf attends with a more experimental approach, her engagement with China as style also materialises more noticeably in the narrative structures of her writing.

2.2 Solid, Ornamental Things

Woolf's formulation of the bond between the style, objects, and politics of her increasingly experimental literatures is noticeable even in her early short stories. The discussions in this section particularly focus on her remarks on Chinese objects within this tripartite formulation in her stories 'The Mark on the Wall', 'Kew Gardens', and 'Solid Objects', which Woolf wrote around the publications of *The Voyage Out* and *Night and Day*. These three stories not only share commonality in their references to Chinese objects; as I will continue to expound on in my analysis, Woolf also plays with the thematic ideas of perspective, form, and reality in her narrative techniques for these stories. Significantly, and therefore, her short stories foreground solidities, but they are also about the fluidity of personal experiences and material objects, which often meld together in Woolf's writing. The formalist ideals of Bloomsbury are reinvented in Woolf's narratives. She does replicate the imperialist language of Bloomsbury's aesthetic formalism in her fictions, but her

liquid decomposing and recomposing of material things, too, ultimately gestures to her political considerations of the empire. The Chinese things in Woolf's short stories then advance her politics as she treads between the binary spheres of solidity and fluidity, the material and mental in her fiction writing.

'The Mark on the Wall' displays the push and pull of material presences and the subjective, conscious mind. The interplay of tension between the outer and inner worlds of its female narrator is characterised by her fixation on a dark mark, which triggers in her a meandering stream of thought as she processes her perceptual engagement with the object. The material object is thus inseparable from the inward experiences of the narrator; her sensing body works to integrate her physical and imaginative worlds. Throughout this process, the narrator seeks to decipher her reality. She recognises the dark mark as something solid, definite, and materially real. It is a welcomed alternative to her subjective consciousness and, subsequently, an object that allows her to grab hold onto the impersonal world that is external to her mind. This understanding frames the narrative of her story. From the outset of her narration, she asserts the importance of physical objects as tools of organising the practical life: 'in order to fix a date it is necessary to remember what one saw'.²¹⁶ As she notices the mark, she further expresses relief at its ability to interrupt her initial mental activity: 'Rather to my relief the sight of the mark interrupted the fancy [...]'.²¹⁷ And towards the end of her narrative account, she again reiterates her dependence on the objective world through solid objects:

Here is something definite, something real. Thus, waking from a midnight dream of horror, one hastily turns on the light and lies quiescent, [...] worshipping solidity,

²¹⁶ Woolf, 'The Mark on the Wall', in CSF, p. 83.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

worshipping reality, worshipping the impersonal world which is proof of some existence other than ours. That is what one wants to be sure of....²¹⁸

The narrator associates solidity with the reality of the impersonal world, which she clings to as a method of grounding herself into an existence that is beyond the subjective experience of her mind. Consequently, solid objects reassure the narrator of her involvement with her physical environment. They become in themselves markers of the 'real' that is outside of her mental consciousness.

And yet, the narrator's experience of the physical world can only be through the operations of her perceptual faculties and conscious processing. The solid object, the mark, then becomes to her an unstable and changeable thing despite its attachment to the physical world. The narrator refuses to pin down what the mark on her wall really is; she insists on its ambiguity in order to prolong her mental wandering: 'what should I gain? Knowledge? Matter for further speculation? I can think sitting still as well as standing up'.²¹⁹ She also mulls on the impossibility of having control over the physical world. The objects she possesses – and all of humanity possesses – are simply accidental and susceptible to impermanence:

Oh! dear me, the mystery of life! The inaccuracy of thought! The ignorance of humanity! To show how very little control of our possessions we have – what an accidental affair this living is after all our civilization – let me just count over a few of the things lost in our lifetime [...]²²⁰

The mark that she sees shifts from object to object. Its possibilities feed the narrator's fluid ruminations about the affairs of living, which spans from her musings on housekeeping, nature, and literature to the culture and history of the empire. The topics that emerge in the narrator's

²¹⁸ Ibid., p. 88.

²¹⁹ Ibid., p. 87.

²²⁰ Ibid., p. 84.

mental meandering shape also the narrative flow of her account; ultimately, the things that she glosses form, too, the textural patterns to Woolf's lyrical prose.

Woolf's discourse on the 'real' in 'The Mark on the Wall' bears similarity with Bell's deliberation of 'reality' in 'The Flight of the Dragon' as discussed in the previous section. Bell has posited the concept of reality as something that is diminished by the practical ways of Europe. According to Bell, the practical man banishes reality from his life by regarding all things as means instead of ends. In China, for instance, however, the emotional life is superior to the practical life; there are more people in touch with reality, for it is cultural in the East to think of things as ends. Woolf's contemplation of reality via her narrator draws on a resembling notion. The topics of discussion in Woolf's short story aesthetically fuse with each other to express the emotions of the narrator's inner life. The formal style of Woolf's writing is thus tied to the narrator's mental meandering, which delivers meaning despite its apparent aimlessness. Woolf suggests the significance of subjective, abstract experiences in her story and interprets this to be more solidly true than the practical systems of the external world. The traditional objects and practices that set the standard of social rules are mutable. The narrator deems the word 'reality' to have a violent 'military sound'.²²¹ She proceeds to reflect on the shift from an old to new reality in the first two decades of the twentieth century:

[Reality] recalls leading articles, cabinet ministers – a whole class of things indeed which as a child one thought the thing itself, the standard thing, the real thing, from which one could not depart save at the risk of nameless damnation. [...] There was a rule for everything. [...] Tablecloths of a different kind were not real tablecloths. How shocking, and yet how wonderful it was to discover that these real things, Sunday luncheons, Sunday walks, country houses, and tablecloths were not entirely real, were indeed half phantoms, and the damnation which visited the disbeliever

²²¹ Ibid., p. 86.

in them was only a sense of illegitimate freedom. What now takes the place of those things I wonder, those real standard things?²²²

In her mental wandering, the narrator connects the uncertainty of the physical world with the patriarchal and classist constructions of Victorian English society. The material signifiers of power and wealth shift along with the times; even the most mundane, everyday things are indefinite and phantasmic. The social changes that mark the passing away of the previous Victorian era – and the arrival of the modern age – undermine the old standards that were once taken as obvious. To the narrator, this realisation is ‘shocking’, ‘wonderful’, and finally freeing. She also applies her discovery of the physical world’s mutability to her review of literary methods: ‘The novelists in future’ will ‘leav[e] the description of reality more and more out of their stories’.²²³ It is not the seemingly solid, ‘hard separate facts’,²²⁴ but the emotional, inner reflections of people that these novelists should pursue. Her sentiment here reveals Woolf’s own grasp of fiction writing. Woolf has continued to argue on this theory in her essays and other works; notably, in ‘Modern Fiction’, and also some time later in ‘Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown’ (1924), she has likewise challenged the realist approaches to fiction of the previous centuries in favour of techniques that capture the inner depths of human lives. Turning back to Woolf’s thematic concerns in ‘The Mark on the Wall’, then, the inner life of her narrator stands out against the material displays of the external world.

Nevertheless, the narrator’s impressions of physical objects remain key to her mental wandering; they continue to occupy a solid presence in her mind as signposts for her stream of thought. The narrator jumps from object to object in her consideration of the human life. Contemplating on civilisation, history, and eventually the things of the empire, she notices the

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Ibid., p. 85-86.

²²⁴ Ibid., p. 85.

protrusion of the mark from the wall and compares it with ‘those barrows on the South Downs which are, they say, either tombs or camps’.²²⁵ She goes on to imagine an antiquary who follows up on this question. The antiquary, a retired colonel, acquires archaeological evidence for both sides of the debate; when lying on his deathbed, he thinks not of his wife or children but of the artifacts that are collected in a local museum. His last conscious thoughts are:

of the camp and that arrowhead there, which is now in the case at the local museum, together with the foot of a Chinese murderess, a handful of Elizabethan nails, a great many Tudor clay pipes, a piece of Roman pottery, and the wine-glass that Nelson drank out of – proving I really don’t know what.²²⁶

Yet nothing is substantial; nothing is certain. The narrator’s breezy disregard of the objects at the museum, including an arrowhead excavated by the retired colonel, comically discredits the ideals of imperial pomp and pride that these objects symbolise. The encased objects – Elizabethan nails, Tudor clay pipes, Roman pottery, and ‘the wine-glass that [Horatio] Nelson drank out of’ – all point to the cultural, imperial, and colonial legacy of Britain. The insertion of a ‘foot of a Chinese murderess’ is hence all the more striking in this context.

As a literary image, the foot of a Chinese murderess dually evokes the passivity and cruelty of the Orient. The severed foot prompts the apparition of a Chinese woman who is a victim of violence; her mutilated body renders her silent, passive, and unable to resist her aggressors. And yet, she is imposed with the identity of a murderess. Her offence deflects any sympathy for her circumstance, and further supports the stereotypical contrast between Oriental passion and Western, British rationality. Ira Nadel has suggested that this depiction of a Chinese foot is ‘[p]erhaps

²²⁵ Ibid., p. 86.

²²⁶ Ibid., p. 87.

Woolf's cruellest image of the Orient';²²⁷ he has also similarly observed the colonial implications of Woolf's imagery: 'The arrowhead and the foot distinguish between two conflicting cultures, one dominant, the other subservient'.²²⁸ This image of a decorative Chinese foot on display, furthermore, recalls the actual exhibitions in Britian, such as the aforementioned Festival of Empire, which succeed through spectacles of exotic things and bodies. Besides the political associations with the foot, therefore, its decorative nature also stands out in this scene, for the organic Chinese foot is curated together with other synthetic items for show behind the glass. Its appearance in the museum gestures to the permeating existence of Chinese objects in twentieth-century Britian; the organic character of the foot moreover elicits the historical presence of Chinese persons in the empire, who are also objects of imperial domination. The imagined image of a Chinese murderess' foot thus epitomises the profoundly ornamental mode through which Chinese cultures and personhoods were received in early twentieth-century Britain.

One wonders about the pragmatics of the foot display. Woolf's surreal imagery does not necessitate a practical interpretation, but the decorative foot can nonetheless be recognised as a blend of both organic and synthetic dimensions. It is worth noting that Woolf slightly revised the imagery in her 1919 edition of the story, which is now more popular in reprints of the text. In her 1917 publication of 'The Mark on the Wall' in *Two Stories*, Woolf originally depicts the museum case to be showing 'the *hand* of a Chinese murderess' (emphasis my own). This change from hand to foot does not appear to significantly alter the symbolism of the imagery, but Woolf's switch of body parts might reflect her growing intrigue with the Chinese shoe, which she explicitly discusses in her future writings. 'The Chinese Shoe' lends the title to her 1923 review of Kathleen Fitzpatrick's biographical book *Lady Henry Somerset*. Upon contemplating on the events that

²²⁷ Ira Nadel, 'Oriental Woolf', *Affirmations: of the Modern*, 4.1 (2016), p. 69.

²²⁸ Ibid., p. 70.

shaped the life of Lady Henry Somerset, Woolf asserts in her essay that the conventions of '[t]he Victorian age was to blame [...] until we feel that the old Chinese custom of fitting the foot in the shoe was charitable compared to the mid-Victorian practice of fitting the woman to the system'.²²⁹ In 'A Sketch of the Past' (written from 1939-40), Woolf would also repeat this sentiment regarding her relatives: 'Aunt Virginia, it is plain, put her own daughters, my mother's first cousins, through tortures compared with which the boot or the Chinese shoe is negligible, in order to marry one to the Duke of Bedford, the other to Lord Henry Somerset'.²³⁰ Woolf's reference to the Chinese shoe in these two texts likely refers to the Chinese lotus shoes (蓮履), which were typically ornately decorated and made for the bound feet of women in China. Small, delicate feet were commonly viewed as a mark of beauty and a symbol of status from the Chinese Song through Qing dynasties; foot binding was thus a prevalent practice among the women of the Han Chinese upper classes, and was still observed by some even during the early twentieth century.²³¹ Interestingly, and which my first chapter has observed, Woolf reiterates with the Chinese shoe a connection that she has made as early as 1910 in her review on Max von Boehn and Oskar Fischel's *Modes and Manners of the Nineteenth Century*: She brings Chinese customs into alignment with the restrictive codes of the Victorian era. Woolf's association between regressive Chinese and Victorian traditions, against more modern and feminist ideals, accentuates her political criticism against the imperial structures of Britian.

The foot in 'The Mark on the Wall' may be embodied by a Chinese shoe – foot or shoe, the distinction is insignificant, for both symbols assume a superficial existence in the condition of their encasement. The foot/shoe remains an awful imagery; the shock that the imagery incites lies in the

²²⁹ Woolf, 'The Chinese Shoe', *Nation & Athenaeum* (1923), in E 3, p. 390.

²³⁰ Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past', in MoB, p. 99.

²³¹ See Condon Yan Tung Lee, 'The "golden lotuses": bound feet', *Hong Kong Medical Journal*, 22.1 (2016). <<https://www.hkmj.org/abstracts/v22n1/90.htm>>.

clashing combination of its violent genesis and decorative beauty. Woolf's intentional arrangement with the foot/shoe in her text hence shatters the simple, surficial ornamentality of the image. Her discussion circles back to the perspective of her narrator, which also underpins the ideological heart of 'The Mark': 'I want to sink deeper and deeper, away from the surface, with its hard separate facts'.²³² The narrator, as with Woolf, withdraws herself from the factual exterior of things to reconfigure and make meaning of the experiences that are more intuitively consistent with their internal grasp of reality. The foot of the Chinese murderess makes up in part the flow of objects that shifts in the mind of the narrator; it supports the language and formal composition of Woolf's text, which works, too, to prioritise the truth of personal subjectivity over the physical world. The imagined foot is thus more real than the external, 'standard' rules that easily transform: once more, 'these real things, Sunday luncheons, Sunday walks, country houses, and tablecloths were not entirely real'.²³³ Woolf's emphasis on the validity of the inner life then upholds beliefs that paradoxically facilitates the changes of 'real'-world politics.

In 'Kew Gardens', Woolf no longer fixes her story on the perspective of a single character; instead, the short fiction moves between multiple perspectives that are threaded together by a disembodied, omniscient voice. The narrative attention in 'The Mark' and 'Kew Gardens' is markedly different. While the narrator of the 'The Mark' attempts to find meaning in her observations of outer and inner experiences, the narrator of 'Kew Gardens' sets out to describe and report rather than interpret. Accordingly, the outlook of the latter gives rise to vivid descriptions that resemble painted scenes. Yet there remain many technical and thematic similarities between the two texts. As in 'The Mark', Woolf's 'Kew Gardens' also explores the interplay between expressions, forms, and objects in shaping perceptions of reality. Woolf's preoccupation with these

²³² Woolf, 'The Mark', p. 85.

²³³ Ibid., p. 86.

ideas is evident in the collection of vignettes that make up her story, including the pair of vignettes that feature a young couple walking through Kew Gardens.

The young man and young woman of this scene are engaged in light conversation. There is some tender awkwardness between them; the atmosphere is tinged with restraint: ‘short insignificant words also expressed something, words with short wings for their heavy body of meaning, inadequate to carry them far and thus alighting awkwardly upon the very common objects that surrounded them and were to their inexperienced touch so massive’.²³⁴ The man further registers the solidity of his surroundings: ‘Even when she wondered what sort of tea they gave you at Kew, he felt that something loomed up behind her words, and stood vast and solid behind them [...] what were those shapes?’.²³⁵ Those shapes, he eventually recognises, are ‘little white tables’, ‘waitresses’, and ‘a bill that he would pay’ – ‘it was real, all real, he assured himself, fingering the coin in his pocket, real to everyone except to him and to her; even to him it began to seem real’.²³⁶ Woolf connects verbal expression with the formal expressivity of her prose. The words spoken between the couple materialise into visual form, which continues to blend with the objects that populate their environment. The solidities that surround them, however, lie not simply in tangible objects, but also in the atmosphere. Impressions solidify into a sense of reality; the man, engrossed in his interactions with the woman, becomes increasingly convinced that his desires are taking shape in the material world.

The woman navigates the scene with a different subjective lens. She gradually lacks interest in her conversation with the man. Instead, she is excited about the sights of the garden:

²³⁴ Woolf, ‘Kew Gardens’, p. 94.

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Ibid.

‘Wherever *does* one have one’s tea?’ she asked with the oddest thrill of excitement in her voice, looking vaguely round and letting herself be drawn on down the grass path, trailing her parasol, turning her head this way and that way, forgetting her tea, wishing to go down there and then down there, remembering orchids and cranes among wild flowers, a Chinese pagoda and a crimson-crested bird; but he bore her on.²³⁷

Oriental imageries enter Woolf’s rendition of Kew Gardens. And yet, her oriental imagination is grounded in factual details of the place. Sir William Chamber’s Chinese Pagoda, for example, which Woolf references in the above extract, still stands in Kew Gardens today. Built in the eighteenth century, it endures as a testament to the chinoiserie style in British architecture, and exemplifies the country’s efforts in transporting the Chinese landscape onto domestic soil. Kew Gardens, moreover, hosts a wide variety of oriental plant species. Plant hunters of the Victorian era would bring back from China plant specimens that are later featured in the garden.²³⁸ In the present day, the Chinese Grove, Temperate House, and Rose Garden of Kew Gardens, etc., are still filled with plants that originated in China.²³⁹ Woolf’s oriental tropes here – the Chinese pagoda, along with orchids, cranes, and a crimson-crested bird – thus not only manifest a visual aesthetic influenced by oriental styles, but also reflect the abundant presence of oriental objects that decorate British spaces.

Importantly, the oriental objects that make up Woolf’s imageries hence join with the formal aspects of her story. The function of her tropes extends beyond their literal representations; Woolf’s orientalist configuration of Kew Gardens informs, too, the structural and stylistic design of her text. Her addition of these oriental tropes adds to the poetic, vividly pictorial language of her

²³⁷ Ibid., p. 95.

²³⁸ See Patrick Mulligan and Ellen McHale, ‘How Victorian plant hunters shaped British gardens’, *Kew* (2020) <<https://www.kew.org/read-and-watch/victorian-plant-hunters-china>> [accessed 21 August 2025].

²³⁹ See Katie Avis-Riordan and Eddie Johnston, ‘Travel Asia at Kew’, *Kew* (2024) <<https://www.kew.org/read-and-watch/travel-the-world-at-kew-asia>> [accessed 21 August 2025].

narrative. The overall composition of 'Kew Gardens', including its shifting points of perspective, also resonates with Fry's consideration of Chinese paintings in 'An Essay in Aesthetics', which Chapter One of my thesis has discussed. In 'An Essay in Aesthetics', Fry studies the 'successive unity' of Chinese paintings, which he recognises to take root in the panoramic depiction of scenes from multiple focal points.²⁴⁰ In 'Kew Gardens', Woolf adopts a similar approach by disrupting linear narrative expectations. Instead, she focuses on the unfolding of sensuous experience across fluid, shifting perspectives. Woolf's dreamlike, fantastical interpretation of Kew Gardens with her oriental imageries then mirrors the empire's fantasy making. Her fragmented impressions of the emotional life convey a formalist sense of the 'real' that positions the concept away from practical, utilitarian attitudes towards reality. In both Woolf's fiction and in the objective world, Kew Gardens assumes a distinct aesthetic space within the urban sprawl of London. This becomes obvious towards the end of Woolf's short story, when her narration pulls back from the garden to reengage with the surrounding city.

'Kew Gardens' closes with the following sentence:

But there was no silence; all the time the motor omnibuses were turning their wheels and changing their gear; like a vast nest of Chinese boxes all of wrought steel turning ceaselessly one within another the city murmured; on the top of which the voices cried aloud and the petals of myriads of flowers flashed their colours into the air.²⁴¹

The narrator turns from the silencing beauty of the garden to the murmuring bustle of the city. As the scenes switch, the narrator, observing the busyness of London, likens the wheels and gear of its motor omnibuses to nested Chinese boxes of wrought steel. This imagery of interlocking

²⁴⁰ Roger Fry, 'An Essay in Aesthetics', in *Vision and Design* (Dover Publications, Inc., 1998 [1920]), p. 23.

²⁴¹ Woolf, 'Kew Gardens', p. 95.

Chinese boxes further underpins the hum of city life in London. Once more, Woolf's gesture towards Chinese objects in her discourse reproduces their embeddedness within British settings. Her inclusion of oriental objects in her writing is also a stylistic choice that materialises in the creative form of her narrative. Chinese boxes, as the name implies, traditionally originate from China; they are typically a set of ornamental containers that are designed to nest one inside another. In literary usage, Chinese boxes thus metaphorically denotes a framed narrative structure where one story is enclosed within another. The layered structure of 'Kew Gardens' visibly exemplifies this design. As I have already observed, Woolf presents Kew Gardens as an enclosed, dream-like world that is nestled within the bustle of London. The fragmented vignettes that compose her story also unfold from each other within the contained frame of her garden. In this closing sentence, the notion of Chineseness then not only remains as an integral element to the functioning of the empire; it moreover affirms the influence of Chinese styles on Woolf's experimentations with literary form.

Woolf's exploration of the relationship between object and form in her short fictions reaches its culmination in 'Solid Objects'.²⁴² This story follows a man named John who becomes increasingly obsessed with collecting pieces of objects around the city of London. One day, as he 'start[s] from his rooms in the Temple to catch a train in order to address his constituents', John comes across a piece of broken china 'lying half-hidden in one of those little borders of grass which edge the bases of vast legal buildings'.²⁴³ China objects lie in Woolf's narrative as emblems of conspicuous consumption that her modern contemporaries generally associate with their Victorian predecessors. Destroyed and discarded, the china objects crucially signal a change of

²⁴² My discussion of 'Solid Objects' has been published along similar arguments in a book chapter. See 'Ornamental Woolf: A New Critical Perspective on Ornamentalism, Orientalism and Virginia Woolf's "Chinese" Discourse', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Virginia Woolf and Transnational Perspectives*, ed. by Elisa Bolchi, Maria Rita Drumond Viana, Alice Davis Keane, Monica Latham, Sayaka Okumura, and Mine Özyurt Kiliç (Edinburgh University Press, 2025), pp. 333-348.

²⁴³ Woolf, 'Solid Objects', in CSF, p. 104.

times in which aesthetic preferences are shifted. 'Solid Objects' then sees John's fascination with a china artefact that in its original form would have served as a familiar motif to the empire. The point of John's activities, however, is his making from the fragmented object a new aesthetic standard that renders the artefact freshly ornamental. As the story continues, John would display the 'finest specimens' of broken china on his mantelpiece, which the narrator observes to be 'more and more of an ornamental nature' as John uses them less and less practically as paper weights.²⁴⁴ These events in 'Solid Objects' could thus be read in parallel to Bloomsbury's formalist experimentations with Chinese aesthetics.

The title of Woolf's short story suggests that 'Solid Objects' could be additionally read in part as a response to Fry's aesthetic discourse in 'An Essay in Aesthetics'. Fry's essay takes as a point of departure a paraphrased quote on the topic: "The art of painting" says that eminent authority, "is the art of imitating solid objects upon a flat surface by means of pigments".²⁴⁵ Fry's argument here can be further understood by his illustration of the 'China ornament' in the same essay, which my previous chapter has examined. In 'An Essay in Aesthetics', Fry posits that even an untrained observer would, to some extent, view a China ornament from the artistic perspective of 'pure vision'.²⁴⁶ He thus solidifies the object's purpose purely in its formal aesthetics, which his philosophy considers significant to creative and emotional experiences. Likewise, Woolf in 'Solid Objects' explores the ornamental properties of the china object and its hold on the imagination. Her emphasis on the china object's solidity, however, more explicitly references its materiality, which her narrative interprets in close relation to the politics of the empire.

²⁴⁴ Woolf, 'Solid Objects', p. 105.

²⁴⁵ Roger Fry, 'An Essay in Aesthetics', in *Vision and Design* (Dover Publications, Inc., 1998 [1920]), p. 12.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

The porcelain china object has historically epitomised the physical aestheticisation of China and Chineseness. As Eugenia Zuroski Jenkins argues, '[t]he form most privileged as an indication of Englishness is the chinoiserie object – the “thing Chinese”'.²⁴⁷ While Jenkins' statement revolves around the English identity in the early nineteenth century, her claim is also immensely relevant to the imperial British identity in the early twentieth century. The chinoiserie object – the 'thing Chinese' – has become by Woolf's time a commodified marker of taste and culture in English and generally British societies. Chinaware, which contributes significantly to Britain's chinoiserie productions, is thus indicative of a metropolitan British identity that arose from the empire's consumption behaviours. The china object as an ornamental embodiment of Chineseness further endows its material form with a sense of agency. New Materialist scholars have already drawn such connections between the materiality and agency of objects. Bill Brown's 'Thing Theory', for instance, terms material presences as the 'thingness' of objects, which, he claims, becomes obvious when objects 'stop working for us'.²⁴⁸ Jane Bennett's theorising of a 'vital materiality' similarly discusses the 'thing-power' of objects. Objects appear as things, Bennett suggests, when they are 'not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them'.²⁴⁹ Correspondingly, the objects in Woolf's story engage with their observers and environments in a system of mutual responsiveness. The thingness of the china object especially assumes an agential character that also evokes the ornamentalisation of Chinese personhoods through the empire's material production.

Bloomsbury's ornamentalising of Chineseness, like John's aestheticising of the china shards, makes new from pieces of exotic tropes that are familiar to the empire's orientalist

²⁴⁷ Eugenia Zuroski Jenkins, 'Introduction: Writing China into the English Self', in *A Taste for China: English Subjectivity and the Prehistory of Orientalism* (Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 1.

²⁴⁸ Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory', *Critical Inquiry*, 28.1 (2001), pp. 1-22 (p. 4).

²⁴⁹ Jane Bennett, 'Vibrant Matter', *Cultural Vibrancy*, 14.1 (2016), pp. 7-11 (p. 8).

imagination. John's objects, moreover, offer to him an alternative reality much like Bloomsbury's discovery of formalism in art; the objects collected by John become to him more solid than conventional rules of 'reality'. As Woolf navigates between the poles of aesthetic production and consumption within the empire, she appears increasingly engaged with the materiality of the objects that she employs in her ornamental discourse. Woolf's depictions of the china object – the *thing* Chinese – in 'Solid Objects' suggest a growing awareness of her own acts of ornamentalism. The interactions between John and his shards of china offer a politicised critique of the empire's aestheticising activities that Bloomsbury participates in. For John's encounter with his first piece of china denotes a struggle between the gazing subject and the aestheticised object: 'John was determined to possess it; but the more he pushed, the further it receded'.²⁵⁰ And when John finally acquires the china shard, his fascination with it is described in othering and exoticising terms: 'it looked like a creature from another world – freakish and fantastic as a harlequin'.²⁵¹ John's preoccupation with the object's substance and shape signals a desire to create with its material properties; his ornamentalising activities gesture to ideas of producing in the early twentieth century that are generally conceived against Victorian notions of consuming. Nonetheless, in an irony that would not be lost to Woolf, John's modernist endeavour to create with 'exotic', orientalist motifs still implicates a consumption of objects that are being aestheticised by the empire.

Positioning the subject-object relations of John's aestheticising process within the broader context of imperial politics, the 'exotic' ornament, here the china object, embodies the empire's ornamentalisation of (Chinese) cultures and personhoods. Consequently, Woolf's narrative presents an anxiety of the object's potential to resist and retaliate. Her portrayal of the china object

²⁵⁰ Woolf, 'Solid Objects', p. 104-105.

²⁵¹ Ibid., p. 105.

hints at the inscrutability of its material, which resists John's comprehension. In 'Solid Objects', John is only able to visualise his first piece of china in vague, uncertain metaphors: The china shard 'nearly resemble[es] a starfish' and later 'seemed to be pirouetting through space, winking light like a fitful star'.²⁵² He also expresses confusion about its pattern: the china shard has 'green stripes or spots of some kind'.²⁵³ These instances suggest a refusal by the china object to serve John as ornament. Its resistance, however, provokes his obsession with the object. Far from acting as decorative possessions, the china shards on John's mantelpiece, together with his other collected items, begin possessing him: 'As his eyes passed from one to another, the determination to possess objects that even surpassed these tormented the young man'.²⁵⁴ The objects become to John a source of torment; his desire to domesticate the objects as purely decorative ornaments does not seem to hold actual authority over them, and instead causes a weakening of his own welfare. Written near the end of World War I, Woolf's materialist descriptions in 'Solid Objects' bear witness to an escalating destabilisation of the imperial British identity. The china objects in her text not only emblematised the empire's ornamentalism but also point to its anxiety of dissolution – fittingly, the end of the British empire would eventually be signified by Hong Kong's return to China. Woolf's narrative, though starting from a position from within the centre of the empire, could be read as an anti-imperialist discourse against Britain's ambitions to possess and domesticate foreign resources. Her materialist portrayals of the china shards in 'Solid Objects' show her budding consciousness of the dissenting voices against the empire from within and outside its territories, which from since the Boer Wars would intensify at the turn of the century through World War II.

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Ibid., p. 104.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 106.

Woolf's early innovations with her writing is perhaps most strikingly realised in her short fiction. In particular, 'The Mark on the Wall', 'Kew Gardens', and 'Solid Objects' exemplify her turn towards the techniques that would come to define her experimental style. Woolf establishes in these three short stories her artistic connections between object and style; her formal literary innovations, moreover, are deeply entangled with the sharpening of her political sensibility. Within this creative framework, Woolf weaves across her narratives ideas of China and Chineseness, which she dually evokes through material objects and as a decorative concept. Her orientalist discourse is thus inevitably implicated in the imperialist logic of Britain. And yet, Woolf's engagement with the Chinese aesthetic predominantly serves to propel the stylistic experimentation of her narratives. To reassess her practice in constructive terms, therefore, and more significantly, Woolf's Chinese orientalism in her stories also operates to sustain her critique against the empire.

2.3 From Bond Street to the Party

Woolf published one of her most widely read novels, *Mrs Dalloway*, in May of 1925. She also wrote a series of literary sketches around the premise of the Dalloways. As part of the developmental process of the novel, Woolf wrote between 1922 and 1923 'Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street' and 'The Prime Minister', both of which she would eventually absorb into the opening sequence of *Mrs Dalloway*. In the spring of 1925, after correcting and returning the proofs of the novel, and continuing after its publication, Woolf wrote additional short stories set at Mrs Dalloway's party.²⁵⁵ Among her Dalloway sketches, Woolf published only 'Mrs Dalloway in Bond

²⁵⁵ These short stories include 'The Man Who Loved His Kind', 'The Introduction', 'Ancestors', 'Together and Apart', 'The New Dress', 'A Summing Up', and 'A Simple Melody'.

Street’ and ‘The New Dress’ during her lifetime;²⁵⁶ most of the other sketches, however, were later collected in the posthumous volume *A Haunted House* (1944) produced by her husband, Leonard Woolf, through the Hogarth Press. Overall, Woolf’s Dalloway sketch-stories stand independently, though they collectively centre on the Dalloways, their London party, or its guests. Together, these stories illustrate Woolf’s fascination with the social performance of parties and her exploration of the emotional undercurrents that they evoke. Chinese objects recur as imagery and style across Woolf’s sequence of narratives. In particular, this section discusses her stories ‘Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street’, ‘The Man Who Loved His Kind’, ‘The New Dress’, and ‘A Summing up’, which further demonstrate Woolf’s weaving of oriental aesthetics into the broader fabric of her literature. Emerging from a period that closely intertwines with Woolf’s work on *Mrs Dalloway*, these stories effectively wrap up my previous observations on her short fiction and lay the groundwork for my discussion of the novel as well as *To the Lighthouse* in the following chapter.

