

**The Presence of the Past: Medieval Encounters in the Writing of  
Virginia Woolf and Lynette Roberts**

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## Abstract

This thesis starts from the premise that medievalism is an important yet under-recognised seam in British modernist culture. Untangling and examining the medieval threads that weave throughout the modern interest in the new, I supply an important link in the chain connecting modernism to postmodernism. Specifically, I consider medievalism through the lens of gender. Suggesting that women's prolific engagement with medieval culture during the modernist period has been mysteriously neglected, I illuminate modernist women writers' creative engagement with the Middle Ages by focusing on two writers in particular – Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) and Lynette Roberts (1909-1995). By means of historicist cultural analysis and close reading, I show that the Middle Ages emerge in their work as an important imaginative structure for thinking about questions of war, gender, and national identity.

My central argument is that Woolf's and Roberts's representations of medieval culture are strongly implicated in their wider reassessment of national identity and women's relation to national tradition in the first part of the twentieth century. Re-visioning the Middle Ages from a new angle, Woolf and Roberts recast the foundational myths on which the categories of gender and national identity were based. This project, as I see it, is twofold: recuperating a female-oriented past through a close attention to the 'details of life', and inventing a tradition for use in the present day. Returning to the Middle Ages, Roberts and Woolf salvage a 'usable past' with which to construct a new form of national culture for the future – one that admits women and 'outsiders like ourselves'.

There is a political, recuperative impulse behind my decision to pair Woolf, a modernist who is ubiquitous and canonical, with Roberts, a writer who, partly due to her gender and Welsh affiliations, remains an obscure and marginalized voice even today. Establishing a dialogue between Roberts's ethnographic poetry and Woolf's poetical prose, I use Roberts's positioning on the cultural margins in order to attain new purchase on Woolf's complex approaches to empire and national belonging. On the other hand, Woolf's feminist polemics help to uncover the feminist components of Roberts's cultural vision, indicating the ways in which her feminism intersects with her nationalist and socialist commitments.

I show that, in spite of their cultural differences, Roberts and Woolf both use the medieval past in order to articulate those marginalised experiences, at once 'travelling' and 'native', that remain unassimilated to the colonial experience. While, for Roberts, the act of

historical re-writing opens out the possibility for a new, postcolonial awakening for Wales, for Woolf, it provides the basis for reconceiving the nation on new 'common ground' for the postwar future.

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## Introduction

### Virginia Woolf, Lynette Roberts and the Presence of the Past

We stand on the last promontory of the centuries! ...Why should we look back, when what we want is to break down the mysterious doors of the Impossible? Time and Space died yesterday. We already live in the absolute, because we have created eternal, omnipresent speed.<sup>1</sup>

Filippo Tommasini Marinetti, *Futurist Manifesto*

Published in 1909, Filippo Tommasini Marinetti's *Futurist Manifesto* called for a new form of art that, energetic and violent in form, would liberate itself from the ties of the past in order to propel itself into a technological future. For Marinetti, modernist creation is predicated on the destruction of history. Declaring that '[w]e will destroy the museums, libraries, academies of every kind', he announces that a primary aim of Futurism is to free Italy from the reign of 'the numberless museums that cover her like so many graveyards'.<sup>2</sup> National tradition, in his view, spelt stasis and death: throwing away the heavy baggage that bound one to place and to the past was, for Marinetti, the only way truly to *live*.

In light of pronouncements such as Marinetti's, medievalism and modernism have for a long time been considered a contradiction in terms. The critical consensus, for much of the twentieth century at least, held that Ezra Pound's famous dictum 'make it new' set the standard for a modernism based on transformation, novelty, and abandonment of the past.<sup>3</sup> Writing in 1933, Herbert Read argued that in modernist art, 'we are now concerned, not with a logical development of the art of painting in Europe, not even with a development for which there is a historical parallel, but with an abrupt break with all tradition', noting that

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<sup>1</sup> Filippo Tommasini Marinetti, 'The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism', trans. by R.W. Flint and Arthur A. Coppotelli, in *Marinetti: Selected Writings* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1972), pp. 39-44 (p. 41).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>3</sup> Malcolm Bradbury and James Macfarlane, *Modernism, 1890-1930* (Hassocks, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1978), pp. 19-23.

‘the aim of five centuries of European effort is openly abandoned’.<sup>4</sup> This conception of modernism continued to hold sway at mid-century: in an inaugural lecture delivered in Cambridge in 1954, C.S. Lewis asserted that

I do not think that any previous age produced work which was, in its own time, as shatteringly and bewilderingly new as that of the Cubists, the Dadaists, the Surrealists, and Picasso has been in ours. And I am quite sure this is true [...] of poetry [...]. I do not see how anyone can doubt that modern poetry is not only a greater novelty than any other ‘new poetry’ but new in a new way, almost in a new dimension.<sup>5</sup>

For critics such as Read and Lewis, modernist art and literature enacted a dramatic ‘shattering’ of history and tradition. In this regard, they reiterated the views of the modernists themselves, many of whom, like Marinetti, saw modernist culture in terms of revolutionary newness. In her 1925 essay ‘How it Strikes a Contemporary’, Virginia Woolf suggests that modern literature is necessarily oriented toward the present, for:

We are sharply cut off from our predecessors. A shift in the scale – the sudden slip of masses held in position for ages – has shaken the fabric from top to bottom, alienated us from the past and made us perhaps too vividly conscious of the present. Every day we find ourselves doing, saying, or thinking things that would have been impossible to our fathers. And we feel the differences which have not been noted far more keenly than the resemblances which have been very perfectly expressed.<sup>6</sup>

As Woolf makes clear in her critical essays, for the new generation of modernists writing in Britain in the wake of World War I, the tools of their nineteenth-century forebears – realism, aestheticism, historicism – no longer seemed capable of expressing the massive ‘shift in [social] scale’ and unprecedented ‘structures of feeling’ that defined life in a mass, technological society.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, modernist writers’ and artists’ seeming disavowal of history in favour of the ‘now’ was partly bound up in their desire to break away from the legacy of

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<sup>4</sup> Herbert Read, *Art Now: An Introduction to the Theory of Modern Painting and Sculpture*, rev. edn (1933; London: Faber & Faber, 1960), p. 88.

<sup>5</sup> C.S. Lewis, ‘*De Descriptione Temporum: An Inaugural Lecture*’ (Cambridge, 1955), in C.S. Lewis, *They Asked for a Paper* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1962), pp. 9-25.

<sup>6</sup> Virginia Woolf, ‘How it Strikes a Contemporary’, in *Virginia Woolf: Selected Essays*, ed. by David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 23-31 (p. 27).

<sup>7</sup> The term is Raymond Williams’s; see Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 132.

Victorian culture. The Victorians had been obsessed with history: evolutionary, geological, political, biographical, or folkloric. As indicated in Marinetti's *Manifesto*, the museum became in the modernist imagination the emblem of the nineteenth-century mania for collecting and codifying the past.<sup>8</sup> It is fitting, therefore, that medievalism – the imaginative engagement with ideas and forms identified with the Middle Ages – emerged as a pre-eminent cultural and aesthetic paradigm in Britain over the course of the nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> From one perspective, medievalism could be seen to stand for all that the modernists wished to destroy and transcend; rejecting the Victorian worship of the medieval past, with all of its sentimentalism, nostalgia, and decadent decorativeness, was to declare freedom from a nineteenth-century culture identified by Michel Foucault with 'an ever-accumulating past, with its great preponderance of great men and menacing glaciation of the world'.<sup>10</sup>

However, violent rejections often imply a lingering attachment to what is being rejected, and indeed, critics such as Read and Lewis could be said to take the modernists' own self-mythologies at face value. In recent years, a number of scholars, including Jane Garrity, Alexandra Harris, Paul Robichaud, and Bruce Holsinger, have begun to call attention to the tangible, tangled thread of what Garrity terms 'neo-medievalism' running through the modernist interest in the new.<sup>11</sup> As Larry Scanlon has pointed out, Ezra Pound, 'modernism's greatest impresario', was also a 'frustrated medievalist' who kick-started his literary career in

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<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', *Diacritics*, 16.1 (1986), 22-27 (p. 22).

