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VIRGINIA WOOLF AND POST-IMPRESSIONISM: FRENCH ART, ENGLISH THEORY, AND FEMINIST PRACTICE[1]

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"On or about" November 1910, Roger Fry invented the term post-impressionism to describe the departure from impressionism by French-based artists "out of the cul-de-sac into which naturalism had led them" (MacCarthy 1910: 10). Desmond MacCarthy, the secretary to Fry's notorious exhibition, "Manet and the post-impressionists", recalls that here "for the first time the British public saw the works of Cézanne, Matisse, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Seurat, Picasso and other now familiar French painters. No gradual infiltration, but —bang! an assault along the whole academic front of art" (1945: 123). The spectacular colourism of this new French art was the point at which the assault was most brutally felt by the many hostile members of the public and outraged critics who came to deride the exhibition.

When reactionary critics were not pouring scorn on the primitivism and insanity they saw represented on the walls of the Grafton, they were snorting in disbelief at the most obvious symptom to them of such degeneracy: the "barbaric" colours.[2] Most furore is aroused where women are depicted in exotic and "unnatural" colours:

> In a typical [Gauguin] hideous brown women, with purple hair and vitriolic faces, squat in the midst of a nightmare landscape of drunken palm trees, crude green grass, vermilion rocks, and numerous glaringly coloured excrescences impossible to identify. [...] A revolution to be successful must presumably revolve; but, undeniably clever as they often are, the catherine-wheel antics of the Post-Impressionists are not likely to wake many responsive chords in British breasts.[3]

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MacCarthy, summarily despatched to Europe by Fry for the paintings which were to fill the "stop-gap exhibition of modern foreign artists", witnessed on his return Fry's actual coining of the term post-impressionism for "a young journalist who was to help us with publicity": "Roger first suggested various terms like "expressionism", which aimed at distinguishing these artists from the impressionists; but the journalists wouldn't have that or any other of his alternatives. At last Roger, losing patience, said: "Oh, let's just call them post-impressionists; at any rate they came after the impressionists"" (1945: 124).

Cézanne, Gauguin and Van Gogh, the most prominently represented in the exhibition, were all by 1910 "long since dead" (Bowness 1979: 9).[4] A smaller sample of work by Fauves and Cubists such as Matisse and Picasso was shown to indicate the continuation of this newly defined school, but "the whole emphasis was thrown on to the old masters", as Benedict Nicolson observes. The living were not represented by their most recent, *avant-garde*, achievements; cubism in fact "was the most serious omission" (Nicolson 1951: 13). The exhibition, nevertheless marks 1910 as a defining moment in *avant-garde* aesthetics. It is the moment of European modernism's revolutionary impact on the practices of British artists, but it is also the moment when British formalist theories first emerge and shape the critical apparatus for modernism. Fry's neologism, Alan Bowness remarks, "is unusual, not only because it was invented 25 years after the art it describes, but because it was the invention of an English critic arranging an exhibition of modern French art" (1979: 9). Fry's historic exhibition is often cited to explain Virginia Woolf's enigmatic statement, in "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" (1924): "on or about December 1910 human character changed" (Woolf 1986-1990, 3: 421). Andrew McNeillie, for example, glosses Woolf's date with reference to the post-impressionist exhibition and the death of Edward VII (in Woolf 1986-1990, 3: 437). 1910 and the formalist aesthetics of Roger Fry and Clive Bell with which this date has become linked are also invoked in readings of *To the Lighthouse* (1927) to explain the painting practice of Lily Briscoe. It is worth noting that Bell's theory of "Significant Form" emerged with the second post-impressionist exhibition in 1912, but in retrospect has sometimes been conflated with Fry's formalism, and anachronistically associated by many Woolf critics with the 1910 exhibition. In what follows I will consider how 1910 saw other events surrounding the exhibition that we might acknowledge as relevant to Lily Briscoe's and Woolf's post-impressionism.

Contemporary critical reception of post-impressionism and Woolf's literary engagement with it, I suggest, is influenced by the suffragette

activism occurring at the time of the 1910 exhibition, culminating in "Black Friday", when a demonstration ended in violent assault upon most of its participants at the hands of the police. On 18 November 1910 (the post-impressionist exhibition opened ten days earlier on 8 November), Suffragettes massed to demonstrate at Westminster against the loss of the Conciliation Bill (proposing the enfranchisement of a narrow category of women) due to the crisis in Parliament and the imminent fall of the Asquith government. Mass assault and arrest followed. Woolf did not participate in the demonstration, but she did attend the huge rally at the Albert Hall in preparation for it a few days earlier (Woolf 1975-1980, 1: 438). What is of interest in this discussion is a wider critical argument over the significance of text and context: 1910 is a critical moment in the interpenetration of these spheres when the art on gallery walls was brought into dialogue with the political events on the streets outside. I will argue that (what amounts to) Woolf's manifesto on 1910 seems to resonate both with the formulations by Fry and Bell on European art and with the formulations and practices of British suffragist artists —I will look at the work of Mary Lowndes in particular– and that these two combined influences may be at work in Woolf's *Künstlerroman* of 1927.