Woolf continues to use Chinese images in her stories surrounding *Mrs Dalloway*. Specifically, she demonstrates an interest in the aesthetic of Chinese lanterns in ‘The Man Who Loved His Kind’ and ‘A Summing Up’, which she blends figuratively into the atmosphere of her scenes. In ‘The Man Who Loved His Kind’, the protagonist, Prickett Ellis, finds himself profoundly embarrassed when measuring his own ordinariness against the display of privileged gaiety among the Dalloways’ other guests. He mentally lashes out his frustration at a woman, Miss O’Keefe, whose manner suggests that she belongs to a more affluent class:

And Prickett Ellis feeling something rise within him which would decapitate this young woman, make a victim of her, massacre her, made her sit down there, where they would not be interrupted, on two chairs, in the empty garden, for everyone was upstairs, only you could hear a buzz and a hum and a chatter and a jingle, like the mad accompaniment of some phantom orchestra to a cat or two

²⁵⁶ See fn. 174.

slinking across the grass, and the wavering of leaves, and the yellow and red fruit like Chinese lanterns wobbling this way and that – the talk seemed like a frantic skeleton dance music set to something very real, and full of suffering.²⁵⁷

Prickett Ellis manages his frustration by withdrawing with Miss O’Keefe to a different space that softens his internalised sense of social alienation. In the empty garden, where only they sit, he is relatively freed from the superficial party rituals that had weighed on him. Yet the garden offers to Prickett an alternative sensory experience. In his feelings of resentment towards the party and its guests, he continues to find discomfort in the things that Miss O’Keefe finds beauty in. Chinese lanterns form in part this sequence of description that reveals his inner turmoil; the wobbling fruits of the garden, in yellows and reds, are compared in Woolf’s narrative to Chinese lanterns. Alongside other auditory and visual elements that shape Woolf’s imagery, the aesthetic evocation of Chinese lanterns then contributes to the background murmur that Prickett sets to ‘something very real, and full of suffering’. Here, Woolf combines the oriental image with the activities of the English garden to illustrate her protagonist’s absorption in his own unease. Her description moreover signals an orientalist melancholia in Prickett’s suppressed expression of his extreme displeasure.

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with expanded imperial trade and international exhibitions, Chinese lanterns came to reinforce the incorporation of oriental aesthetics into the British domestic landscape. Within late Victorian and Edwardian culture, the soft, diffused glow of Chinese lanterns was moreover aligned with a sensibility of ephemeral beauty and stylised impression that carried into the art and literature of the period. The oriental paper lanterns in John Singer Sargent’s painting ‘Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose’ (1885-6), for example, exemplify this tendency, as the ostensibly exotic forms of the lanterns are naturalised within a

²⁵⁷ Woolf, ‘The Man Who Loved His Kind’, in CSF, p. 198.

quintessentially English garden scene.²⁵⁸ Situated within the cultural currents of her time, Woolf would have absorbed these orientalist influences. Her use of Chinese lanterns in her stories similarly mobilises such aesthetic ideas to shape the texture of her writing. Woolf repeats her motif of the Chinese lantern in ‘A Summing Up’. Her pictorial simile is reversed in this story; Chinese lanterns instead emerge as coloured blotches akin to fruits. The opening of ‘A Summing Up’ reads:

Since it had grown hot and crowded indoors, since there could be no danger on a night like this of damp, since the Chinese lanterns seemed hung like red and green fruit in the depths of an enchanted forest, Mr Bertram Pritchard led Mrs Latham into the garden.²⁵⁹

The Chinese lanterns hanging in the Dalloways’ garden cast an aestheticised strangeness over the atmosphere. Their embodied mysticism converges with the Western fantasy of an enchanted forest to establish a setting that is seemingly removed from conventional reality. Woolf’s imagery with the Chinese lanterns thus builds her stylistic vision for ‘A Summing Up’, and further animates the interior life of its protagonist, Sasha Latham, across the story’s narrative. The Chinese lanterns, too, appear in the garden to ornament its space. As ornamental, decorative objects, they additionally serve to emphasise the inclusion of oriental aesthetics within the English domestic landscape, much like those in Sargent’s painting, where the lanterns are integrated within the charm of an English garden.

Chinese objects spread throughout Woolf’s stories. ‘The New Dress’, which concludes with Mabel Waring’s decision to leave the party, closes with another line that also features a

²⁵⁸ See also ‘How John Singer Sargent painted Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose’, Tate Gallery (1 January 2023) [15 February 2026] <<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/sargent-carnation-lily-lily-rose-n01615/how-john-singer-sargent-painted-carnation-lily>>. ‘The inspiration for the painting came during a boating expedition Sargent took on the Thames at Pangbourne in September 1885, with the American artist Edwin Austin Abbey, during which he saw Chinese lanterns hanging among trees and lilies.’

²⁵⁹ Woolf, ‘A Summing Up’, in CSF, p. 208.

Chinese item: '[Mabel Waring] wrapped herself, round and round and round, in the Chinese cloak she had worn these twenty years'.²⁶⁰ The age of the Chinese cloak stands in contrast to the newness of Mabel's dress. Accordingly, the Chinese detail of Mabel's cloak hints at a sense of antiquity, which resonates with Woolf's general associations of the style with the outmoded habits of the previous century. The Chinese cloak, nonetheless, also carries a quality of aesthetic timelessness that leads Mabel to deem it fitting for her party attire. As part of her outfit to the Dalloways' party, Mabel's choice of clothing reinforces the decorative value of its Chinese style, which persists even at the heart of the British metropole.

Woolf's incorporation of the Chinese cloak in 'The New Dress' functions as more than just a reminder of its material presence in the empire. Its inclusion in her narrative moreover enhances the formal texture of her story. 'The New Dress' begins and ends with Mabel's engagement with her cloak. The Chinese cloak, therefore, provides a structural frame through which Woolf articulates her story; the decorative materiality of the cloak runs in parallel with the artificial cues of the party to which Mabel, upon taking off her cloak, exposes herself. Woolf thus uses the Chinese garment as a medium on which to develop her own ideas about fiction writing. A little after her composition of the short story, in 1926, Woolf would similarly reflect on the writing style of her time through the Chinese coat in her review of Gladys Bronwyn Stern's *A Deputy Was King*. This review, titled 'Life and the Novelist', was originally published in the *New York Herald Tribune*. In this review, Woolf explains her rejection of literary realism, which she critiques as being too concerned with surface details and linear narrative conventions: 'All this representation of the movement of life has sapped our imaginative power'.²⁶¹ Instead, Woolf argues, the novelist's task is to sift through the raw material of the everyday and interpret from such impressions the

²⁶⁰ Woolf, 'The New Dress', in CSF, p. 177.

²⁶¹ Woolf, 'Life and the Novelist', *New York Herald Tribune* (1926), in E 4, p. 403.

‘bone and substance’ of life upon which the reader’s emotions are stirred.²⁶² Woolf regrets that Stern’s writing falls within the realist tradition. She singles out a scene from the novel in which ‘Miss Stern wants us to realise the beauty of a Chinese coat’ to extend her claim.²⁶³ Quoting from the text, Woolf contends that Stern’s description of the Chinese coat renders it to merge ‘in one brilliant blur’.²⁶⁴ Woolf then proceeds to present her ideas about fiction writing by building on her critique of Stern’s method:

The same method applied to people has the same result. Quality is added to quality, fact to fact, until we cease to discriminate and our interest is suffocated under a plethora of words. For it is true of every object – coat or human being – that the more one looks the more there is to see. The writer’s task is to take one thing and let it stand for twenty: a task of danger and difficulty; but only so is the reader relieved of the swarm and confusion of life and branded effectively with the particular aspect which the writer wishes him to see.²⁶⁵

Woolf outlines her distaste for narratives that rely on pretentious language and elaborate descriptions. Her objection to this style of writing does not necessarily stem from its flowery expression, but from its typical lack of cohesion and depth. Woolf takes issue with the text when the reader’s interest becomes ‘suffocated under a plethora of words’. Rather, she argues, the novelist’s mission is to distil the complexities of life into a simple representation that allows the reader to view it through a carefully curated lens. To Woolf, Stern’s portrayal of the Chinese coat epitomises her failure to grasp this core principle of writing; the ornate nature of the coat is mirrored in the ornate style of Stern’s prose, whose excessive account only works to confuse and overwhelm. The Chinese coat also appeals to Woolf as a highly decorative object. Her alignment

²⁶² Ibid., p. 401.

²⁶³ Ibid., p. 403.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 404.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

of coat and person within this discourse on literary method is then all the more interesting, for she comprehends that both the synthetic and the organic are susceptible to being merely reduced to their exterior. Woolf's discussion in her essay consequently underscores the novel's need to penetrate beyond surficial structures into the actual substance of things.

Woolf's *Dalloway* stories convey precisely this vision. Her preoccupation with Mrs Dalloway's party can be traced to her fascination with the psychology of its guests that underlies the artificiality of the occasion. On 27 April, 1925, when *Mrs Dalloway* was about to be published, Woolf significantly reflects in her diary on her approach to capturing this vision of 'party consciousness', or 'frock consciousness', which similarly brings to the fore the interplay of the exterior and the interior through sartorial terms:

But my present reflection is that people have any number of states of consciousness: & I should like to investigate the party consciousness, the frock consciousness &c. The fashion world at the Becks [...] is certainly one; where people secrete an envelope which connects them & protects them from others, like myself, who am outside the envelope, foreign bodies. These states are very difficult (obviously I grope for words) but I'm always coming back to it.²⁶⁶

Woolf's coining of 'frock consciousness' is specifically striking. The concept recognises clothing – the party frock, in particular – as a material canvas through which identities are created and judged. Clothing is then not just decorative, but also acts as a synthetic layer of skin on which economies of power, class, and gender play out. In the context of a party, one's clothes especially function as an ornamental cover beneath which people negotiate their social associations. As Woolf observes in her diary entry, the 'frock consciousness' thus leads to the secretion of an impalpable envelope in parties that regulates who is socially included and excluded as guests. Woolf notes her

²⁶⁶ Woolf, 27 April 1925, in D 3, pp. 12-13.

insecurities while sitting to be photographed for *Vogue* around this time; like Mabel in ‘The New Dress’, she finds herself ‘outside the envelope’ within the sphere of the fashion community. Importantly, she goes on to characterise her own exclusion as belonging to a group that those inside the ‘envelope’ perceive as ‘others’ and ‘foreign bodies’.

The theme of white otherness is a recurring concern in Woolf’s work. As discussed in the first section of this chapter, Woolf explores the idea from her writing of *Melymbrosia* through *To the Lighthouse* and beyond. Her preoccupation with this theme has biographical roots; Woolf loved parties, to which she was often invited, but the entry here in her diary also exemplifies her sensitivity to – and anxiety about – the relational dynamics that shape such social functions. Woolf’s understanding of her own foreignness in party settings seeps into the substance of her fiction. Such as with Mabel’s Chinese cloak in ‘The New Dress’, or the Chinese eyes of Elizabeth Dalloway and Lily Briscoe in respectively *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf’s interpretation of social alienation in her literature goes as far as to augment psychological disconnection with physical and ethnic difference. Woolf gives a developed form to this notion through the character of Elizabeth Dalloway. As early as her writing of ‘Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street’, however, Woolf was already experimenting with oriental aesthetics that would later inform her development of Elizabeth’s character in this regard.

Among the cluster of sketch-stories Woolf composed around the Dalloways, ‘Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street’ is the story that is most closely connected with the genesis of *Mrs Dalloway*. This story, alongside ‘The Prime Minister’, forms part of the initial sketches for her novel and was intended by Woolf to contribute to its opening sequence. Woolf later revised her plan; instead, she decided to publish this story as a standalone piece in *The Dial* in 1923. Nonetheless, there remains an extensive overlap between ‘Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street’ and the

opening section of *Mrs Dalloway*. ‘Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street’ could then be read as an early foundation upon which Woolf would continue to hone her writing for the novel. There is a scene from this story that especially stands out within the scope of discussion on Woolf’s orientalist discourse. Clarissa Dalloway, while waiting to try on gloves, observes another customer in the shop:

There was only one other customer, sitting sideways at the counter, her elbow poised, her bare hand drooping, vacant; like a figure on a Japanese fan, thought Clarissa, too vacant perhaps, yet some men would adore her.²⁶⁷

This customer, poised and expressionless, is gazed at by Clarissa as an object of affection. Clarissa compares her mannerisms to a stylised figure on a Japanese fan. She bears the same vacant countenance, Clarissa thinks, yet she is charming; an attractive figure to look at – ‘some men would adore her’. The woman customer thus becomes a hybrid of flesh and thing. She is portrayed in Woolf’s narrative through orientalist tropes of the Eastern woman as passive, doll-like, and primarily ornamental; a sexualised but impenetrable figure, whose existence invites possession in Western fantasies. Ultimately, Clarissa’s aestheticising gaze at the customer lays bare Woolf’s stylistic orientalism at this juncture in her writing career.

Woolf would omit this scene from *Mrs Dalloway*. Yet the oriental manner of the customer returns to the novel through someone even closer to Clarissa. Her daughter, Elizabeth, who has ‘Chinese eyes’, is portrayed by Woolf with similar descriptions. In *Mrs Dalloway*, Elizabeth reflects on herself while also recalling her mother’s opinion of her: she ‘had no preferences’ and ‘inclined to be passive’; ‘[i]t was expression she needed’. Nonetheless, ‘she was always charming

²⁶⁷ Woolf, ‘Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street’, in CSF, p. 156.

to look at', and '[e]very man fell in love with her'.²⁶⁸ The language emerging in this sequence of thought repeats that of Clarissa's evaluation of the shop customer. Here, Woolf reiterates the orientalist tropes that she has used in 'Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street'; in *Mrs Dalloway*, her aesthetic orientalism continues to persist as a method of enhancing the stylistic texture of the novel. Despite this, Woolf's orientalism in *Mrs Dalloway* does not halt at the aesthetic aspect. There is a display of growth in her literary innovation with the oriental aesthetic, which, with regard to her development of Elizabeth's character, also connects with her feminist and anti-imperial politics that sets Elizabeth apart from the social sphere of her mother. Further elaboration on this argument will follow in the next chapter. In any case, Woolf's contemplation in her diary serves as a summary for her final construction of Elizabeth. The character takes on a 'foreign bod[y]' as she stays 'outside the envelope' of her mother's socialite scene.

Woolf's conventional orientalism in 'Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street', among the other examples during her early days of fiction writing, paves the way for her more creative and political engagement with the orientalist aesthetic in her later work. By the time she had finished drafting *Mrs Dalloway*, for instance, as her diary entry in 1925 shows, her incorporation of oriental style into her discourse on domestic practices had become more pronounced. These observations do not excuse the inherent problematics of her orientalist descriptions, but they do help to demonstrate her growing maturity as a writer. Her discussion of Chineseness during the period examined in this chapter largely treats the concept either as factual substance or through reductive stereotypes, though there are already indications of her effort to innovate on the notion. As Woolf's writing develops, which the next chapter continues to explore, her Chinese orientalism becomes more deeply integrated into her experimentation with literary themes and style.

²⁶⁸ Woolf, MD, p. 148.

Chapter Three

1925-1927: ‘Chinese Eyes’ in *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*

Virginia Woolf’s trope of ‘Chinese eyes’ has developed into her most well-known example of Chinese orientalism. This trope emerges as a facial feature on two of her characters: Elizabeth Dalloway, in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), and Lily Briscoe, in *To the Lighthouse* (1927). The emergence of this trope in two of Woolf’s seminal works might account for its recognisability in contemporary scholarship on her engagement with China. Patricia Laurence’s *Lily Briscoe’s Chinese Eyes: Bloomsbury, Modernism and China* (2013), which currently stands as the most extensive book on Woolf and China, has also likely, by its title, pushed forward the visibility of this trope. There are other critics, too, as outlined in my Introduction, who have observed Woolf’s trope of ‘Chinese eyes’²⁶⁹ – as a matter of fact, the existing criticism on Woolf’s interest in China still largely centres on her description of this ocular image. And, within the expanding field of studies on Woolf’s relationship with China, much attention continues to be paid to her Chinese discourse surrounding Elizabeth’s and Lily’s ‘Chinese eyes’ in the two aforementioned novels. Recent conference discussions effectively reflect this tendency.²⁷⁰ In particular, the increasing cohort of students and early career researchers contributing to the field remains inclined to reference Woolf’s ocular trope in their arguments. Despite such growing efforts to explore Woolf and China, scholarly engagement with this topic is still comparatively scarce within the rich scope of Woolf studies. My

²⁶⁹ See pp. 18-19 of the thesis.

²⁷⁰ This claim stems from my observations over the course of my doctoral research. I am especially thinking about the Annual International Virginia Woolf Conferences of 2024 and 2025, which saw some lively dialogues on Woolf and China.

observation of the field's developments by no means suggests that these discourses on Woolf's relationship with China – even when concerning her ocular trope – are exhausted. If anything, and as implied at the very foundation of my research project, Woolf's engagement with China continues to offer fertile ground for academic scholarship. In this context, *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, upon which most criticisms surrounding Woolf and China converge, have become the two texts that demand especially careful scrutiny with regard to explorations of the topic. It must be acknowledged, moreover, that Woolf's 'Chinese eyes' has taken an important and arguably central role in the development of studies on Woolf and China.

Given the interest and premise of my research project, which endeavors to chart the presences and patterns of Woolf's Chinese orientalism across her literary oeuvre, it is therefore not only inevitable but also necessary for my study to delve into this specific ocular image that has become key to the development of scholarship on Woolf's engagement with China. This chapter then serves as the nucleus of the thesis – it binds and crystalises the arguments that guide the analyses across my other chapters. Woolf's 'Chinese eyes' gesture beyond the physical feature that she has placed on the characters of Elizabeth and Lily; they, too, point towards the writer's own transnational gaze at China that in turn informs her aesthetic vision. There persists, furthermore, a genuine need to further examine the ocular trope, among Woolf's other visual strategies, in *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. Woolf had reached a heightened level of maturity in her literary craft by the time she was composing these two novels. Her orientalist discourse in these works is thus more fluidly woven into her narratives, and brings out the full potential of her experimentation with Chinese aesthetics in her creative process. Accordingly, *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, in which Woolf's ocular trope is embedded, provide ample ground for examining the interplay between her thematic and formal concerns that involve the East. Above all, my concentration on

the two novels in this chapter is an effort to fill a critical gap in studies that have tended either to overlook the racist implications of the trope or to scrutinise them only briefly. My analysis of Woolf's 'Chinese eyes' therefore aims to offer a comprehensive interpretation of the trope by drawing on the details in both novels as well as their textual history, including their corresponding holograph drafts from Woolf's writing notebooks. In this chapter, my observations remain focused on the characters of Elizabeth and Lily, who bear 'Chinese eyes'. The scope of my discussion, nevertheless, encompasses broader concerns; the ocular trope ultimately serves as a basis from which Woolf's orientalist vision extends.

As mentioned, my discussion in this chapter draws on Woolf's published novels, *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, as well as their holograph drafts. While writing *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf referred to her work by various titles; 'The Hours', in particular, denotes the collection of notebooks that forms the first full-length draft of her novel. My work studies the microfilm copy of these notebooks, which serves as the main material for my textual examination of *Mrs Dalloway* in conjunction with the published version of the novel. I similarly explored the textual history of *To the Lighthouse*, as well as some newspaper clippings containing reviews of the novel, which offer helpful context for Woolf's creative decisions and which I have, in turn, included in my discussion of the text. It is through these trajectories of research that I approach my reading of Woolf's two novels.

3.1 Miss Dalloway in Victoria Street

Elizabeth Dalloway makes her first published appearance in 'Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street' (1923) when Clarissa, passing by Hatchard's book shop in London, notices the frontispiece of

some memoir books that remind her of her daughter: ‘What a duck, [Clarissa] thought, looking at the frontispiece of some books of memoirs spread wide in the bow window, Sir Joshua perhaps or Romney; arch, bright, demure; the sort of girl – like her own Elizabeth – the only *real* sort of girl.’²⁷¹ Arch, bright, and demure, Clarissa’s introduction of Elizabeth thus recalls the poised young women who are often depicted in the portraits of Sir Joshua Reynolds and George Romney. From the very outset, Elizabeth embodies an aesthetic presence; she exudes a visual appeal that casts her character in ornamental terms. In ‘Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street’, Clarissa further aligns Elizabeth’s appearance with the neoclassical ideals of femininity that are typically represented by the British aristocratic women of Reynolds’ and Romney’s paintings. To Clarissa, who proudly reflects on her daughter’s demeanor, Elizabeth therefore fits the class-inflected aesthetic that centrally informs Clarissa’s vision of what a proper girl should be.

In *Mrs Dalloway*, however, Elizabeth assumes an altered appearance that destabilises her mother’s classist ideals of white femininity. She leaves a striking impression that is closely tied to her appearance:

The door opened. Elizabeth knew that her mother was resting. She came in very quietly. She stood perfectly still. Was it that some Mongol had been wrecked on the coast of Norfolk (as Mrs. Hilbery said), had mixed with the Dalloway ladies, perhaps a hundred years ago? For the Dalloways, in general, were fair-haired; blue-eyed; Elizabeth, on the contrary, was dark; had Chinese eyes in a pale face; an Oriental mystery; was gentle, considerate, still.²⁷²

Elizabeth’s features no longer place her within the visual conventions of whiteness as idealised by Clarissa through the paintings of Reynolds and Romney. She is not ‘fair-haired’ nor ‘blue-eyed’; instead of possessing the typical Dalloway traits, she is ‘dark’, has ‘Chinese eyes in a pale face’,

²⁷¹ Woolf, ‘Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street’, in CSF, pp. 154-155.

²⁷² Woolf, MD, p. 134.

and, Clarissa deems, is overall an ‘Oriental mystery’. As a subject of her mother’s orientalisg gaze, Elizabeth is further marked by the ethnic stereotypes that are imposed on Chinese persons in much of Western cultural discourse. She is ‘gentle, considerate, still’ – a girl who is passive in disposition, and thus finally deferential to authority. Significantly, Elizabeth’s Chinese eyes are then an aesthetic concept that is also imbued with racist implications. The Chineseness of her eyes can be understood as referring to the narrow, slanted shape that is stereotypically associated with East Asian populations. Elizabeth’s Chinese eyes are therefore, in themselves, a decorative image, yet they moreover function to sketch her character.²⁷³

There is furthermore an explicit connection between the aesthetic appearance of Elizabeth’s Chinese eyes and the idea of genetic inheritance in Clarissa’s contemplation of her daughter: ‘Was it that some Mongol had been wrecked on the coast of Norfolk (as Mrs. Hilbery said), had mixed with the Dalloway ladies, perhaps a hundred years ago?’ Interestingly, Clarissa has in her thought sequence conflated the Mongols and the Chinese, which are distinct ethnic groups with different cultures and histories. When writing this scene, Woolf’s homogenisation of the ethnic groups may be informed by the vocabularies of racial classifications that go on to give rise to scientific racism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The word ‘race’ gained its modern meaning in the field of physical anthropology through German anthropologist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, who in the eighteenth century proposed to classify humans into five racial groups based on

²⁷³ See also Jane Goldman, ‘Explanatory Notes’, *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf, ed. Jane Goldman (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming); Anne Thackeray Ritchie, *Toilers and Spinners, and Other Essays* (Smith, Elder, & Co., 1974), p. 159. Goldman observes that Anne Thackeray Ritchie, in ‘Little Paupers’ in *Toilers and Spinners*, also writes about an Elizabeth with Chinese eyes: ‘Kitty was a sweet-looking girl of four, with great blue eyes. Little Phoebe was about eight, and she looked like the descendant of a hundred tramps. She had the same stunted grown look that had struck me in Elizabeth the day before, the narrow head and Chinese eyes; her face seemed to tell the same piteous story of the past.’ Ritchie was the daughter of novelist William Makepeace Thackeray, Leslie Stephen’s sister-in-law by his first marriage, and step-aunt (or ‘Aunt Anny’) to Virginia Woolf. Given the close relationship between Woolf and Ritchie, it is likely that Woolf was aware of Ritchie’s story and may have drawn on it in her own characterisation of the similarly named Elizabeth in *Mrs Dalloway*. It is also worth noting that Ritchie makes a parallel comparison between blue eyes and Chinese eyes in her description.

differences in physical characteristics.²⁷⁴ One of these groups – the Mongolian race, or Mongoloid – comprises the peoples of East Asia, and is often identified by the monolid shape of the eyes. This classification, moreover, led to the development of now offensive terms by eugenicists, including ‘Mongolism’, which was generally studied as heritable in Woolf’s time.²⁷⁵ Following these complexities, Woolf’s confusion of the two ethnic groups appears to reinforce her aesthetic, rather than historical, investment in the ocular trope. The apparent ignorance in Woolf’s homogenising exercise, however, could be further understood as a political response to her contemporary discourses of genetics and eugenics.

Woolf may have deliberately conflated the Mongols and the Chinese in Clarissa’s description of Elizabeth. Clarissa’s muddling of the Armenians and the Albanians just a few paragraphs earlier is a startling detail to her character, especially in 1925, when *Mrs Dalloway* was first published. Her confusion between the victims and the victimisers – and indifference to the Armenian genocide during the Great War – is somewhat replicated in her conflation of the Mongols and the Chinese, given their violent history during the thirteenth century under Genghis Khan and his successors. Both confusions highlight her privilege as well as her insensitivity towards historico-political issues; Woolf presents Clarissa as a shallow character in this regard. It stands to reason, therefore, that Woolf was also engaging with deeper political concerns through Clarissa’s muddling of the Mongols and the Chinese. Woolf shows interest in the ideas of genetic inheritance in *Mrs Dalloway*. Mr. Bentley, for instance, invokes ‘the Mendelian theory’ when reflecting on the symbolic meanings of a passing plane one afternoon²⁷⁶ – an allusion on Woolf’s part to Gregor

²⁷⁴ Blumenbach classified humans into five groups: the Caucasian race, the Mongolian race, the Malayan race, the Ethiopian race, and the American race.

²⁷⁵ Donald Childs provides an elaboration on Elizabeth Dalloway’s Mongolian heritage that connects her Chinese eyes with hypotheses of Mongolism, particularly with regard to those of George Savage and F.G. Cruikshank. See Donald Childs, ‘Boers, whores, and Mongols in *Mrs. Dalloway*’, in *Modernism and Eugenics: Woolf, Eliot, Yeats, and the Culture of Degeneration* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 50-51.

²⁷⁶ Woolf, MD, p. 30.

Mendel's Laws of Inheritance, which is proven by the hybridisation of garden peas. Clarissa's reference to Mrs Hilbery, as argued in Chapter Two, similarly substantiates Woolf's preoccupation with the genetic and eugenic discourses of her time. As for Elizabeth's Chinese eyes, of which the aesthetic is complicated by its genetic implications, Woolf thus uses the trope as a site of political critique to reject the narratives of white supremacy that are grounded in notions of pure, white lineages. The effect of Woolf's politics is made all the more profound through Clarissa's relationship with Elizabeth. Clarissa builds her identity upon her class privilege as a protector of imperial Britain, and yet even she must recognise the racial mixedness in her familial lineage. In fact, the extensive history of conquests across both the East and the West means that genetic exchanges are ultimately a global occurrence.

Woolf would emphasise Elizabeth's Chinese eyes again in another scene. As Elizabeth finds herself alone on Victoria Street, she offers an internalised account of her mother's observations:

Buses swooped, settled, were off – garish caravans, glistening with red and yellow varnish. But which should she get on to? She had no preferences. Of course, she would not push her way. She inclined to be passive. It was expression she needed, but her eyes were fine, Chinese, oriental, and, as her mother said, with such nice shoulders and holding herself so straight, she was always charming to look at; and lately, in the evening especially, when she was interested, for she never seemed excited, she looked almost beautiful, very stately, very serene. What could she be thinking? Every man fell in love with her, and she was really awfully bored.²⁷⁷

'Passive' and in need of 'expression', yet 'charming to look at', and 'very stately, very serene', Elizabeth understands herself through her mother in a manner that overtly signals the 'China (porcelain) Doll' stereotype. Clarissa sees her daughter as attractive but impenetrable. Like the

²⁷⁷ Woolf, MD, p. 148.

China Doll, Elizabeth is a subject of aesthetic interest deemed artificial rather than human – certainly, we can see Elizabeth further pondering her own doll-like ontology shortly afterwards: ‘In many ways, her mother felt, she was extremely immature, like a child still, attached to dolls [...] and that was charming’.²⁷⁸ Curiously, and moreover, the poised yet expressionless demeanor of Elizabeth echoes that of the customer in ‘Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street’, whom Clarissa compares to a figure on a Japanese fan: ‘There was only one other customer, sitting sideways at the counter, her elbow poised, her bare hand drooping, vacant; like a figure on a Japanese fan, thought Clarissa, too vacant perhaps, yet some men would adore her’.²⁷⁹ Noting these parallels, it appears that Woolf has cut the oriental figure from her short story only to transfer the aesthetic into the more noticeable – and named – character of Elizabeth in her final novel. The oriental association is also extended in Woolf’s remaking of the aesthetic, for Elizabeth’s Chineseness in *Mrs Dalloway* gestures beyond her appearance and towards genetic ties.

Woolf’s blurring of Japanese and Chinese aesthetics could be explained by basic orientalism; a view of the East in reductive and singular terms. But her change in description could signal, too, to more particular impressions that Woolf associates with Chineseness in her final novel. In the manuscript of *Mrs Dalloway*, there is a parallel sequence to the second scene that describes Elizabeth’s Chinese eyes:

²⁷⁸ Woolf, MD, p. 151.

²⁷⁹ Virginia Woolf, ‘Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street’, p. 156.

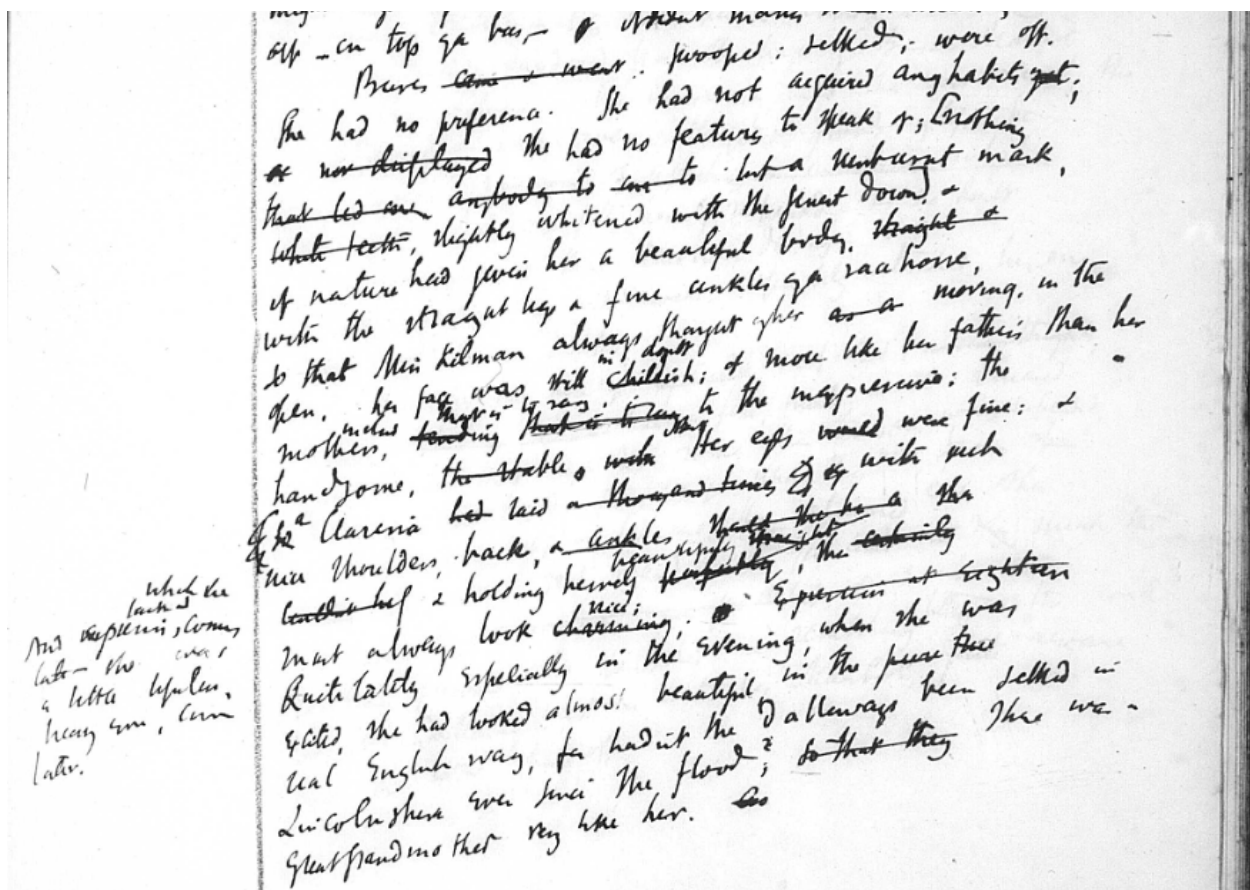


Figure 7. Virginia Woolf, extract from the handwritten manuscript of *Mrs Dalloway*. S x Ms - 18/2/B/15 - University of Sussex Special Collections at The Keep. Original copy at the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library. With courtesy of The Society of Authors as the Literary Representative of the Estate of Virginia Woolf.