<sup>9</sup> Michael Alexander describes medievalism as 'the offspring of two impulses: the recovery by antiquarians and historians of materials for the study of the Middle Ages; and the imaginative adoption of medieval ideas and forms'. Michael Alexander, *Medievalism: The Middle Ages in Modern England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), p. xxii. In this thesis, I focus on the latter impulse, but I also show how each component of medievalism – the scholarly and the imaginative – are always implicated in the other.

<sup>10</sup> Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', p. 22.

<sup>11</sup> Jane Garrity, *Step-daughters of England: British Women Modernists and the National Imaginary* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 243; Alexandra Harris, *Romantic Moderns* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2010), pp. 7-37 (p. 4); Paul Robichaud, *Making the Past Present: David Jones, the Middle Ages, and Modernism* (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007); Bruce Holsinger, *The Premodern Condition: Medievalism and the Making of Theory* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005).



1910 with a book on the poetry of the medieval French troubadours, *The Spirit of Romance*.<sup>12</sup> T.S. Eliot, another paradigmatic Anglo-American Modernist, was deeply influenced by Dante throughout his literary career, and his later works in particular often engage with medieval themes and texts: his play *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) dramatizes the assassination of Thomas à Becket in 1170, while his poem *Little Gidding* (1942) invokes the writings of fourteenth-century mystic Julian of Norwich.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Pound's and Eliot's early poetic personae could be seen to be modelled after the troubadours – peripatetic artists singing, albeit ironically, of the landscapes and tragedies of their modern worlds.<sup>14</sup>

Recent historical surveys, namely David Matthews's *Medievalism: A Critical History* (2015) and Michael Alexander's *Medievalism: The Middle Ages in Modern England* (2007) present medievalism as a neglected cultural impulse that has nonetheless persisted in British art and literature since at latest the close of the Middle Ages. Matthews's study calls attention to what he sees as a continuous seam of medievalist thought and practices traceable from its early inception in the fifteenth century through to its latter-day incarnation in postmodern popular culture, detectable in 'films, computer games, graphic novels, music, (from folk to heavy metal), heritage and tourism'.<sup>15</sup> That the European Middle Ages continue to exert an imaginative hold on Western culture today is suggested by the runaway popularity of

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<sup>12</sup> Larry Scanlon, 'Modernism's Medievalism Imperative: The Hard Lessons of Ezra Pound's Hugh Selwyn Mauberley', *American Literary History*, 22 (2010), 838-862 (p. 838).

<sup>13</sup> Jewel Spears Brooker, 'The Fire and the Rose: Theodicy in Eliot and Julian of Norwich', in *Julian of Norwich's Legacy: Medieval Mysticism and Post-Medieval Reception*, ed. by Sarah Salih and Denise N. Baker (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 69-86.

<sup>14</sup> *The Waste Land* famously invokes Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and Eliot's dedication of the poem to Pound as '*Il Miglior Fabbro*' (the better/best artisan or craftsman) borrows the words Dante uses to describe twelfth-century Occitan troubadour Arnaut Daniel. '*Il Miglior Fabbro*' is also the title of Pound's chapter on Daniel in the *Spirit of Romance*. These connections suggest that not only did Eliot and Pound imagine parallels between their literary ambitions and the writings of medieval authors Dante and Arnaut, but that their common interest in medieval texts served as a conduit for friendship and literary exchange between the two men. See T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, in *The Annotated Waste Land with Eliot's Contemporary Prose*, ed. by Lawrence Rainey, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 57.

<sup>15</sup> David Matthews, *Medievalism: A Critical History* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2015), p. 122.

television dramas such as *Game of Thrones* (2011-16), which is loosely based on the fifteenth-century Wars of the Roses, or *The Last Kingdom* (2015), set in 870s England.

While Alexander's study focuses on the high point of the 'medieval revival' in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it also argues that an imaginative engagement with the medieval past can be regarded as a significant subtext, not only to modernity in general, but to modernism in particular. Alexander contends that while Victorian medievalism ostensibly went into decline at the end of the nineteenth century following the deaths of William Morris, Edward Burne-Jones, Alfred, Lord Tennyson and John Ruskin, the Edwardian period saw a 'relaunch of medievalism, a second medievalist revival' which infused and intersected with the development of modernism in formally constitutive ways.<sup>16</sup> It can be argued on the basis of studies such as Matthews's or Alexander's that an awareness of British modernism's interaction with medievalism is crucial to a historicized understanding, not only of the complexity and development of modernism itself, but also to the emergence and resonance of popular and/or avant-garde streams of medievalism into the twentieth century, in Britain and beyond – the novels of J.R.R Tolkien, the revisionary folk tales of Angela Carter, or the historical imagination of Umberto Eco.

Yet the story of medievalism in modernist literature remains, at present, one-sided. While the premodern interests of figures such as Pound, Eliot, W.B. Yeats, James Joyce, and David Jones have been adequately documented, no full-length study has yet been made of women writers' and artists' approaches to medieval art, culture and history during the earlier twentieth century.<sup>17</sup> That the contribution of women to the emergence of medievalism as a

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<sup>16</sup> Alexander, p. 212.

<sup>17</sup> Alexander's study considers Chesterton, Yeats, Eliot, Pound, and David Jones, among other twentieth-century male authors, but, save scholar Jessie Weston, makes no reference to modernist women medievalists (indeed, the study as a whole is almost exclusively focused on men). Matthews's *Medievalism* also concentrates on male writers, tracing a genealogy that runs from antiquaries such as John Leland (c.1503-1552) and William Camden (1551-1623), through Romantic novelists such as Walter Scott (1771-1832) to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood of the mid nineteenth century.

vital cultural discourse during this period has been so neglected is all the more surprising, given the fact that it was women who played a central role in the excavation and dissemination of medieval culture at this time. The new generation of female scholars that emerged after higher education was opened up to women in the last quarter of the nineteenth century looked to the medieval past in order to perform what Jane Tompkins terms ‘cultural work’: a ‘monumental effort to re-organise culture from the woman’s point of view’.<sup>18</sup> Eileen Power’s seminal social history *Medieval People* (1924) and Jessie Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance* (1920) offer just two important examples of this female-oriented rewriting of medieval history: *Medieval People* used previously overlooked documents in order to piece together a social history focused on domestic life, while *From Ritual to Romance* drew on anthropological discourses in order to connect Arthurian Grail narratives with ancient matriarchal fertility rites.

The Middle Ages held wide appeal during the interwar years, and both Weston and Power’s books met with popular and critical success. *Medieval People* ran into ten editions and is still in print today, while the impact of *From Ritual to Romance* on *The Waste Land* is famously alluded to by Eliot in his notes to the poem.<sup>19</sup> Women writers in particular looked to these pioneering scholars as role models: Naomi Mitchison admired Eileen Power, while Bryher wrote of Jessie Weston that she ‘became the shining flag of all my rebellions. Besides, she was a woman, and where she had gone, I could follow’.<sup>20</sup> Representations of the medieval past feature importantly in the work of many British women writers of the first part

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<sup>18</sup> Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford, 1985), p. 83. See also Ruth Hoberman, *Gendering Classicism: The Ancient World in Women’s Twentieth Century Historical Fiction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 7. For more information on medieval women scholars of the modernist period, see *Women Medievalists and the Academy*, ed. by Jane Chance (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), and Leena Kore-Schröder, ‘Who’s Afraid of Rosamund Merridew? Reading Medieval History in “The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn”’, *Journal of the Short Story in English* [Online], 50 (2008), 1-11 (ejournal pagination) <<http://jsse.revues.org/719>>.

<sup>19</sup> Kore-Schröder, ‘Who’s afraid of Rosamund Merridew?’ pp. 3, 8.