Rita Felski, in *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, takes up some of the issues concerning text and context to arise from Toril Moi's notorious intervention (in *Sexual/ Textual Politics*) into feminist criticism and Woolf studies:

> Feminist theories of "textual politics" grounded in a modernist aesthetics —for example, the celebration of the writings of Virginia Woolf as radically subversive of patriarchal ideology— are thus open to criticismon the grounds that they continue to draw upon static oppositions between realism and modernism without taking into account the changing social meanings of textual forms. The assumption that the political value of a text can be read off from its aesthetic value as defined by a modernist paradigm, and that a text which employs experimental techniques is therefore more radical in its effects than one which relies on established structures and conventional language, is too simple. Such an assumption takes for granted an equivalence between automatized language and dominant ideology and between experimentalism and oppositionality, an equation which is abstract and ultimately formalist in its failure to theorize the contingent functions of textual forms in relation to socially differentiated publics at particular historical moments. [...] It is thus increasingly implausible to claim that aesthetic radicalism equals political radicalism and to ground a feminist politics of the text in an

> assumption of the inherently subversive effects of stylistic innovation. (1989: 161)

I want here to consider the "historical moment" of the inception of Fry's English formalism in relation to the context of the feminist political sphere and how this may inform "the changing social meanings" of Woolf's post-impressionist "textual forms".

First, it is useful to remind ourselves of the differences between earlier formalist approaches to *To the Lighthouse* and recent, textually based, feminist approaches which argue that Woolf's "stylistic innovation" is somehow "inherently subversive" and feminist. David Daiches, for example, an early commentator on Woolf's novels, finds Lily Briscoe's vision, her completed painting at the close of *To the Lighthouse*, a unifying symbol that brings formal harmony to the novel:

> Symbolically, the past returns and shapes the present. Mrs Ramsay comes back into Lily Briscoe's picture, as she had been part of the original design ten years before, and out of this meeting of two very different personalities across the years the final insight results. Across the water at the same moment Mr Ramsay, by his praise of James's handling of the boat, is exorcising the ghost of James's early resentment, also ten years old, and all the threads of the story are finally coming together. It is a masterly piece of construction. (1945: 92)

Daiches also offers an interesting decoding of the novel's sophisticated language of colour. On the other hand, Makiko Minow-Pinkney, one of the first critics to rise to Moi's more recent challenge and offer a book length study of Woolf's work, based on the theories of Kristeva, Derrida, and Lacan, finds the same painting a celebration of the *loss* and *impossibility* of unifying symbolic meaning. Interestingly, Minow-Pinkney's sexual/ textual reading does gesture toward historical context too:

> Lily's line represents an unsurpassable bar between lived experience and the symbolic order, which always objectively exists but comes to subjective consciousness as the result of a historical "fall" from the plenitude of the Ramsays to the dearth suffered by the post-war generation. It is the necessary condition of the subject as such, and reacts back to interrogate the symbolic visions of the first half of the novel. The book's ambivalent attitude to this bar or gap is finally grounded in the daughter's fraught relation to the mother. Mrs Ramsay's death is the bleak loss of the possibility of total meaning, yet it also reveals an arbitrariness in the sign which reduces even her impressive symbols into fictional constructs with no compelling authority over the next generation. (1987: 116)