Buses ~~came and went~~ swooped; settled; were off.
 She had no preference. She had not acquired any habits yet;
~~or nor displayed~~ she had no features to speak of; [nothing
~~that led see anybody to see to~~ but a sunburnt mask,
~~white teeth~~, slightly whitened with the finest down.] &
 if nature has given her a beautiful body, ~~straight &~~
 with the straight legs & fine ankles of a racehorse,
 so that Miss Kilman always thought of her ~~as a~~ moving, in the
 open, her face was still ~~childish~~ in doubt; & more like her father's than her
 mother's,
~~tending that is to say~~ to the unexpressive: the
 handsome, ~~the stable with~~ Her eyes ~~would~~ were fine; &

(~~so~~ Clarissa ~~had said a thousand times~~) & with such
And expression nice shoulders, back, & ~~ankles should she be a she~~
which she lacked, & holding herself ~~perfectly~~ beautifully, she ~~certainly~~
comes late – she was must always look ~~charming~~; nice; ~~Expression at eighteen~~
a little lifeless, Quite lately especially in the evening, when she was
heavy eyes, comes excited, she had looked almost beautiful in the ~~pure true~~
later. real English way, for hadn't the Dalloways been settled in
Lincolnshire ever since the flood? ~~so that they~~ There was a
great-grandmother very like her.

The transcription provided is my own.²⁸⁰ There is no mention of Chinese eyes in this early record of the scene. The messiness of the draft, however, which documents the conception process of *Mrs Dalloway*, serves as helpful material for my mapping of the Chinese marker's function in its contribution to the multiple versions of Elizabeth.²⁸¹ Comparing the draft and published texts, Elizabeth's later Chineseness stands in for the lengthier constructions of her character that would be cut from the final novel. And yet, Elizabeth's Chineseness also supplements these initial characterisations with a visibly differing quality that marks and makes her character. In particular, my attention is drawn to Elizabeth's overt connection with Englishness in the manuscript account: 'Quite lately especially in the evening, when she was excited, she had looked almost beautiful in the ~~pure true~~ real English way'. This transition from Englishness to Chineseness may be ostensibly strange, yet it consolidates the idea that Woolf's thinking about Chineseness is essentially about Englishness. Woolf's manuscript draft describes Elizabeth through impressions that closely resemble those used in the final novel. In the manuscript draft, Elizabeth has 'no preference' and

²⁸⁰ All transcriptions of 'The Hours' in this chapter are my own. I have, however, also used Helen Wussow's transcription of the text as additional reference.

²⁸¹ I have similarly discussed the British Museum manuscript of *Mrs Dalloway* in a short article. See Serena Wong, 'Elizabeth Dalloway, Chinese Eyes, and the "real English way"', in *The Modernist Review*.
<https://modernistreviewcouk.wordpress.com/2024/08/26/elizabeth-dalloway-chinese-eyes-and-the-real-english-way/>.

has ‘not acquired any habits’; she has ‘no features to speak of’, her face tends to be ‘unexpressive’ yet ‘handsome’, but she has ‘a beautiful body’ with ‘such nice shoulders’, and she ‘hold[s] herself perfectly beautifully’. She also simply has ‘fine’ eyes. These descriptions suggest Elizabeth’s quintessentially English charm, which was Woolf’s original vision for the character. Woolf’s subsequent review of her own eugenic language, and with it Elizabeth’s racial purity, thus replaces Elizabeth’s ‘~~pure~~ true real’ Englishness with her marked oriental Chineseness. While a notable revision, this textual change reveals that Woolf’s creative engagement with Chineseness is habitually and ultimately a self-reflexive exploration of imperial British, and particularly white English, identities.

Moreover, this draft extract also reveals that Woolf’s preoccupation with the genetic and eugenic discourses of her time may be tied to her personal concerns. Within the various parallels between the Dalloway family and Woolf’s own, Elizabeth stands out as a character whose portrayal may be read as autobiographically inspired by Woolf herself. Woolf had ancestral connections to Lincolnshire on her mother’s side; according to family story, her maternal grandfather, John Jackson, had stayed in the county before leaving for India with the East India Company.²⁸² It was in India that he met his wife and Woolf’s grandmother, Maria Pattle, who was the daughter to an Anglo-Indian family. Maria’s Indian heritage could be traced to her own great-great-great-great-grandmother, a woman named Marie Monique, who was of Bengali Hindu descent.²⁸³ Maria’s mother and Woolf’s great-grandmother, Adéline Maria de L’Étang, therefore also had an Indian heritage – the mixed ancestry of Adéline and her sisters stirs suggestions that their famously

²⁸² See Marion Dell, ‘Fabulous Forebearers’, *The Elusive Julia Prinsep Stephen*, <https://theelusivejuliastephen.com/forebears/#:~:text=This%20is%20a%20brief%20introduction%20to%20some,her%20mother%2C%20Julia%20Stephen%27s%2C%20line%20of%20descent> [accessed 25 Sept 2025].

²⁸³ See Marion Dell, ‘A Vision of Beauty: Chapter 2’, *The Elusive Julia Prinsep Stephen*, <https://theelusivejuliastephen.com/ch2/> [accessed 25 Sept 2025].

lustrous hair and dark eyes confer upon them ‘a quality of Oriental beauty’.²⁸⁴ Woolf’s exploration of her family history may thus shed light on the added context in her draft regarding Elizabeth’s appearance: ‘she had looked almost beautiful in the ~~pure true~~ real English way, for hadn’t the Dalloways been settled in Lincolnshire ever since the flood? ~~so that they~~ There was a great-grandmother very like her.’ In Woolf’s holograph draft, Elizabeth’s familial lineage continues to explain her Caucasian features. The supplementary detail here, however, which the final novel excludes, suggests that Woolf was already reconsidering her characterisation of Elizabeth at this stage of her writing. Elizabeth’s dark complexion, Chinese eyes, and alleged Mongolian lineage in the final novel correspond more personally with the oriental connection to Woolf’s maternal ancestry. Woolf’s revision of Elizabeth is then possibly her method of recognising not only the broader heterogeneity of white identities, but also the specific racial mixedness within her own family.

Woolf’s mention of Elizabeth’s great-grandmother in her holograph draft, and her subsequent replacement of this familial reference with the Dalloways’ Mongolian connection in the final novel, collectively offer an intriguing context for reading Woolf’s own eugenical anxiety. Themes of heredity and madness run throughout *Mrs Dalloway*; the novel’s struggle with hereditary insanity was undoubtedly informed by Woolf’s own episodes of mental illness, and would have also served as a means for Woolf to work through her own fears about the issue. Her portrayal of Sir William Bradshaw most explicitly reveals her worry about the hereditary nature of mental defects: ‘Worshipping proportion, Sir William not only prospered himself but made England prosper, secluded her lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalised despair, made it impossible

²⁸⁴ Brian Hill, *Julia Margaret Cameron: A Victorian Family Portrait* (Peter Owen, 1973), p. 16, quoted in Marion Dell, ‘A Vision of Beauty: Chapter 2’ [accessed 25 Sept 2025].

for the unfit to propagate their views until they, too, shared his sense of proportion [...]'.²⁸⁵ Bradshaw commits his career to controlling reproduction on eugenic grounds. His restriction of childbirth, moreover, is clearly guided by the beliefs about inherited degeneracy that connect genetic fitness with blood and lineage. '[U]nsocial impulses', deems Bradshaw, are 'bred more than anything by the lack of good blood'.²⁸⁶ Upon meeting Septimus Warren Smith, Bradshaw is hence quick to diagnose his patient on the basis of such ideas: 'The fellow made a distasteful impression. For there was in Sir William, whose father had been a tradesman, a natural respect for breeding and clothing, which shabbiness nettled'.²⁸⁷ Woolf's language in her writing of Bradshaw, and through him Septimus, noticeably echoes the eugenic principles of Max Nordau, who in his book *Degeneration* (1892) connects what he diagnoses as a cultural outbreak of hysteria with biological and moral degeneracy in the late nineteenth century. In any case, these descriptions in Woolf's novel, along with the information from her holograph draft, hint at the influence that the eugenic discourses of her time would have had on her thinking, from which stems her internalised anxiety about her own madness and its potential effect on her work. Woolf's shift in her characterisation of Elizabeth, which implies a 'taint' in the Dalloway bloodline, substantiates her deep-rooted concern with eugenic ideologies. And yet, it is plain that Woolf also challenges these beliefs. Her depiction of Bradshaw is satirical and absurd; Woolf presents Bradshaw as a figure of oppressive authority, whose lack of compassion is masked by his self-deluded professionalism. Her revision of Elizabeth's character can then be read as also a strategy to confront and navigate her growing anxieties surrounding the eugenic discourse.

²⁸⁵ Woolf, MD, p. 109.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 111.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., pp. 106-107.

Elizabeth's orientalised Chineseness, which codes her with doll-like qualities that invite domination and control, renders her vulnerable to the possessive inclinations of those around her. Being gentle, passive, and still, Elizabeth appears subdued beneath the weight of her mother's affections. 'Here is my Elizabeth,' said Clarissa, as she introduces her daughter to Peter Walsh.²⁸⁸ The possessive 'my' in Clarissa's sentence signals her relational intimacy with Elizabeth, but it also implies a sense of infantilisation that reduces Elizabeth to a state of dependence on her mother. While Elizabeth does not articulate her opinion on Clarissa's word choice, Walsh notices the imbalance in the dynamic between mother and daughter and reflects on this encounter: 'The way she said "Here is my Elizabeth!" – that annoyed him. Why not "Here's Elizabeth" simply? It was insincere. And Elizabeth didn't like it either.'²⁸⁹ Walsh understands Clarissa's introduction as a performative framing of her relationship with her daughter. He moreover offers a perceptive insight into Elizabeth's discomfort with her mother's artificial display of authority. Yet Clarissa is not the only person desiring to claim Elizabeth in *Mrs Dalloway*. Doris Kilman, too, who acts as Elizabeth's history tutor, exhibits disconcertingly possessive behaviour towards her student. I return here to the first instance in which Elizabeth's Chinese eyes are mentioned. Specifically, I draw on the draft extract paralleling this scene, which can also be found in Notebook Two of 'The Hours':

²⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 52.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 53.

Remember our party to-night!’”²⁹⁰ Kilman, too, seeks to steer Elizabeth towards her own ideals. She imparts her values to Elizabeth: ‘Law, medicine, politics, all professions are open to women of your generation, said Miss Kilman’,²⁹¹ and, finally, ‘[Elizabeth] must not let parties absorb her’.²⁹² Like Clarissa, Kilman is reluctant to let Elizabeth go: ‘Ah, but she must not go! Miss Kilman could not let her go!’²⁹³ Nonetheless, she is met with the same fate that mirrors Clarissa’s: ‘She had gone. Mrs. Dalloway had triumphed. Elizabeth had gone.’²⁹⁴ Both Clarissa and Kilman believe the other to have prevailed in exerting their influence over Elizabeth. And yet, Elizabeth yields to neither Clarissa’s nor Kilman’s influence; she shows effort in resisting both possessive authorities.

Despite her seeming passivity, Elizabeth is a character who exercises more agency than is immediately apparent. When confronted with her mother’s outbursts, Elizabeth’s silence often functions as an act of quiet defiance. She even goes so far as to disregard her mother: ‘But Elizabeth had already opened the front door; there was a van passing; she did not answer.’²⁹⁵ Elizabeth’s defiance extends beyond her mother to include Kilman as well. She is confident in refusing Kilman: ‘Elizabeth, with her oriental bearing, her inscrutable mystery, sat perfectly upright; no, she did not want anything more.’²⁹⁶ Even Kilman senses Elizabeth’s aversion towards herself: ‘But to sit here, unable to think of anything to say; to see Elizabeth turning against her; to be felt repulsive even by her – it was too much; she could not stand it.’²⁹⁷ And, when Elizabeth finally sees her chance to leave, she does so without sparing a single thought for her history tutor: ‘And did Elizabeth give

²⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 138.

²⁹¹ Ibid., p. 143.

²⁹² Ibid., p. 144.

²⁹³ Ibid., p. 144.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 145.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 138.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 144.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

one thought to poor Miss Kilman [...]? She was delighted to be free.’²⁹⁸ Elizabeth savours her freedom from both Clarissa and Kilman. Crucially, her oriental identity in the final novel appears deeply bound up with her growing independence and quest for autonomy.

The oriental coding of Elizabeth’s character reaches peak significance when she ventures out alone from Victoria Street. Leaving Kilman at the Army and Navy Stores to finish her tea, Elizabeth relishes her time in solitude and out of doors: ‘And Elizabeth waited in Victoria Street for an omnibus. It was so nice to be out of doors. She thought perhaps she need not go home just yet. It was so nice to be out in the air.’²⁹⁹ Elizabeth becomes more fully herself during this brief escape from her guardians. Her subsequent journey from Victoria Street through the Strand and back towards Westminster is a particularly important sequence in the novel, as it allows a rare glimpse into her thoughts. While waiting for the omnibus on Victoria Street, Elizabeth begins to seriously contemplate her preferences and identity. ‘London was so dreary’, she decides, ‘compared with being alone in the country with her father and the dogs’.³⁰⁰ She wrestles with the lifestyle that Clarissa wants for her: ‘she had to go to parties [...] she was really awfully bored [...] For it was beginning. Her mother could see that – the compliments were beginning. That she did not care more about it – for instance for her clothes – sometimes worried Clarissa [...]’.³⁰¹ Elizabeth’s reflections are inseparable from the imperial and patriarchal systems that she must navigate as a young English woman. As a Dalloway, she is implicated in the aristocratic and high societies that sustain these systems. Her racialised appearance and mixed lineage, however, also signal her potential to subvert these systems as part of a new generation.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., pp. 148-149.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 147.

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

³⁰¹ Ibid., pp. 147-148.

Elizabeth's racialised identity situates her in a position that is more closely attuned to the effects of globalisation. Her body physically registers the global networks shaped by migration, colonialism, and the cultural and racial hybridity that results, thereby enabling her to more fluidly transcend the limits of British aristocratic society. Her education in modern history, moreover, grants her a broader global perspective that distances her from the political legacy of her class. Unlike her mother, Elizabeth is uninterested in the lavish parties that uphold the elite hierarchies within London. Rather than maintaining this veneer of stability in the post-Great War context, Elizabeth navigates and propels the rapid changes of her society by confronting the patriarchal traditions of her mother's era. Ashley Nadeau and Umass Amherst have similarly argued that Elizabeth's racial difference signals her political dissidence: 'Of Virginia Woolf's young, unmarried women, Elizabeth Dalloway has the most potential to be transgressive. Beyond suggesting global interaction, the racialization of Elizabeth's body distances her from the expectations of her bourgeois post-war society and physically expresses political difference.'³⁰² Elizabeth's visible diversity distinguishes her as a figure who seeks to subvert the exclusionary systems entrenched within her society. Her oriental connections, however, do not necessarily cast her as a colonised subject at the periphery of the British empire. Elizabeth retains her white identity and with it the privileges of her social class; she can freely explore the London metropolis and, by boarding the omnibus, survey the city from an elevated vantage point according to her own will and comfort. It is true that she is looking to carve her own path out of the British imperial patriarchy. 'In short, she would like to have a profession', Elizabeth contemplates about herself. 'She would become a doctor, a farmer, possibly going into Parliament if she found it necessary'.³⁰³ And yet,

³⁰² Ashley Nadeau and Umass Amherst, 'Exploring Women: Virginia Woolf's Imperial Revisions from *The Voyage Out* to *Mrs. Dalloway*', *Modern Language Studies*, 44.1 (2014), pp. 14-35, p. 25.

³⁰³ Woolf, MD, p. 150.

as this thought sequence reveals, Elizabeth's solution to revising the oppressive structures of her society ironically involves her pursuit of professional roles that are fundamentally embedded in colonial practices of control. Her shortlist of professions is entangled in a matrix of domination over bodies, territories, and politics. Elizabeth's exploration of her place as a young woman within the empire creates the conditions for her gendered challenge to imperial patriarchy, but her imaginative exercise primarily remains to serve the interests of white women, and does not extend to review her relationship with raced bodies outside the empire. Her racial otherness is therefore first and foremost an artistic device through which Woolf communicates her concerns about the British empire. Woolf's thinking about Chineseness is always rooted in the realities of Englishness; while Woolf's oriental tropes may indicate her curiosity towards the East, her allusions to China, and more widely to the Orient, are ultimately self-reflexively intertwined with the politics of her immediate society in England.

The elements of Chineseness that Woolf establishes through Elizabeth are thus artistic tropes of difference. While they may suggest Woolf's increasing desire to be in dialogue with the East, it is necessary to recognise that her inclusion of Chinese themes in her work remains primarily an aesthetic choice. Chinese aesthetics, and China itself, occupy a sufficiently distant ground in Woolf's imagination for her to rework them as alternative spaces within Britain. Undeniably, Woolf's Chinese orientalism had, for the most part, moved beyond basic romanticising practices during the period in which she was writing *Mrs Dalloway*. Her use of Chinese aesthetics in her descriptions has transformed into an experimental technique that seamlessly integrates with her political assertions. Woolf's discussions surrounding her Chinese discourse certainly centre on Britain. The process of her discussions, however, necessarily prompts her to consider Britain in the context of its history and in relation to other global powers.

Elizabeth's Chinese eyes hence capture the ephemerality of eras and ages that make up the larger history of Britain's globalising position. Elizabeth's Chineseness, especially when connected with her vision, signals the emergence of a new English generation into which Clarissa's Victorian England is transitioning. It could well be upon Woolf's reconsideration of the 'pure', 'true', and 'real' in ideas of Englishness that she had arrived at a more cosmopolitan conclusion. Elizabeth's Chinese eyes challenge the myth of white Englishness that had supported the British imperial project. The image of her Chinese eyes is, therefore, ultimately a double-edged aesthetic; it reaffirms Chineseness as a decoratively oriental concept, and yet it also gestures to the coming of a younger generation in Britain that would go on to recognise the orientalism of its imagery.

3.2 Lily Briscoe's Chinese Vision

Among all of Woolf's discourses on China and Chineseness across her oeuvre, Lily Briscoe's 'Chinese eyes' in *To the Lighthouse* remains her most well-known trope. The critical attention given to this instance of Woolf's Chinese discourse is well justified; 'Chinese eyes' continue to be a common visual stereotype of racial difference even in the present context, and, by the time Woolf took up writing *To the Lighthouse*, she had fully honed her literary skills that would secure the novel's lasting recognition. Woolf uses the trope in *To the Lighthouse* as a progression from its deployment in *Mrs Dalloway*. The trope of 'Chinese eyes' in *To the Lighthouse* persists as a symbolic reminder of the heterogeneity within white identities under the British empire. In *To the Lighthouse*, however, 'Chinese eyes' assume a more central presence in the development of the novel's formal and plot structures. Lily Briscoe, who has 'Chinese eyes', acts as one of the main figures in the novel. With 'Chinese eyes' that mark her racial and perceptual alterity, Lily

reconfigures her role as a woman within the systems of imperial patriarchy and, moreover, refines the aesthetic techniques of her painting, which preoccupy her throughout the novel. Compared to *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf's engagement with the trope in *To the Lighthouse* reflects a sharper sensitivity to its political functions and constraints. In this later novel, she shows even clearer intent in using the Chinese trope as an inward-facing, self-reflexive critique of the British empire. Lily's character emerges as a more pronounced embodiment of the feminist discourse that Woolf had conveyed through Elizabeth. Woolf employs 'Chinese eyes' in *To the Lighthouse* to strategically confront the patriarchal structures of the empire; in doing so, she has also succeeded in augmenting the aesthetic and critical potential of this trope.

Despite its saturation with orientalist connotations, the image of 'Chinese eyes', through which Woolf negotiates her politics of the empire, also operates as a lens for her aesthetic orientation towards the East. Indeed, in *To the Lighthouse*, the image is especially intertwined with Woolf's vision of a new visual order that becomes increasingly clear by the end of the novel. Leading critical readings of the novel's Chinese trope tend to interpret it as a product of Woolf's attempt at mapping China within the cultural context of British modernism. Of particular influence is Patricia Laurence's argument, which posits that 'Lily's "Chinese eyes" suggest not the Empire's foraging glance toward the distant lands of China and India for trade and gain, but the new aesthetic voyaging in the East during the modernist period.'³⁰⁴ In her book *Lily Briscoe's Chinese Eyes: Bloomsbury, Modernism and China* (2013), Laurence emphasises that Bloomsbury was 'sympathetic to Chinese civilization and receptive to forms of art that opened up foreign texts and contexts'.³⁰⁵ While her study acknowledges the association of modernism with imperialism,

³⁰⁴ Patricia Laurence, *Lily Briscoe's Chinese Eyes: Bloomsbury, Modernism and China* (University of South Carolina Press, 2013), p. 10.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

Laurence proposes the need to listen for a multivoiced China and England emerging from ‘the inner spaces of community’, which find perspectives beyond the imperial and colonial narratives that obscure activities of personal exchange in the direction of a transnationally evolving future.³⁰⁶ Laurence hence recognises Lily’s embodiment of ‘Chinese eyes’ as a site for questioning one’s aesthetic place and, ultimately, one’s ‘universality’ within cross-cultural networks.³⁰⁷ There is much to appreciate in Laurence’s reading of the ocular trope. Specifically, her investigation into the connections between Bloomsbury’s theorisation of Chinese art and Woolf’s calligraphic style of writing, particularly in relation to Lily’s final line for her painting, is a valuable observation to which I will return later in my discussion.³⁰⁸ Nevertheless, Laurence’s eagerness to advocate for a transnationally collaborative solution to the trope may overlook the uneven power dynamics that structure global systems of exchange. Similar criticisms that interpret Woolf’s trope of ‘Chinese eyes’ as primarily a celebration of cultural hybridity are also prone to downplay this important consideration. Like my analysis of the trope in *Mrs Dalloway*, therefore, my reading of Lily’s Chinese eyes in *To the Lighthouse* also insists on anchoring the image in the racialised and imbalanced power relations that underpin its construction. Woolf’s language surrounding the trope is steeped in the stereotypical discourses that circulated through the cultural practices of her time. Encountering ‘Chinese eyes’ then becomes both a political and personal experience. Though Woolf frames it aesthetically, in the context of her global readership, the image triggers a process of negotiation between the text and the self for her transnational and especially Chinese readers. It is thus necessary to interrogate the racist nuances of the trope before turning to its more creatively productive implications. In recognising such complications that underlie Woolf’s aesthetic

³⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 21.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 10.

³⁰⁸ Ibid., pp. 287-351.

judgment, this additional dimension in reading her ‘Chinese eyes’ also allows for a better understanding of the influences behind her modernist literary practice.

The critical conversation around Lily’s ‘Chinese eyes’ has produced other discussions of the trope that are also useful to my reading. Notably, Urmila Seshagiri argues through a feminist lens that Lily’s eyes ‘exclude her socially *and* elevate her artistically’, with her oriental vision thus enabling her resistance against the artistic realism of the previous age.³⁰⁹ Echoing Laurence and Seshagiri, Ira Nadel similarly notes that Lily’s formalist methodology in her painting reflects Woolf’s interest in the aesthetic principles of Chinese art. He observes that the description of Lily’s last line in her painting draws on the vocabulary of Chinese art as used by Bloomsbury: ‘rhythm, line, stroke, and pause are linked to a calligraphy that establishes a continuum from word to image. The end of the novel is an Oriental, calligraphic moment.’³¹⁰ Karen Kaivola’s emphasis on the connections between Lily’s oriental marking and structural androgyny further contributes to this critical alignment of aesthetics, gender, and race. Kaivola proposes that Lily’s Chinese features signal her identity as ‘a woman artist who resists traditional female roles’, thereby rendering her artistic ambitions a means of reconciling the separate gender spheres in Victorian ideology.³¹¹ And finally, to conclude the trajectory of criticism surrounding Lily’s ‘Chinese eyes’, there is, moreover, a growing body of Chinese scholarship that questions the trope’s political operations within the frameworks of translation theory and global literary studies. Contributing to this discourse, for example, is Leo Chan Tak-hung’s examination of the trope in Chinese translations of *To the Lighthouse*, which he understands as an epitome of a ‘border-crossing experience’ that requires the

³⁰⁹ Urmila Seshagiri, ‘Orienting Virginia Woolf: Race, Aesthetics, and Politics in *To the Lighthouse*’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 50.1 (2004), pp. 58-84, p. 67; p. 76.

³¹⁰ Nadel, Ira, ‘Oriental Woolf’, *Affirmations: of the Modern*, 4.1 (2016), pp. 65-91, p. 81.

³¹¹ Karen Kaivola, ‘Revisiting Woolf’s Representations of Androgyny: Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Nation’, *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, 18.2 (1999), pp. 235-261, p. 250.

reader to move ‘back and forth between the two semiotic systems embedded in the text’.³¹² Chan identifies the transnational complications in interpreting the trope as stemming from the existence of different referential codes adopted by the author and the reader, which create for the latter a constant need to renegotiate personal boundaries.³¹³ It is upon the foundation of these critical arguments that I expand on the view of Lily’s ‘Chinese eyes’ as a highly aesthetic and political image. These criticisms further reaffirm the need to evaluate Woolf’s racialised language in relation to her global influence today and, moreover, to consider the personal dimension of textual contact within this critical exercise.

The Chineseness of Lily’s eyes is mentioned at her first appearance. In *To the Lighthouse*, as Mrs Ramsay models for Lily’s picture, she observes her guest who is painting on the lawn:

But the sight of the girl standing on the edge of the lawn painting reminded her; she was supposed to be keeping her head as much in the same position as possible for Lily’s picture. Lily’s picture! Mrs. Ramsay smiled. With her little Chinese eyes and her puckered-up face she would never marry; one could not take her painting very seriously; but she was an independent little creature, Mrs. Ramsay liked her for it, and so remembering her promise, she bent her head.³¹⁴

Lily thus emerges to the reader through Mrs Ramsay’s gaze. Lily has ‘little Chinese eyes’ and a ‘puckered-up face’; while it is Lily who paints, Mrs Ramsay’s view of her simultaneously serves as a frame that brings her oriental features into an aesthetic emphasis. Mrs Ramsay portrays Lily in unflattering terms. Lily’s Chinese features, under Mrs Ramsay’s gaze, are associated with her limited prospects for marriage. Her oriental appearance and bearing further prevent Mrs Ramsay from taking her artistic pursuits seriously. Upon Lily’s initial emergence, her Chinese eyes then

³¹² Leo Tak-hung Chan, ‘Lily Briscoe’s “Chinese Eyes”: The Reading of Difference in Translated Fiction’, *Quaderns: Revista de traducció*, 15.1 (2008), pp. 197-209, p. 207.

³¹³ Ibid., p. 208.

³¹⁴ Virginia Woolf, *TL*, p. 21.

meet Mrs Ramsay's (Caucasian) gaze on fundamentally colliding grounds. Her racialised presence not only reinforces the positional difference between the two women but also alludes to their generational differences amid a time of cultural transition. Mrs Ramsay, embodying Victorian ideals, is unable to see eye to eye with Lily, whose vision is shaped by the changing values of a modernising society. And yet, there is still a sense of rapport between the hostess and her guest. While Mrs Ramsay may lead a different lifestyle, she appreciates Lily's independence and supports her creative endeavours. This scene, which first brings Mrs Ramsay and Lily together within a shared narrative frame, therefore also sets up the push-and-pull dynamic that defines their relationship.

Mrs Ramsay continues to evaluate Lily's appeal in terms of her marriageability. A little later in the novel, when the Ramsays and their houseguests are considering a potential visit to the nearby lighthouse, Mrs Ramsay once again assesses Lily's Chinese features:

'And even if it isn't fine to-morrow,' said Mrs. Ramsay, raising her eyes to glance at William Bankes and Lily Briscoe as they passed, 'it will be another day. And now,' she said, thinking that Lily's charm was her Chinese eyes, aslant in her white, puckered little face, but it would take a clever man to see it, 'and now stand up and let me measure your leg,' for they might go to the Lighthouse after all, and she must see if the stocking did not need to be an inch or two longer in the leg.

Smiling, for an admirable idea had flashed upon her this very second – William and Lily should marry – she took the heather mixture stocking, with its criss-cross of steel needles at the mouth of it, and measured it against James's leg.³¹⁵

Once more, Mrs Ramsay's attention is drawn to Lily's 'Chinese eyes'. Her assessment of Lily's Chinese features in this instance takes an even more vivid turn. Not only are Lily's eyes Chinese, but they are also 'aslant' in her face that is 'white', 'puckered', and 'little'. Lily's racially hybrid appearance underscores her alterity within the imperial context of white womanhood, which Mrs

³¹⁵ Ibid., p. 31.

Ramsay goes on to associate with her marital worth under patriarchal norms. Mrs Ramsay supposes that it would ‘take a clever man’ to see Lily’s charm. Nevertheless, she acknowledges that some appeal remains embedded in Lily’s ‘Chinese eyes’ – perhaps, she conceives, William [Bankes] and Lily should marry.

This scene is moreover important for containing the first instance in which Woolf remarks on Lily’s Chineseness in her holograph draft for the novel. In Notebook One of Woolf’s manuscript for *To the Lighthouse*, there is a draft passage for this scene that includes Mrs Ramsay’s contemplation on ‘how Chinese Lilies eyes were’. Here, Woolf had not yet cemented her tropic expression of ‘Chinese eyes’, though she was already developing the idea of Lily’s Chineseness through her ocular features. I provide below the relevant holograph extract from Woolf’s notebook, accompanied by my transcription of the text:³¹⁶

³¹⁶ All transcriptions of the *To the Lighthouse* holograph manuscript from Woolf’s notebooks in this chapter are my own. I have consulted the *Woolf Online* text materials in the process of my transcription.

why shouldn't those two marry? – an admirable plan –
& ~~knowing her own~~ her singleness, her simplicity made
her <laugh> ~~smile~~ Thus, And smiling she took the heather mixture
stocking with the crisscross of steel knitting needles at
the mouth of it & measured it against James's leg

In her initial design of Lily's racialised identity, Woolf offers an orientalist characterisation that leans more towards Lily's unattractiveness than her charm. Apart from the Chineseness of her eyes, Lily also has a 'little sallow face' that is 'not [to everybody's] taste'. In the left margin of the page, Woolf further supplements her budding depiction of Lily with notes that 'she had not beauty', though there is 'a sort of piquancy' about her. Lily's lack of feminine appeal is linked to her oriental appearance, a connection that Woolf has also made in *Mrs Dalloway*. Despite her charms, Elizabeth, in *Mrs Dalloway*, is 'not exactly pretty; handsome rather'.³¹⁷ Woolf thus applies a similar androgynous logic in her description of Lily, who, in the holograph draft of *To the Lighthouse*, clearly subverts traditional notions of English beauty ideals. In her final novel, Woolf appears to revert to her formulation of an oriental-coded allure that she has presented in *Mrs Dalloway*, suggesting that Lily, with her Chinese features, can still be a charming character (though it would take a clever man to see it). Lily's face is no longer sickly 'sallow' but, though in equally racialised terms, more robustly 'puckered'. Explicitly, there is also a 'charm' embodied by Lily's eyes, which, while an aesthetic detail of her appearance, further conveys the appeal that comes with her artistic ambition. Lily hovers at the margins of traditional femininity under Mrs Ramsay's gaze. For some time, she remains a potential candidate for marriage. And yet, at the outset, Woolf also plans for Lily's character 'a sort of piquancy' – a sense of independence and boldness in her

³¹⁷ Woolf, MD, p. 61.

racial alterity – that ultimately displaces Lily from conventional roles for women under the imperial patriarchy.