<sup>20</sup> Bryher, *Heart to Artemis* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962), p. 135.

of the twentieth century; texts such as Mary Butts's Grail-themed text *Armed with Madness* (1928),<sup>21</sup> Sylvia Townsend Warner's novel *The Corner that Held Them* (1948), set in a fourteenth-century convent, and Naomi Mitchison's Arthurian re-writing, *To the Chapel Perilous* (1955), convey the range and ambition of modernist women writers' revisionary engagement with medieval tradition during this time.<sup>22</sup> In Wales, women's medieval re-writings gained momentum at a slightly later date,<sup>23</sup> but significantly, Dorothy Edwards was transposing narratives from the *Mabinogi* in her novel *Winter Sonata* (1928),<sup>24</sup> while Brenda Chamberlain devoted attention to the embedded medieval history of Bardsey Island in her novel *Tide-Race* (1962).<sup>25</sup> Drawing on Bruce Holsinger's analysis of the relation between twentieth-century French theory and medieval scholarship in his seminal study *The Premodern Condition* (2005), I suggest that modernist women writers' moments of literary originality operate in what Holsinger terms a 'sedimented relation' to the scholarly productions of female medieval historians, within a shared field of 'enunciative regularity'.<sup>26</sup>

This thesis seeks to illuminate modernist women writers' engagement with the Middle Ages by focusing on two writers in particular: Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) and Lynette Roberts (1909-1995). An imaginative engagement with the British Middle Ages, I suggest,

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<sup>21</sup> Mary Butts was influenced by both T.S. Eliot and Jessie Weston. Jane Garrity suggests that the mythopoeic *Armed with Madness* 'attempt[s] to evoke meaning by recuperating ancient archetypes, particularly those derived from Arthurian legend' (Garrity, p. 208).

<sup>22</sup> To this list should be added Enid Dinnis's novel *The Anchorhold: A Divine Comedy* (1922); loosely based on the life of fourteenth-century mystic Julian of Norwich. The popularity of this novel during the modernist period is testified by the fact that it reached its sixth imprint in 1934.

<sup>23</sup> This trend is exemplified by texts such as Rhiannon Davies Jones's *Lleian Llan-Llyr* (1965), an imagined account of the life of a nun in Wales in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, or Marion Eames's *Y Gaeaf Sydd Unig* (1982), a novel set in the reign of Llywelyn ap Gruffudd. Although the impulse towards historical re-writing took off slightly later among Welsh women writers, it shared the same revisionary ethos; Jane Aaron has called attention to feminist re-appropriations of the Blodeuwedd myth in the work of a wide range of English and Welsh-language writers, from Angharad Jones and Elin Llwyd to Gillian Clarke and Hilary Llewellyn Williams. See Jane Aaron, 'Y Flodeuwedd Gyfoes: LIên Menywod, 1973 1993', in *DiFfinio Dwy Lenyddiaeth Cymru*, ed. by M. Wynn Thomas (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1995), pp. 190-208.

<sup>24</sup> Claire Flay, *Dorothy Edwards* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), p. 66.

<sup>25</sup> Damian Walford Davies, *Cartographies of Culture: New Geographies of Welsh Writing in English* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002), p. 84.

<sup>26</sup> Holsinger, p. 20; Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. by A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972), p. 145.

forms a crucial yet under-recognised undercurrent to both Woolf's and Roberts's writing. By means of close reading, historicist cultural analysis, and an attention to psychoanalytical and poststructuralist theory, including models associated with French feminisms, I excavate the important medieval subtext to their aesthetics and political thought. My central argument is that both Woolf's and Roberts's representations of medieval culture are strongly implicated in their wider re-assessment of national identity and women's relation to national tradition. Re-writing medieval origins, I suggest, allows both writers to explore the dark spaces 'between the acts' of history, to give voice to women and other marginalised voices ignored by official, metropolitan British histories – what Woolf describes as the 'lives of the obscure'.<sup>27</sup> Roberts and Woolf similarly contest a Victorian tradition that saw the Middle Ages gendered as masculine and represented as 'Godlike and my fathers'', as an emblem of patrimony.<sup>28</sup> Instead, they identify the medieval past with domains often associated with women's experience – the everyday, the domestic, the sensual and tactile, presenting it as the harbour for a lost maternal legacy.

Writing in 1971, Adrienne Rich emphasised the importance of historical 're-vision' to women's creativity and sense of personal autonomy. For Rich, '[r]e-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival'.<sup>29</sup> I suggest that for Woolf and Roberts – writers who, while very different in terms of class and national affiliation, shared a context marked by the devastation of war and the radical unsettling of established social structures – re-writing the medieval past becomes an act of survival, a

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<sup>27</sup> See Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader, First Series*, ed. by Andrew McNeillie (1925; London: Vintage, 2003), p. 106.

<sup>28</sup> Alice Chandler, *A Dream of Order: The Medieval Ideal in Nineteenth-Century English Literature* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 1. The phrase is Thomas Carlyle's. For the implication of the Middle Ages in nationalist and gendered discourses during the nineteenth century, see Inga Bryden, 'Arthur in Victorian Poetry', in *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*, ed. by Helen Fulton (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), pp. 368-380 (p. 370).

<sup>29</sup> Adrienne Rich, 'When we Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision', *College English*, 34.1 (1972), 18-30 (p. 18).

response to a moment of acute personal and cultural crisis. Rich claims that historical re-vision is crucial to women's self-knowledge, for 'until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves'.<sup>30</sup> Yet it is also an act of political defiance against a patriarchal status quo, 'part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society'.<sup>31</sup> Accordingly, both Woolf and Roberts mobilise the medieval past in order to articulate a sense of resistance to what they both saw as a hierarchical, individualistic, patriarchal social order. In different ways, they present the Middle Ages as a structure for re-imagining the present, a site in which to discover alternatives to the masculinist culture that, in their view, had led to war.<sup>32</sup>

In this regard, their medievalism reflects Liedeke Plate's characterisation of women's re-writing as the articulation of 'a feminist approach to the past confident that change is possible and that it will be brought about by changing the stories which shape cultural foundation myths and thus human existence'.<sup>33</sup> While Victorian medievalism was often backward-looking and idealistic, marked by a pervasive sense of longing for a time that was always already in the past, Woolf's and Roberts's medievalism is instead forward-looking, optimistic, and resolutely practical. Although they often approach the concept of nationhood with a certain ambivalence, neither Woolf nor Roberts advocates the jettisoning of national culture altogether. Rather, they present culture as an avenue by which the Welsh and/or British nation can be re-made, out of the blasted fragments that remain. Fundamentally, they return to the culture of the Middle Ages, not to escape the present, but to salvage a 'usable past' with which to build a new kind of national culture for the postwar future: a culture centred not upon masculinist values of heroism, militarism, and unity, but on values of

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<sup>30</sup> Rich, p. 18.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Damien Keane, 'Modernisms and Medievalisms, Old and New', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 32.2 (2009), 185-192 (p. 191).

<sup>33</sup> Liedeke Plate, *Transforming Memories in Contemporary Women's Writing* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 8.

nurturing, collectivity, and the toleration and celebration of difference.<sup>34</sup> The medievalist undercurrent to Woolf's and Roberts's writing – what I identify as their medieval 'unconscious' – functions, not only as a response to war, but also as a frame for thinking about key questions of gender, domesticity, and national identity.

Despite these common aims, Roberts's medievalism is inflected in very different ways from that of Woolf, not least because in her re-vision of the medieval past, Roberts self-consciously engages a Welsh-language literary tradition, while Woolf limits herself to writers canonical to the English tradition, particularly Chaucer. In the section that follows, I will outline some of the chief characteristics of each writer's approach to the culture and forms of the Middle Ages. I then move on to elucidate some of the key contexts and thematic threads that, in my view, inform and unite their medievalist imaginaries: modernist 'neo-medievalism', national identity, motherhood, and the impulse I term 'Neo-Romanticism'. Outlining some of the emergent critical fields through and against which I situate my own arguments, I proceed, finally, to explain the reasons for the structure and methodology of my thesis: why examine Roberts and Woolf side by side? How might this juxtaposition inform our understanding of women's engagement with history and national culture in Britain during the first half of the twentieth century?