Whether interpreted as symbolically unifying or disruptive and deconstructive, Lily's picture is usually understood as a homologue for the novel in which it appears (Stevenson 1992: 165). Let us now look at one of the most cited passages in *To the Lighthouse*, where Lily Briscoe explains to William Bankes how to read her modernist painting. It is often argued that this is also a lesson in how to read modernist literature and *To the Lighthouse* itself. The novel describes Lily's erection of her easel while all around her people are reading and reciting literature. Mr Ramsay nearly knocks down Lily and her picture as he recites Tennyson's "Charge of the Light Brigade"; Mrs Ramsay is reading aloud to her son a Grimms' fairy tale; later Mr and Mrs Ramsay read privately and silently from Scott and Shakespeare; later still Mr Carmichael's bedtime reading of Virgil is noted; and in Part Three he reads from a Yellow Period novel, while Mr Ramsay is busy reading a book as the boat reaches the lighthouse and as Lily finishes her (second) painting. All the works of literature named are by male authors. Like the many pictorial analogies, these elements feed into the self-consciously aesthetic quality of *To the Lighthouse*, but they also suggest a tension between Lily's creative activity and the other characters' readerly activities. Lily has to fight for the space to make her new text. Her visual art intervenes in the midst of all these (patriarchal) literary texts. Lily also distinguishes her aesthetics from the impressionistic art of the French-sounding Mr Paunceforte:

> The jacmanna was bright violet; the wall was staring white. She would not have considered it honest to tamper with the bright violet and staring white, since she saw them like that, fashionable though it was, since Mr Paunceforte's visit, to see everything pale, elegant, semi-transparent. (1927: 34)

She seems to find Mr Paunceforte's aesthetics as distasteful as she will later find those of Mrs Beckwith, "that kind old lady who sketched" whom she recalls for her repugnantly compliant domestic politics towards Mr Ramsay (1927: 236). Mrs Beckwith is precisely the kind of domesticated, patriarchal, woman artist that Lily wants to avoid being positioned as —or mistaken for— when she sets up her easel.

> Taking out a penknife, Mr Bankes tapped the canvas with the bone handle. What did she wish to indicate by the triangular purple shape, "just there?" he asked. It was Mrs Ramsay reading to James, she said. She knew his objection —that no one could tell it for a human shape. But she had made no attempt at likeness, she said. For what reason had she introduced them then? he asked. Why indeed? —except that if there, in that corner, it was bright, here, in this, she felt the need of darkness. Simple, obvious, commonplace, as it was, Mr Bankes was interested. Mother and child then —objects of universal veneration, and in this case the mother was famous for her beauty— might be reduced, he pondered, to a purple shadow without irreverence. But the picture was not of them, she said. Or, not in his sense. There were other senses, too, in which one might reverence them. By a shadow here and a light there, for instance. Her tribute took that form, if, as she vaguely supposed, a picture must be a tribute. A mother and child might be reduced to a shadow without irreverence. A light here required a shadow there. He considered. He was interested. He took it scientifically in complete good faith. The truth was that all his prejudices were on the other side, he explained. The largest picture in his drawing-room, which painters had praised, and valued at a higher price than he had given for it, was of the cherry trees in blossom on the banks of the Kennet. He had spent his honeymoon on the banks of the Kennet, he said. Lily must come and see that picture, he said. But now —he turned, with his glasses raised to the scientific examination of her canvas. The question being one of the relations of masses, of lights and shadows, which, to be honest, he had never considered before, he would like to have it explained —what then did she wish to make of it? And he indicated the scene before them. She looked. She could not show him what she wished to make of it, could not see it even herself, without a brush in her hand. She took up once more her old painting position with the dim eyes and the absent-minded manner, subduing all her impressions as a woman to something much more general [...]. It was a question, she remembered, how to connect this mass on the right hand with that on the left. [...] She stopped; she did not want to bore him; she took the canvas lightly off the easel. (1927: 84-85)

Significantly, when Lily is asked to explain her work —formulate a theory for how to read her text— she in fact stops painting (she does not pick up her brush again in the novel until Part Three after the passing of ten years of upheavals). Furthermore, in explaining to her male audience the "question" of "relations of masses, of lights and shadows" in terms of significant form, she

is described as "subduing" in the process, "all her impressions *as a woman* to something much more general" (my italics). This suggests she may be masking some feminist import to her visual aesthetic practice which is at odds with the abstract verbal explanation she offers to a man. It also seems that Lily's striking colourism becomes subdued as she offers her formalist interpretation (the purple triangle becomes a shadow in the above passage).