Woolf goes on to expand upon her characterisation of Lily as the novel progresses. Further into *To the Lighthouse*, as Mrs Ramsay prepares dinner for her guests, she returns to her contemplation of Lily in more elaborate detail. This time, Mrs Ramsay evaluates Lily particularly in comparison to Minta Doyle:

Purposely, however, for she had it on her mind that Lily, who had helped her with Mr. Tansley, was out of things, she exempted her from the rest; said ‘Lily anyhow agrees with me,’ and so drew her in, a little fluttered, a little startled. (For she was thinking about love.) They were both out of things, Mrs. Ramsay had been thinking, both Lily and Charles Tansley. Both suffered from the glow of the other two. He, it was clear, felt himself utterly in the cold; no woman would look at him with Paul Rayley in the room. Poor fellow! Still, he had his dissertation, the influence of somebody upon something; he could take care of himself. With Lily it was different. She faded, under Minta’s glow; became more inconspicuous than ever, in her little grey dress with her little puckered face and her little Chinese eyes. Everything about her was so small. Yet, thought Mrs. Ramsay, comparing her with Minta, as she claimed her help (for Lily should bear her out she talked no more about her diaries than her husband did about his boots – he would talk by the hour about his boots), of the two Lily at forty will be the better. There was in Lily a thread of something; a flare of something; something of her own which Mrs. Ramsay liked very much indeed, but no man would, she feared.³¹⁸

Mrs Ramsay thinks that Lily, together with Charles Tansley, is ‘out of things’ and ‘suffer[s] from the glow’ of her other guests at the summer house, specifically Minta and Paul Rayley. Lily ‘faded’ under Minta’s glow; with her ‘little puckered face’ and her ‘little Chinese eyes’, Lily ‘became more inconspicuous than ever’ – [e]verything about her was so small’. In this scene, Woolf further develops Lily’s form through Mrs Ramsay with the same stereotypical language that she has employed in the prior passage. Lily’s oriental appearance renders her presence inconspicuous,

³¹⁸ Woolf, TL, p. 113.

thereby reinforcing her social exclusion. Woolf's portrayal of Mrs Ramsay's attitude towards Lily, however, is thoroughly consistent; Mrs Ramsay maintains her regard for Lily's marginality with a degree of respect and even admiration. Her comparison of Lily with Minta makes this apparent. Mrs Ramsay sees Minta as more closely aligned with her ideals of womanhood. And yet, she quietly concedes that 'of the two Lily at forty will be the better'. Here, Woolf expands on her vision of Lily's 'piquancy' – Mrs Ramsay notes that there is 'in Lily a thread of something; a flare of something; something of her own', which she 'liked very much indeed, but no man would, she feared'. Lily possesses an essence, informed by her racialised coding, that channels the passion, defiance, and independence permeating her identity. Mrs Ramsay may be unable to fully comprehend Lily. Nevertheless, she recognises that there is in Lily a capacity for things that she herself, as a woman shaped by the conventions of Victorian society, cannot quite reach.

Notebook Two of Woolf's manuscript for *To the Lighthouse* contains a passage that parallels this scene. Within this passage in her holograph draft, Woolf similarly writes about Lily's Chineseness. It is clear from her draft that she was trying to further her oriental depiction of Lily from the previous passage that references the Chineseness of her character. This draft passage marks the last of the two instances in which Woolf mentions Lily's Chinese features in her holograph notebooks for *To the Lighthouse*:

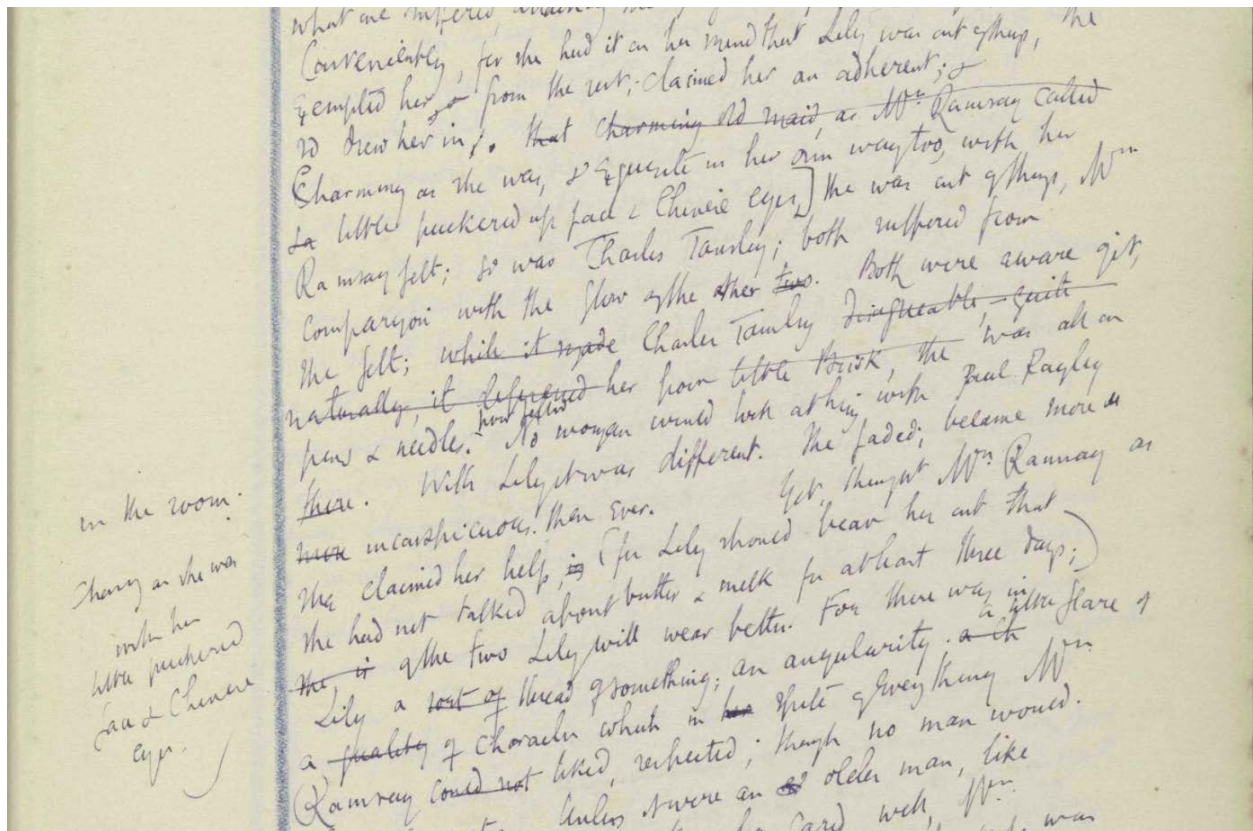


Figure 10. Virginia Woolf, extract from the handwritten manuscript of *To the Lighthouse*. Fol. 25; SD p. 171 – Woolf Online. Original copy at the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library. With courtesy of The Society of Authors as the Literary Representative of the Estate of Virginia Woolf.

Conveniently, for she had it on her mind that Lily was out of things, exempted her from the rest; claimed her an adherent; & so drew her in, ~~that charming old maid, as Mr. Ramsay called~~ Charming as she was, & exquisite with her own way too, with her ~~a~~ little puckered up face & Chinese eyes,] She was out of things, Mrs. Ramsay felt; so was Charles Tansley; both suffered from comparison with the glow of the other ~~two~~. Both were aware of it, she felt; ~~while it made~~ Charles Tansley disagreeable, ~~quite~~ ~~naturally, it depressed her poor little Brisk, she was all on~~ pins & needles. <poor fellow> No woman would look at him with Paul Rayley there. With Lily it was different. She faded; became more & ~~more~~ inconspicuous than ever. Yet, thought Mrs. Ramsay as she claimed her help, ~~in~~ (for Lily should bear her out that she had not talked about butter & milk for at least three days;)

in the room.

Charming as she was with her

little puckered	she is of the two Lily will wear better. For there was in
face & Chinese	Lily a sort of thread of something; an angularity. a-h <a little flare of>
eyes.	a quality of character which in her spite of everything Mrs.
	Ramsay could not liked, respected; though no man would.

Woolf's inscriptions at the margin show that she wrote Lily's 'little puckered face & Chinese eyes' with deliberate consideration. She also establishes Lily's charm in this draft passage; Lily is 'charming as she was with her little puckered face & Chinese eyes', and 'exquisite with her own way too'. Though this dimension to Lily is less pronounced in the published version of this passage, it continues to resonate throughout Woolf's portrayal of her character in the final novel. Lily's Chinese charm, for example, explicitly carries over into the published version of the aforementioned scene in which Mrs Ramsay reflects on Lily's marriageability. Moreover, this draft passage reveals Woolf's effort to foreground Lily's inscrutability by eventually limiting Mrs Ramsay's access to her interior emotions. In Woolf's draft, Lily, like Charles Tansley, is acutely aware of her own being 'out of things'; this awareness 'depresses[s]' her – she is 'all on pins & needles'. In the final novel, however, '[w]ith Lily it was different', she is unlike Tansley. Mrs Ramsay focuses on Lily's appearance and does not delve too deeply into her interiority. She registers only the intangible flare of Lily's spirit. Otherwise, Lily exudes a quiet satisfaction with her own disposition and alterity; Mrs Ramsay observes no intense – much less negative – emotional display from Lily.

Regardless, Lily is a character who exercises her own agency. In the final novel, Woolf includes additional references to Lily's 'Chinese eyes', which become not only a racialised descriptor under Mrs Ramsay's gaze but moreover a cue for Lily's own aesthetic and political discernments. Seated at the dinner table, Lily screws up her 'Chinese eyes' while contemplating the misogyny that she has experienced from Tansley:

Lily Briscoe knew all that. Sitting opposite him could she not see, as in an X-ray photograph, the ribs and thigh bones of the young man's desire to impress himself lying dark in the mist of his flesh – that thin mist which convention had laid over his burning desire to break into the conversation? But, she thought, screwing up her Chinese eyes, and remembering how he sneered at women, 'can't paint, can't write', why should I help him to relieve himself?³¹⁹

The corporeal distinctions between Lily and Tansley, which take root in their respective racial and gender identities, also translate into their differing desires. Lily's vision pierces Tansley's need to assert his presence. She, meanwhile, understands the power of her own social inconspicuousness and recognises that, by withholding what Tansley wants, she can strip him of his influence. Her (lack of) reaction to Tansley is therefore a calculated act of resistance, which she adopts in response to his dismissive claim that 'women "can't paint, can't write"'. Lily's habit of screwing up her eyes, which are Chinese, then functions to emphasise her agency and reflective perception.

Yet Lily is not always confident in the perceptions that her racialised sight reveals. It is worth noting that Tansley's taunt lingers throughout Lily's development of her artistic vision, functioning initially as a source of her inner doubt, and then as a catalyst for her dogged perseverance and drive for a breakthrough. Lily's early painting during the pre-war period is a tortured exercise in questioning the impressionistic taste of the late nineteenth century:

She could have wept. It was bad, it was bad, it was infinitely bad! She could have done it differently of course; the colour could have been thinned and faded; the shapes etherealised; that was how Paunceforte would have seen it. But then she did not see it like that. [...] And it would never be seen; never be hung even, and there was Mr. Tansley whispering in her ear, 'Women can't paint, women can't write...' ³²⁰

³¹⁹ Ibid., p. 99.

³²⁰ Ibid., p. 54.

Lily is deeply dissatisfied with her painting. 'It was bad', and with her rejection of conventionality, she accepts that it 'would never be seen; never be hung even'. Tansley's taunt reverberates in her mind, as if to affirm her fear. Nonetheless, Lily commits to her vision; she cannot see differently. She was painting at a time when her contemporaries were still upholding impressionistic styles: 'the colour could have been thinned and faded; the shapes etherealised'. Paunceforte, among other artists who visit the Ramsays' summer house, execute paintings with 'lemon-coloured sailing-boats' and 'pink women on the beach'.³²¹ 'But then she did not see [her painting] like that.'

Lily's paintings have always veered towards the abstract. Her techniques increasingly protest against the ideologies of Victorian realism that still influence her contemporary artists. Lily's struggle for a method to break free from the principles governing her predecessors' art also signals her desire to escape the imperialist and patriarchal structures of that world. The things she paints reflect her search for a sense of formal purity, and hence a separation from artificial constructions, that the members of Bloomsbury often recognise in Chinese and non-Western art. In her early efforts at painting, Lily already demonstrates her preference for formalist styles: her portrait of Mrs Ramsay and James appears as a 'triangular purple shape';³²² 'she had made no attempt at likeness'.³²³ Lily's early efforts to detach herself from conventions fail, however, because she remains acutely aware of the opinions beyond her immediate emotions. Her doubt in her artistic vision persists even as she works on her last painting; naturally, her progression towards her final vision is not linear. Tansley's taunt remains with Lily while she paints her last piece in the novel:

³²¹ Ibid., p. 17.

³²² Ibid., p. 58.

³²³ Ibid., p. 59.

She looked at the canvas, lightly scored with running lines. It would be hung in the servants' bedrooms. It would be rolled up and stuffed under a sofa. What was the good of doing it then, and she heard some voice saying she couldn't paint, saying she couldn't create, as if she were caught up in one of those habitual currents which after a certain time experience forms in the mind, so that one repeats words without being aware and longer who originally spoke them.

Can't paint, can't write, she murmured monotonously, anxiously considering what her plan of attack should be.³²⁴

Though she has her doubts, Lily is spurred on by Tansley's taunt. Her monotonous chanting of Tansley's words thus comes across as a mantra for her eventual arrival at her vision. Indeed, she proceeds to consider 'what her plan of attack should be'. Lily is ultimately resolute in realising her vision on the canvas.

Tansley, however, is not the only character in *To the Lighthouse* whose condescension drives Lily's concentration on her work. Lily's creative practice is inextricably tied to the way she positions herself within society. Her aesthetic vision is therefore also one that challenges the social hierarchies of the empire. Upon catching herself feeling pity for William Bankes, Lily checks herself:

He is not in the least pitiable. He has his work, Lily said to herself. She remembered, all of a sudden as if she had found a treasure, that she too had her work. In a flash she saw her picture, and thought, Yes, I shall put the tree further in the middle; then I shall avoid that awkward space. That's what I shall do.³²⁵

Lily recognises that her pity towards Bankes stems from 'some need of her own',³²⁶ conditioned by the position of her gender, which in turn contributes to her weariness. It becomes clear to Lily that her 'resolve to live' ought not be 'stirred by pity', but by more meaningful concerns.³²⁷ Just

³²⁴ Ibid., p. 173.

³²⁵ Ibid., p. 92.

³²⁶ Ibid.

³²⁷ Ibid.

as Banks 'has his work', so too should she have hers. Lily immediately remembers her painting and instead directs her energy to improving her craft. She decides to 'put the tree further in the middle'.

The tree in Lily's mind epitomises her process of assembling the colours and lines that will complete her painting. In deciding to put the tree closer to the middle, Lily is also working out the full composition of her picture, which she wants to bring into visual harmony. In a previous episode, she has shown concern about her artistic plan regarding the centre of her painting, which she sees as paramount to its overall unity:

It was a question, she remembered, how to connect this mass on the right hand with that on the left. She might do it by bringing the line of the branch across so [...] But the danger was that by doing that the unity of the whole might be broken.³²⁸

Lily's continued deliberation on the middle section of her painting thus signifies further progress towards reaching her artistic vision. Interestingly, Lily's small breakthroughs in her craft, marked by her increasing clarity in approaching the middle of her painting, are consistently prompted by circumstances that evoke structural misogyny. Later, as Lily reflects on Rayley's reaction to her offer of help, she once again feels a strong impulse to return to her work:

He meant yes or no – either perhaps. But it was not his meaning – it was the odd chuckle he gave, as if he had said, Throw yourself over the cliff if you like, I don't care. He turned on her cheek the heat of love, its horror, its cruelty, its unscrupulosity. It scorched her, and Lily, looking at Minta being charming to Mr. Ramsay at the other end of the table, flinched for her exposed to those fangs, and was thankful. For at any rate, she said to herself, catching sight of the salt cellar on the pattern, she need not marry, thank Heaven: she need not undergo that degradation. She was saved from that dilution. She would move the tree rather more to the middle.³²⁹

³²⁸ Ibid., p. 60.

³²⁹ Ibid., p. 111.

Rayley's dismissive chuckle 'scorche[s]' Lily, and leads her to reconsider Minta's position within the social hierarchy under which her friend presents herself. Minta's efforts to gain male approval disconcert Lily; Minta is but 'exposed to those fangs [of men/ of the patriarchy]'. Subsequently, Lily recognises that 'she need not marry' – in her singleness, 'she need not undergo that degradation'; she is 'saved from that dilution'. This realisation motivates Lily to pick up her painting, which serves as her refuge from marriage. Inspired by this epiphany, '[s]he would move the tree rather more to the middle.'

Lily's obsession with the centre of her painting throughout *To the Lighthouse* points to a deeper preoccupation with the formal cohesion of her work. As she matures as an artist, Lily becomes increasingly meticulous in attending to the self-referential components of her art that reflect formalist concerns. The free indirect narrative surrounding her postwar painting process especially foregrounds her developing sense of formalism. Significantly, the moment at which Lily begins her painting anew after the Great War is pivotal to her attainment of her final vision. The draft passage corresponding to this moment in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* notebooks already shows the author negotiating her language to capture Lily's matured artistic sensibility. In Notebook Three of the manuscript, Woolf writes:

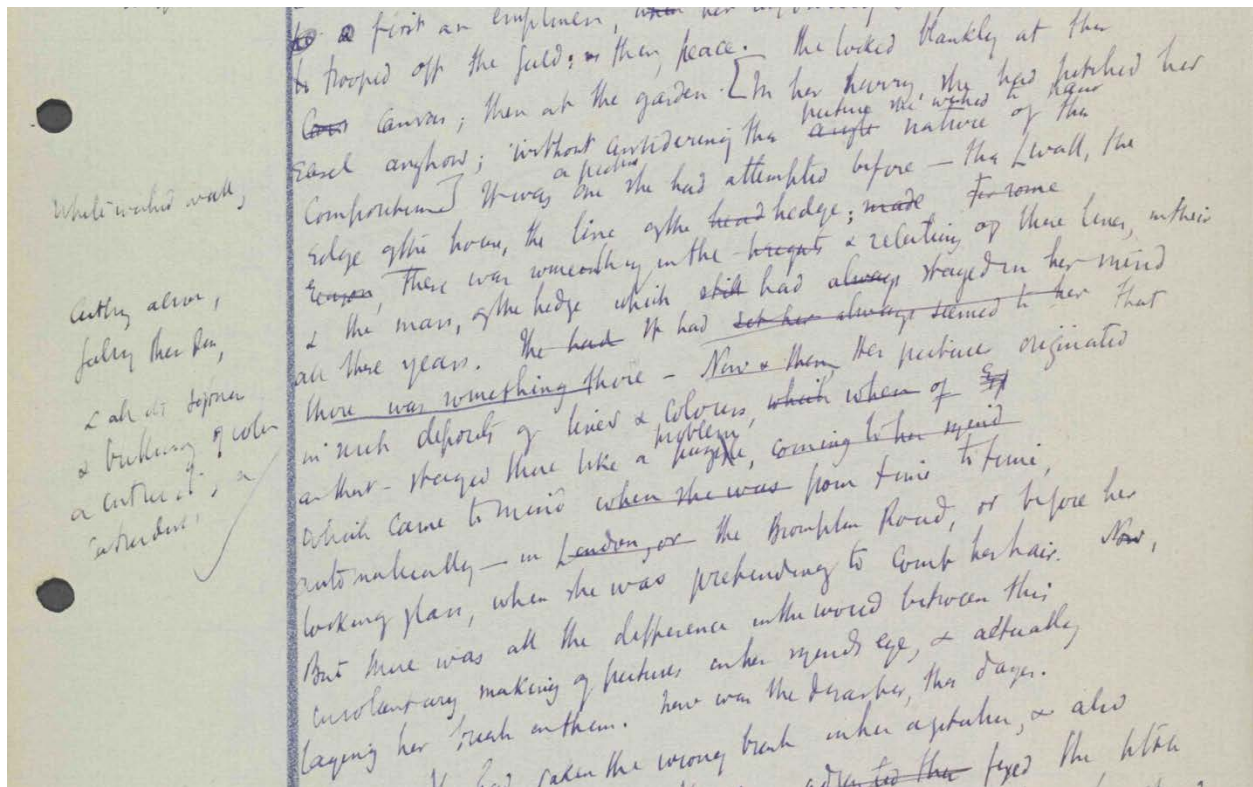


Figure 11. Virginia Woolf, extract from the handwritten manuscript of *To the Lighthouse*. Fol. 141; Fol. 206; SD p. 255 – Woolf Online. Original copy at the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library. With courtesy of The Society of Authors as the Literary Representative of the Estate of Virginia Woolf.

... She looked blankly at the
~~can~~ canvas; then at the garden. [In her hurry, she had pitched her
white washed well, easel anyhow; without considering the ~~angle~~ <picture she wished to paint> nature of
the
composition.] It was one <a picture> she had attempted before – the wall, the
cutting across, edge of the house, the line of the ~~head~~ hedge; ~~made~~ For some
falling thus down, ~~reason~~, There was something in the ~~heights~~ & relations of those lines, in their
& all its softness & the mass, of the hedge which ~~still~~ had ~~always~~ stayed in her mind
& brilliancy of colour all these years. ~~She had~~ It had ~~set her always seemed to her~~ that
a contrast, a there was something there – Now & then, Her picture originated
contradiction in such deposits of lines & colours, ~~which when of ex~~
as that – stayed there like a <problem> puzzle, ~~coming to her mind~~
which came to mind ~~when she was~~ from time to time,
automatically – in London, or the Brompton Road, or before her
looking glass, when she was pretending to comb her hair. Now,

But there was all the difference in the world between this
involuntary making of pictures in her minds eye, & actually
laying her brush on them. Now was the disaster, the danger.

Lily considers the ‘relations’ of lines and the ‘mass’ of objects. ‘Her picture originated in such deposits of lines & colours’. All these, additionally, flow from an ‘involuntary making of pictures in her mind[’]s eye’. Lily’s conception of her picture prioritises pure visual elements over the actual subject matter of her art. She values the aesthetic construction of her painting, and is further emotionally attached to the formal arrangements within her piece. The composition of her picture impresses itself vividly in her mind – the difficulty with her painting, Lily recognises, is to authentically render her mental impressions onto the canvas.

In the published novel, Woolf largely retains the aesthetic language of her draft in the same scene. It is worth noting, however, that she adds to the sequence Lily’s artistic vision through ‘Chinese eyes’:

She looked blankly at the canvas, with its uncompromising white stare; from the canvas to the garden. There was something (she stood screwing up her little Chinese eyes in her small puckered up face) something she remembered in the relations of those lines cutting across, slicing down, and in the mass of the hedge with its green cave of blues and browns, which had stayed in her mind; which had tied a knot in her mind so that at odds and ends of time, involuntarily, as she walked along the Brompton Road, as she brushed her hair, she found herself painting that picture, passing her eye over it, and untying the knot in imagination. But there was all the difference in the world between this planning airily away from the canvas, and actually taking her brush and making the first mark.³³⁰

Similarly, Lily remembers in this published version of the text ‘the relations of those lines cutting across, slicing down’ and ‘the mass of the hedge with its green cave of blues and browns’. Her

³³⁰ Ibid., p. 171.

contemplation on the lines, colours, and movements that form her picture stays in her mind, so that ‘at odds and ends of time, involuntarily [...] she found herself painting that picture, passing her eye over it, and untying the knot in imagination’. Echoing her attentions in the draft, Lily’s prioritisation in her art demonstrates strong formalist concerns. Woolf’s parenthetical emphasis on Lily ‘screwing up her little Chinese eyes’ in the revised scene, as Lily attempts to discern her aesthetic vision, accordingly accentuates the alterity of her perception and further suggests the racialised roots of her visual revelation. This added emphasis can be read as Woolf’s invocation of Chinese art principles, particularly as framed within the discourses of Bloomsbury, that guide Lily’s painting practice.

The language that Woolf uses to describe Lily’s painting process for her last picture draws on a formalist vocabulary that, significantly, also resonates with Bloomsbury’s critical interest in Chinese art. Lily, after scrutinising her blank canvas through her ‘Chinese eyes’, finally moves her brush:

With a curious physical sensation, as if she were urged forward and at the same time must hold herself back, she made her first quick decisive stroke. The brush descended. It flickered brown over the white canvas; it left a running mark. A second time she did it – a third time. And so pausing and so flickering, she attained a dancing rhythmical movement, as if the pauses were one part of the rhythm and the strokes another, and all were related; and so, lightly and swiftly pausing, striking, she scored her canvas with brown running nervous lines which had no sooner settled there than they enclosed (she felt it looming out at her) a space.³³¹

Lily’s brush moves in connection with her whole body. Woolf’s portrayal of Lily’s brush movements, moreover, echoes the critical terms associated with Bloomsbury’s discourse on Chinese art and painting, as discussed in my previous chapters with reference to, for example,

³³¹ Ibid., p. 172.

Roger Fry's 'An Essay in Aesthetics' (1909) and 'Some Aspects of Chinese Art' (1926), and Clive Bell's review of *The Flight of the Dragon* (1911). Lily, 'so pausing and so flickering', attains with her brush 'a dancing rhythmical movement, as if the pauses were one part of the rhythm and the strokes another, and all were related'. There is a rhythmic harmony and continuity in Lily's brushstrokes, which are closely tied to the emotional state of the artist. Laurence, in her criticism of this scene, has also suggested that 'Lily's process as she paints [...] achieves in one stroke the union of subject and object'.³³² For Chinese painters, especially given the materials that they work with, it is important that 'the fleetingness and spontaneity of the brush stroke is captured'.³³³ Lily's technique as a modernist artist appears to adopt such principles of Chinese art; her emotions are conveyed through the movement of her brushstrokes, and she seeks above all to distill the essence of her painted subjects, rather than their literal likeness. Within this process of her painting, Lily continues to strive for a total unity in her picture. Once again, she notices the space in the middle, upon which the formal harmony of her vision depends.

To the Lighthouse ends with Lily realising her vision, which lies at the heart of the novel's thematic and structural concerns. The importance of Lily's vision is underscored in the final lines of the novel:

With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision.³³⁴

Lily draws a line at the centre of her painting, thereby resolving the empty space in the middle and completing the formal unity of her piece. It is uncertain what her line depicts – the line may be the

³³² Laurence, *Lily Briscoe's Chinese Eyes*, p. 353.

³³³ Ibid.

³³⁴ Ibid., p. 226.

tree that has recurred in her thoughts, or it may be the Lighthouse towards which the Ramsays finally embark. The line could represent neither; its literal depiction is irrelevant. What matters is Lily's ultimate arrival at her vision, which, through her 'Chinese eyes', is as much political as it is aesthetic. Lily's artistic innovation emerges from the intersection of her gender and racial identities within the constraints imposed by the empire. Her final vision is thus a moment of acceptance and confidence in her own difference, which she recognises as her source of strength.

Lily's vision affirms that women *can* paint and *can* write. Significantly, this recurring mantra in Lily's mind aligns the practices of painting and writing within a shared paradigm, which not only gestures towards the legitimacy of female artistic creation but also alludes to Chinese conceptions of the literary arts. Painting and poetry in traditional Chinese art-making are united through calligraphy. Verse inscriptions are part of painting designs, and the painting, drawn with the same calligraphic brushes, is merged with the brushstrokes of characters. Ultimately, painting and writing take place in the same artistic space.³³⁵ By connecting the two practices, Woolf extends Lily's painting process to parallel her own literary writing. And yet, this connection further functions to reflect Woolf's vision of aesthetic innovation in her literature, which she partially realises through 'Chinese eyes'. Woolf integrates the domains of painting and writing in *To the Lighthouse* through its plot development, formal structure, and stylistic language. Her eagerness to experiment with oriental motifs in the novel shows a desire to engage with the East during the globalising age, which embodies her pursuit of cross-cultural exchanges and her search for foreign perspectives that transcend the imperial British sphere. Woolf's racialised language, which reinforces racist stereotypes, means that she is unable to fully escape complicity in the empire's systems of oppression. Nevertheless, her reimagining of Chinese aesthetics in her literature

³³⁵ See also Laurence, *Lily Briscoe's Chinese Eyes*, pp. 353-354.

remains a productive effort to break free from the constraints of the empire. Woolf's own arrival at new forms of expression, shaped by global aesthetic influences, enables her critical voice to assert itself more powerfully in her writing. In doing so, despite the reproduction of imperialist stereotypes in her writing decisions, her work also contributes to the progress of modern discourses on intercultural empathy and collaboration.

3.3 Woolf's Dissidence in Context

Woolf's racialised portrayals in her writing, particularly her Chinese discourse in *To the Lighthouse*, should be read within the cultural context of her time. The Keep Archive Centre, which operates in partnership with the University of Sussex, hosts two sets of newspaper clippings that are useful for a postcolonial reframing of Woolf's novel. These newspaper clippings serve as complementary materials for approaching *To the Lighthouse*, but they are also significant to better understanding the conditions under which Woolf incorporates her Chinese aestheticism into the fabric of her text. This final section thus reinforces my previous discussions of the novel while simultaneously bringing the collective considerations of this chapter to a close.

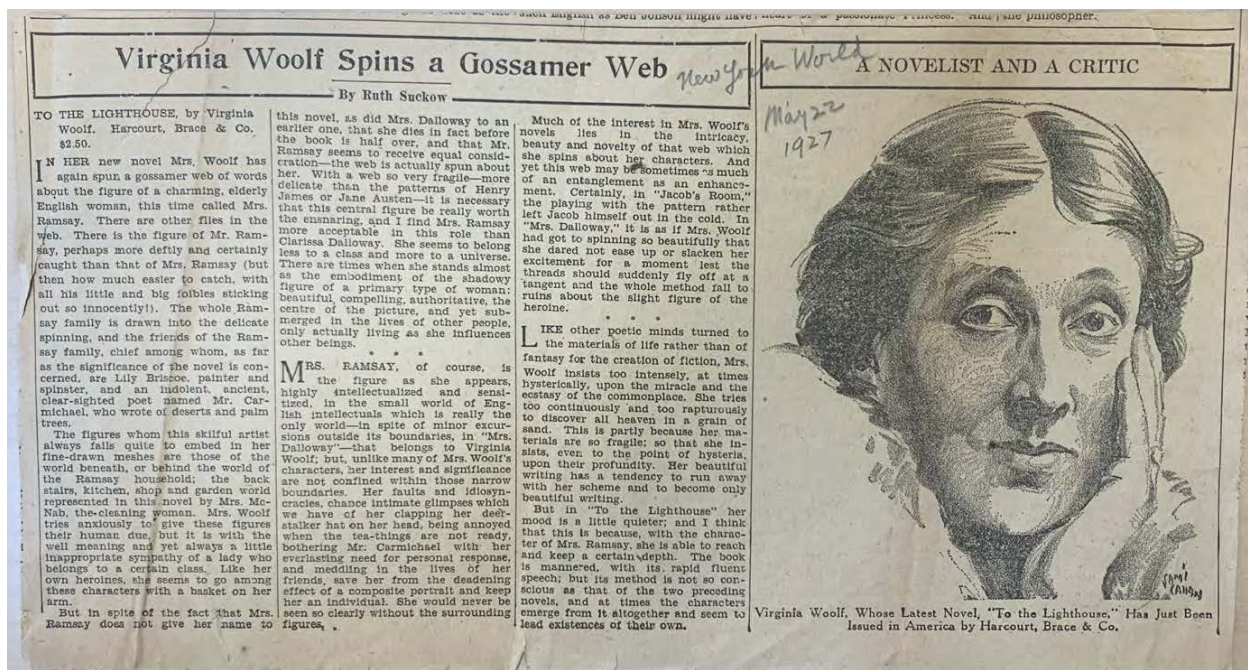


Figure 12. Newspaper clipping from *New York World*. S x Ms - 18/3/B/14 - University of Sussex Archive at The Keep.

The first review by Ruth Suckow, titled 'Virginia Woolf Spins a Gossamer Web', was published in *New York World* on the 22nd of May in 1927. Suckow observes in her review that much of the interest in *To the Lighthouse* lies in 'the intricacy, beauty and novelty' of a gossamer web of words which Woolf spins about her characters. She recognises that this web is spun about Mrs Ramsay, who stands at the centre of the novel as 'the embodiment of the shadowy figure of a primary type of woman: beautiful, compelling, authoritative, the centre of the picture, and yet submerged in the lives of other people, only actually living as she influences other beings'. Suckow further suggests that the Ramsay family and their guests are in fact all 'drawn into the delicate spinning', chief among whom, as far as the significances of the novel are concerned, 'Lily Briscoe, painter and spinster, and an indolent, ancient, clear-sighted poet named Mr Carmichael'. Significantly, the key characters of Lily Briscoe and Augustus Carmichael are both pertinent to the formation of Woolf's orientalist discourse in her novel. This chapter has discussed in detail the

character of Lily Briscoe, who has ‘Chinese eyes’. My following chapter will continue to explore the character of Augustus Carmichael, who takes opium.

PHONE
stations
NY THEATRE
By 9:30
Evening and
Weekend

d for Love!
Romance of
ious Lover!
NER BROS.
CENT

RYMORE
in
en a Man
oves"
THOS. PRODUCTION
WITH
COSTELLO
nd New
PHONE
STATIONS
1 WEEK
east of Coney Island
period Collections
CHATEAU CHERRY
national Auto Polo
City Press, Circus, Com-
certs & Dancing

**SACHA GUITRY'S
LATEST HIT**
Sacha Guitry's new play
"Desiré," just produced at the
Theatre Edouard VII., has
proved to be the triumph of the
season. The box-office receipts
have been higher than in any
other theatre in Paris where
comedy is played. For in-
stance, on April 20th the Com-
edie Francaise played to 12,500
francs, while the receipts at
the Edouard VII. were 26,800
francs.
Even compared to the box-
office takings at the Sunday
matinees of the Casino de Paris
and Folies-Bergere, Sacha
Guitry's succeeded in beating
them—an achievement consid-
ered without precedent.
"Desiré," played by Sacha
Guitry and Yvonne Printemps,
is one of the biggest successes
of this celebrated French
writer.