### **Woolf's medievalism**

Woolf's most overt explorations of medieval culture stand, like book-ends, at the beginning and end of her literary career, which suggests that the medieval past retained imaginative appeal for her for the duration of her writing life. One of her earliest short stories, 'The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn' (1906), traces the discovery of a forgotten manuscript written by a young woman living in Norfolk in the fifteenth century, while her final work before her death

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<sup>34</sup> Van Wyck Brooks, 'On Creating a Usable Past', *The Dial*, 18<sup>th</sup> April 1918, quoted in Plate, p. 8.

in 1941, a chapter in a history of English literature that was to be entitled ‘Reading at Random’ or ‘Turning the Page’, explores the origins of the English literary tradition in a vernacular culture of song and minstrelsy that flourished before the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century. As I show in this thesis, Woolf returns again and again to the Middle Ages over the course of her writing life, sometimes explicitly, as in her essay ‘The Pastons and Chaucer’ (1925), and often obliquely, as in the Arthurian echoes that cadence *The Waves* (1931), or the appearance of the chorus in the guise of Chaucer’s pilgrims in the village pageant depicted in *Between the Acts* (1941).

Woolf’s medievalism is, like so much of her thought, wide-ranging, complex, and eclectic. It draws as much on visual and material cultures as on canonical medieval authors such as Chaucer and Malory, and is sometimes playfully historicist, as in ‘The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn’, and sometimes embedded in anthropological or mythical forms and discourses, as in *The Waves* or ‘Anon’. Importantly, her engagement with the British Middle Ages often forms part of her complex interaction with the cultural legacy of the Victorians. Just as, for Paul Robichaud, David Jones ‘[transforms] Victorian medievalism using the tools of Anglo-American modernism’,<sup>35</sup> so Virginia Woolf can be seen to apply modernist techniques such as collage, formal fragmentation, and irony in order to challenge the nineteenth-century notion of a stable, unified, hieratic medieval past. Conversely, Woolf mines formal and ideological aspects of Victorian medievalism in order to expand and invigorate her modernist art. For instance, she draws on a medievalist tradition in the visual arts associated with the Pre-Raphaelites – the so-called ‘fleshly school of art’ – in order to express the sensual, embodied, and spiritual aspects of women’s lives in her fiction.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, as I suggest in chapters 3 and 4, both Woolf and Roberts can be seen to draw on

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<sup>35</sup> Robichaud, p. 5.

<sup>36</sup> See Robert Buchanan, ‘The Fleshly School of Poetry: D.G. Rossetti’, *Contemporary Review*, 18 (1871).



the medievalist ideas and design of William Morris in order to develop an ethics and aesthetics of human making, in response to the destruction of war. Notably, however, Woolf's search for 'new' tools of expression with which to revolutionise the art of fiction takes her beyond Victorian medievalism, back to medieval culture itself. As I show, her novel *Mrs Dalloway* draws on the ritualistic model of medieval popular drama in an effort to develop a participatory, collective expression of grief and renewal after the Great War.

History had been a passion of Woolf's throughout her life. Hoping to make Woolf his literary and intellectual heir, Leslie Stephen had trained his daughter as a literary historian from a young age, introducing her to a wide range of canonical nineteenth-century histories and biographies.<sup>37</sup> Although she was undoubtedly influenced by the great historical texts of the nineteenth century,<sup>38</sup> Woolf was also frustrated with the teleological, fact-based models of historiography espoused in the texts recommended to her by her father, and in her representations of the medieval past, she sets out to convey what she felt conventional histories left out – namely, the flux of everyday experience, the intensity of 'the moment', and, in a connected sense, the lived experience of ordinary people – especially that of women.<sup>39</sup>

Indeed, in her engagement with the premodern past, Woolf frequently places an emphasis on the quotidian, the material, and the particular, what she describes as '[t]he girl at

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<sup>37</sup> These include Froude's *Carlyle*, Creighton's *Queen Elizabeth*, Lockhart's *Life of Scott*, Carlyle's *Reminiscences*, James Stephen's *Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography*, J. R. Lowell's *Poems*, Campbell's *Life of Coleridge*, Carlyle's *Life of Sterling*, Pepys's *Diary*, Macaulay's *History*, Carlyle's *French Revolution*, Carlyle's *Cromwell*, Arnold's *History of Rome*, and Froude's *History of England*. See Katherine C. Hill, 'Virginia Woolf and Leslie Stephen: History and Literary Revolution', *PMLA*, 96.3, 351-362 (p. 353).

<sup>38</sup> Particularly those of G.M. Trevelyan and R.G. Collingwood. See Beth Carole Rosenburg, 'Woolf's Postmodern Literary History', *MLN*, 115.5 (2000), 1112-1130 (p. 1114).

<sup>39</sup> In this way, Woolf's historical strategies comply with Liedeke Plate's definition of women's re-writing as 'a genre in which narratives of the past are retold from the perspective of a new, marginal, and usually female character in the original story' (Plate, p. ix). For Woolf's identification of medieval history with 'the moment' and the everyday, see Marea Mitchell, "'The Details of Life and the Pulsings of Affect': Virginia Woolf's Middle English Texts", *The Chaucer Review*, 51.1 (2016), 107-129 (pp. 108, 123).

the door. The wind and the rain. The audience at the play. At the fire side' [sic].<sup>40</sup> In so doing, she identifies different locations for English history and tradition to those inscribed in official historiographies. In 'The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn', for instance, Joan Martyn's fictive diary offers a detailed insight into the workaday life of a fifteenth-century manor house, while in her essay 'The Pastons and Chaucer', Woolf imaginatively reconstructs the everyday lives of the fifteenth-century Paston family through their Letters, devoting great attention to the material details included in the family correspondence, from the 'great quantities of fowls, sheep, pigs, eggs, bread and cream' consumed at John Paston's funeral to the 'privy' in the bedroom.<sup>41</sup> The Pastons, as Brenda Silver notes, were great friends of Woolf's: not only do they reappear briefly in her essay 'Anon', but the 'extraordinary similarities between the Paston Letters and Joan Martyn's "journal"' noted by Bernt Engler suggest that she had already read the Letters by the time she came to write her short story in 1906.<sup>42</sup>

The pronounced emphasis placed on materiality and dailiness in Woolf's medievalism can be connected to her feminist revisionist project. Woolf's insistence in her essay 'Women and Fiction' (1929) that 'when a woman comes to write a novel, she will find that she is perpetually wishing to alter established values – to make serious what appears insignificant to a man, and trivial what is to him important' applies equally well to her approach to history as her approach to fiction, and in texts such as 'The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn' she can be seen to harness what she saw as the outsider's perspective of the woman writer in order to

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<sup>40</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'Notes for Reading at Random', in Brenda Silver, "'Anon' and 'The Reader': Virginia Woolf's Last Essays", *Twentieth Century Literature*, 25 (1979), 356-441 (pp. 373-379; p. 276). All references are to this edition and henceforth will be given parenthetically in the text.

<sup>41</sup> 'The Pastons and Chaucer', in *The Collected Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Leonard Woolf, 4 vols (London: The Hogarth Press, 1967), III, 1-17 (pp. 5, 17). All references are to this edition and henceforth will be given parenthetically in the text. Where ambiguity is possible, I use the abbreviation *PC*.