What is important for most critics about this exchange between Lily Briscoe and William Bankes, however, is that it seems to echo quite straightforwardly the aesthetic theories of Roger Fry and Clive Bell. In connection with this, close attention is often paid to Woolf's letter to Fry on how she imagines *To the Lighthouse* should be read:

> I meant "*nothing*" by The Lighthouse. One has to have a central line down the middle of the book to hold the design together. I saw that all sorts of feelings would accrue to this, but I refused to think them out, and trusted that people would make it the deposit for their own emotions —which they have done, one thinking it means one thing another another. I can't manage symbolism except in this vague, generalised way. Whether it's right or wrong I don't know, but directly I'm told what a thing means, it becomes hateful to me. (1975-1980, 3: 385)

Here Woolf seems to be courting Fry in his own aesthetic terms. But following the exchange between Briscoe and Bankes, perhaps Woolf too is "subduing all her impressions as a woman to something much more general". She does indeed often use vocabulary picked up from her painter friends to talk about her literary works as, for example, where she says in an earlier letter to Fry: "I'm not sure that a perverted plastic sense doesn't work itself out in words for me" (1975-1980, 2: 285). "Plastic" is a key term for Fry; and we can see how close Woolf's and Lily's apparently generalising vision is to his from the following extract from his *Vision and Design* (1920):

> The greatest object of art becomes of no more significance than any casual piece of matter; a man's head is no more and no less important than a pumpkin, or, rather, these things may be so or not according to the rhythm that obsesses the artist and crystallises his vision. Since it is the habitual practice of the artist to be on the lookout for these peculiar arrangements of objects that arouse the creative vision, and become material for creative contemplation, he is liable to look at all objects from this point of view. [...] It is irrelevant to ask him, while he is looking with this

> generalised and all-embracing vision, about the nature of the objects which compose it. (1920: 52)

The "objects of universal veneration" Bankes sees "reduced [...] to a purple shadow without irreverence" are close to the objects arousing Fry's "creative vision". It may well be that the "something much more general" which subdues Lily's feminism, then, is Fry's "generalised and all-embracing vision".

The 1910 post-impressionist exhibition catalogue was not in fact written by Fry. MacCarthy, ventriloquising Fry, anonymously performed "the ticklish job of writing the preface" (MacCarthy 1945: 124), according to which the post-impressionist artist's individual expression is at odds with the naturalistic project of the impressionists. The latter "were interested in analysing the play of light and shadow into a multiplicity of distinct colours; they refined upon what was already illusive in nature" (MacCarthy 1910: 8). Impressionism, then, is concerned with pushing analysis of the object world to the limits. The post-impressionists use larger, flatter areas of colour in departing from their technique and their naturalism. Lily Briscoe's famous preoccupation with the centrality of a tree in her composition perhaps signals a nod to MacCarthy's preface:

> Impressionism encouraged an artist to paint a tree as it appeared to him at the moment under particular circumstances. It insisted so much upon the importance of rendering this exact impression that his work often completely failed to express a tree at all; as transferred to canvas it was just so much shimmer and colour. The "treeness" of the tree was not rendered at all; all the emotion and associations such as trees may be made to convey in poetry were omitted[...]. And there is no denying that the work of the post-impressionists is sufficiently disconcerting. It may even appear ridiculous to those who do not recall the fact that a good rocking-horse often has more of the true horse about it than an instantaneous photograph of a Derby winner. (1910: 8)

This distinction between impressionism and post-impressionism is sometimes lost to critics who confuse the two when reading Woolf, and refer to her work as impressionist, particularly when invoking the famous "luminous halo" passage from "Modern Fiction" (1919). Bankes' prized picture of "cherry trees in blossom on the banks of the Kennet" seems close to MacCarthy's definition of impressionism, whereas Lily's purple triangle and final central line are more in keeping with his post-impressionism.

Interestingly MacCarthy associates the latter with the achievements of poetry.

Clive Bell's theory of "Significant Form" is not the same as Roger Fry's formalism, but these theories evolved in close proximity, sometimes converging but sometimes diverging. Bell first used his famous term "Significant Form" in the 1912 exhibition catalogue to introduce the work of English artists converted to post-impressionism by the European masters on show in the 1910 exhibition. Like MacCarthy, he too finds literary analogy helpful:

> For the second post-impressionist Exhibition I have been asked to choose a few English pictures, and to say something about them. Happily, there is no need to be defensive. The battle is won. We all agree, now, that any form in which an artist can express himself is legitimate, and the more sensitive perceive that there are things worth expressing that could never have been expressed in traditional forms. We have ceased to ask "What does this picture represent?" and ask instead, "What does it make us feel?" We expect a work of plastic art to have more in common with a piece of music than with a coloured photograph. [...] What I mean by "simplification" is obvious. A literary artist who wishes to express what he feels for a forest thinks himself under no obligation to give an account of its flora and fauna. The post-impressionist claims similar privileges: those facts that any one can discern for himself or discover in a text book he leaves to the makers of Christmas-cards and diagrams. He simplifies, omits details, that is to say, to concentrate on something more important –on the significance of form. (1912: 9)