**LOEW'S STATE
METROPOLITAN**
FULTON-SMITH-LIVINGSTON STS.
—WEEK OF MAY 23—
**JOHN
BARRYMORE**
in 'The Beloved Rogue'
VAUDEVILLE
STATE METROPOLITAN
BURT & JULIAN HALL &
ROSEDALE DEXTER AND BAND
Week May 30... "ROOKIES"

CHANEY
in **Mr. Wu**
Adapted from the successful stage play
with LOUISE DRESSER—RENEE
ADOREE—RALPH FORBES
JOYCE COLES—JOHN TRIESAULT
PAVLA PAVLICK
CAPITOL BALLET CORPS AND
CHESTER HALE GIRLS
"Fantasie Oriental"
CAPITOL GRAND ORCHESTRA
DAVID MENDOZA
Conductor.
SELECTIONS FROM "MADAME
BUTTERFLY"—Puccini
DOORS OPEN 12 NOON—ORGAN RECITAL TO 12.30

BRONX OPERA HOUSE
140th STREET, East of Tolson Ave.
Popular Prices Males, Wed & Sat.
Beginning Tomorrow Evening
Following the Long and Successful Broad-
way Engagement at the National Theatre
MISSRS. ELANEY AND RUTLE
Present
The Sensational Mystery Melodrama
"FOG"
By John Willard
Author of "Cat and Canary"
"By far a better Mystery Play than John
Willard's other Confessions of Success, "Cat
and Canary".—Alan Dale, American.

BEAU GESTE
Herbert Brenon's great mystery-
melodrama—A Paramount Picture
House of Hits
RIALTO
One of the Public Theatres
Times Sq.

22 GROVE ST.
THEATRE
Sally Bruce Kinsolving's
"DAVID & BATH-SHEBA"
Ph. Spring 1902
Evening, 8.15
St. \$1.50 & \$2
"The Death of Jacques"—Hope
"CHICKEN BROTHERS"
PALISADES PARK
Opposite W. 123 St. "Come On Over."
Salt Water Surf Bathing Opens May 28.

Figure 13. Newspaper clipping from *New York World*. S x Ms - 18/3/B/14 - University of Sussex Archive at The Keep.

The remarkability of this newspaper clipping, however, lies in the backside page of Suckow's review. As I was sifting through the stack of reviews for *To the Lighthouse* at the archive, I realised that the reverse page for this particular review contains an advertisement for the 1927 film adaptation of *Mr. Wu*, together with a picture of the character with slanted eyes and a Fu Manchu moustache. In effect, the illustration likely intends to resemble for dramatic purposes Dr. Fu Manchu, the supervillain created by English author Sax Rohmer in 1912, who became immensely popular as a symbol of the 'Yellow Peril' trope in the early twentieth century. The story of *Mr. Wu* is set in China and centres around the eponymously named character, who is a rich and powerful Chinese patriarch. Mr Wu's daughter, Nang Ping, meets and falls in love with a young

Englishman named Basil Gregory, from whom she became pregnant. Mr Wu discovers of their relationship and concludes that his daughter has dishonored the family; he lets the customary Chinese law lead her punishment in death. In revenge against the Gregory family, however, Mr Wu plans to inflict harm on the Gregorys as well, only to have himself stabbed by Mrs Gregory in an ensuing struggle. The story ends with the death of Mr Wu and his tragic realisation of the destructiveness in his actions. This 1927 American film adaptation was based on the original stage play by Harold Owen and Harry Vernon, which was first staged in 1913 in London. Both performances of the story rely on the practice of yellowface and perpetuate the orientalist stereotypes of Chinese people as inscrutable and vengeful. The material paralleling of *To the Lighthouse* and *Mr. Wu* on the newspaper clipping then effectively captures the cultural discourse of both Britain and America to which Woolf was writing her novel. There is no evidence to support that Woolf has directly engaged with the story of *Mr. Wu*. Nevertheless, the success of *Mr. Wu* as an entertainment project in early twentieth-century Britain and America gestures to the wider atmosphere of creative orientalism at the time, which Woolf would have been influenced by and also, to some extent, attempted to resist.

NEW NOVELS

Young Men in Love. By MICHAEL ARLEN. Hutchinson. 7s. 6d.
The Wall of Glass. By AMABEL WILLIAMS-ELLIS. Cape. 7s. 6d.
To the Lighthouse. By VIRGINIA WOOLF. Hogarth Press. 7s. 6d.

Mr. Michael Arlen continues to wander about in worlds not realised. It is not that his Peers of the Realm, ladies of title, Secretaries of State and other denizens of Mayfair eat and drink and chatter with a disconcerting absence of what a young critic has called "vermilylityde." Other and less successful novelists have drawn on their untutored imaginations when seeking to put these high mysteries before the lower classes for whom they write. Nor is it that his courage takes him out of his depth to the extent of allowing him to parallel that "all rowed fast but none so fast as stroke" which has made his great predecessor immortal. Mr. Arlen knows the etiquette of such athletics as his characters practise. The shaming of cocktails; the drawing, but not firing, of revolvers; the driving of racing cars to the danger of the public, are not hidden from him, and he can take a party on board a yacht lying in the Solent without getting himself entangled in the rigging. And, when he has got us there, we cannot complain because Lord Townleigh has turned the *Celandor* into a disreputable private night-club, though I myself would like to know from what language the yacht itself was named. Night clubs and the suicidal misery of the people who frequent them are Mr. Arlen's theme. They are all desperately unhappy, these gilded revellers of his. Even when they get to the night club, even at the bar, they cannot enjoy their drinks:

What was so singular was that everyone who was trying to reach some beautiful goal was generally wounded in some silly skirmish miles before, so that when at last he came to his beautiful goal he was not fit, he was too hurt and tired to enjoy it.

Now nobody can complain because a novelist chooses to tell us through the adventure of his hero, how

... the world he loved so much
 Had turned to dust and ashes at his touch.

The subject is in fact a highly moral one. Mr. Arlen's *Young Men in Love* is a highly moral tale. It shows us Venetia, who from her childhood up has been the mistress of her father's colleague, the Right Honourable Peter Antony Serle, P.C., M.P. Serle has a wife and a daughter rather older than Venetia, but Venetia is necessary to him as the stimulant which keeps his gigantic brain equal to its political activities. When she is twenty-five Venetia thinks she would like to marry quite another kind of man. She is, not unnaturally, bored by the company of her father and his friends, who are indeed heavily boring people:

The profound silliness with which wealth afflicts so many worthy men was not their silliness. *Ton* bored them. They accepted the company of princes with the resignation of philosophers and the irony of pirates.

They were, in fact, no fit companions for a young girl. They were also entirely unlike the kind of people Mr. Arlen thought he was describing when he started to tell us about them. Mr. Arlen is, as I have said, quite out of his depth, not only in Mayfair, which would not matter very much, but, and this is more serious, in his own literary medium. Two characters he knows and can put before us. One is the clever and rather pathetic young writer who, after a struggle, wakes one morning to find himself famous and too rich to be at all happy. The other is the fashionable whore whose advances this fundamentally shy though superficially impudent young man repulses. We have seen them both in other novels by the same author. They occur again in *Young Men in Love* and they are competently described. But all the other people in this book are made in their two images and this is confusing. They all speak alike. You cannot open a page of the almost continuous dialogue in which the tale is written and be sure who is speaking. Lord or lounge-lizard, novelist or courtesan, "Darling" is their form of address and "Oh, shut up!" the style of their repartee. Mr. Arlen lacks variety. He also lacks command of epithet or metaphor. Tropes come to him indeed, but he hardly ever knows what to do with them:

His face was the colour of sleeping-car linen as you see it through half-open doors on your way to the breakfast-car.

He wondered why her hair smelled of a bathroom and a cherry orchard... her hair had the same smell as a cleanly woman's bedroom in the morning.

Her eyes danced along her eyelashes into his heart... Warm dusky eyes... he wandered about in them like a man enjoying a cigar in a warm dusky garden.

And it is not only in such flights of overburdened fancy that Mr. Arlen misses his way. The facts of life are hidden from him in an equal confusion of ignorance and imagery. His Venetia, faithless to her cabinet minister, takes tea with the over-risen novelist in his flat, which overlooks Mount Street Gardens, "and every one who walks through wears a smile that lasts a little way up the busy streets beyond, like the taste of oysters through luncheon on the 1st of September." He, poor man, asks Venetia to admire his view:

"Bother the view," she said. And he saw that she was wiser than he... Things were happening. There was a silken sound and the clothes fell from her body like petals from a shaken rose.

Now, if Mr. Arlen had sought for any reliable information as to what really does happen when a young lady of fashion casts off clothing of all description in London to-day, he would have been told that, far from being able to let her clothes fall from her like silken petals from a shaken rose, she has to struggle out of them, usually with the help of the onlooker, passing through one of the most inelegant and undignified moments possible to civilised humanity when the sheathlike garments of her sophistication are pulled over her head and completely shackle her arms and disintegrate the lacquered perfection of her hair. This scene strikes the top-note of the book—but it is incredibly out of tune. It is followed by a really brilliant description of the agonies suffered by the novelist when Venetia has left him to dine with the politician. She has promised to ring her new lover up at eleven o'clock. But by half-past eleven she has not done so, and though he tries to telephone to her every half-hour thereafter it is not until half-past one that her voice answers him. By this time his passion has withered into jealous despair. Here Mr. Arlen is on safe ground. He knows, at last, what he is writing about—he has come to the record of a communicable anguish. He is almost as good, though not nearly so funny, as M. Sacha Guity when he wrote and when he plays *Un Monsieur attend une Dame*. If only Mr. Arlen would master his metaphors and stick to the people and the situations he understands, and if only he could bring himself to write a novel in which no lady undergoes an operation...

The Wall of Glass is in all respects so different a piece of work that it requires an effort to realise that it is a tale of contemporary London and presents the same world as *Young Men in Love*. Mrs. Williams-Ellis, like Mr. Arlen, takes the governing classes for her province. But, unlike Mr. Arlen, she really does know the people who govern England, knows them so well, Conservative, Liberal or Labour leaders, that it is impossible in reading her crowded brilliant pages not to identify some of the real people who, in decorous but incomplete disguises, move across her varied scene. At first *The Wall of Glass* makes rather confused reading. We are hurled from Carlton House Terrace to South Battersea, from Bloomsbury to the Wellstead Garden City. We travel home from a Pirandello play at Barnes on the top of an omnibus with two potential lovers and are just beginning to be really thrilled by their relationship when, turning a page, we find ourselves introduced to Sir Stephen Wineop, our Minister to Sweden, "who liked to be considered an expert on contemporary life." It is all a little too coddled, too busy. But presently the torrent of life broadens and deepens into a river along which we can travel more comfortably side by side with the several boats that are all steering to their moorings in a harbour where the business of a general election is to involve all the characters Mrs. Williams-Ellis has marshalled together.

And as we read, more and more do we feel the assurance and comfort of being in the hands of a writer who knows her business and who knows her world. Towards the end of the book the competence of the novelist is reinforced by real and controlled emotion. The two main love-stories are developed into moving tenderness and a fire of passion, so that we smile at the foolishness and cry over the pathos of young men in love. For Mrs. Williams-Ellis has insight and a sense of proportion as well as inside knowledge of the world in which she lives. *The Wall of Glass* is a very fine novel, and quite the finest novel of contemporary English life since the War that I have read.

With Mrs. Woolf we have the same assurance from the outset as Mrs. Williams-Ellis gives us towards the middle of her tale, that the writer knows the world she presents. But that is all there is in common between *The Wall of Glass* and *To the Lighthouse*. For where Mrs. Williams-Ellis is competent, talented and human and deals with careers and characters from without, Mrs. Woolf is illuminated, analytic and radiant with a personal quality that increases in beauty and power with every

Figure 14. Newspaper clipping from *The New Statesman*. S x Ms - 18/3/B/14 - University of Sussex Archive at The Keep.

book she writes and has in *To the Lighthouse* reached a pitch unobtainable by any English writer of her school.

Her story is meagre enough. Little James Ramsay, aged six, longs above all things to be rowed out to the lighthouse on the island that faces the Hebridean port near which the Ramsays have their summer holiday house. But Mr. Ramsay doesn't want to go, and when the weather threatens, takes an oppressive pleasure in declaring the trip planned for the morrow to be out of the question. Ten years later Mrs. Ramsay is dead, the War has devastated the original party, and James himself steers the boat that takes his father and his elder sister to the lighthouse while Lily Briscoe, the painter, sets up her canvas on the lawn of the Ramsays' house and tries, once more, to set down the picture she could not paint on the day when Mrs. Ramsay was reading aloud to little James, when his hopes were shattered and his mother to console him.

turned the pages of the Stores list in the hope that she might come upon something like a rake, or a mowing-machine which, with its prongs and its handles, would need the greatest skill and care in cutting out.

But into this slender frame Mrs. Woolf has fitted a picture so rich and poignant that, watching it, we do not seem to be reading a novel so much as living a part of our own lives.

Mrs. Woolf's art is, after a difficult apprenticeship, at last entirely her servant. She has herself described her own impulses, her own way with the life she touches so surely. Lily Briscoe, loving Mrs. Ramsay, asks herself:

What art was there known to love or cunning by which one pressed through to those secret chambers? . . . How then did one know one thing or another thing about people, sealed as they were? Only like a bee, drawn by some sweetness or sharpness in the air intangible to touch or taste, one haunted the dome-shaped hive, ranged the wastes of the air over the countries of the world alone, and then haunted the hives with their murmurs and their stirrings; the hives which were people.

And it is the very honey of souls, sweet yet sharp, mysterious and delectable, heavy with the garnered plunder of the years that is distilled for us in this beautiful novel.

NAOMI ROYDS-SMITH.

THE CHINESE PUZZLE

China and Foreign Powers. (An Historical Review of their Relations.) By Sir Frederick Whyte, K.C.S.I. Published under the auspices of the Royal Institute of International Affairs. Oxford University Press. 2s. 6d.

This brochure has been prepared for the Conference of the *Institute of Pacific Relations*, to be held at Honolulu in July, and its author is one of a group of unofficial experts which is going there to represent Great Britain. The brief outline he offers us is a very able piece of work. It is clearly and dispassionately written, and it will have an interest and a usefulness for a great many students of Far Eastern affairs who are not fortunate enough to be going to Honolulu. Besides the review itself, there are a number of important appendices, including Sir Austen Chamberlain's memorandum of December, 1926, the Hankow agreement of February, 1927, Sun Yat-sen's Will and the "Cantonese Programme."

Sir Frederick Whyte divides his history into four well-marked, though overlapping, periods. These he calls the periods of (1) "Chinese Seclusion and Foreign Exclusion"; (2) "European Admission"; (3) "European Aggression"; (4) "Chinese Revolt: Liquidation and Equilibrium." In the first we, and other nations, were trying feebly and unsuccessfully to get our foot into China for trading purposes. The Chinese attitude towards us at the end of the eighteenth century is shown in a diverting extract from the reply of the Emperor Chien Lung to George III, who had sent Lord Macartney with a mission and gifts to Peking. It begins thus:

You, O King, live beyond the confines of many seas, nevertheless, impelled by your humble desire to partake of the benefits of our civilisation, you have despatched a mission respectfully bearing your memorial. . . . I have perused your memorial; the earnest terms in which it is couched reveal a respectful humility on your part which is highly praiseworthy. . . . As to your entreaty to send one of your nationals to be accredited to my Celestial Court and to be in control of your country's trade with China, this request is contrary to all usage of my dynasty and cannot possibly be entertained. . . . If you assert that your reverence for Our Celestial dynasty fills you with a desire to acquire our civilisation, our ceremonies and code of laws differ so completely from your own that, even if your Envoy were able to acquire the rudiments of our civilisation, you could not possibly transplant our manners and customs to your alien soil. . . .

And thus it ends:

Our dynasty's majestic virtue has penetrated into every country under Heaven, and Kings of all nations have offered their costly tribute by land and sea. As your Ambassador can see for himself, we possess all things. I set no value on objects strange or ingenious, and I have no use for your country's manufactures.

But very soon there began a period, covering a couple of generations, in which China became familiar not only with our manufactures but with our warships. The first war with China in 1839 is, Sir Frederick Whyte says, misnamed the "Opium War"; it was, in fact, fought not for a drug but for equality of status in China. The Treaty of Nanking, which ended it, secured that equality of status, and gave us besides Hongkong and privileges in the "open" treaty ports. Then the others came to take their pickings—America, France, Norway, Sweden, Belgium. Russia was already settling down firmly in the north, and Japan, emerging suddenly from her medieval seclusion, was getting ready.

The period of European aggression dates roughly from the 1870's to the close of the Great War. China was now really in the grip of the "foreign Imperialists," to whose ranks Germany made a substantial addition. Early in this century the Chinese began to kick against the pricks, and promptly got into worse trouble. Our policy after the Boxer Rebellion was mildly benevolent; the Anglo-German agreement of 1900 gave a pledge against attempting to seize any territorial advantages, and, no doubt, as Sir Frederick Whyte says, did prevent excessive demands being made by other Powers. But Russia was a menace and Japan a still greater. The highly controversial subject of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance gives Sir Frederick Whyte some difficulty. He admits that it caused mischief; but he argues that it was justified in 1902 as a stabilising factor in the Far East—as a "British insurance against a general war." However that may be, it is certain that it provided Japan with the support and impetus she needed for her aggressions, and left us for some years to play a negative part in Chinese affairs. In 1911, when the Manchus were overthrown and the Republic established, the British policy of leaving the Chinese to work out their own salvation was benevolent enough. But unfortunately the attempt to translate this benevolence into practice, first by supporting Yuan Shih-kai and later by schemes of economic and financial reconstruction, earned for us only suspicion and anger from the new Nationalist China.

In the Washington Conference Sir Frederick Whyte sees a recovery of our initiative. It was Great Britain, he insists, and not the United States, that got politics put on the agenda, much to the disgust of Japan. Apart from any altruistic feelings which we might cherish for China, there were urgent grounds for pressing a new policy in our own material interests. And the Washington treaties, with their provisions for remedying Chinese discontents, were as much prudence as generosity. As Sir Frederick Whyte observes, "renunciation of territory or privilege was a low price to pay for an option on Chinese good will in future." Alas! we hardly need his skilful pen to remind us of the failure to win that good will and the reasons for it—the civil wars and anarchy, the postponement of the tariff conference owing to the dispute over the French share of the Boxer indemnity, the machinations of Russia and the fierce temper of Chinese Nationalism. He closes, however, on an optimistic note. The Foreign Office memorandum of December, 1926, shows Great Britain once more taking the initiative, in calling on the Powers to renounce their privileges—for their own sake as well as China's. Great Britain is

in the advantageous (if also momentarily perilous) position of leadership. Already committed by the Nine Power Treaty to a constructive policy in China, she is now doubly committed by her own act, in addressing the Treaty Powers last December, to the welcome responsibility of carrying the Washington principles into full effect.

We agree. But it is a formidable task, and it has become still more formidable in the last five months. It is not easy to see how in the present imbroglio we can even make a beginning of it.

MR. HUMBERT WOLFE AND OTHERS

Requiem. By HUMBERT WOLFE. Benn. 6s.

Beauty the Pilgrim. By GERALD GOULD. Benn. 3s. 6d.

The Pillars of Hercules and Other Poems. Cambridge University Press. 3s.

An exacting reader of Mr. Humbert Wolfe's new book of verses might generalise some of the criticisms which occurred to him in the following terms: So Mr. Wolfe, he would exclaim, is, after all, numbered among those writers who take a vigorous

Figure 15. Newspaper clipping from *The New Statesman*. S x Ms - 18/3/B/14 - University of Sussex Archive at The Keep.

The second review of *To the Lighthouse*, authored by Naomi Royde-Smith, forms a section of a longer piece titled 'New Novels', which was published in *The New Statesman* on the 4th of June in 1927. Royde-Smith posits that Woolf is 'illuminated, analytical and radiant with a personal quality that increases in beauty and power with every book she writes'. Similar to Suckow's review, she observes Woolf's descriptive framing of her novel, and proposes that 'into this slender frame Mrs. Woolf has fitted a picture so rich and poignant that, watching it, we do not seem to be reading a novel so much as living in a part of our own lives'. Again, Royde-Smith distinguishes the painter Lily Briscoe as an important character in the novel, through whom Woolf conveys her own impulses concerning literature and, more broadly, life.

Once more, the information in proximity to the page that features Royde-Smith's review of *To the Lighthouse* is striking. The article that follows Royde-Smith's review is another review piece titled 'The Chinese Puzzle', which reviews Sir Frederick Whyte's brochure 'China and Foreign Powers: An Historical Review of their Relations' in preparation for the Conference of the *Institute of Pacific Relations* to be held in Honolulu in the July of that year. Whyte would attend the conference on his own individual authority.³³⁶ The review reiterates the biased narrative in Whyte's explanation of British interests in China from since the nineteenth century. This article, as with Whyte's brochure, admits to European aggression in China. Yet it attributes this to China's arrogance towards the West, and portrays the Opium War as reasonably fought by Britain for the nation's 'equality of status in China'. The article moreover highlights a political benevolence on Britain's part in its involvement with Chinese affairs following the Boxer Rebellion and the Xinhai Revolution.

³³⁶ Sir Frederick Whyte. *China and Foreign Powers: An Historical Review of their Relations* (Oxford University Press, 1927), p. v.

It is useful to reference the original source of Whyte's brochure in order to achieve a fuller understanding of the review's discussion. In particular, Whyte's analysis of the Opium War in his brochure calls for attention:

Doubtless, at times, the British Government was driven to take action which seemed something more than commercial; and the reason is not far to seek. In the first period of our review we, as the leaders of the 'ocean-men', found our traders' way barred by an arrogant dynasty which acknowledged no other Power on equal terms. Unaccustomed to any such denial of what we deemed our manifest right, we pressed our claim to trade with China to the point of war; and, as already noted, we fought the First China War in order to open the closed door of China to our merchants. That it was occasioned by a dispute over the import of opium is true; that it was fought only to force opium on an unwilling consumer was no true. British statesmen, from Gladstones onwards, have sometimes denounced the so-called 'Opium War', and if it had been only a war for that unpleasant drug their denunciation would be valid. But they and our modern Chinese critics alike forget that our main purpose was to secure both equal status and security for our nationals in China, and that other nationals did not fail to profit by our action, leaving us to bear the brunt of the odium.³³⁷

Whyte reaffirms the imperial status of Britain in his brochure by foregrounding its maritime strength – that the British are 'leaders of the "ocean-men"'. As the newspaper review has summarised, Whyte then justifies the empire's instigation of war by asserting Britain's right to what he frames as 'equal status and security' in China, particularly to do with the issue of trade. Whyte's attitude would have been typical of many people in Britain during his and Woolf's time. Notably, his claims about the Opium War extend to two subsidiary strands of thinking about opium, that first, the issue of opium is inextricably connected with China, and second, that the opium trade with China has become symbolic of the empire's justification for its colonial violence in the East. These ideas will be further explored in the next chapter.

³³⁷ Ibid., p. 35

The general orientalism of the period provides the context for Woolf's thinking about China and Chineseness. Her racialised language in her writing, particularly pertaining to 'Chinese eyes' that are 'aslant' in a 'puckered little face', clearly imitates the oriental characterisations in the likes of Dr. Fu Manchu and Mr. Wu, whose maliciously exaggerated features, following the propaganda of the Yellow Peril, serve to underscore their racial and moral otherness. And yet, it does not appear to have been Woolf's intention for her orientalist depictions to be construed as expressions of hostility against the Chinese. If anything, her general incorporation of Chinese aesthetics into her work reflects an appreciation for Chinese culture, which is typical of Bloomsbury's sentiments, despite the power imbalances inherent in her creative reworking of its elements. Woolf's orientalist discourse diverges from the political aggressiveness that characterises much of the contemporary debate on the topic. Woolf is keenly aware of the systemic oppressions posed by imperial rule; her critical focus remains on Britain, and she seeks accountability from within the empire rather than externalising blame. The practice of aestheticising China and the Orient long predates Woolf's employment of the concept in her literature. Within Western mappings in the twentieth century and beyond, China has endured as a locus of possession and a romanticised site of alternative. Woolf's writing demonstrably draws upon such ideas. Even so, her political deployment of Chinese aesthetics as a means of challenging the empire renders her method of orientalism both innovative and emblematic of her experimental, modernist concerns in the new age.

Woolf's reflective dissidence from the prevailing narratives of her time defines her success as an early twentieth-century writer, during a period of transition that demanded new modes of expression and perspective. Woolf's texts unfold fluidly at the convergence of political thought and literary aesthetics; from her writing flows a pictorial vision of China that enacts the critical interventions of her discourse. The newspaper clippings that I have discovered at the archive, in

their combined textual and illustrative form, echoes the complex structure of Woolf's novels. As representational pictures of the past, they illuminate the context in which Woolf makes her literary decisions and the lens through which her work should be interpreted.

Chapter Four

1906-1932: Imperial Intoxications

Virginia Woolf's reflections on her own prose style became increasingly defined over the course of her writing career. This chapter examines Woolf's deepening interest in the possibilities of prose and novel forms as she negotiates her complex relationship with aesthetic materialism both in literary terms and as a condition of her work. Building on the foundation of my preceding discussions, Woolf's balancing act between the socio-economic sensitivities of her political concerns and the phenomenological aims of her literary prose often draws on ideas of cultural alternatives and racial alterities. In the context of her engagement with China, Woolf's incorporation of Chinese influences into her writing typically emerges at the intersection of the situational and formal developments in her literature. Chinese objects function as sites of aesthetic appeal within her interrogation of imperial rule and possession. The ontology of Chinese persons, moreover, surfaces in her writing through ornamental qualities that fuse the synthetic with the corporeal. The innovative arrangements of her prose thus adapt these patterns of artistic conception to position the notion of Chineseness as a confrontation with British traditions. In this light, this chapter particularly explores Woolf's connection of opium and illness with her stylistic formulation of the novel in relation to ideas of prose poetry. It also examines, by extension, Woolf's discussion of Hong Kong under British colonial rule following the Opium Wars. This latter dimension of Woolf studies has received little to no attention in existing critical scholarship. And yet, the topic is importantly relevant to Woolf's discourse on opium and, more broadly, to her evolving approach to writing prose.

As early as 1919, in her review of Joseph Hergesheimer's *Java Head*, Woolf's writing already shows a consideration of the interconnections between opium, race, and prose writing. In her 1926 essay 'On Being Ill', Woolf further foregrounds a link between illness, opium, and literary language through the figure of Thomas De Quincey, whom she also writes about with greater focus in 'The English Mail Coach' (1906), 'Impassioned Prose' (1926), and 'De Quincey's Autobiography' (1932). De Quincey, moreover, provides a model for Woolf's portrayal of Augustus Carmichael in her novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927). And, finally, Woolf similarly expounds her belief in a poetic form of fiction in essays including 'Poetry, Fiction and the Future' (1927), *A Room of One's Own* (1929), and 'Foreword to *Recent Paintings by Vanessa Bell*' (1930), all of which gesture towards her serious reflections on blending the lyrical, rhythmic, and impressionistic qualities of poetry with the narrative and structural elements of prose. Woolf's creative discernment for formally new expressions spans most of her writing career; following this trajectory, this chapter therefore covers a timeframe that is significantly longer than that of previous chapter discussions. Nonetheless, the temporal placement of this chapter helps clarify Woolf's arrival at her mature thoughts on a new literary mode, which exhibits characteristics that contemporary scholarship often attributes to her modernist style. Woolf's development of her experimental approach to literature converges with her aesthetically and racially informed views of the East, as will be explored in the discussions of this chapter with reference to the aforementioned writings.

Woolf's thinking about opium in relation to literary style, and within the framework of Britain's imperial history, also closely intersects with her contemplations on Hong Kong. The Chinese region came under British occupation after the First and Second Opium Wars (1839-1842; 1856-1860). Woolf's research notes for *Empire and Commerce in Africa* (1920) by her husband

Leonard Woolf, now held in the University of Sussex Special Collections at The Keep, show that she was studying the commercial and political developments of the period surrounding these events. Some time thereafter, Woolf also mentions Hong Kong in her essay ‘Thunder at Wembley’ (1924). And, between 1932 and 1936, she further refers to the colonial region in her letters and diary entries. These materials reflect Woolf’s recognition of Hong Kong as a locus of encounter between China and Western powers, upon which Chinese sovereignty and British imperial ambition collide, and, nevertheless, where productive exchanges unfold. Additionally, through Leonard, Woolf had familial ties to senior members of Hong Kong’s colonial government, which deepens the intimate context of her engagement with the imperial dynamics shaping the occupied region. Woolf’s practical and intellectual interactions with Hong Kong thus offer valuable insights into the evolution of her ideas on literary practice, which she expands in tandem with her deliberations on race and empire. The body of this chapter will continue to examine the said texts in consideration of these outlined perspectives.

Given my roots in Hong Kong, there is undeniably a personal dimension to this chapter’s positioning of the region as a conceptual hub for considering Bloomsbury’s, and especially Woolf’s, modernism. This personal dimension, nevertheless, is consistent with the methodological considerations of my project as outlined in the Introduction of this thesis.³³⁸ The approach aligns with the increasingly global methodologies of literary and modernist studies, which call attention to transnational patterns of literary circulation while moving away from the systematically imperialist narratives of the West. In particular, this chapter’s use of Hong Kong as a site-specific departure for reading Woolf is inspired by Kuan-Hsing Chen’s theoretical model in *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (2010), which advocates for a reading practice that is grounded in

³³⁸ In particular, see the third section of the Introduction chapter of this thesis.

relation to one's own cultural space.³³⁹ In placing Woolf's literary engagement with China at the centre of my research, the broader view of this thesis already operates within a similar strategy of reorienting literary studies. The narrower pinpointing of Hong Kong as a contextual guide for this chapter subsequently reinforces the local dimension of this strategy from my positional perspective.

It is also worth noting that the specific historical developments of Hong Kong render the region highly apt as a conceptual approach to underscoring the colonial and imperial inheritances within discourses of the global, especially with regards to China. Furthermore, the methodological focus on the connections between Woolf and Hong Kong informs the study of modernist literature within the Hong Kong context itself. The sociopolitical status of English in Hong Kong has changed since the region's return to China in 1997; in the context of Hong Kong, modernist literary studies thus necessitate a renewed strengthening of their value beyond the pragmatic grounds of English language learning.³⁴⁰ Woolf's relationship with Hong Kong accentuates the significant relevance between English modernist landscapes and the region's modern realities. This investigation into Woolf's interactions with Hong Kong, moreover, contributes to a pluralistic interpretation of Hong Kong's literary history that encompasses its longstanding involvement in translocal and transnational flows of exchange.³⁴¹ Ultimately, this chapter's localising of Hong Kong within Woolf's Chinese orientalism augments the ongoing de-colonial and de-imperial efforts in reading her literature. The methodological approach, which extends from Woolf's search for literary innovation, in turn locates her own cosmopolitan identity at the centre of the British empire.

³³⁹ See the Introduction chapter of this thesis for a more detailed discussion of Chen's theory, pp. 64-65.

³⁴⁰ See Evelyn Tsz Yan Chan, 'Positioning modernist texts in the English department in Hong Kong: From "planetary" modernisms to "planetary" pedagogies?', *Literature Compass*, 20.1 (2023).

³⁴¹ See Shuang Shen, 'Hong Kong Literary History and the Construction of the Local in Xi Xi's *I City*', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 73.4 (2012), pp. 569-295, p. 576.

4.1 Opium Dreams

Orientalist literature on China, which reached peak popularity from the mid-eighteenth to the early twentieth century, remained fashionable during Woolf's time. In particular, following the Opium Wars, such writings entered a distinct phase that shifted from sentiments of Sinophilia to Sinophobia.³⁴² Themes of Chinese decadence and decline were often explored alongside notions of Western civilisation and progress. Within these accounts, moreover, the pervasive aestheticisation of China further complicates this narrative process of naturalising and consolidating Western imperial expansion. Chinese objects function as a medium for reimagining China in terms of moral and cultural exhaustion. Hyper-ornamental representations of Chineseness, in turn, articulate a sense of decaying excess and stagnation in the East. Woolf was familiar with Chinese orientalist literature; she actively engaged with these texts. Such artificial depictions of China and Chinese persons thus provide a discursive backdrop against which she both inherits and negotiates her own aesthetic position within contemporary British culture.