<sup>42</sup> Silver, "'Anon' and 'The Reader': Virginia Woolf's Last Essays", p. 17; Bernt Engler, 'Imagining Her-Story: Virginia Woolf's "The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn" as Historiographical Metafiction', *Journal of the Short Story in English*, 20 (1993), 9-26 (p. 17).

effect a shift in values in how we understand the past.<sup>43</sup> Placing the ‘great events’ of war and economic history in the background, and the ‘small’ experiences of domestic life in the foreground, she views history through the prism of the private and ephemeral, rather than the public and official. In this way, she strives to recuperate the ‘lapsed materiality’ of women’s lives, to reconnect with a sense of history as it was lived.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, through her attention to what Ben Highmore terms ‘the details of life and the pulsings of affect’,<sup>45</sup> she attempts to trace the subtle processes of change and continuity, being and becoming, that have shaped English history.

‘The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn’ is focalised in part through Rosamund Merridew, a middle-aged medieval historian. A self-proclaimed ‘eccentric’ and outsider to the historical establishment, she emerges in some ways as a spokesperson for Woolf’s revisionary approach to the medieval past.<sup>46</sup> Like Woolf, Merridew prefers imaginative ‘scene making’ over facticity and narrative linearity, and places the body at the heart of her historical vision, claiming that ‘[a] sudden light upon the legs of Dame Elizabeth Partridge sends its beams over the whole state of England, to the King upon his throne; she wanted stockings!’ (34).<sup>47</sup> Woolf’s choice of a narrator in Merridew testifies to the rise to prominence of women historians in the discipline of medieval studies at the turn of the twentieth century. As Leena Kore-Schröder notes, women scholars were drawn in significant numbers to the study of the Middle Ages at this time, due in part to the fact that medieval society offered ‘a

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<sup>43</sup> Virginia Woolf, ‘Women and Fiction’, in *Selected Essays*, ed. by David Bradshaw, pp. 132-139 (p. 136).

<sup>44</sup> Gillian Beer, *Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p. 10. Maurice Blanchot notes that the everyday brings us ‘back to existence in its very spontaneity and as it is lived’.

<sup>45</sup> Ben Highmore, *Ordinary Lives: Studies in the Everyday* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2011), p. xii.

<sup>46</sup> Virginia Woolf, ‘The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn’, in *A Haunted House: The Complete Shorter Fiction*, ed. by Susan Dick (London: Vintage, 2003), pp. 33-62 (p. 36). All references are to this edition and henceforth will be given parenthetically in the text.

<sup>47</sup> In her autobiographical essay, Woolf writes that ‘I find that scene making is my natural way of marking the past’. Virginia Woolf, ‘Sketch of the Past’, in *Moments of Being*, ed. by Jeanne Schulkind (London: Pimlico, 2002), pp. 178-160 (p. 145).

different view on the relations between communality and individuality, or the public and the private' to the modern model of the individual citizen in the political nation-state.<sup>48</sup> Around the time when Woolf was writing 'The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn', a number of women historians, including Elizabeth Dixon, Lina Eckenstein and Mary Bateson, were publishing work on the role of women in medieval society and economic life.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, Merridew's excavation of a domestic history centred around what Joan Martyn calls the 'cheek of the hearth' (46) can be seen to anticipate Eileen Power's *Medieval People* (1924), a text that, in Power's words, is 'chiefly concerned with the kitchens of History'.<sup>50</sup>

In its concern with 'the imaginary lives of ordinary people',<sup>51</sup> Woolf's medievalism can be seen to bear the imprint of Eileen Power in particular, the figure described by her biographer as 'the best-known medieval historian of the interwar years'.<sup>52</sup> In *Medieval People* (1924), Power illustrates 'various aspects of social life in the Middle Ages' by reconstructing the lives of figures such as Madame Eglentyne, 'Chaucer's prioress in real life', or Thomas Paycocke, an Essex clothurier.<sup>53</sup> Power's interest in individuals 'unknown to fame' can be regarded as a reaction against the nineteenth-century tendency toward 'hero-worship' in history,<sup>54</sup> yet it was also symptomatic of her drive – shared with other women historians – to '[broaden] the focus of history and [extend] the audiences for it'.<sup>55</sup> *Medieval*

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<sup>48</sup> Kore-Schröder, 'Who's Afraid of Rosamund Merridew?', p. 3.

<sup>49</sup> See Elizabeth Dixon, 'Craftswomen in the *Livre des Métiers*', *Economic Journal*, 5 (1895), 209-28; Lina Eckenstein, *Women Under Monasticism: Chapters on Saint-Lore and Convent Life Between AD 500 and AD 1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1896), and *Borough Customs*, Selden Society 18 and 21, ed. by Mary Bateson (London: Quaritch, 1904, 1906).

<sup>50</sup> Eileen Power, *Medieval People*, 10<sup>th</sup> edn (1924; London: Methuen, 1963), p. 19. Gutenberg ebook.

<sup>51</sup> Mitchell, p. 115.

<sup>52</sup> Maxine Berg, *A Woman in History: Eileen Power 1889-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 2.

<sup>53</sup> Power, p. vii. Woolf also makes mention of the 'Betsons and Paycockes of Essex' – families featured in Power's *Medieval People* – in her essay 'Anon'. See Virginia Woolf, 'Anon', in Brenda Silver, "'Anon" and "The Reader": Virginia Woolf's Last Essays', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 25 (1979), 356-441 (pp. 380-424; p. 384). All references are to this edition and henceforth will be given parenthetically in the text. Where ambiguity is possible, I use the abbreviation A.

<sup>54</sup> See, for instance, Thomas Carlyle's *On Heroes and Hero Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841).

<sup>55</sup> Michell, p. 111.

*People* ran to ten editions and is still in print today, which indicates something of the widespread popularity of the text among non-specialist readerships.<sup>56</sup> We know that Woolf read Power's work; in 1940 she records buying 'Eileen Power for 6d'.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, she was personally acquainted with Power via a web of family connections: Power was close friends with Karin Constelloe, who married Woolf's brother Adrian Stephen in 1914, and Woolf attended at least one social event at Power's house at 20 Mecklenburgh Square, Bloomsbury.<sup>58</sup> She would thus have been particularly receptive to the medieval zeitgeist that Power helped to promote amongst the British middle classes during the interwar years, and indeed, many of Woolf's historical aims and techniques – her interest in social history, her desire to 'personify' the past, her establishment of a history connected to what Power termed 'the labours and passions of flesh and blood' – can be viewed in the context of the pioneering approaches to the past popularised by Power.<sup>59</sup>

Woolf frequently re-animates the medieval past in order to explore questions of Englishness and the dynamics of a specifically literary history. In fact, in many of her representations of medieval history, she can be seen to respond to the tendency, current during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to position the Middle Ages as the point of origin for a national literary tradition that, composed of the writing of 'great men' (Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton), was promoted as an arbiter of cultural 'Englishness' during the early part of the twentieth century, especially in the context of the British colonies.<sup>60</sup> In re-writing the medieval 'origins' of English literary history, Woolf, as Marea Mitchell has

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<sup>56</sup> Kore-Schröder, 'Who's Afraid of Rosamund Merridew?', p. 4.

<sup>57</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Anne Olivier Bell, 5 vols (London: The Hogarth Press, 1977-1984), V, p. 345.

<sup>58</sup> Kore-Schröder, 'Who's Afraid of Rosamund Merridew?', p. 4.

<sup>59</sup> Power, p. vii.

<sup>60</sup> As Inga Bryden observes, during the Victorian period the Middle Ages became the locus of '[o]ne of the most powerful myths of the origin of English national identity'. This was connected to the discourse of Anglo-Saxonism – the racialized glorification of an 'Anglo-Saxon' or 'Teutonic' past, often accompanied by anti-Celtic feeling (p. 370). Woolf, and particularly Roberts, focus instead on a heritage connected to an insular 'Celtic' tradition in their attempt to re-vision national origins.

argued, strives to transform and expand the Victorian concept of national tradition in order to include the contribution of women and ordinary people.