Bell distinguishes the high art of post-impressionism from mundanities such as greeting card illustration or diagram making; and in his highly influential book, *Art*, two years later, he extends his theory of "significant form" to account not just for post-impressionist art, but for "*all*" art:

> There must be some one quality without which a work of art cannot exist; possessing which, in the least degree, no work is altogether worthless. What is this quality? What quality is shared by all objects that provoke our aesthetic emotions? What quality is common to 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? Only one answer seems possible —significant form. In each, lines and colours combined in a particular way, certain forms

> and relations of forms, stir our aesthetic emotions. These relations and combinations of lines and colours, these aesthetically moving forms, I call "significant form"; and "significant form" is the one quality common to all works of visual art. (1914: 7-8)

The qualities of post-impressionism as first defined by English theorists to describe French art of the turn of the century are now extended to embrace a universal aesthetic theory. Bell also comments on colour in relation to significant form, suggesting "the distinction between form and colour" to be "unreal": you cannot conceive a colourless line or a colourless space; neither can you conceive a formless relation of colours. [...] When I speak of significant form, I mean a combination of lines and colours (counting white and black as colours) that moves me aesthetically" (1914: 7-8). For Bell colour is in fact form, and therefore presumably structural. Yet he persists in maintaining the distinction between "lines and colours" while claiming their congruity. The power of colour is subsumed in the abstract notion of significant form. As an aspect of pure form, colour is deprived of all meaning except the mystically emotional. Bell develops the notion of the spiritual dimension of significant form into a full blown religion of art. He closes *Art* with a vision of "aesthetic rapture":

> the religion of art will serve a man better than the religion of humanity. [...] What he loses in philanthropy he may gain in magnanimity; and because his religion does not begin with an injunction to love all men, it will not end, perhaps, in persuading him to hate most of them. (1914: 292-293)

This is the source of the transcendent aesthetic often attributed to Woolf's Bloomsbury-based modernism.

Allen McLaurin's excellent and influential study of Woolf and the visual arts examines Lily Briscoe's painting technique with close reference to the theories of Roger Fry, but Clive Bell's theories also influence his discussion, and are evident in such terms as "formal significance" and "emotionally significant" employed in his discussion of the exchange between Bankes and Briscoe. Citing the passage given above from Fry's *Vision and Design*, McLaurin finds that "in [their] discussion Lily speaks for precisely this habitual vision of the artist" whereas

> William Bankes is one of those people who, in Fry's terms, would say of a landscape "What a nice place" instead of "What a good picture". William's other criteria, the unaesthetic ones of size and monetary value, are also very much those which Roger Fry constantly rejected [...]. William also brings into the discussion irrelevant private emotional associations: "He had spent his honeymoon on the banks of the Kennet, he said. Lily must come and see that picture, he said." The kind of abstraction that Lily is concerned with is very different from the scientific examination which he is used to. Her abstraction can only be conveyed in paint, it can only be expressed with her paintbrush [...]. It is only in the actual making of the work of art that she realises what she wants to "say". Mrs Ramsay's distinguished presence and Lily's affection for her are very important in the novel, but Lily as painter must select only the formal visual aspects of her experience, and so Mrs Ramsay becomes a purple triangle. The equivalent problem for Virginia Woolf herself was the transmutation of her knowledge of her mother and father into the characters of Mr and Mrs Ramsay. The careful balancing which we can see in their portrayal gives them a *formal significance* which is more generally valid than a straight autobiography or biography would be. There is a careful selection and abstraction here which is *emotionally significant*. (1973: 192; my italics)

McLaurin looks closely at Woolf's colour references and also examines her infamous use of framing brackets with reference to the visual arts. His is the standard, orthodox reading of Woolf's post-impressionism. It concentrates on the influence of the male theorists closest to Woolf and ignores that of women colleagues in Bloomsbury and the issue of feminism altogether. More recently, scholars such as Diane Filby Gillespie have turned attention to Woolf's artist sister, Vanessa Bell, but the aesthetic influence of Woolf's feminist sisters in the suffrage movement has still to be more fully explored.

"On or about" *September* 1910 the suffrage artist Mary Lowndes published a manifesto-style essay, "On Banners and Banner Making". Lowndes was the chief suffragist artist, responsible for organising the banners and colours and floats in the suffragist demonstrations which dominated the political sphere in the years before the Great War:

> Great numbers of banners have been seen of late in the streets of London: some beautiful in themselves, many picturesque in effect, and some indifferently ugly and dreary. Banners, however, of one sort and another have evidently become associated with the appearance of women in public life, and it seems likely that they

> will continue to be associated, to the great gain of our colourless streets and hitherto sober political gatherings. (1910a: 172-173)

Although "political colours" are not new, Lowndes says, "now with the new century has come to fruition a new thing, and colour has a fresh significance. What is the new thing? Political societies started by women, managed by women and sustained by women" (1910a: 172-173). Significantly, by 1910, then, feminism and colourism are powerfully connected.