An early instance of Woolf's explicit engagement with Chinese orientalist literature, especially pertaining to narratives surrounding China's relation with the opium trade, appears in her 1919 review of Joseph Hergesheimer's *Java Head*. Given the novel's central focus on the American Ammidon family, who engage in imperial trade with China, including opium, Woolf necessarily considers the literary function of the drug in her review. Her analysis of the plot's

³⁴² See, for example, Matteo Ricci's *China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matthew Ricci* (1538-1610) and Voltaire's *The Orphan of China* (1753). Cf., for example, Charles Dicken's *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), M.P. Shiel's *The Yellow Danger* (1898), Jack London's *The Unparalleled Invasion* (1910), and Sax Rohmer's *The Mystery of Dr Fu Manchu* (1913), among many others.

developments is tied to her critique of the novel's stylistic execution. These observations emerge clearly from her reading of the text. Woolf offers a summary of the novel:

Again we have America some hundred years ago. The scene is laid at Salem. [...] One day [Jeremy Ammidon's] son, the sea captain Gerrit, after being given up for lost, sails into the harbour, and along with his casks and bales brings to shore an unknown bride, a Chinese woman of the highest caste. Exposed to the chatter and gossip of Salem society, Taou Yuen remains imperturbable and alien. The love-making of Edward Dunsack, a merchant trading with China, acquainted with the language and demoralised by the smoking of opium, scarcely rouses her. But through him she learns to suspect her husband's fidelity. He was, she is told, in love with Dunsack's niece. During her visit to the suspected girl Dunsack breaks into the room, and to escape the horrors pressing round her Taou Yuen snatches his opium pills, swallows one after another, and dies in her sleep.³⁴³

Gerrit Ammidon brings to Salem a Chinese bride 'of the highest caste'. Historically, Chinese society was structured by class rather than by caste; given Taou Yuen's position as 'a Manchu and the daughter of a noble' during the Qing dynasty,³⁴⁴ Woolf's remark is a gesture to the character's high social standing within China. Nevertheless, Woolf presents a commentary that echoes a corresponding emphasis in Hergesheimer's narrative. Upon Taou Yuen's arrival in America, and despite her privileged status in China, she 'remains imperturbable and alien' to Western society. Her aloofness operates reciprocally; she is othered by her immediate companions and, accordingly, she distances herself from them. By the end of the novel, it is obvious that Taou Yuen cannot integrate into life in America. Her coerced suicide is but a symbolic and visible manifestation of her inability to survive on American soil.

Taou Yuen's death is marked by her taking of opium, a stereotypically Chinese habit that only reinforces the Eastern exoticism of her ontological essence. And yet, the use of opium is not

³⁴³ Woolf, 'Java Head', *Times Literary Supplement* (1919), in E 3, pp. 47-49.

³⁴⁴ Joseph Hergesheimer, *Java Head* (William Heinemann Ltd., 1923 [1919]), p. 76.

limited to the Chinese. Edward Dunsack, who trades with China, also smokes opium and is 'demoralised' by it. The effects of his opium use are suggested by his family as a 'Chinese disease'.

Nettie Vollar, Edward's niece, discusses the Dunsacks with her mother, Kate Dunsack Vollar:

Nettie Vollar felt no impulse toward crying; she was bright with anger – anger at what Barzil Dunsack had done with her mother, at the harm he had worked in her. "You are a saint compared to Uncle Edward," she asserted. "I don't know what's wrong with him, but there is something."

"I've noticed it too: times his eyes are glazed like, and then his staring at you like a cat. It's a fact he doesn't eat right, and he forgets what's said as soon as a body speaks. Might he have some Chinese disease, do you think?"

"It's not like a real sickness..."³⁴⁵

Kate notices her brother's physiological and psychological deterioration. Edward's eyes has become 'glazed like'; he stares 'like a cat'. In addition, he 'doesn't eat right', and 'forgets what's said' as soon as he is spoken to. Unaware of Edward's opium habit, she connects his declining health with 'some Chinese disease', that is, a contraction of something from his travels to China. Kate's oblivious comment rests on racist assumptions: first, the notion of a pathological East, and second, the perceived debilitation of Chinese appearances associated with this orientalist discourse. Within the framework of China, opium often serves in the Western imagination as a shorthand for moral weakness and physical corruption. Kate may not have directly linked Edward's declining health to his opium use, but her reference to 'some Chinese disease' alludes to a similar Western anxiety that views China as a source of pernicious influences. The reader, at any rate, can easily recognise the narrative connection between Edward's opium habit and his deteriorating state. Nettie attempts to soften her mother's racism: the idea of a Chinese disease is

³⁴⁵ Hergesheimer, *Java Head*, pp. 164-165.

‘not like a real sickness’. She remains puzzled, however, by Edward’s obsession with China and Taou Yuen, which appears to have brought about his increasing dysfunction.

While Hergesheimer’s novel relies on stereotypical Chinese tropes, much of his narrative thus still thoughtfully reflects on the cultural and philosophical tensions between the East and West. The subtleties of his plot and depictions complicate the racist attitudes of his American characters and highlight Taou Yuen’s struggles within their milieu. Woolf’s review shows her recognition of these nuances in Hergesheimer’s writing. She acknowledges his critical staging of cross-cultural entanglements that exposes a cycle of damage, in which neither Eastern nor Western bodies emerge unscathed:

But as a picture the eye rests on some tuft of daisies or spray of foliage while conscious of the larger lines, so these details are part of the surrounding landscape. At the same time that Taou Yuen loves and dies, the old sea captain Jeremy faces the fact that the slow-sailing ships of his youth and pride are outdone by the new racing clippers, and dies of the shock of finding that without his knowledge two of the company’s vessels are engaged in the opium trade. Somehow, too, it is not merely jealousy that has killed the Chinese woman, but America, with its ‘unfamiliar circumstances, tradition, emotions’^{346 347}.

Not only does Edward suffer a metaphorical death from his opium habit. The literal death of Jeremy Ammidon, too, emblematises the collapse of moral codes in a new Western order that prioritises economic progress. The imperial enterprise of opium trade, as a consequence, inflicts harm upon itself. Woolf displays a greater uncertainty regarding Hergesheimer’s abrupt handling of Taou Yuen’s suicide: ‘Somehow’, the situation of her death also involves more than mere personal jealousy. Nevertheless, Woolf successfully indicates, as emphasised in the novel, that the true cause of Taou Yuen’s inevitable death in America lies in the ‘unfamiliar circumstances,

³⁴⁶ See Hergesheimer, *Java Head*, pp. 266-267.

³⁴⁷ Woolf, ‘Java Head’, p. 48.

tradition, [and] emotions' of the country. Woolf frames the unfortunate events of Hergesheimer's novel within the culturally, commercially, and racially charged landscape of mid-nineteenth-century America, in which the novel is set. Through pictorial metaphors, she simultaneously interprets the particulars of Hergesheimer's plot as components of 'larger lines'. Significantly, her review is then concerned as much with *how* Hergesheimer presents his narrative as with *what* he presents.

Hergesheimer's manner of writing falls into what is known in his time as the 'aesthetic' school.³⁴⁸ His literature is hence floridly descriptive and tends to favour stylistic elegance and mood. Woolf, as mentioned in the previous chapters, generally dislikes this mode of writing. Alongside her rejection of literary realism, she would go on to in 'Life and the Novelist' (1926), for example, which Chapter Two discusses, critique the flowery language of novelists who are unable to distil the complexities of life into a coherent representation.³⁴⁹ Unsurprisingly, she therefore takes issue with Hergesheimer's stylistic decisions in his novel. Woolf criticises his preoccupation with superficial details:

The odious discipline which we should prescribe for Mr Hergesheimer is to write a novel in which there is no furniture, no ladies' dresses, no still life. He should be forced to write of modern people; he should be required to make them talk. For the comparative failure of *Java Head* is due to a self-indulgence which eliminates all that Mr Hergesheimer finds difficult or repellent and leaves those problems which he enjoys solving and is certain of solving exquisitely as often as he chooses.³⁵⁰

Woolf prescribes for Hergesheimer an 'odious discipline' – that he should write a novel devoid of descriptions about external, tangible things. Her sentiment anticipates the argument that she would

³⁴⁸ Other well-known writers of this school include James Branch Cabell and F. Scott Fitzgerald, with whom Hergesheimer is often grouped.

³⁴⁹ See my discussion of 'Life and the Novelist' in Chapter 2, section iii. 'From Bond Street to the Party'.

³⁵⁰ Woolf, 'Java Head', p. 47.

later articulate more clearly in essays such as 'Mr Bennet and Mrs Brown' (1923) and 'Character in Fiction' (1924). The modern novel, posits Woolf in these essays, should aim to reveal the inner life of characters rather than describe their material circumstances. In 'Character in Fiction', Woolf especially maintains that writers of the previous century, including the Edwardians, 'have laid an enormous stress upon the fabric of things'.³⁵¹ For Woolf, Hergesheimer's descriptive tendencies then follow the writing tools and conventions of the previous generation, which do not translate well into the changed ways of experiencing reality among his contemporary readers. The major fault in Hergesheimer's writing is thus his prioritisation of material details over psychological description and depth.

In 'Life and the Novelist', Woolf reviews Gladys Bronwyn Stern's *A Deputy Was King*, through which she highlights a scene describing a Chinese coat to exemplify her criticism of narratives that rely on overly embellished language. In 'Java Head', Woolf offers a similar illustration that prefigures this line of critique in her later essay. She observes a scene in which Hergesheimer describes Taou Yuen's apparel. Woolf deems the relevant passage 'too long to quote in its entirety; worse, it is too detailed to be seen as a whole'.³⁵² For reference, nonetheless, the passage is provided in its entirety below:

Never before had Rhoda seen such lovely clothes: A long gown with wide sleeves of blue-black satin, embroidered in peach-colored flower petals and innumerable minute sapphire and orange butterflies, a short sleeveless jacket of sage green caught with looped red jade buttons and threaded with silver and indigo high-soled slippers crusted and tasseled with pearls. Her hair rose from the back in a smooth burnished loop. There were long pins of pink jade carved into blossoms, a quivering decoration of paper-thin gold leaves with moonstones in glistening drops, and a band of coral lotus buds. Pierced stone bracelets hung about her delicate wrists,

³⁵¹ Woolf, 'Character in Fiction', *Criterion* (1924), in E 3, pp. 420-438, p. 432.

³⁵² Woolf, 'Java Head', p. 48.

fretted crystal balls swung from the lobes of her ears; and clasped on the ends of several fingers were long pointed filagrees of ivory.³⁵³

As with Stern, Hergesheimer's depiction of Chinese apparel is exceedingly decorative and elaborate. The ornate nature of Taou Yuen's attire is mirrored in the ornate style of Hergesheimer's prose, which works to reinforce the ornamentally compromised ontology of Chinese persons in twentieth-century Western narratives. Hergesheimer's description insists that Taou Yuen's identity is constituted through her clothes. The material ornamentation of her body, which accentuates her hybrid position as both thing and person, then serves as a site through which her Chineseness is read. Woolf pays attention to Hergesheimer's occupation with the surficial details of Taou Yuen's character. She continues her critique of his prose:

Happily Mr Hergesheimer has himself saved us from uttering the priggish comment which keeps breaking in among these pretty things. 'She is very gorgeous and placid, superior on the surface; but the heart, Gerrit – that isn't made of jade and ivory and silk.'³⁵⁴ No, the heart is neither gorgeous nor placid. When Mr Hergesheimer has to describe not what people wear but what they feel, he shows his lack of ease or of interest by becoming either very violent or very stiff. There is no sense of enjoyment in his dialogue.³⁵⁵

Hergesheimer underpins through Rhoda Ammidon that Taou Yuen is 'superior on the surface'; the heart, however, 'isn't made of jade and ivory and silk'. Here, Rhoda, Gerrit's sister-in-law, is cautioning Gerrit about potential future changes in his relationship with his wife. Hergesheimer's account of their conversation on human nature stays centred on material description. Woolf thus points to this weakness in Hergesheimer's writing – while he can prolifically describe what people wear, his efforts to describe what people feel fall short. Hergesheimer is unable to effectively

³⁵³ Hergesheimer, *Java Head*, p. 76.

³⁵⁴ See Hergesheimer, *Java Head*, p. 92.

³⁵⁵ Woolf, 'Java Head', p. 48-49.

convey the texture of inner life and emotions to his readers. His prose, albeit elaborate, then requires a stylistic reinvention to capture his characters' realities for the modern age.

Encrusted with impressionistic, racialised, and artificial representations, Taou Yuen's Chinese body succumbs to a symbolic disfigurement within Hergesheimer's narrative that mirrors her existential affliction in the West. Her metaphorical illness further recalls the notion of a pathological East, which associates her decorative persona with the decadent habit of taking opium and its effects of literal, physical illness that infect even white men. Taou Yuen's body, therefore, functions as a microcosm of the imaginary Orient; the dualities of her metaphorical and literal illnesses converge to exemplify China's role as a site of alternatives in the Western imagination. Woolf would continue to pursue echoing lines of association in her later reflections on literary writing. In her 1926 essay 'On Being Ill', Woolf moves away from Hergesheimer's *Java Head* to Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1821) as she contemplates the relationship between illness and literature:

Novels, one would have thought, would have been devoted to influenza; epic poems to typhoid; odes to pneumonia, lyrics to toothache. But no; with a few exceptions – De Quincey attempted something of the sort in *The Opium Eater*; [...] – literature does its best to maintain that its concern is with the mind, that the body is a sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks straight and clear, and, save for one or two passions such as desire and greed, is null, negligible and non-existent. On the contrary, the very opposite is true. All day, all night the body intervenes; [...] The creature within can only gaze through the pane – smudge or rosy; it cannot separate off from the body [...]³⁵⁶

Woolf argues in this essay for the centrality of illness in literary works. She expresses regret over the little attention paid to illness in English literature and contends that the topic warrants much more frequent consideration. The condition of the body, she observes, is inextricably bound with

³⁵⁶ Woolf, 'On Being Ill', *New Criterion* (1926), in E 4, pp. 317-329, pp. 317-318.

the soul, and hence necessarily intervenes in a person's experience of their subjective reality. Woolf asserts that English literature seldom concerns itself with the body – De Quincey's work, particularly *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, stands out as a notable exception.

Woolf's study of illness is fundamentally concerned with how the body shapes and transforms interior perception. Her preoccupation with the topic thus ultimately turns towards the operations of language in literature and, within this exploration, the implicated processing of words in the human consciousness. Woolf recognises that words convey impressions beyond their surface meaning; words are always meagre in comparison to the ideas that they evoke. In illness, the 'quality' of words is augmented in incomprehensibility:

In illness words seem to possess a mystic quality. We grasp what is beyond their surface meaning, gather instinctively this, that, and the other – a sound, a colour, here a stress, there a pause – which the poet, knowing words to be meagre in comparison with ideas, has strewn about his page to evoke, when collected, a state of mind which neither words can express nor the reason explain. Incomprehensibility has an enormous power over us in illness, more legitimately perhaps than the upright will allow. In health meaning has encroached upon sound. Our intelligence domineers over our senses. But in illness, with the police off duty, we creep beneath some obscure poem by Mallarmé or Donne, some phrase in Latin or Greek, and the words give out their scent, and ripple like leaves, and chequer us with light and shadow, and then, if at last we grasp the meaning, it is all the richer for having travelled slowly up with all the bloom upon its wings. Foreigners, to whom the tongue is strange, have us at a disadvantage. The Chinese must know better the sound of *Antony and Cleopatra* than we do.³⁵⁷

Drawing on the poet, whose strength lies in evoking mental impressions beyond the literal denotation of words, Woolf builds her case for the rewards of reading when ill. The sound of words, in illness, for example, imposes itself on intelligent meaning; these sounds thereby produce sensations that enrich the words when their significance is finally grasped. Woolf consequently

³⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 324-325.

posits that much can be gained from experiencing incomprehensibility in literature. Curiously, her argument veers into ethnic reasoning: foreigners, for whom the English language is strange, have native speakers at a disadvantage – ‘The Chinese must know better the sound of *Antony and Cleopatra* than we do’.

The logic in Woolf’s remark is ethnic but without pejorative judgment; she is supporting her argument with an observation based simply on linguistic and cultural difference. In this instance of her discussion, the notion of Chineseness is merely invoked as a category through which Englishness is rendered in distinct contrast. It should be noted, however, that Woolf’s approach to illness within the discourse of her essay is framed from a markedly English standpoint, which diverges from the representations of illness associated with Oriental bodies as depicted, for instance, in *Java Head*. Woolf’s consideration of illness in ‘On Being Ill’ addresses intellectual concerns. Her centring of illness in human identity and experience articulates a privileged posture about philosophy and literature that is rarely mirrored in orientalist narratives concerning the East. De Quincey explicitly foregrounds this racialised distinction in *The Opium Eater* as he contemplates the effects of opium on his mind:

I question whether any Turk, of all that ever entered the Paradise of opium-eaters, can have had half the pleasure I had. But, indeed, I honour the Barbarians too much by supposing them capable of any pleasures approaching to the intellectual ones of an Englishman. For music is an intellectual or a sensual pleasure, according to the temperament of him who hears it.³⁵⁸

De Quincey reflects on his experiences at a London opera-house. He separates his mental faculties from those of the ‘Turks’. Calling Turkish people ‘Barbarians’, De Quincey dismisses their

³⁵⁸ Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater and Other Writings*, ed. by Robert Morrison (Oxford University Press, 2013 [1821]), p. 45.

capacity to attain pleasures beyond primitive instincts. In contrast, he, as an Englishman, when under the influence of opium, has his faculties expanded. As the title of his book makes clear, he is emphatically an *English* opium-eater. De Quincey's reasoning clearly exhibits a double standard along racist lines: while the ill effects of opium point to a sign of moral degeneracy in the Oriental person, they become a romantic vice with benefits when applied to the white, English man. His racist biases persist throughout his autobiographical account. Further into *The Opium Eater*, De Quincey recalls his encounter with a Malay sailor who also smokes opium. The Malay haunts him in his dreams:

The Malay has been a fearful enemy for months. I have been every night, through his means, transported into Asiatic scenes. I know not whether others share in my feelings on this point; but I have often thought that if I were compelled to forego England, and to live in China, and among Chinese manners and modes of life and scenery, I should go mad. [...] The mere antiquity of Asiatic things, of their institutions, histories, modes of faith, &c. is so impressive, that to me the vast age of the race and name overpowers the sense of youth in the individual. A young Chinese seems to me an antediluvian man renewed. [...] In China, over and above what it has in common with the rest of southern Asia, I am terrified by the modes of life, by the manners, and the barrier of utter abhorrence, and want of sympathy, placed between us by feelings deeper than I can analyze. I could sooner live with lunatics, or brute animals. All this, and much more than I can say, or have time to say, the reader must enter into before he can comprehend the unimaginable horror which these dreams of oriental imagery, and mythological tortures, impressed upon me.³⁵⁹

In typical orientalist fashion, De Quincey's narrative conflates Eastern societies and cultures. His thoughts on the Malay extend to broader Asiatic scenes, and eventually to Chinese manners and modes of life. De Quincey's pronounced xenophobia reveals a deeper anxiety about the East; his exoticising views are marked by a combination of fascination and terror. Above all, his musings are framed by the sense of an opium-induced reverie. His transition between landscapes takes on

³⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 72.

the dreamlike character of a drugged fantasy. The impressive vastness of Asia, moreover, is to De Quincey a challenge to his refined English sensibilities. Such is the kind of orientalist discourse that Woolf negotiates through her literary education. Her own portrayals of the Orient do not escape these inherited conventions; she similarly draws on ideas of antiquity and mysticism in her early treatment of China, as examined in the previous chapters and particularly in Chapter One.³⁶⁰ By citing the racially problematic *The Opium Eater* as a touchstone of English literary achievement, Woolf further exposes her entanglement in the discursive systems that sustain these racialised frameworks of thought. Nonetheless, Woolf's praise for *The Opium Eater* evidently stems not from its racialised content, but from De Quincey's stylistic breakthrough in prose.

The previously quoted extract on De Quincey's oneiric mulling of the Orient exemplifies the greater qualities that Woolf commends in his writing. In 'Impassioned Prose', which Woolf published in the same year as 'On Being Ill', she asserts that De Quincey 'was always dreaming'.³⁶¹ By way of example, she cites a scene from *Autobiographical Sketches* (1853), in which De Quincey recalls standing by his sister's dead body. Woolf elaborates on her observation of the scene:

The visions were of extreme vividness; they made life seem a little dull in comparison; they extended it, they completed it. But in what form was he to express this that was the most real part of his own existence? There was none ready made to hand. He invented, as he claimed, 'modes of impassioned prose'. With immense elaboration and art he formed a style in which to express these 'visionary scenes derived from the world of dreams'.³⁶²

³⁶⁰ See especially Chapter One, section iii. 'Chinese Stories in a Willow Pattern Plate'.

³⁶¹ Woolf, 'Impassioned Prose', *Times Literary Supplement* (1926), in E 4, pp. 361-369, p. 363.

³⁶² For both quotes, see Thomas De Quincey, 'Preface', in *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, 15 vols (2nd edn, Adam and Charles Black, 1862-1863 [1785-1859]), I, p. xvii.; Woolf, 'Impassioned Prose', p. 363.

As with his oneiric journey to the Orient, De Quincey presents a strikingly imaginative experience following his sister's death. Woolf underscores the vividness of De Quincey's visions. She constitutes them as the principal impetus for his invention of what he terms 'modes of impassioned prose'. Essentially, De Quincey reconfigures his prose style to accommodate the intensity of his emotions, which occurs from the extreme force of his dream-visions. Woolf understands De Quincey's visions to be 'the most real part of his own existence' – visions, in effect, extend and complete the motions of the everyday. In turn, they also extend and complete De Quincey's prose style, which inherently embodies the stirrings of his inner life.

Woolf compares De Quincey's writing to the general prose of her time. She expresses frustration with the common prose writer, whose technique fails to properly capture interior ideas and feelings:

A prose writer may dream dreams and see visions, but they cannot be allowed to lie scattered, single, solitary upon the page. So spaced out they die. For prose has neither the intensity nor the self-sufficiency of poetry.³⁶³

Woolf separates typical prose from poetry. For her, the common prose writer relies on factual statements rather than expressive language; prose, therefore, has neither 'the intensity nor the self-sufficiency of poetry'. Elsewhere in the essay, Woolf clarifies her assessment concerning the conventions of contemporary novelists:

But, unfortunately for those who would wish to see a great many more things said in prose than are now thought proper, we live under the rule of the novelists. If we talk of prose we mean in fact prose fiction. And of all writers the novelist has his hands fullest of facts. [...] The whole tendency therefore of fiction is against prose

³⁶³ Ibid.

poetry. The lesser novelists are not going to take risks which the greater deliberately avoid.³⁶⁴

By 'prose', Woolf means 'prose fiction'. And, of all writers, she contends that the novelist 'has his hands fullest of facts'. Consequently, the tendency of prose fiction 'is against prose poetry'. Woolf's contrast between the two literary forms emphasises their formal differences; her distaste for the materially factual accounts of prose fiction gestures towards her preference for the 'self-sufficient' language of poetry and prose poetry, which she associates with De Quincey's work. Woolf's views in 'Impassioned Prose' echo her reflections on the interior value of words in 'On Being Ill'. In 'De Quincey's Autobiography', she further expounds on this quality of 'self-sufficiency' in writing that she esteems and identifies in De Quincey's texts. Woolf considers the particular excellence and strengths of De Quincey's prose, which exhibits a poetic character:

The emotion is never stated [...] it is suggested and brought slowly by repeated images before us until it stays, in all its complexity, complete. The effect is one that is very rarely attempted in prose and is rarely appropriate to it because of this very quality of finality. It does not lead anywhere. [...] His reader was to be put in possession of a meaning of that complex kind which is largely a sensation.³⁶⁵

Such prose has a 'quality of finality'. It is complete in and despite its complexity, for the sensations it presents are described rather than stated, and thereby full in meaning. All that the work conveys is contained within the text itself. The reader, desiring to better understand the prose, needs only to reread the text and mull more deeply on its words.³⁶⁶

³⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 362.

³⁶⁵ Woolf, 'De Quincey's Autobiography', *The Second Common Reader* (1932), in E 5, pp. 452-459, p. 453-454.

³⁶⁶ Woolf has likewise recognised other writers who show similar qualities in their work. Cf. Woolf, 'Character in Fiction', pp. 427-428. '*Tristram Shandy* or *Pride and Prejudice* is complete in itself; it is self-contained; it leaves one with no desire to do anything, except indeed to read the book again, and to understand it better. The difference perhaps is that both Sterne and Jane Austen were interested in things in themselves; in character itself; in the book in itself. Therefore everything was inside the book, nothing outside.'

Woolf is careful to claim that while De Quincey's writing is imbued with emotion, his work reveals very little about himself. His prose shines best when it is descriptive rather than lyrical; De Quincey's strengths lie in his portrayal of interior sensations rather than in self-revealing cries of feeling. Ultimately, De Quincey's opium-saturated confessions chiefly concern his dreams:

His confession is not that he has sinned but that he has dreamed. Hence it comes about that his most perfect passages are not lyrical but descriptive. They are not cries of anguish which admits us to closeness and sympathy; they are descriptions of states of mind in which, often, time is miraculously prolonged and space miraculously expanded.³⁶⁷

The states of mind De Quincey describes are temporally and spatially extended through his imaginative visions. And, significantly, Woolf emphasises that De Quincey's writing remains in prose:

So thinking, he altered slightly the ordinary relationships. He shifted the values of familiar things. And this he did in prose, which makes us wonder whether, then, it is quite so limited as the critics say, and ask further whether the prose writer, the novelist, might not capture fuller and finer truths than are now his aim if he ventured into those shadowy regions where De Quincey has been before him.³⁶⁸

For Woolf, De Quincey's writing affirms the expansive possibilities of the prose form. Though his works incorporate poetic elements, they remain fundamentally prose and thus point towards ways of innovating prose and the novel to convey the experiences of modern life. In particular, she maintains that the novelist should direct their attention to capturing the fuller and finer truths, which, as De Quincey demonstrates, are embedded in interior perceptions and impressions.

³⁶⁷ Woolf, 'Impassioned Prose', p. 367.

³⁶⁸ Ibid.

Essentially, Woolf's reflection on De Quincey serves to refine her own craft as a writer of prose and the novel.

Woolf's study of De Quincey dates from the early days of her writing career. In 1906, she already wrote a review on his essay 'The English Mail Coach' (1849), in which she makes her initial observations of his writing style. Her conclusions in this review share similarities with her later reading of his works. In this review, she assesses the fault and virtue of De Quincey's prose. Woolf notes that they are identical:

De Quincey's chief fault at least is one that under other circumstances becomes his chief virtue. He suffers from the gift of seeing everything a size too large, and of reproducing his vision in words which are also a size too large, unless indeed, they are applied as, happily, is so often the case, to emotions which cannot be magnified.³⁶⁹

Fundamentally, De Quincey 'suffers from the gift of seeing everything a size too large, and of reproducing his vision in words which are also a size too large'. His writing, which mirrors his act of dreaming, can be richly ornate and descriptive. Woolf's criticism of De Quincey here then operates by the same reasoning as her evaluation of Hergesheimer and Stern. De Quincey's language tends to be rhetorically elaborate. When applied to his representations of the material world, his stylistic approach can verge on excessiveness and give rise to narrative incoherence. It is when he applies his words to depicting emotional sensations, which are expansive, that he best demonstrates his skill.

In her review of 'The English Mail Coach', Woolf crucially connects De Quincey's mental experiences to his opium habit and its somatic effects. As she asserts in 'On Being Ill', the mind and the flesh are necessarily inseparable. In 'The English Mail Coach', Woolf draws a link between

³⁶⁹ Woolf, 'The English Mail Coach', *Guardian* (1906), in E 1, pp. 365-368, p. 366.

the conscious mind and the physical brain; she also notionally recasts her reference to opium as ‘certain foreign substances’ in her discussion:

But if his mind is thus painfully contracted by the action of certain foreign substances upon it, the conditions in which it dwells habitually allow it to expand to its naturally majestic circumference. Indeed, De Quincey’s writing at its best has the effect of rings of sound which break into each other and widen out and out till the brain can hardly expand far enough to realise the last remote vibrations which spend themselves on the verge of everything where speech melts into silence.³⁷⁰

Woolf’s assessment of De Quincey’s writing claims an inextricable relationship between the influence of opium on his mind and the corresponding nature of his prose. As she argues, upon ‘the action of certain foreign substances’, which are ‘painfully contracted’ by De Quincey’s mind, the conditions of his mental space expand to encompass the full intensity of his visions. Her reference to opium as ‘foreign substances’ alludes to its Eastern origins and marks the displacement of the drug within a Western context; the drug, ostensibly, is incongruous with the white man’s body and mind. Certainly, De Quincey’s opium addiction causes his physical decline, which he recognises in *The Opium Eater*.³⁷¹ And yet, his taking of opium also becomes a catalyst for the very qualities that Woolf identifies as central to his artistry in prose. Woolf is thus suggesting that De Quincey’s final familiarity with opium is aesthetic rather than corporeal. The drug exerts a ‘painful’ influence on him; nevertheless, it facilitates the full potential of De Quincey’s creative faculties. Her interpretation of De Quincey’s best writing embraces a figurative opium-induced haze, in which the meanings of words are overtaken by the impressions and sensations they elicit; Woolf’s connection of writing and sound in this passage complements her argument in ‘On Being Ill’ regarding the heightened quality of words in illness. Under the influence of ‘foreign substances’,

³⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 367.

³⁷¹ See ‘The Pains of Opium’ in Part II of his book, which especially addresses his declining health.

through which De Quincey's mental faculties expand, his writing opens onto alternative modes that depart from the prose of facts.

Though readers are more immediately exposed to the effects of De Quincey's opium use on his inner life, his mind and body remain inseparable. The bodily impact of the drug on De Quincey's health are intertwined with his expressions of interiority. In 'Impassioned Prose', as she discusses De Quincey's penchant for literal and literary forms of dreaming, Woolf further articulates the interrelation of mind and body in approaches to De Quincey:

One has been told only what De Quincey wished us to know; [...] But nevertheless there grows upon us a curious sense of intimacy. It is an intimacy of the mind, and not the body; yet we cannot help figuring to ourselves, as the rush of eloquence flows, the fragile little body, the fluttering hands, the glowing eyes, the alabaster cheeks, the glass of opium on the table.³⁷²

The reader, in reading De Quincey's autobiographical writing, develops an intimacy with him that is largely 'of the mind'. The oneiric visions that permeate his narrative afford close access to his subjectivity. Nevertheless, these sensations and impressions evoked by his writing will eventually return the reader to a conception of the author himself. The physical figure of De Quincey emerges: he has a 'fragile little body', 'fluttering hands', 'glowing eyes', and 'alabaster cheeks'. Beside him stands 'the glass of opium', which encapsulates the essence of both his prose style and appearance. The mind and the body are thus ultimately bound; it is impossible to contemplate De Quincey's writing without also considering his identity and the material circumstances that constitute it.

Woolf recognises De Quincey's sole mastery as an autobiographer in 'Impassioned Prose'. She argues that the combination of his excessive verbosity and his disinterest in the external world

³⁷² Woolf, 'Impassioned Prose', p. 366.

limits his potential to succeed as either a poet or a novelist. Again, De Quincey's affliction runs deeper than his skin; as he himself confesses, his disease is primarily a metaphorical and literary malady of the mind:

Faced with the usual problem of what to write, since write he must, he decided that with all his poetic sensibility he was not a poet. He lacked the fire and the concentration. Nor, again, was he a novelist. With immense powers of language at his command, he was incapable of a sustained and passionate interest in the affairs of other people. It was his disease, he said, 'to meditate too much and to observe too little'.^{373 374}

De Quincey's opium addiction is a chronic disease that reveals itself through both psychological and physical symptoms. Yet, as both he and Woolf recognise, De Quincey's most profound disease, which is visible in his prose and intertwined with his use of opium, lies in the method in which he experiences life. De Quincey 'meditate[s] too much' and 'observe[s] too little'. He is excessively absorbed in the inner workings of his mind. Woolf reiterates this characterisation of the writer in 'De Quincey's Autobiography':

Together with this fatal verbosity and weakness of architectural power, De Quincey suffered too as an autobiographer from a tendency to meditative abstraction. 'It was my disease', he said, 'to meditate too much and to observe too little'.³⁷⁵

In 'De Quincey's Autobiography', Woolf lays out the strengths and weaknesses of De Quincey as an autobiographer. Regarding the latter, she notes De Quincey's loquaciousness and the structural disorder in his storytelling. Woolf elaborates on the literary dimension of De Quincey's 'disease': 'Discursiveness – the disease that attacked so many of the nineteenth-century English writers –

³⁷³ See De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, p. 48.