For Julia Briggs, Woolf's lifelong 'search for women in history' – traceable in her reviews of women's memoirs and her novel *Orlando* (1928) – takes its origins in her early short story, 'The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn'.<sup>61</sup> In this view, fifteenth-century Joan Martyn emerges as a medieval precursor to 'Shakespeare's sister', anticipating the more detailed analysis of women's exclusion from literary history and culture carried out by Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*.<sup>62</sup> Importantly, however, Joan Martyn is not only a writer, but also an avid reader, whose unusual literacy marks her out as 'queer' (41) or unusual in the context of late medieval society: like the young Woolf, she 'always has her nose in a book' (54), and is enthralled when Richard, a wandering storyteller, shows her a codex containing 'all the stories of the Knights of the Round Table' (55). Indeed, Woolf's visitation of medieval history often opens out onto an exploration of reading, and the creative nature of the relation between readers and writers. 'The Pastons and Chaucer' is the opening essay in the 1925 book of critical essays that Woolf entitled *The Common Reader*. Taken as a whole, this essay collection offers a kind of imaginative history of the literary amateur, 'ranging at random' between canonical voices and more obscure, marginal ones, exploring the connections between them.<sup>63</sup> In 'The Pastons and Chaucer', the young John Paston is portrayed, much like Joan, as a rebellious 'common reader' whose predilection for stories sets him apart from the practical materialism of his family:

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<sup>61</sup> Julia Briggs, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life* (London and New York: Harcourt, 2006), p. 228.

<sup>62</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, in *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, ed. by Morag Shiach (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 3-149. 'The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn' can be seen to anticipate the interest in the 'lives of the obscure' expressed in the essays in Woolf's *Common Reader* series, many of which make use of genres usually subordinated to literature, such as the diary and the domestic letter, in order to illuminate a hidden past of female creativity.

<sup>63</sup> Woolf wished to take up this playful, irreverent approach to tradition in the literary history that she began to write in the 1940s, 'Reading at Random'. See Silver, "'Anon" and "The Reader"', p. 356.

There, on the hard chair in the comfortless room with the wind lifting the carpet and the smoke stinging his eyes, he would sit reading Chaucer, wasting his time – dreaming – or what strange intoxication was it that he drew from books? (7)

John's sitting down to read Chaucer offers the occasion for a long excursus by Woolf on Chaucer's poetry. Through this framing device – quite likely derived from the work of Chaucer itself, which abounds with texts within texts, and images of reading – Woolf explores the relation between Chaucer's poetry and the lives of the people who read him, anticipating the importance that she places on the material contexts of reading and writing in *A Room of One's Own*. Chaucer's writing, she suggests, is notable in its sensitivity to the conditions of everyday life during the late Middle Ages: although 'Chaucer was a poet' (11), endowed with an ability to conjure a sense of 'enchantment' (14) with 'the most ordinary words and the simplest feelings' (14), he 'never flinched from the life that was being lived at the moment before his eyes' (p. 11). By aligning Chaucer – the so-called 'father of English poetry' – with the figure of the 'common reader' in this way, Woolf can be seen to re-imagine the English literary tradition that was thought to flow from him as 'common ground' – a landscape constructed as much by readers (as exemplified by John Paston) as by individual poets and writers.<sup>64</sup>

In an essay entitled 'Reading' written in 1919, Woolf meditates on the elusive, hidden origins of the English literary tradition. Gazing out on the 'immeasurable avenue' of English literature,

I could see Keats and Pope [...] and then Dryden and Sir Thomas Browne – hosts of them merging in the mass of Shakespeare, behind whom, if one peered long enough, some shapes of men in pilgrims' dress emerged, Chaucer perhaps, and again – who

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<sup>64</sup> It was John Dryden who in 1700 first designated Chaucer 'the father of English poetry', thus positioning him as a point of origin of an English literary tradition. John Dryden, 'Preface to Fables Ancient and Modern', in *Of Dramatic Poesie and Other Critical Essays*, ed. by George Watson (London: J.M. Dent, 1962), II, p. 280. Steve Ellis suggests that 'The Pastons and Chaucer' works to remove Chaucer from his lofty pedestal as 'Father of English poetry' and to recast him as a 'common writer', by immersing him in the 'hubbub of the Pastons around his base' and contextualizing him within the vernacular tradition of Anon. Steve Ellis, 'Framing the Father: Chaucer and Virginia Woolf', *New Medieval Literatures*, 7 (2005), 35-52 (p. 51).

was it? Some uncouth poet scarcely able to syllable his words; and so they died away.<sup>65</sup>

That ‘uncouth poet scarcely able to syllable his words’ was to haunt Woolf’s writing throughout her life. Much later, in her 1941 essay ‘Anon’, she takes a closer look at the shadowy beginnings of English literary tradition. Focusing on the figure of Anon, the wandering singer-storyteller, Woolf imaginatively recreates a popular medieval tradition of ‘anonymous minstrelsy, folk song, legend and words that had no name attached to them’ (390) that, in her view, ran alongside, and fed into, the canonical tradition of Chaucer and Shakespeare: were it not for Anon, in Woolf’s view, ‘the English might be a dumb race’ (383). As I show in Chapter 5, Anon becomes emblematic of an ‘anterior, adversary’ literary culture, rooted in collectivity and participation rather than bourgeois individualism – a tradition that is the product of shared pathways and fields, rather than the private house.<sup>66</sup> In this way, Woolf uses her vision of the medieval past in order to project a new, anti-hierarchical conception of English culture, grounded in what Raymond Williams terms ‘the conditions of our common life’, as the basis for national reinvention.<sup>67</sup> The peculiar legacy of all outsiders to history and culture, the tradition of ‘Anon’ resurfaces in Woolf’s writing in modern working-class women’s voices: in the ‘ancient song’ of an old woman outside Regent’s Park tube station in *Mrs Dalloway*, ‘the voice of no age or sex, the voice of an ancient spring spouting from the earth’ (69), or the ‘luch[ing]’, roll[ing]’ rhythms of elderly

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<sup>65</sup> Virginia Woolf, ‘Reading’, in *The Collected Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Leonard Woolf, II, 12-33 (p. 13).

<sup>66</sup> Maria Dibattista, *Virginia Woolf’s Major Novels: The Fables of Anon* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), p. 193.

<sup>67</sup> Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (1958; London: Penguin, 1985), p. 285. ‘Anon’ can be seen to provide Woolf with ‘a form for articulating an experience of a common culture that resonates across both the amalgam of representations and the experience of living culture’. See Ben Highmore, ‘Introduction’ to Raymond Williams, in *The Everyday Life Reader*, ed. by Ben Highmore (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 91.



Mrs McNab in *To The Lighthouse*, offering a sense of transpersonal continuity and organic regrowth.<sup>68</sup>

Gillian Beer notes that for Woolf, English history is playful, a ‘spume of language’.<sup>69</sup> In her essay ‘Craftsmanship’, Woolf observes that English words that we use are steeped in history – our own and that of others:

Words, English words, are full of echoes, of memories, of associations – naturally. They have been out and about, on people’s lips, in their houses, in the streets, in the fields, for so many centuries.<sup>70</sup>

Yet if language provides a sense of continuity with people and moments in the past, then it also embodies ceaseless change: words live ‘[v]ariouly and strangely, much as human beings live, by ranging hither and thither, by falling in love, and mating together’ (89). English words are resistant to having their meanings fixed, and are ‘highly democratic’ (90), too; ‘[r]oyal words mate with commoners, English words marry French words, German words, Indian words, Negro words, if they have a fancy’ (90). Parodying the rhetoric of the English folk revivalists, Woolf contends that ‘the less we inquire into the past of our dear Mother English the better it will be for that lady’s reputation – for she has gone a-roving, a-roving fair maid’ (90). As Vanessa Manhire remarks, Woolf shares the folk revivalists’ interest in an ancient, more ‘primitive’ English past, but not their concern with purity and authenticity.<sup>71</sup> Instead, Anon – ‘nameless, ribald, obscene’ (A, 383) – can be seen to convey an alternative, wandering Englishness, an Englishness articulated in the liberated, promiscuous, joyful movement of language itself.