"The best known suffrage colours are the purple, white and green of the WSPU [the Women's Social and Political Union]", as Lisa Tickner observes. "White was for purity, green for hope and purple for dignity. [...] Purple was sometimes given as "loyalty" or "courage" and green as "youth" or "regeneration" (1987: 265).[5] These colours were linked with the militant Women's Social and Political Union in particular and "the cause" in general. By no means the only colours of feminism, they were by far the most famous.[6] The suffrage colours were often displayed in opposition to the Union Jack: the purple, white and green became an alternative rallying point to the red white and blue. In keeping with this pseudo-militarism, Joan of Arc, armour-clad and sporting the purple white and green, was adopted as the patron saint of the suffragettes. "In all ages it has been woman's part to make the banners, if not to carry them", Lowndes explains. But this traditionally feminine art, "the divers colours of needle work", once woven "in honour and support of [woman's] favourite fighting hero", has been revived, not to sanction male warfare, but

> for the first time in history to illumine woman's own adventure. The oriflammes she made, the silken pennons of the knights, the gorgeous embroidery for the tourneys, the quaintly wrought histories of adventure —such as the Bayeux tapestry— were all in honour and support of her favourite fighting hero. [...] And now into public life comes trooping the feminine; and with the feminine creature come the banners of past times, as well as many other things which people had almost forgotten they were without. (1910a: 172, 173)

The meaning of the suffrage colours was not fixed, and shifted according to context, as Tickner observes: "So long as the concepts were positive the exact niceties of the symbolism were less important than the decorative impact of the colours and their effect in unifying the cause" (1987: 294). Tickner rightly stresses the general sense of the positive and unifying effects of these colours. Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, describing in 1909 the

intended impact and particular symbolism of the suffrage tricolour, emphasised its symbolic sense of "regeneration" (in Tickner 1987: 294). Feminists were repainting, reinventing, and restructuring the world anew. It may not be unreasonable to suppose that when *To the Lighthouse* appeared in 1927, the year before the full enfranchisement of women, the suffragette colours would not have been forgotten. The colours were established, as Pethick-Lawrence earlier proclaimed of the purple, white and green, as "a new language of which the words are so simple that their meaning can be understood by the most uninstructed and most idle of passers-by in the street" (in Tickner 1987: 94). It is precisely this "new language" of feminist colours that Woolf seems to take up in her work; and this feminist language of colours, I am suggesting, she locks onto a literary sense of post-impressionist colourism. The language of Lowndes' manifesto in particular may be discerned in Woolf's later feminist and aesthetic manifestos. For example, Lowndes' declaration that the feminist colours will "illumine woman's own adventure" seems to anticipate some of Woolf's phrasing in *A Room of One's Own* (1929): Mary Beton instructs Mary Carmichael, the aspiring novelist, "above all, you must illumine your own soul"; and *Life's Adventure* is the title of Mary Carmichael's novel (Woolf 1929: 135, 142). I will discuss possible similarities with "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" below.

In 1910 Lowndes describes the art of suffrage banner-making in terms uncannily similar to those of later post-impressionist theories: "A banner is not a literary affair, it is not a placard: leave such to boards and sandwichmen" (1910a: 174). Anticipating the flavour of Bell's 1912 observations on "the makers of Christmas-cards and diagrams", she identifies the non-verbal political significance of feminist colourism, while at the same time drawing on a discourse of aestheticism:

> A banner is a thing to float in the wind, to flicker in the breeze, to flirt its colours for your pleasure, to half show and half conceal a device you long to unravel; you do not want to read it, you want to worship it. Choose purple and gold for ambition, red for courage, green for long-cherished hopes. If above these glories of colour you write in great letters "Troy Town", that is not now a placard, it is a dedication. [...] Let us go, then, and make banners as required, and let them all be beautiful. (1910a: 174, 178)

Like Bell's (post-impressionist) art, these political banners are not to be decoded so much as worshipped, a point Lowndes interestingly emphasises with allusion to classical myth. "Troy Town" is Lowndes' fictional example of a patriarchal town in need of suffragist banners: "Imagine to yourself, my

reader, Miss Blank, the active Secretary of the newly-formed Branch Society of Troy Town" (1910a: 173). This allusion suggests the set of (patriarchal) myths associated with the Trojan war; and is in keeping with suffragist tastes for the reappropriation and refiguring of imagery from the powerful cultural sources of classical myth. Suffragist demonstrators not only employed mythic emblems but often dressed for parades and pageants as (in)famous heroines and goddesses from history and mythology (Tickner 1987: 125-126).