³⁷⁴ Woolf, 'Impassioned Prose', p. 363.

³⁷⁵ Woolf, 'De Quincey's Autobiography', p. 456.

had him in her coils.’³⁷⁶ Like many of his contemporaries, De Quincey develops a propensity for superfluous expressions in his writing. Woolf thus also adopts the concept of ‘disease’ to signify a problematic condition in the practice of literature.

Ultimately, the flaws in De Quincey’s literary labour occur alongside the redeeming qualities of his prose. As the preceding discussion indicates, Woolf’s final verdict on his writing is one of praise. She offers an explicit assessment of both the limitations and merits of his work:

De Quincey as an autobiographer labours under great defects. He is diffuse and redundant; he is aloof and dreamy and in bondage to the old pruderies and conventions. At the same time he was capable of being transfixed by the mysterious solemnity of certain emotions; of realising how one moment may transcend in value fifty years.³⁷⁷

De Quincey dreams. The grandness of his visions, often opium-induced, is too overwhelming to be properly reproduced in words. The taste for embellished rhetoric in his time moreover reinforced the habitual verbosity of his language. What results, therefore, is a long-windedness in his narrative that Woolf criticises – she contends that the defect in his prose stems largely from his inclusion of unnecessary details that add to his writing a sense of redundant wordiness. Nevertheless, Woolf recognises that De Quincey accomplishes in his prose what most of his and her contemporaries failed to achieve. His work is complete and self-sufficient; the sensations he describes capture his interiority, thereby enhancing the depth of his writing that many prose writers, especially novelists, overlook in their preoccupation with factual and materialist depictions. Woolf seeks to produce a similar effect of interior expression in her own writing. Her arrangements in *To the Lighthouse* reflect her continued examination of the artistic techniques that she associates with

³⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 455.

³⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 457.

De Quincey's work. In this novel, she further explores the relationship between sensory impressions and written words in her own rendition. Woolf's development of interior portrayals remains attentive to the body and the physical conditions that define it. In combining corporeal and material concerns, Woolf also delves into ideas of disease and illness, which she then aligns with broader racial and social paradigms of difference.

Woolf was certainly thinking about De Quincey as she was working on *To the Lighthouse*. Her diary entries and letters confirm that her writing of the novel was concurrent with her work on 'Impassioned Prose'.³⁷⁸ An entry in Woolf's diary from 11 May, 1926 suggests that both projects were well underway by that date: 'Arguing about the Ar[chbisho]p of Canterbury with Jack Squire at 12 seems now normal, but not – how often do I repeat – nearly as exciting as writing *To the Lighthouse* or about de Q[uin]cey'.³⁷⁹ In a letter to Vita Sackville-West, dated 18 June, 1926, Woolf also shares with her recipient her struggle in progressing with both projects: 'Yes, I do write damned well sometimes, but not these last days, when I've been slogging through a cursed article ['Impassioned Prose'], and see my novel [*To the Lighthouse*] glowing like the Island of the Blessed far far away over dismal wastes, and cant reach land.'³⁸⁰ About a month later, in July of 1926, she updates Vita: '[...] and I'm reading de Quincey, and Richardson, and again de Quincey – again de Quincey, because I'm in the middle of writing about him ['Impassioned Prose'], and my God Vita, if you happen to know do wire whats the essential difference between prose and poetry – It cracks my poor brain to consider.'³⁸¹ And, in another diary entry from 22 July, 1926, Woolf likewise outlines her writing schedule with regard to the two temporally adjacent projects: 'However, I

³⁷⁸ See fn. 1 in the references section of Woolf, 'Impassioned Prose', pp. 367-368, for a complete list of Woolf's diary entries and letters regarding her mention of De Quincey in relation to her writing of the essay.

³⁷⁹ Woolf, in D 3, p. 83.

³⁸⁰ Woolf, in L 3, p. 276.

³⁸¹ Ibid., p. 281.

drive my pen through de Quincey of a morning, having put *The Lighthouse* aside till Rodmell.’³⁸² These records attest to Woolf’s simultaneous engagement with De Quincey as she was writing *To the Lighthouse*. Her correspondence with Vita, moreover, explicitly reveals her preoccupation with forms of poetic prose and prose poetry through her reading of De Quincey as she was striving for artistic breakthroughs in her own writing.

Although Woolf was deeply interested in autobiographical writing, she was not an autobiographer in the conventional sense of the term.³⁸³ Much of her prose writing turns towards the craft of fiction. Consequently, her reflections on De Quincey’s autobiographical prose come to shape her own growth as a novelist. The latter part of this section will return specifically to Woolf’s developed notions of prose poetry. In *To the Lighthouse*, however, as she was simultaneously studying De Quincey’s work, Woolf was also processing her reading by incorporating the writer’s influence into her own creative characterisations. It is worth noting that Mrs Ramsay initially reads *The Opium Eater* in Woolf’s holograph draft of the novel:

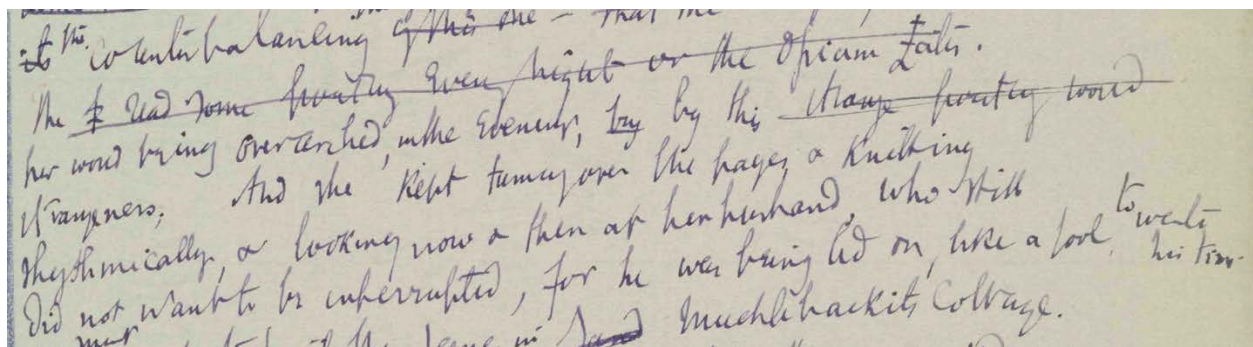


Figure 16. Virginia Woolf, extract from the handwritten manuscript of *To the Lighthouse*. Fol. 19; Fol. 145; SD p. 194 – *Woolf Online*. Original copy at the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library. With courtesy of The Society of Authors as the Literary Representative of the Estate of Virginia Woolf.

³⁸² Woolf, D 3, p. 95.

³⁸³ Woolf’s *Moments of Being* sees her reflecting on her life through fragmented autobiographical sketches. She also experimented with fictionalised autobiography in novels such as *Orlando* (1928) and *Flush* (1933).

~~She read some poetry every night or the Opium Eater.~~
her world being overarched in the evenings, ~~by by this strange poetry world~~
strangeness; And she kept turning over the pages & knitting
rhythmically, & looking now & then at her husband, who still
did not want to be interrupted, for he was being led on, like a fool, to waste his time.

Understandably, Woolf crosses out this detail in her draft and removes it in the final version of *To the Lighthouse*. It is somewhat uncharacteristic of Mrs Ramsay to engage with the complexity of De Quincey's work. Nonetheless, Woolf's mention of *The Opium Eater* in this instance remains important; it not only indicates that she was thinking of De Quincey and his poetic prose while writing her novel, but also shows that she was attempting to embed his presence into the development of her characters.

Woolf's imaginative rendering of De Quincey is most evident in the character of Augustus Carmichael. Similar to De Quincey, Mr Carmichael appears to smoke opium. With his 'yellow cat's eyes', which call to mind those of Edward Dunsack's in *Java Head*, Mr Carmichael is intellectually intense but socially detached:

she must interrupt for a moment, as they passed the tennis lawn, to ask Mr. Carmichael, who was basking with his yellow cat's eyes ajar, so that like a cat's they seemed to reflect the branches moving or the clouds passing, but to give no inkling of any inner thoughts or emotion whatsoever, if he wanted anything. [...] he had slipped into his glass at lunch a few drops of something, which accounted, the children thought, for the vivid streak of canary-yellow in moustache and beard that were otherwise milk-white.³⁸⁴

In *Java Head*, Edward's use of opium gives him glazed eyes and a catlike stare. Woolf's cat imagery for Mr Carmichael in *To the Lighthouse*, particularly regarding his staring eyes, curiously

³⁸⁴ Virginia Woolf, TL, p. 14.

echoes this opium-induced portrayal. Her description may further reflect the orientalist language common in her time.³⁸⁵ In Charlotte Lorrimer's 1907 short story collection *The Call of the East*, for example, of which Woolf's review is discussed in Chapter One, the half-Chinese Chee Toy in 'Barton's Eurasian Wife' similarly possesses 'a certain catlike fascination'.³⁸⁶ In any case, Mr Carmichael's catlike eyes additionally gesture to a dimension of oriental inscrutability in his character that Mrs Ramsay observes. His rumoured opium habit, compounded by his appearance and temperament, marks his social position as an outcast. Mr Carmichael's use of opium becomes progressively obvious in *To the Lighthouse*. The 'few drops of something' to which the children attribute his physical yellowness is eventually identified: 'He said nothing. He took opium. The children said he had stained his beard yellow with it. Perhaps.'³⁸⁷ Yet, even if strongly implied in the novel, Mr Carmichael's opium eating habit ultimately stays speculative; his identity as a poet, however, is indisputable.

That Mr Carmichael reads and writes poetry is established from the beginning of *To the Lighthouse*. In his early life, he was involved in 'an affair at Oxford with some girl; an early marriage; poverty; going to India; translating a little poetry'.³⁸⁸ Mr and Mrs Ramsay, looking out over their lawn, also consider his being a poet:

³⁸⁵ See Jane Goldman, 'Explanatory Notes', *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf, ed. Jane Goldman (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). Many orientalist depictions of East and South Asian persons employed feline imagery, especially in reference to the eyes. See, for example, Sax Rohmer, *The Insidious Dr. Fu-Manchu* (A.L. Burt, 1913), p. 366: Dr. Fu-Manchu has a 'face like Satan, a close-shaven skull, and long, magnetic eyes of the true cat-green [...] with all the cruel cunning of an entire Eastern race, accumulated in one giant intellect'; see also Lytton Strachey, *A Son of Heaven: A Tragic Melodrama*, ed. by George Simson (Cecil Woolf, 2005 [1912]), p. 29: In his play, Strachey writes his stage directions for the Empress – 'Her eyes are always moving, and exceedingly shrewd. There is a touch of the cat in her – especially when she smiles. And beneath the extreme mobility of her countenance, one can perceive the stranger dark traces of a barbarous animalism'; finally, see also Leonard Woolf, *The Village in the Jungle* (Edward Arnold, 1913), p. 155: "In Colombo all say they are shameless. Very fair, very mad, and very shameless. Their eyes are like cat's eyes. The proverb says, "If the eyes of a woman are like the eyes of a cat, evil comes to the man who looks into them."'

³⁸⁶ Charlotte Lorrimer, *The Call of the East* (Gay and Bird, 1907), p. 260.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

³⁸⁸ Woolf, TL, pp. 14-15. See also John Ferguson, 'A Sea Change: Thomas De Quincey and Mr. Carmichael in *To the Lighthouse*', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 14.1 (1987), pp. 48-49; Ferguson, also drawing on his observations of the

And there he would lie all day long on the lawn brooding presumably over his poetry, till he reminded one of a cat watching birds, and then he clapped his paws together when he had found the word, and her husband said, 'Poor Augustus – he's a true poet', which was high praise from her husband.³⁸⁹

Lying on the lawn as he often does, Mr Carmichael broods over his poetry while finding the words it requires. The process of his writing resembles De Quincey's approach to his own work and accords with the method of literary experience that Woolf ultimately centres in her more theoretical essays. As a 'true poet', Mr Carmichael is sensitive to the arrangement of his words. He is acutely aware of the sensations that words both embody and evoke, and thus absorbs himself in their power until he can adequately capture his conscious impressions on the page. Subsequently, his poetry reaches his interior life, which, in turn, stirs similar emotional responses in his readers. Through observing his writing process, Mr Ramsay acknowledges Mr Carmichael's poetic gift. The poet's talent with words is also recognised by the wider British public later in the novel: '[Mr. Carmichael brought out a volume of poems that spring, which had unexpected success. The war, people said, had revived their interest in poetry.]'³⁹⁰ If Mr Carmichael does take opium like De Quincey, the drug, as rendered by Woolf, may in parallel serve to expand his mental capacities, thereby augmenting his ability to experience and describe sensations. Regardless, and despite his social aloofness, Mr Carmichael becomes a successful writer in Woolf's novel.

Also similar to De Quincey, Mr Carmichael dwells in a perpetual dream state. His detachment from the social world may stem from his opium habit. Yet, at its core, his tendency to dream is integral to his poetic practice; his dreams are what enable his artistry, for they allow him

holograph text of *To the Lighthouse*, makes a compelling argument about the parallels in the early lives of De Quincey and Augustus Carmichael.

³⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 105.

³⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 146.

to sink into his interior sensations and translate them into words. At the end of *To the Lighthouse*, Lily Briscoe recognises the close connection between Mr Carmichael's dreaminess and his literary artistry:

‘D’you remember, Mr. Carmichael?’ she was inclined to ask, looking at the old man. But he had pulled his hat half over his forehead; he was asleep, or he was dreaming, or he was lying there catching words, she supposed.³⁹¹

Lily finds Mr Carmichael ‘asleep’, or ‘dreaming’, or ‘lying there catching words’. In their textual alignment, these three activities are collapsed in Lily’s observation as interchangeable acts. Mr Carmichael’s waking and sleeping states are blurred within his creative proficiency. Interestingly, it is Lily who finally reiterates this characterisation of Mr Carmichael. A quiet camaraderie appears to have developed between them by the novel’s close. Lily even positions herself within the protective proximity of Mr Carmichael:

She fetched herself a chair. She pitched her easel with her precise old-maidish movements on the edge of the lawn, not too close to Mr. Carmichael, but close enough for his protection. Yes, it must have been precisely here that she had stood ten years ago. There was the wall; the hedge; the tree. The question was of some relation between those masses. She had borne it in her mind all these years. It seemed as if the solution had come to her: she knew now what she wanted to do.³⁹²

As Chapter Three discusses, Lily’s ultimate breakthrough in her art is supported by her racialised and social difference. In developing her artistic vision, Lily learns to distance herself from the voices that doubt her vision for the future. It follows, then, that she also draws herself closer to those whose position resonates with hers. Mr Carmichael, with his rumoured opium habit, yellow

³⁹¹ Ibid., p. 186.

³⁹² Ibid., p. 161.

bodily stains, physical frailty, and inscrutable demeanor, emerges as an aesthetically oriental-coded figure. Fundamentally, like De Quincey, after whom Woolf ostensibly models him, Mr Carmichael consequently exists on the margins of the empire in affective isolation from his wider community. Yet, and also similar to De Quincey's categorisation of his own social status, Woolf's foregrounding of the intellectual capacities that arise from Mr Carmichael's opium-influenced identity importantly underscores his aloofness within the English context. De Quincey and Mr Carmichael are both socially estranged as individuals; their literary aptitudes, however, also mark them as creative pioneers whose genius is (for the most part) unrecognised by their society. Mr Carmichael's success with his poetry signals his contribution to contemporary tastes in the transitional period following the Great War. His figuratively racialised position then gestures to a deeper connection with Lily that extends beyond their outward and behavioural patterns. The racialised challenge posed by both characters to the empire informs their shared artistic visions. Woolf's characterisation of Mr Carmichael, as with Lily, is thus deliberately political; it is significant that *To the Lighthouse* closes with these two characters.

Naturally, Woolf's exploration of prose poetry extends beyond her fictional characterisations. Her engagement with De Quincey, including her reflections on race and illness, informs the development of her own conclusions about the literary form, which she applies to the future formal expansion of the novel. In 'Poetry, Fiction and the Future', Woolf particularly lays out her thoughts on prose poetry in relation to emerging trends in modern literature. She initiates her argument by observing the underlying shortcomings of much contemporary literature in meeting the sensitivities of her time:

Nobody indeed can read much modern literature without being aware that some dissatisfaction, some difficulty, is lying our way. On all sides writers are attempting

what they cannot achieve, are forcing the form they use to contain a meaning which is strange to it. Many reasons might be given, but here let us select only one, and that is the failure of poetry to serve us as it has served so many generations of our fathers. Poetry is not lending her services to us nearly as freely as she did to them. The great channel of expression which has carried away so much energy, so much genius, seems to have narrowed itself or to have turned aside.³⁹³

Woolf asserts that much of modern literature appears trapped in a form that no longer matches its meaning. Among the reasons that contribute to this phenomenon, she notably points out that such dissatisfaction stems from ‘the failure of poetry’ to serve the present generation of readers. Poetry, Woolf discerns, is not functioning as freely as a form in the present age as it did before. Her leap from prose to poetry may initially come across as abrupt; her consideration becomes coherent, however, when situated within her broader perspective on the historical evolution of literary styles.

Woolf acknowledges in her essay that the writing of her time remains ‘rich in lyric poetry’³⁹⁴. But, ‘for our generation and the generation that is coming the lyric cry of ecstasy or despair which is so intense, so personal and so limited, is not enough.’³⁹⁵ For Woolf, the lyric poem is an outdated mode of creative expression. By taking ‘a vague, mysterious thing called an attitude to life’ as the benchmark for producing good literature, she posits that, across time, those writers who can ‘use their faculties freely’ and ‘express themselves freely and fully’ are ultimately successful in their work.³⁹⁶ She recognises that modern experiences, and with them modern temperaments, have shifted from those of the previous ages. Modern literature, therefore, should keep pace with the modern mind:

It is as if the modern mind, wishing always to verify its emotions had lost the power of accepting anything simply for what it is. Undoubtedly, this sceptical and testing

³⁹³ Woolf, ‘Poetry, Fiction, and the Future’, *New York Herald Tribune* (1927), in E 4, pp. 428-441, p. 429.

³⁹⁴ Ibid.

³⁹⁵ Ibid.

³⁹⁶ Ibid., pp. 430-431.

spirit has led to a great freshening and quickening of soul. There is candour, an honesty in modern writing which is salutary if not supremely delightful. [...] Naturally the poets were frightened away.³⁹⁷

The emotions of the ordinary modern person lack unity; their mind is full of ‘monstrous, hybrid, unmanageable emotions’.³⁹⁸ Subsequently, their spirit, sceptical and testing, also more vigorously animates the sensibilities of their inner life. Modern writing has, to some extent, already responded to the heightened complexity of modern emotions. Woolf thus deems it fitting that ‘the poets were frightened away’.

Woolf explains that poetry, through its allegiance to beauty, has remained aloof to the everyday purpose of life. With ‘her veils, her garlands, her memories, her associations’, poetry proves too stiff to express the swift currents of modern information and emotion.³⁹⁹ Poetry is hence incapable of completing the demands that modern times assign to her. Woolf thereby concludes that modern emotions ‘submit more readily to prose than to poetry’.⁴⁰⁰ She believes that prose will assume some of the functions once carried out by poetry, just as poetry has superseded the tasks of earlier literary modes:

If, then, we are daring and risk ridicule and try to see in what direction we who seem to be moving so fast are going, we may guess that we are going in the direction of prose and that in ten or fifteen years’ time prose will be used for purposes for which prose has never been used before. That cannibal, the novel, which has devoured so many forms of art will by then have devoured even more. We shall be forced to invent new names for the different books which masquerade under this one heading. And it is possible that there will be among the so-called novels one which we shall scarcely know how to christen. It will be written in prose, but in prose which has many of the characteristics of poetry. It will have something of the exaltation of poetry, but with much of the ordinariness of prose.⁴⁰¹

³⁹⁷ Ibid., pp. 433-434.

³⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 429.

³⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 434.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., pp. 434-435.

The future, Woolf claims, is 'going in the direction of prose'. And yet, she recognises that prose will continue to evolve to better meet modern needs. In particular, the novel, which Woolf regards as the fullest expression of prose, will go on to expand in form so that its heading will need new categories. Woolf specifically references a group of rising novels that resists standard categorisation. This new rendition of the novel is written 'in prose which has many of the characteristics of poetry'; it has 'something of poetry, but with much of the ordinariness of prose'. What Woolf suggests is that the future of the novel is partially contingent upon the development of prose poetry.

In her arguments, Woolf defines the scope and nature of her envisaged prose poetry form. This innovative method of writing primarily differs from the traditional novel in that it will 'stand further back from life'.⁴⁰² As poetry does, the prose poetic novel gives 'the outline rather than the detail'.⁴⁰³ It subordinates material descriptions to express the interiority of characters. Poetry minimises its focus on personal relations to make room for 'the relation of the mind to general ideas and its soliloquy in solitude'.⁴⁰⁴ Resembling poetry, this new category of the novel then also remembers that the human experience 'spend[s] much time sleeping, dreaming, thinking, reading, alone'.⁴⁰⁵ Woolf's formulation of the prose poetic form closely echoes her observation of De Quincey's work. Not only does she reemphasise the importance of ordinary sensations in literature, but she also considers the significance of interior activities in which oneiric experiences play a part.

⁴⁰² Ibid., p. 435.

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid.

The novel, Woolf anticipates, will therefore in these respects take on some of the attributes of poetry. Nevertheless, it will still need to ‘take the mould of that queer conglomeration of incongruous things – the modern mind’.⁴⁰⁶ The prerogatives of prose lie in ‘its freedom; its fearlessness; its flexibility’.⁴⁰⁷ Woolf thus maintains that the future of modern writing must be rooted in prose. Despite its merits, however, the form of prose does come with certain sacrifices – ‘the penalty it pays for having dispensed with the incantation and the mystery, with rhyme and metre’ is its inadequacy to convey simple things in profound ways. It therefore remains ideal that, over time, the novel should adopt the combined prose poetic form. Yet, Woolf elaborates on the potential issues of the prose poem:

It is true that prose writers are daring; they are constantly forcing their instrument to make the attempt. But one has always a feeling of discomfort in the presence of the purple patch of the prose poem. The objection to the purple patch, however, is not that it is purple but that it is a patch.⁴⁰⁸

The presence of the ‘purple patch’ of the prose poem leads to a discomfort in reading. Further into her explanation, Woolf characterises this as the violent and performative swings in the formal aspects of the novel, which do not align with the described material of the work. Woolf’s objection to the ‘purple patch’, however, is not that it is ‘purple’, but that it is a ‘patch’. Her distinction here is crucial. She is not opposed to the ornamental techniques of poetry in prose, but rather to the method in which they are assimilated into the book. Drawing on Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, Woolf argues that it is possible for a novel to be ‘stained purple’, ‘yet never patchy’.⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 436.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., pp. 436-437.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 437.

Tristram Shandy ‘stands back from life’; it is ‘a book full of poetry, but we never notice it’.⁴¹⁰ In its exploration of different interior perspectives, and with an attitude that freely expresses itself without constraints in factual depictions, the coherence of Sterne’s text serves as a successful example of the prose poetic novel: ‘There, one sees, is poetry changing easily and naturally into prose, prose into poetry.’⁴¹¹

Woolf thus summarises her ideas on prose poetry within the practice of novel-writing:

So, then, this unnamed variety of the novel will be written standing back from life, because in that way a larger view is to be obtained of some important features of it; will be written in prose because prose, if you free it from the beast of burden work which so many novelists necessarily lay upon it of carrying loads of details, bushels of fact – prose thus treated will show itself capable of rising high from the ground, not in one dart, but in sweeps and circles, and of keeping at the same time in touch with the amusements and idiosyncrasies of human character in daily life.⁴¹²

Woolf is confident that there is much potential in the future of the novel. Prose, written ‘standing back from life’, and thus freed from ‘carrying loads of details’ and ‘bushels of fact’, will in particular demonstrate its capacity to reach artistic heights. Much like the workings of the modern mind, Woolf expects this process to be far from straightforward. The prose poetic novel will rise ‘in sweeps and circles’. Nevertheless, she encourages writing in prose poetry, for this mode of literature is most effective at ‘keeping in touch with the amusements and idiosyncrasies of human character in daily life’. Evidently, as demonstrated in the previous chapters of this thesis, Woolf adheres to her own advice. In *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, for example, she had carefully delved into the sensory impressions that form the experiences of her characters. In *The Waves*

⁴¹⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹¹ Ibid., p. 438.

⁴¹² Ibid.

(1931), notably, she would further present passages, especially in its interludes, that capture lyrical rhythm and evoke sensory-rich imagery, much like that found in poetry.

Woolf's exploration of prose poetry is situated within her conception of literature as a form of art. Her approach to writing embraces the ornamental techniques of literary expression, which, when employed effectively, enhances the formal and thematic depth of her work. As the previous chapters discuss, Woolf was exposed to the aesthetic debates of Bloomsbury early in her writing career; her work, naturally, also reflects her engagement with such ideas of art. Woolf's thinking about formalist aesthetics continued throughout much of her career. Around the time she was formulating her notion of prose poetry in the late twenties, she was, as usual, also preoccupied with Bloomsbury's interpretation of formal theories. Indeed, her evolving understanding of literary forms is closely tied to the development of her formalist sensibility. In this context, the aesthetic principles that Bloomsbury associates with Chinese objects and art reemerge as a contributing influence. Significantly, in her 1930 foreword to a catalogue of paintings by her sister Vanessa Bell, Woolf compares the aesthetics of Vanessa's portraits to those of oriental things: 'If portraits there are, they are pictures of flesh which happens from its texture or its modelling to be aesthetically on an equality with the China pot or the chrysanthemum.'⁴¹³ Echoing the positional views of Roger Fry and Clive Bell, Woolf's paralleling of the aesthetic quality between Vanessa's nude portraits and the oriental tropes presents a distinctly formalist outlook that posits Chineseness as a model of 'high' art. Her aesthetically racialised construction of artistic appeal consequently transfers to her consideration of reading and writing literature.

⁴¹³ Woolf, 'Foreword to *Recent Paintings by Vanessa Bell*' (1930), in E 5, pp. 137-142, p. 139.

Further into her foreword, Woolf provides a more detailed insight into her understanding of Vanessa's paintings. Her aesthetic grasp of Vanessa's art intriguingly echoes her sustained contemplation on the interplay between impressions, emotions, and the constraints of language:

But Mrs Bell says nothing. Mrs Bell is silent as the grave. Her pictures do not betray her. Their reticence is inviolable. That is why they intrigue and draw us on; that is why, if it be true that they yield their full meaning only to those who can tunnel their way behind the canvas into masses and passages and relations and values of which we know nothing – if it be true that she is a painter's painter – still her pictures claim us and make us stop. They give us an emotion. They offer a puzzle.

And the puzzle is that while Mrs Bell's pictures are immensely expressive, their expressiveness has no truck with words. Her vision excites a strong emotion and yet when we have dramatized it or poetised it or translated it into all blues and greens, and fines and exquisites and subtles of our vocabulary, the picture itself escapes. It goes on saying something of its own.⁴¹⁴

Woolf asserts that the unique quality of Vanessa's paintings lies in their ability to 'intrigue and draw us on'. The visual composition of her sister's works excites a strong emotional response from observers, which 'claim' them in a state of profound and contemplative appreciation. Ultimately, Woolf argues that attempts to define the paintings are futile; they can never be fully captured by description – 'the picture itself escapes' and 'goes on saying something of its own'. This quality in Vanessa's paintings, Woolf goes on to expound, is attributed to the painter's vision, which dictates the meaningful cohesiveness that is found in her work. Woolf's formalist perspective on Vanessa's paintings clearly corresponds to her own conceptions of literary writing. Her explanation of the paintings' allure is particularly revealing: 'they yield their full meaning only to those who can tunnel their way behind the canvas into masses and passages and relations and values of which we know nothing'. The compositional elements of 'masses', 'passages', 'relations', and 'values' in Woolf's account recalls Lily Briscoe's creative process in *To the Lighthouse*. Woolf also directly

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., p. 139-140.

mentions a ‘tunnelling process’ in her diary while writing *Mrs Dalloway*, which she connects with the sensory experience of fragmented memories.⁴¹⁵ And, finally, Woolf’s emphasis on meaning in formal structure also traces back to her reading of De Quincey’s poetry-laden prose. In her consideration of Vanessa’s paintings, Woolf finds herself attempting to reconcile the expansiveness of conscious impressions with the restricted capacity of words. This passage then reinforces the interrelation of picture and prose that emerges in her work. As both the creative and theoretical writings of Woolf suggest, her interest in reaching the depths of the human experience through literature finds its solution in painting with words the vivid sensations of life.

Woolf’s stylistic arrival at her own prose preference takes shape through her search for alternative approaches to established British norms, including her contemplation of race and illness. In her conception of modernity, which is politically charged, Woolf’s striving for difference is also an effort to challenge the habits of the empire and its prevailing taste. Inevitably, her critique of imperial ideologies is caught within the historical developments that sustain the expansion of the empire. Within these competing contexts, opium then serves as an important symbolic focus through which to consider Woolf’s identity and practice as a writer. In the writings of Woolf, opium is attributed an Eastern origin; she recognises, nevertheless, that it has become firmly bound to the British imperial project. Her concern with opium remains decidedly British. Her interest in its consequences is largely confined to Britain and, particularly, the English body. Woolf’s preoccupation with opium, subsequently, takes on a predominantly ornamental dimension. While Woolf does consider the health implications of opium, her examination in this regard is concentrated on its visible effects. In a more significant vein, Woolf links opium in her reflections to the expansion of sensory experiences, which she finds integral to reimagining methods of

⁴¹⁵ Woolf, in D 2, p. 272. 15 October 1923: ‘It took me a year’s groping to discover what I call my tunnelling process, by which I tell the past by instalments, as I have need of it.’

literary expression. Woolf is keen to experiment with new ways of creatively advancing her writing practice. Her artistic engagement with opium, and with its formalist principles that find innovation in oriental aesthetics, extends from her ongoing eagerness to refine her craft. The discussions of this section have primarily focused on the conceptual associations with which Woolf incorporates the idea of opium into her work. And yet, much must also be said about the historical aspects of the opium trade and its role in fostering imperial and colonial violence. The chapter, therefore, now turns to the colonial aftermath imposed on China pertaining to opium, and to Woolf's navigation of her position within this context as a woman from the heart of the empire.