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<sup>68</sup> Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, ed. by Margaret Drabble (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 107.

<sup>69</sup> Beer, *The Common Ground*, p. 8.

<sup>70</sup> Virginia Woolf, ‘Craftsmanship’, in *Selected Essays*, ed. by David Bradshaw, pp. 85-91 (p.88). All references are to this edition and henceforth will be given parenthetically in the text.

<sup>71</sup> Vanessa Manhire, ‘“The Lady’s Gone a-Roving: Woolf and the English Folk Revival’’, in *Virginia Woolf Out of Bounds: Selected Papers from the 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Jessica Berman and Jane Goldman (New York: Pace University Press, 2001), pp. 236-242 (p. 236).

Although Woolf sometimes leans toward the Romantic conception of the Middle Ages as a time of unspoilt landscapes and organic community, unlike many nineteenth-century medievalists, she does not construe the Middle Ages as an absent ideal. Rather, her version of medieval culture is distinguished by its sense of presence, rather than absence. Chaucer's literary world is defined by 'the solidity that plumps it out, the conviction which animates its characters' (PC, 9); in 'Anon', as in *Mrs Dalloway*, the archaic past still resonates in the modern day, for in reading medieval texts such as Malory's *Morte Darthur*, we 'hear the voice of Anon murmuring still' (A, 384). If, for T.S. Eliot, 'History is a pattern/Of timeless moments',<sup>72</sup> then in Woolf's work the medieval past is associated with the now, the moment – what Woolf in 'The Pastons and Chaucer' terms 'this very moment of Tuesday, the sixteenth day of April, 1387' (12). By way of formal techniques such as the juxtaposition of different voices and the enclosure of one text within another, Woolf breaks up, and renders discontinuous, her historical narratives. Yet in so doing, she also establishes a dialogue between the medieval past and the modern present, showing how history is always active within the present moment, and how the present is always actively remaking the past.<sup>73</sup>

### **Roberts's medievalism**

The medieval past appears as an 'allusive substratum' to Roberts's poetry, discernible in a densely-woven tissue of references to medieval legends, folk traditions, texts, and historical figures, from Dante to the *Mabinogi*, the Chester Mystery Cycle to the Plantagenet kings.<sup>74</sup> The detailed notes and footnotes that she provides to many of her poems point to the historically layered nature of her writing, her concern with exploring the 'byroads' of

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<sup>72</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'Little Gidding', in *Four Quartets* (London and New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), p. 58.

<sup>73</sup> Kore-Schröder, 'Who's afraid of Rosamund Merridew?', pp. 2, 9.

<sup>74</sup> Robichaud, p. 23.

medieval Welsh history, as a kind of countercurrent to the main text.<sup>75</sup> In *Gods with Stainless Ears* (1951), for example, a dilatory gloss to the word ‘Torque’ discusses Aneurin’s sixth-century heroic poem, *The Gododdin*, and Gerald of Wales’s *Journey through Wales* (1191).<sup>76</sup> Roberts’s imaginative engagement with the Middle Ages usually revolves around a Welsh axis, and often has to do with the localist strand in her poetics: like the torque, her version of medieval history is often embedded in the local landscape, connected to the life and culture of west Wales. Yet her medieval purview does not limit itself either to the local or the national. In her essay ‘An Introduction to Village Dialect’, she seeks to discover what she calls the ‘essence of all languages of the soil’ by gathering together a range of premodern poetry and folk song derived, not only from Wales, but from countries including England, France, Iceland, Hungary and Italy.<sup>77</sup>

The vision of history that emerges in Roberts’s writing reflects the organicist perspective evinced by Oswald Spengler in his *Decline of the West* (1918, 1923).<sup>78</sup> Invoking Spengler’s conception of human culture as a living, developing organism, Roberts often identifies the Middle Ages with the organic origins of Western culture. Her poetry often points to what she saw as the holistic connection with the natural world retained by medieval Welsh society – an interrelationship that, she suggests, has been denigrated or thrown out of kilter by the effects of war and modernity. For instance, Part II of *Gods with Stainless Ears* includes an epigraph from Dafydd ap Gwilym’s poem ‘Mawl i’r Haf’ (52), its lyrical

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<sup>75</sup> Roberts’s footnotes represent what might be called her ‘dilatory’ approach to textuality and temporality: small, momentary allusions in the main texts offer the occasion for digressive asides that draw the reader away from the main text and invite a non-linear way of reading Welsh history and culture.

<sup>76</sup> Lynette Roberts, *Gods with Stainless Ears*, in *Collected Poems*, ed. by Patrick McGuinness (Manchester: Carcanet, 2005), pp. 41-78 (p. 72). All references are to this edition and henceforth will be given parenthetically in the text.

<sup>77</sup> Thus, her medievalism can be seen to effect the ‘negotiation between indigenous traditions and an international culture’ detected by Robichaud in the work of David Jones (p. 4). See Lynette Roberts, ‘An Introduction to Village Dialect’ (1944), in *Lynette Roberts: Diaries, Letters, and Recollections*, ed. by Patrick McGuinness (Manchester: Carcanet, 2008), pp. 108-124 (p. 119). All references are to this edition and henceforth will be given parenthetically in the text.

<sup>78</sup> Oswald Spengler, *Decline of the West*, 2 vols, trans. by Charles Francis Atkinson (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1926). For an assessment of Spengler’s Romantic, organic vision of history, see Robichaud, p. 8.

hymning to a resplendent nature standing in stark contrast to the ‘vitreous monochrome’ (III, l. 54) of a modern-day landscape scarred by industry and war. Through her incorporation of premodern traditions, Roberts seeks to explore the entanglement of culture and nature in war, to interrogate the way in which the destruction of natural habitat can be regarded as an assault on human culture, too. Indeed, her appeal to the ‘organic’ culture of the Middle Ages in her writing can be read as a direct response to the crisis of war. It reflects her aim to bring a civilization in crisis ‘back down to earth’, so as to find a basis for starting again. Through her engagement with the medieval Welsh past, she attempts to discover continuity in discontinuity, to imaginatively bridge modernity’s rupture from its own roots.

The return to roots was presented as a matter of survival during the Second World War, not just figuratively, but literally, as propaganda campaigns such as ‘Dig for Victory’ encouraged Britons to help the war effort by growing their own fruit and vegetables.<sup>79</sup> Roberts’s medievalism, as I show, encompasses all the forms that going ‘back to the land’ might take. Specifically, her engagement with the Middle Ages often opens out onto an exploration of nationhood, and national origins. The dream-like glimpses of the medieval past provided by her poetry point to her understanding that medieval forms and narratives exist ‘deep sunk’ (A, 381) in the national unconscious, and are integral to the way Wales has understood and mythologized itself as a nation. Similar to Woolf, Roberts’s engagement with the Middle Ages is often connected to her interest in the idea of a literary tradition, and emphasises its constitutive role in constructing a sense of nationhood. Her poetry and prose centres upon a nexus of medieval Welsh-language literary texts, including *The Mabinogi*, Aneurin’s *Y Gododdin*, the poetry of Dafydd ap Gwilym (1325-85), Taliesin, and Llywarch Hen. These writings form the backbone of what Tony Conran has designated the *traddodiad*,

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<sup>79</sup> Daniel Smith, *The Spade as Mighty as the Sword: The Story of World War Two’s ‘Dig for Victory’ Campaign* (London: Aurum, 2011).

the ancient, Welsh-language culture of Wales that developed out of ‘the ruins of Celtic Christianity’ around the sixth century and flourished over the Middle Ages, reaching its culmination in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.<sup>80</sup> The *traddodiad* pertains to a bardic culture of ‘praise-poetry, music and story-telling’ sustained in aristocratic circles, yet it also includes an ‘unofficial’, earlier body of material described by Conran as ‘prophecy, religious literature, poetry that might or might not reflect ancient Druidic beliefs’.<sup>81</sup> Drawing on both the ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ threads in her poetry, Roberts demonstrates how popular and highbrow, oral and literary forms, interact in the shaping of a nation.