In another essay, "Modern Stained Glass", which appeared in *The Englishwoman* in *November* 1910, Mary Lowndes extols the colours in the east window of Cologne Cathedral, in terms that seem to anticipate Clive Bell's aesthetic raptures over "significant form":

> It is colour, wonderful colour, fraught with meaning and intent. It is intelligible, but cannot be explained; it is devotional, and yet you can discern no form. It is no more capable of literary description than the voice of the organ would be were Beethoven seated at the organ. Approach it closely, and the wonder fades; look at it as it was intended to be looked at as crowning and finishing that wondrous choir, and you feel that imperfect indeed would be the great church without the glory and the mystery of its east windows. (1910b 57-58)

Lowndes' own aesthetic raptures over colour resonate with the rhetoric of her earlier essay, in the same journal, on suffragist colours. Very soon after, again in the pages of *The Englishwoman*, Lowndes published one of the few positive reviews of "Manet and the post-impressionists". She singles out Gauguin for her focus. His colourism, so offensive to post-impressionism's detractors (Dunlop 1972: 146), meets with her warm approval:

> His glowing patches of colour have a marvellous quality of subdued light, as though, indeed, the rays of the sun were truly veiled and controlled by them as they are by passing through the semi-transparent glass of a thirteenth-century church window. [...] In certain ancient glass a deep flesh-tone of a brown or pinkish brown is used, and this low tone [...] has a marvellous effect in harmonising and subduing colours that might in different company have been violent and even offensive. [...] Gauguin has found the secret in the isles of the Pacific, and, with his wonderful bronze flesh-tones, we find him also in full possession of the glorious glass colours which the old glass-blowers of eight hundred years ago began to make, and which Nature has finished in her own laboratory with water, wind, and the dust of the earth. (1911: 183-184)

Perhaps it is not only her interest in stained glass, but also her experience as organiser of suffrage colours, that makes Lowndes sympathetic to Gauguin's palette.

Woolf's elaboration on her choice of 1910 as a significant date is worth careful consideration in the light of British suffragist as well as European-inspired post-impressionist aesthetics. 1910's shift in human relations, represented in the work of Samuel Butler and Bernard Shaw, Woolf sees symbolised in the figure of "one's cook": "The Victorian cook lived like a leviathan in the lower depths, formidable, silent, obscure, inscrutable; the Georgian cook is a creature of sunshine and fresh air; in and out of the drawing room, now to borrow the *Daily Herald*, now to ask advice about a hat" (1986-1990, 3: 422). The imagery of a woman servant emerging leviathan-like from the dark depths of the kitchen into sunlight may suggest a shift from women's dark, subliminal, creaturely existence to luminous, colourful liberation. Compare Mrs. McNab's depiction as "a tropical fish, oaring its way through sun-lanced rocks" (Woolf 1927: 206). Woolf's vocabulary is similar to that of Mary Lowndes's 1910 essay on suffrage colourist banner-making: "now into public life comes trooping the feminine; and with the feminine creature come the banners of past time" (Lowndes 1910a: 173). Incidentally, in 1913, in the *Daily Herald*, the newspaper Woolf, as an index of change since 1910, finds the cook borrowing, Christina Walshe declares of the second post-impressionist exhibition: "The post-impressionists are in the company of the great rebels of the world. In politics the only movements worth considering are woman suffrage and socialism. They are both post-impressionist in their desire to scrap old decaying forms and find for themselves a new working ideal" (in Spalding 1980: 139).

December 1910 may mean for Woolf, then, material improvement for women workers, and the emergence of women from intellectual darkness into prismatic enlightenment, from obscurity into public life. After the creaturely cook, Woolf gives a "more solemn instance [...] of the power of the human race to change" (1986-1990, 3: 422): a revised reading of the *Agamemnon*, in which "sympathies" (usually reserved for the patriarchal order sanctioned by Athena) may now be "almost entirely with Clytemnestra" (422), who avenged her daughter's death by murdering her husband Agamemnon on his return from the Trojan War. This classical allusion becomes more potently feminist when considered in relation to suffragist use of such imagery and Lowndes's references to "Troy Town" in 1910.