4.2 The Queen of Hong Kong

Woolf was well aware of the Opium Wars and the broader historical developments that surround them. The index cards on which her research for Leonard Woolf's *Empire and Commerce in Africa* (1920) was recorded indicate that she engaged, in particular, with accounts of the First Opium War. Two cards, to which she jointly gives the heading 'China: Opium war & Treaty of Nanking', show her reading notes from A.J. Sargent's *Anglo-Chinese Commerce and Diplomacy: Mainly in the Nineteenth Century*. The images of the two cards are reproduced below. On them, Woolf summarises the events leading up to and resulting from the First Opium War:

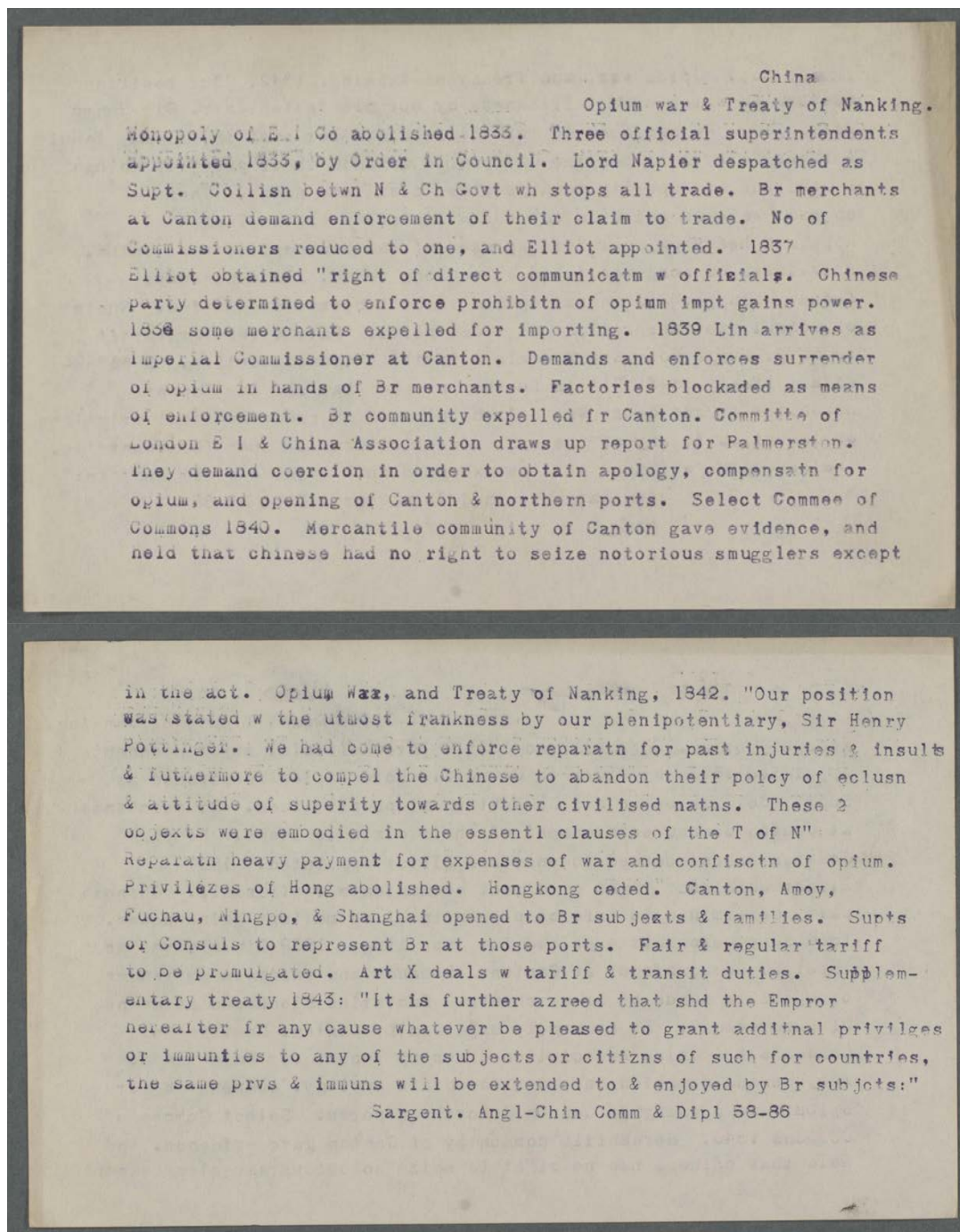


Figure 17. Virginia Woolf, index cards on which she records her research for Leonard Woolf's *Empire and Commerce in Africa*. *WoolfNotes*. Original copy at the University of Sussex Special Collections at The Keep. With courtesy of The Society of Authors as the Literary Representative of the Estate of Virginia Woolf.

Woolf's notes of the war, drawn from Sargent, offer a generally balanced overview of the associated events. Her tone in these notes is informational rather than opinionated; she makes sure

to put the statements reflecting judgement in quotes. Woolf observes the repercussions of China's loss in the war: the Treaty of Nanking compelled China to pay a heavy indemnity to Britain and to open five treaty ports for British commerce and residence. Moreover, 'Hongkong [was] ceded'. With Hong Kong as a fully occupied region, China has become a formal branch of Britain's economic empire. Across the waves, the royal sovereignty of Queen Victoria thus also extends to Hong Kong.

Though not explicitly stated in Woolf's index cards, her summary of the First Opium War correctly implies that British motivations for the war were largely driven by commercial interests. While the opium trade was the immediate catalyst of the eponymous Opium War, broader economic benefits underpinned the true cause of British involvement in the violent conflict. At its core, the war was rooted in a cultural clash shaped by national pride and competing claims to trade privileges. The choice of quotations that Woolf included in her cards reflects this: in its statement for the 1842 Nanking Treaty, Britain wished 'to compel the Chinese to abandon their policy of exclusion and attitude of superiority towards other civilised nations'; in the supplementary treaty added in 1843, Britain further demanded that 'should the Emperor hereafter for any cause whatever be pleased to grant additional privileges or immunities to any of the subjects of such for countries, the same privileges and immunities will be extended to and enjoyed by British subjects'. The terms of the Treaty of Nanking left a lasting mark on Chinese society. In the long term, the treaty sparked the beginning of China's 'Century of Humiliation', during which the country, now exposed in its political and military weakness, became subjected to further unequal treaties and foreign domination. China, eroded of its sovereignty, thus also underwent a shift in its economic structure towards export-oriented trade controlled by foreign powers, including Britain. Subsequently, China experienced significant internal unrest, prompting Chinese intellectuals to recognise the

need for modernisation and reform, which shaped the country's trajectory for the following century. For Britain, however, the war was merely another step in extending its imperial ambitions. It had little impact to the daily life and material circumstances of the average British person at home.⁴¹⁶ Woolf would have recognised this political imbalance as she was contemplating on Britain's relationship with China in the early twentieth century, at a time when indications of the British empire's decline were also becoming apparent.

Woolf's only mention of Hong Kong in public print can be found in her 1924 essay 'Thunder at Wembley', in which she discusses the spring Exhibition of Empire in London that she and Leonard visited in May of that year. 'Thunder at Wembley' was published in *The Nation & Athenaeum*, a British weekly that was substantially regulated in terms of editorial content by members of the Bloomsbury Group;⁴¹⁷ Woolf, therefore, was able to present a highly political review of the British Empire Exhibition in her piece. Using nature as a metaphor for the impending dissolution of the empire, Woolf clearly establishes her anti-imperialist attitude as she examines the displays at the exhibition, which offers a narrative that highlights Britain's benevolent stewardship in its foreign territories. She lists the imported objects that come under her observation:

Dress fabrics, ropes, table linen, old masters, sugar, wheat, filigree silver, pepper, bird's nest (edible, and exported to Hong Kong), camphor, bees-wax, rattans, and the rest – why trouble to ask the price? Once knows beforehand – six and eightpence.⁴¹⁸

⁴¹⁶ See also C. Claire Summers, 'Addiction, Arrogance, and Aggression: The Question of Attitude in the First Opium War', *Tenor of Our Times*, 5.3 (2016), p. 14: 'The [First Opium] war left an undeniable mark on Chinese society, particularly through the terms of the Treaty of Nanking and the development of their foreign trade. For the British, however, it was simply another chapter in the development of the Empire. Nothing significantly changed for the ordinary British at home; they continued to drink their tea as China's foreign policy was being turned upside down. This could have influenced Britain's casual imperialistic attitude: their various spheres of influence lay so far removed from everyday life that it became easy to approach these foreign interactions in a more cavalier manner than they otherwise might have, had they taken place closer to home.'

⁴¹⁷ Notably, Leonard Woolf was its literary editor from 1923-1930.

⁴¹⁸ Woolf, 'Thunder at Wembley', *Nation & Athenaeum* (1924), in E 3, p. 411.

The excerpt shows a number of produce that were displayed at the British Empire Exhibition. Among some items from unspecified regions, though still understood as conventionally exotic to the British taste, there is a curious description of bird's nest that – in parentheses, and thus signaling a clarification of information that is necessary to comprehend the product – points towards its edibility and its exportation to Hong Kong. The description would have held significance for contemporary visitors to the exhibition. Hong Kong in the early twentieth century acted as a trading hub for bird's or swallow's nests, given its intermediary position in the commodity chain to the Mainland Chinese market and beyond. The trade involved a global network that was heavily reliant on Southeast Asian sources.⁴¹⁹ With Hong Kong serving as a crucial entrepot for this traditional Chinese delicacy, Britain hence also benefitted financially and through access to the commodity itself.

Woolf's added clarification in her essay highlights Hong Kong as an important hub of trade in the East, and in a manner that simultaneously gestures to the historical developments that led to the region's British occupation in the first place. Hong Kong, after all, was chosen for occupation by the British for its trading sea ports, and underwent colonisation as a result of the Opium Wars that arose from conflicts over opium trades. In an exhibition so ignorant of its own imperial violence, as reflected in the language of the British Empire Exhibition's official guide that offers its displays as a visual representation of the 'many civilisations and many stages of civilisations [of the British Empire] – [that] it shows the splendours of the markets of the East and the simple fairs of primitive peoples',⁴²⁰ it is unsurprising to observe colonial products as celebratory

⁴¹⁹ See, for example, Craig Thorburn, 'The Edible Birds' Nest Boom in Indonesia and South-east Asia: A Nested Political Ecology', *Food, Culture and Society*, 17.4 (2014).

⁴²⁰ *The British Empire Exhibition 1924: Official Guide* (London: Fleetway Press, 1924), 'Foreword'.

commodities of the empire. Woolf's review attacks such imperialist demonstrations; her mocking of the exhibition undermines the attempted grandiosity of its displays by assuming that the presented motors, machines, and produce are all equally priced at six shillings and eightpence, a modest cost for the conceivably dull, moderate products being put on show. Her deliberate satire, on the one hand, reinforces these performative items as everyday objects, and yet, on the other hand, requires her to take on the position of the proud metropolitan visitor, albeit satirically, that comes under her own criticism. Woolf's ultimate focus in her narration lies in what falls outside of the exhibition. Wild nature, which functions beyond human control, thus works to challenge the assumptions of the British imperialist project. The destructive power of the wind and the sky disrupts the imperial spectacle: 'Colonies are perishing and dispersing in spray of inconceivable beauty and terror which some malignant power illuminates'.⁴²¹ Woolf's address of Hong Kong in her review therefore sets out the complexities of her relationship to the structures of British imperialism – her narrative is critical of the empire but is also, inevitably, a product of it.

Woolf's private mentions of Hong Kong in her diary and letters, which converge on the period from the early to mid 1930s, reveal an even richer and more unfiltered discussion on her impressions of the region. For even though Hong Kong fell under British territory at the time of Woolf's writing, it was nonetheless culturally conceptualised by Woolf and many other Britons as still forming part of the distant Orient on which their imaginations thrived. Woolf herself never travelled to Hong Kong or mainland China, though several of her contemporaries within her social circle did. It thus appears that she relied on descriptions from her family and friends to form her ideas about these places. Woolf's diary entry dated 16 July, 1932, demonstrates this habit. In her entry, Woolf records a conversation she had with Stella Benson, a writer friend who, since her

⁴²¹ Woolf, 'Thunder at Wembley', p. 413.

marriage to her husband James Carew O’Gorman Anderson of the Chinese Customs Service, had lived mainly in mainland China and occasionally in Hong Kong.⁴²² Benson’s narrative of Hong Kong in the entry, which Woolf incorporates into the layer of her own account that reports it, depicts a rather unappealing picture of the colonial region. Benson explicitly claims that she ‘hate[s] Hong Kong’.⁴²³ Sitting in the drawing room with Woolf, she:

went on steadily about the slave trade in H.K.; about James & his little Chinese destroyer, manned by ex-officers from England; how they steam out after sailing ships: the ships cant escape; they throw out bales of cotton & flannel: which float: James goes abroad & discovers the deck laden with opium, heroin; man cries out “That little parcel’s for my father. Let me have that”. Then all the other men say that the cement &c is a present for an aunt. There’s always fighting. Chinese planes come over very low down. Shoot with revolvers. She sits in her kitchen. All the inhabitants crowd round, thinking the English safe – pretend they’re selling eggs. Chinese generals come to dine & stand rifles on each side of their chairs: send soldiers into the kitchen to see that the food isn’t poisoned.⁴²⁴

Benson’s account of her experience in Hong Kong borders on perceptions of Chinese primitivism and cruelty. She brings up the slave trade and also refers to the consumption of drugs among the local population. Benson, moreover, describes the militarised atmosphere in which Hong Kong remains situated. Her discourse, however, is not all arrogant; the language of her discussion, too, shows some awareness of the imperial politics at play in her experience of Hong Kong within the wider context of its relationship to China. For her account of her husband’s work is tender but satirical. She tells about ‘James & his little Chinese destroyer, manned by ex-officers in England’. The vague syntax in Woolf’s diary offers a reading of the ‘Chinese destroyer’ as either a destroyer with Chinese features, with the word ‘Chinese’ comprehended as an adjective, or a destroyer of all

⁴²² Woolf, D 4, p. 117.

⁴²³ Ibid.

⁴²⁴ Ibid., p. 117-118.

things recognised as Chinese, with the word ‘Chinese’ understood as a noun. Furthermore, the auxiliary ‘little’ that is added to this sequence of description is intriguing. It ‘be-littles’ the military power of the destroyer as well as the ex-officers in England who man it, including her husband. Although Benson’s tone could be connected with a gendered or class-based belittling, it may also be fueled with a self-reflexive ridicule of the British empire’s colonial enterprise, which most obviously finds expression in violent machines and self-important men. This is especially evident when revisiting her discussion of the opium drug on ships, which her husband goes after with his ‘destroyer’ – an imagery of British violence in the Opium Wars. The sentiments found in this diary entry from Woolf thus echo much of her argument in ‘Thunder at Wembley’. Yet, the layered narrative in Woolf’s diary likewise suggest her difficult position in engaging with Hong Kong. While her writing alludes to challenges against the empire, it is also shaped by the standpoint of a community whose wealth and resources are built upon colonial activities and the imperial enterprise. Woolf, despite her anti-imperialist politics, still belongs to the centre of this community and its material and intellectual exchange.

Woolf has other ties to Hong Kong. On 27 April, 1935, Woolf mentions in her dairy about a visiting friend, Mrs Collett, who, after the death of her husband in military action, claims that she must ‘go to Hong Kong & stay with Bella’.⁴²⁵ The Bella in question is Bella Sidney Woolf, the younger sister of Leonard and thus sister-in-law to Woolf. In another diary entry, written on 22 June of the same year, Woolf’s declaration of Bella as the ‘Queen of Hong Kong’ may explain Mrs Collett’s feelings. Woolf discusses in this latter entry a visit by her mother-in-law and brother-in-law for tea. She records her conversation with Mrs Woolf:

⁴²⁵ Ibid, p. 306.

Mrs W. & I continued our rather burbling conversation [...] which I mechanically turn off upon Bella: who is now Queen of Hong Kong. She is very ambitious. And so wonderfully tactful. And so popular. What dress did she wear? A beautiful white taffeta. Tom [Southorn, her husband] was so generous – He gave her some money to spend on clothes. She has to have so many. In the old days she did not mind how she dressed.⁴²⁶

It is possible to understand why Woolf would call Bella the ‘Queen of Hong Kong’. Bella’s second husband, Sir Thomas Southorn, was the Colonial Secretary of Hong Kong from 1926-1936.⁴²⁷ He also served as Acting Administrator of Hong Kong from the February to March of 1930, from the May to September of 1935, and in the November of the same year at either end of the tenure of Sir William Peel as governor.⁴²⁸ By virtue of her marriage, Bella was hence connected to the heart of Hong Kong’s colonial government and, within the occupied region, took on a position that afforded her exceptional status and resources. She was, in effect, like a queen. Woolf’s entry, which conveys Mrs Woolf’s assessment of Bella, attributes to her corresponding regal characteristics – Bella is ambitious, tactful, and popular. Her material wealth is further indicated by the dresses that she wears. ‘In the old days she did not mind how she dressed’; now, however, ‘[s]he has to have so many’.

Hong Kong became a site of opportunities for the British population. Woolf encountered many who held posts in the region simply by moving within her social milieu in England. In her letter to Katherine Arnold-Forster, dated the 21st of May, 1936, she recalls to her friend an evening at Coverack, in which the hotel she was staying hosted ‘purple-faced majors from Hong Kong’.⁴²⁹ In another letter, this time to Vanessa Bell, dated 22 July, 1936, she additionally recounts a visit by

⁴²⁶ Ibid., p. 325.

⁴²⁷ Woolf, in D 4, p. 306, n. 19.

⁴²⁸ Andrew Yanne and Gillis Heller, *Signs of a Colonial Era* (Hong Kong University Press, 2009), p. 36; p. 69.

⁴²⁹ Woolf, in D 4, p. 41.

the Woolfs that further illuminate the extent of their connections to the colonial community in Hong Kong:

On Saturday all the Wolves come – hundreds of them, and then I change my skin, and inhabit an extraordinary world. They talk incessantly. Whats its about God knows. And nothing sticks to them. And at last my mother in law rather likes me. But I lie awake at nights imagining what they do at Bexhill. They never go out without meeting some one from Hong Kong, and if they go over an old house, a door opens, and out comes the owner, who turns out – this is fact not ficiton – to be foster mother to Miss Beeton, the granddaughter of the Cook [Isabella Beeton], and Bella's old friend. So they establish what are called links, and it is thought that I'm going too to Bexhill to be introduced to the owner of Dixter, Bellas old friend, and the descendant of Oliver Cromwell.⁴³⁰

Leonard's side of the family, according to Woolf, 'never go out without meeting some one from Hong Kong'. Bella, specifically, appears well acquainted with a wide network of people. And, so, the Woolfs 'establish what they call links'. Woolf herself becomes drawn into her family's web of connections; she is to meet other individuals as well.

Woolf's understanding of Hong Kong, therefore, is shaped by a particular representation of the place that is substantially grounded in the structures and continuities of the British empire. In her diary, Woolf describes Bella as the 'Queen of Hong Kong'. In a more metaphorical sense, however, Woolf's Queen of Hong Kong also symbolically evokes Britannia, the embodiment of Queen Boudicca who 'rules the waves', and, more representationally, Queen Victoria, under whose reign the sun on Britain was said to never set. As a child of the Victorian era, Woolf was born into a time when Hong Kong was indeed under the rule of a queen. By 1882, the year of Woolf's birth, Hong Kong had already been occupied by the British for exactly forty years, during which its landmark sites such as Victoria Peak and Victoria Harbour were named. And yet, in the present

⁴³⁰ Ibid., p. 58.

day, Hong Kong is no longer under the rule of a queen. With a touch of irony, the disintegration of the British empire, which Woolf had anticipated in 'Thunder at Wembley', was symbolised by the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997, marking the final major territorial loss for Britain. Contextualising in the long arc of history, Hong Kong has thus quite recently entered its era of being returned to China. Within this ongoing landscape of transition and change, it becomes all the more important to reconsider how readings of Woolf might evolve from past histories, beginning with the local contexts of her now international readership. Woolf has become firmly entrenched within the present canon of modernist literary studies; as a 'Queen' of the English modernist canon, she hence represents a significant starting point for remodeling the directions of contemporary decolonial curricula. The arguments in this chapter, and more broadly in this thesis, are made in the hope of humanising Woolf beyond her queenly caricature. There is much to admire in Woolf's writing as the discussions throughout have shown. In the twenty-first-century, nevertheless, it remains imperative to acknowledge both the generative and harmful capacities of literature as readers negotiate their relationships to texts within continually shifting landscapes.

Afterword

Miss Wong and Mrs Brown

In ‘Character in Fiction’ (1924), which stands as one of Woolf’s most significant statements on aesthetics and the form of fiction, she discusses the need for a new form of fiction that can reflect the conditions of modern life. Woolf develops her argument through the elusive Mrs Brown. Little is known about the factual details of this old lady in the railway carriage, and yet:

The impression she made was overwhelming. It came pouring out like a draught, like a smell of burning. What was it composed of – that overwhelming and peculiar impression? Myriads of irrelevant and incongruous ideas crowd into one’s head on such occasions; one sees the person, one sees Mrs Brown, in the centre of all sorts of different scenes. I thought of her in a seaside house, among queer ornaments: sea-urchins, models of ships in glass cases.⁴³¹

Mrs Brown represents the heart of human character whose complexity is captured through the subjective, inner life. Going against Edwardian forms of the novel that prioritise external descriptions and facts, Woolf posits that modern portrayals of character should concentrate on what lies in impressions, emotions, and, more broadly, a person’s conscious reality. Mrs Brown stays ‘in the centre of all sorts of different scenes’. Her essential identity remains unchanged across shifts in landscapes. She is eternal; she is human nature; she changes only on the surface – ‘it is the novelist who gets in and out’.⁴³² All novels, Woolf insists, are concerned with character. While

⁴³¹ Woolf, ‘Character in Fiction’, *Criterion* [1924], in E 3, pp. 420-438, p. 425.

⁴³² *Ibid.*, p. 430.

Mrs Brown may be constant as the embodiment of human nature, therefore, it falls on the novelist to interpret and present her.

Interpretations can vary greatly. When it comes to writing, each writer works by their own principles and contexts. Woolf recognises, for example, that an English writer's presentation of Mrs Brown will differ from that of a French or Russian writer – 'Mrs Brown can be treated in an infinite of ways, according to the age, country, and temperament of the writer'.⁴³³ The reader, also, will understand Mrs Brown through varied perspectives: 'old Mrs Brown's character will strike you very differently according to the age and country in which you happen to be born'.⁴³⁴ What, then, is reality, Woolf asks, and 'who are the judges of reality?'⁴³⁵ I wonder how a twenty-first-century Chinese writer might present Mrs Brown. More importantly to the aims of this thesis, as I read and reread Woolf's writing, I wonder, too, how I might be interpreting the symbolic aspects of Mrs Brown as portrayed by Woolf.

The separation that Woolf identifies between herself and her predecessors lies in the clash of emphasis between the material and the mental. Despite this clash in priorities, however, the portrayal of these two elements in literature are not entirely independent of each other. Material context is still helpful to the presentation of a character. Woolf, for instance, finds herself imagining Mrs Brown 'in a seaside house, among queer ornaments: sea-urchins, models of ships in glass cases'. Here, material ornaments enrich Woolf's picturing of the character in line with her vision. Woolf's argument, nevertheless, is that these objects remain ornamental; they can shift and change depending on the perceiver. Hence, ornamental objects assume varying forms and meanings in different contexts. The decorative Chinese things that ornament the content and form of Woolf's

⁴³³ Ibid., p. 426.

⁴³⁴ Ibid., p. 425.

⁴³⁵ Ibid., p. 426.

writings likewise acquire fresh significance as she navigates their descriptive and functional roles within her own narrative framework. Chinese things, as an artistic concept, moreover, not only emerge as ornamental objects in Woolf's texts. Desiring to find new ways of literary expression, Woolf also merges them with the formal properties of her increasingly ornamental prose.

I imagine myself in the railway carriage, therefore, sitting opposite to Mrs Brown. I observe through her character what Woolf wishes me to see. Mrs Brown is Rachel Vinrace, Elizabeth Dalloway, Lily Briscoe, Mr Carmichael, and more. She is the unnamed characters in Woolf's fictions; she is also the voice in Woolf's essays, and Woolf herself. In my reading, Mrs Brown has come to symbolise the method in which Woolf portrays the inner lives of her richly drawn characters. She is also the embodiment of Woolf's experiences and perceptions, and of what Woolf sought to convey to her readers. And yet, Mrs Brown, too, is myself. I, the reader, can only interpret Mrs Brown through the framework of my own experience, understanding, and cultural context. Mrs Brown, then, in part, is what I make of her.

The discussion of this thesis is shaped by a negotiation between these multiple facets of 'Mrs Brown'. Miss Wong wonders how best to approach Mrs Brown as she sits opposite her in the railway carriage. Mrs Brown, as Miss Wong sees her, is bound by the identity in which Woolf constructs her figure. Their surnames gesture to a striking difference in cultural heritage. There is also roughly a century of temporal separation between their lives. In her attempt to know Mrs Brown better, Miss Wong therefore considers ways to bridge these gaps while remaining true to her concerns and values. Immediately, she recognises the need to address the racialised and cultural constructs surrounding Mrs Brown that mediate her own identity. It is also through this critical scrutiny of Mrs Brown that Miss Wong can reflect on her positionality in relation to Woolf. The thesis is to undertake exactly these tasks. As the first full-length study of Woolf's Chinese

depictions across her literary oeuvre, it lays the groundwork for further examinations of her representations of China and Chinese characteristics. Much work, of course, remains to be done in this area of Woolf scholarship.

The constraints imposed by the thesis length necessitate the exclusion of some considerations that are relevant to the scope of this study. In particular, this thesis does not explore in detail some aspects of Woolf's later writing that reflect the ongoing development of her engagement with China. In *Flush: A Biography* (1933), for example, Woolf continues to support her criticism of eugenical ideas through the inclusion of Chinese depictions: 'Just as an English peer who has lived a lifetime in the East and contracted some of the habits of the natives – rumour hints indeed that he has turned Moslem and had a son by a Chinese washerwoman', Flush's friends are 'ready enough to overlook these aberrations' as he returns to them from Italy.⁴³⁶ Traces of conventional orientalism endure in Woolf's narrative; in *Ode Written Partly in Prose on Seeing the Name of Cutbush Above a Butcher's Shop in Pentonville* (1934), she still employs portrayals of Chinese cruelty and inscrutability: messages are flashed 'to China where the mandarins go, mute, cruel; delicate; past the gold pagodas; and the houses have paper/ walls; and the people smile wise inscrutable smiles.'⁴³⁷ Nevertheless, Woolf persists in her fascination with Chinese expressions. In 'Fishing' (1936), she begins her essay as follows: 'there is a Chinese proverb which says that the fisherman is pure at heart "as a white sea-shell"'⁴³⁸ And, in *Between the Acts* (1941), Woolf further comments on the Chinese approach to stage practice: 'Actors show us too much. The Chinese, you know, put a dagger on the table and that's a battle.'⁴³⁹ Woolf's engagement with

⁴³⁶ Woolf, F, p. 88.

⁴³⁷ Woolf, 'Ode Written Partly in Prose on Seeing the Name of Cutbush Above a Butcher's Shop in Pentonville', in CSF, p. 238.

⁴³⁸ Woolf, 'Fishing', *Mom* (1936), in E 6, p. 492.

⁴³⁹ Woolf, BA, p. 85.

Chinese elements across her exploration of novelistic, poetic, and dramatic modes underscores their significance as an enriching aspect of her literary enquiry. China thus informs her thinking up to the final stages of her writing career.

In addition, and as alluded to throughout this thesis, many members associated with the Bloomsbury Group were also intellectually engaged with China. They read and wrote on the country and its cultures, and in some cases even corresponded with Chinese individuals. These members include Roger Fry, Clive Bell, Arthur Waley, Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson, Lytton Strachey, and Julian Bell.⁴⁴⁰ The latter, moreover, went to teach English at Wuhan University, where he met Ling Shuhua, with whom Woolf exchanged letters between 1938-1939.⁴⁴¹ Towards the end of her career, Woolf thus progressed from writing *of* the Chinese to writing *to* the Chinese. Her transnational literary friendship with Ling marks the ambiguous but ultimately empathetic tone of her connection with China. The focus of this thesis on Woolf's writings concerning China and notions of Chineseness situates it within the intellectual activities of the Bloomsbury Group while simultaneously extending those discourses. In turn, by tracing these engagements, the productive findings of this thesis also highlight the broader and ongoing transnational, intercultural, and global dialogues within literary networks in which Bloomsbury members participated.

⁴⁴⁰ See Yaqing Xie, *A Modernist Vision of Chinoiserie: the Bloomsbury Group's Chinese taste*, PhD thesis (University of Nottingham, 2020).

⁴⁴¹ See Patricia Laurence, *Lily Briscoe's Chinese Eyes: Bloomsbury, Modernism and China* (University of South Carolina Press, 2013).

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Appendix A

Pagoda Woolf: A Poem

1. Private (1897-1936)⁴⁴²

	near the	Pagoda	at the other end of Brighton
A bare tree visible in the Light of Human			
Suffering means more than all the		Pagodas	in Tokio.
You can imagine the ghastly pale grottoes, &			
exhausted lamps, the gimcrack temples &		Pagodas,	in which one might still buy a bun;
We are just in from hearing Margaret Davies			
address 1600 cooperators in George 4 th		pagoda	at Brighton – a great success.
The veil clouds to the horizon, & I do not see			
	the	pagoda	or the trees of Kew.
upon which I can build pinnacles and		Pagodas,	all unreal
to walk in the garden & get advice about trees			
	&	pagodas.	
	Cakes on	pagoda	trays.
What are you having I wonder in your			
rickshaw, or		pagoda?	

⁴⁴² Line 1: Virginia Woolf, 21 April 1897, in PA, p. 73; lines 2-3: Woolf, 10 November 1905, Letter to Lady Robert Cecil, in L 1, p. 212; lines 4-5: Woolf, 1906, in PA, p. 307; lines 6-7: Woolf, 5 June 1922, Letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell, in L 2, p. 532; lines 8-9: Woolf, 11 May 1926, in D 3, p. 83; line 10: Woolf, 6 March 1927, Letter to V. Sackville-West, in L 3, p. 342; lines 11-12: Woolf, 3 January 1933, in D 4, p. 140; line 13: Woolf, 12 September 1935, in D 4, p. 340; lines 14-15: Woolf, 25 December 1936, Letter to Julien Bell, in 'Some New Woolf Letters', *Modern Fiction Studies*, ed. Joanne Trautmann Banks (*Modern Fiction Studies*, 1984), vol. 30.2, p. 195.

2. Public (1908-1937)⁴⁴³

and the pale minarets and	pagodas	are exposed to the sun, with all their stains and
next the arms are attacked; they imitate Chinese	pagodas;	frivolities and their midnight grimace.
looked to an English eye frail, ramshackle, and		steel hoops do what they can to relieve them.
absurdly frivolous, more like a	pagoda	in a tea-garden than a place where one slept.
a Chinese	pagoda	and a crimson-crested bird
as ramshackle and fantastic as a Chinese	pagoda,	
the minarets and	pagodas	of our possessions in the East?
past the gold	pagodas;	
crumble and squash beneath their spoons in		
mountains, in pyramids, in	pagodas.	
Great statesmen, in their beards and ruffs,		
despatched affairs of state under the crimson		
awning of the Royal	Pagoda.	
it is a structure leaving a shape on the mind's		
eye, built now in squares, now	pagoda	shaped, now throwing out wings and arcades,
I see the tortuous lanes of stamped mud that		
lead in and out among ramshackle	pagodas;	
That woman, you whisper discreetly, with the		
pearl	pagodas	hanging from her ears, was the pure flame who
		lit the life of one of our statesmen;
Men with withered hands, women with pearl	pagodas	hanging from their ears, came in and went out.
The deft little sentences seemed to build up a	pagoda;	sparely but accurately;
The	pagoda	floated off.

⁴⁴³ Lines 1-2: Virginia Woolf, 'The Diary of a Lady-in-Waiting' (*Times Literary Supplement*, 23 July 1908), in E 1, p. 197; line 3: Woolf, 'Modes and Manners of the Nineteenth Century' (*Times Literary Supplement*, February 1910), in E 1, p. 333; lines 4-5: Woolf, VO, p. 99; line 6: Woolf, 'Kew Gardens' (1919), in CSF, p. 95; line 7: Woolf, ND, p. 237; line 8: Woolf, 'Thunder at Wembley' (*Nation & Athenaeum*, 28 June 1924), in E 3, p. 412; line 9: Woolf, 'Ode Written Partly in Prose on Seeing the Name of Cutbush Above a Butcher's Shop in Pentonville' (1934), in CSF, p. 238; lines 10-11: Woolf, 'Life Itself' (*Nation & Athenaeum*, 20 August 1927), in E 4, p. 443; lines 12-14: Woolf, O, p. 25; lines 15-16: Woolf, AROO, p. 71; lines 17-18: Woolf, W, p. 102; lines 19-22: *ibid*, pp. 133, 208; lines 23-24: Woolf, Y, p. 302.

Appendix B

Hong Kong Woolf: A Poem

1. Private⁴⁴⁴

I hate Hong Kong.
which went on steadily about the slave trade
in H.K.;
After that she broke down, & the only cure
she said was to go to Hong Kong & stay with Bella.
which I mechanically turn off upon Bella:
who is now Queen of Hong Kong.
The only people in the hotel were purple-
faced majors from Hong Kong, and rather dishevelled, slightly vinous ladies,
They never go out without meeting some one
from Hong Kong,

2. Public⁴⁴⁵

Dress fabrics, rope, table linen, old masters,
sugar, wheat, filigree silver, pepper, birds'
nests (edible, and exported to Hong Kong), camphor, bees-wax, rattans, and the rest –
why trouble to ask the price?

⁴⁴⁴ Line 1: Virginia Woolf, 16 July 1932, in D 4, p.117. Lines 2-3: *ibid.* Lines 4-5: Woolf, 27 April 1935, in D 4, p. 306. Lines 6-7: Woolf, 22 June 1935, in D 4, p. 325. Lines 8-9: Woolf, 21 May 1936, Letter to Katherine Arnold-Forster, in L 6, p. 41. Lines 10-11: Woolf, 22 July 1936, Letter to Vanessa Bell, in L 6, p. 58.

⁴⁴⁵ Lines 1-3: Virginia Woolf, 'Thunder at Wembley', *Nation & Athenaeum* (1924), in E 3, p. 411.