In asking us to consider the married life of the Carlyles, Woolf returns to the theme of women's servitude, perhaps mindful of the suffragette scorn for Thomas Carlyle (resulting in a cleaver attack on his portrait in the National Gallery) (Atkinson 1996: 163). He personifies "the horrible domestic tradition which made it seemly for a woman of genius to spend her time chasing beetles, scouring saucepans, instead of writing books" (Woolf 1986-1990, 3: 422). Woolf spells out this tradition's hierarchized, gendered, relations as she announces its demise: "All human relations have shifted —those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics and literature. Let us agree to place one of these changes about the year 1910" (1986-1990, 3: 422). The dramatic suffrage events of 1910 and the post-impressionist exhibition, "a shock to most people", according to Woolf (Woolf 1986-1990, 1: 379), provide political and artistic contexts for such change.

Woolf, of course, was aware of possible literary analogies to post-impressionism, something Fry himself encouraged (Woolf 1940: 180, 183). Arnold Bennett makes such a challenge in his (like Lowndes's) unusually favourable review of "Manet and the post-impressionists" (1917: 284-285), which Woolf in turn reviewed: "These new pictures, he says, have wearied him of other pictures; is it not possible that some writer will come along and do in words what these men have done in paint?" (Woolf 1986-1990, 2: 130). Woolf takes up Bennett's gauntlet, I suggest, and effects some feminist literary innovations, analogous to post-impressionism, and based primarily on the use of colour. Her review of Bennett, as McNeillie notes, "appeared in the same month as that in which Woolf published her experimental story "The Mark on the Wall" and, probably, shortly before she began to write *Kew Gardens*" (1986-1990, 2: 132), but her particular kind of feminist literary post-impressionism comes to fruition —after her meditations on 1910 in "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown"— some years later in *To the Lighthouse*.

The range of colours in Lily's palette as she attempts her picture of Mrs Ramsay suggests a post-impressionist mosaic of prismatic oppositional planes but also allows a flickering glimpse of suffragist colours. Consider the "bright violet" of the jacmanna and the "staring white" of the wall (Woolf 1927: 34), "the grass still a soft deep green, the house starred in its greenery with purple passion flowers" (35), as well as Mrs Ramsay's depiction as purple triangle and her much discussed green shawl (47). Compare Charles Tansley's earlier view of Mrs Ramsay "against a picture of Queen Victoria wearing the blue ribbon of the Garter"; she has "stars in her eyes and veils in her hair, with cyclamen and wild violets" (27). In departing from the Victorian pre-Raphaelite version of ethereal femininity that Mrs Ramsay seems to present to Tansley who insists "women can't write, women can't paint" (134-135), Lily offers a feminist transfiguration of this patriarchal image which is in keeping with both post-impressionist and suffrage aesthetics. "Use the old symbols always when they will serve", Lowndes advises, "but try and use them in a new way; for it is a new thing we are doing" (1910a: 177).

NOTES

[1] This essay expands on material taken from my book, *The Feminist Aesthetics of Virginia Woolf: Modernism, Post-Impressionism and the Politics of the Visual*. Cambridge: Cambridge U. P. 1998.

[2] Robert Ross's "The Post-Impressionists at the Grafton: The Twilight of the Idols". In *Morning Post*, 7 (November 1910). In Bullen, J. B. (ed.).: 102.

[3] Unsigned review, "Paint Run Mad: Post-Impressionism at the Grafton Galleries". In *Daily Express*, 9 (November 1910). In Bullen, J. B. (ed.).: 105-106.

[4] Bowness also points out the instability of the term, post-impressionism, which has since come to describe a much broader (and contradictory) range of art: "Almost 60 years later we have agreed that "post-impressionism" can now be meaningfully applied to the later work of other great Impressionists —notably Degas, Monet, Renoir and Pissarro— who were all specifically excluded by Fry; and more widely still to painting in France and western Europe which reflects an awareness of Impressionism and seeks to move away from and beyond it" (1979: 9).

[5] Tickner quotes from Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, "The Purple, White and Green". In Programme, Prince's Skating Rink Exhibition (London, 1909).

[6] The colours were first thought of by Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence in preparation for the "Woman's Sunday" rally of 21 June 1908. They "were not selected until the middle of May, but according to Sylvia Pankhurst had "achieved a nation-wide familiarity before the month was out". By the 21st they were marked indelibly and politically on the public mind: to see them was to be reminded of the WSPU and its campaign; they were its tricolour, its regimental colours" (Tickner 1987: 265).

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