Conran observes that the memory of a medieval Welsh ‘civilisation’ was repressed in Wales from the eighteenth century onward. The Methodist awakening occasioned a radical change in Wales’s social structure, whereby ‘[t]he old culture – Celtic, tribal, hierarchical – was swept away’, to be replaced by a more egalitarian religious culture marked by ‘sobriety, hard work, cultivation of the soul’.<sup>82</sup> In the Nonconformist culture of the *buchedd*, Wales was no longer seen as the land of murky pagan legends, but as the ‘Land of Chapels, Land of Revivals’.<sup>83</sup> By the twentieth century, the *traddodiad* had been pushed underground, to be regarded as ‘buried treasure’ by writers and artists.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, for Conran, the discovery and reconstruction of medieval Welsh culture became a salient feature of twentieth-century writing in Wales, as Welsh-speaking writers in particular sought to rediscover their forgotten heritage. This recuperative practice built on the ground-breaking work of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Welsh scholars such as John Morris Jones, Ifor Williams, and

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<sup>80</sup> Tony Conran, *Frontiers in Anglo-Welsh Poetry* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), p. vii.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2; Prys Morgan, ‘The Gwerin of Wales – Myth and Reality’, in *The Welsh and their Country: Selected Readings from the Social Sciences*, ed. by I. Hume and W. T. R. Pryce (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 1986), pp. 134-152 (p. 142). Conran calls this social formation the ‘*buchedd*’ (life, or way of life). *Buchedd* values fed into the idealised perceptions of the rural *Gwerin* which inform Roberts’s portrayal of rural Welsh life and handicraft.

<sup>83</sup> Prys Morgan, ‘Keeping the Legends Alive’, in *Wales: The Imagined Nation: Essays in Cultural and National Identity*, ed. by Tony Curtis (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1986), pp. 19-41 (p. 35).

<sup>84</sup> Conran, *Frontiers in Anglo-Welsh Poetry*, p. 66.

Thomas Parry, whose philological research did much to excavate Wales's medieval literary past.<sup>85</sup> Just as Woolf's medievalism can be linked to the scholarship of Eileen Power and Jessie Weston, so Roberts's approach to the premodern Welsh past forms part of the same 'enunciative field' as scholarly works such as John Rhys's and David Brynmor Jones's *The Welsh People* (1900), an ethnographic history of the Welsh land and its people that she recommends to Robert Graves in 1943 as a 'permanent reference book'.<sup>86</sup>

Roberts's preoccupation with the medieval Welsh 'civilisation' reflects the climate of national self-discovery that came to fruition in the founding of Plaid Cymru, the Welsh nationalist party, in 1925. Indeed, for Saunders Lewis, one of the founders of Plaid Cymru, the project of Welsh nationalism and a 'return to the medieval principle' were one and the same.<sup>87</sup> Roberts's incorporation of the *traddodiad* into her poetry speaks of her aim to rescue Welsh tradition from Anglocentric narratives of British cultural history, to articulate a sense of Welsh cultural difference to a metropolitan audience, and for Welsh people themselves. As she explains in her notes to *Gods with Stainless Ears*, she includes untranslated fragments from medieval Welsh poetry in her writing because 'this helps to give the conscious compact and culture of another nation' (76). Modernism and nationalism, like modernism and medievalism, have not traditionally been regarded as easy partners. Modernist culture is conventionally associated with the transnational, the metropolitan, with the art of the exile and the émigré;<sup>88</sup> Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins observed in 2000 that 'the construction of

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>86</sup> Lynette Roberts, 'Letter to Robert Graves', December 13<sup>th</sup> 1943, in *Lynette Roberts: Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, ed. by Patrick McGuinness, p. 168. *The Welsh People* (New York: Macmillan, 1900) is a compendious history of Wales from its prehistory to the modern day, drawing on Rhys's interest in archaeology, ethnography, and Celtic history in order to portray the changing state of the land and the people who lived on it through the ages. Keen to educate herself about Wales and Welsh history on her move to Llanybri, Roberts seems to have read it avidly; indeed, the text can be seen to inform much of her vision of Welsh history and culture, as projected in her poetry.

<sup>87</sup> Saunders Lewis, 'Egwyddorion Cenedlaetholdeb' ('Principles of Nationalism'), (1926; Cardiff: Cymdeithas Plaid Cymru Archive Society, 1975), pp. 1-19 (p. 9).

<sup>88</sup> Terry Eagleton's seminal study of Anglo-American modernism, *Exiles and Émigrés*, was instrumental in furthering this perception of modernist culture. In it, he famously emphasises the 'odd paradox that the heights of modern English literature have been dominated by foreigners and émigrés'. See Terry Eagleton, *Exiles and*

modernism as an international, urban and yet placeless, phenomenon remains, for the most part, a critical given'.<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, because nationalism is often rooted in backwards-looking, conservative forms of ideology, it has often appeared as downright antipathetic to the vociferous newness of modernist art: take, for example, Saunders Lewis's aim of returning to the 'medieval principle'. However, Tony Conran argues that for many Welsh writers of the earlier twentieth century, the *traddodiad* was seen as a way of breaking free from the conservatism of *Buchedd* society into 'imaginative freedom'.<sup>90</sup> Roberts's writing can thus be seen to reflect a specifically Welsh context in which a turn to national tradition came to be identified with freedom, innovation, and resistance to a hegemonic social and religious order. She regarded the medieval Welsh tradition, in Conran's words, as 'excitement and challenge': just as contemporary modernist artist John Piper saw in twelfth-century English font carvings all the 'bigness and strangeness' of Picasso, so in Roberts's eyes medieval Welsh-language culture offered a valuable source of avant-garde inspiration.<sup>91</sup>

Language itself occupies the cornerstone of Roberts's poetic and historical vision. She was fascinated by its plasticity, its capacity to construct a sense of self and world in words. Harnessing medieval poetic traditions, she uses these in order to mould her language into new and 'forceful' shapes, to create a public idiom capable of expressing the changing structures of feeling experienced in Wales during the war.<sup>92</sup> For instance, what Laura Wainwright sees as her 'exploded, defamiliarised English syntax' is inspired by her detailed study of Old English poetry in translation, while *Gods with Stainless Ears* can be seen to evoke the

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*Émigrés: Studies in Modern English Literature* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1970), p. 9.

<sup>89</sup> Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins, 'Locating Modernisms: An Overview', in *Locations of Literary Modernism*, ed. by Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 3-30 (p. 3).

<sup>90</sup> Conran, *Frontiers in Anglo-Welsh Poetry*, p. 67.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. and John Piper, 'England's Early Sculptors', in *The Painter's Object*, ed. by Myfanwy Evans (London: Gerald Howe, 1937), pp. 117-125 (p. 118).

<sup>92</sup> Lynette Roberts, 'The Welsh Dragon', in *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, ed. by Patrick McGuinness, pp. 139-142 (p. 142).

episodic, elliptical style of *The Gododdin*.<sup>93</sup> Roberts turned to the medieval Welsh tradition of the ‘Old Bardic Men’ for a sense of structure and form in an unstable and chaotic world, channelling what H. Idris Bell described as ‘its feeling for discipline, its sense of style, its love of clear, concise and elegant phrase, its force and precision of utterance’ in order to lend her poetry an architectural solidity.<sup>94</sup>

Roberts’s medievalism takes the form of what Paul Robichaud calls ‘a native cultural archaeology’, through which the premodern past is shown to exist primarily in the form of traces, fragments, objects, and images embedded in the local landscape.<sup>95</sup> Moreover, Roberts’s Welsh landscape is in many ways a Romantic one, full of crumbling ruins and echoes from a distant, mythical past. Building up classical and medieval allusions in layers like a collage, her poetry also adopts an x-ray vision, penetrating through the different strata of the soil in order to discover a forgotten history beneath. Sunken Welsh landscapes are prevalent in her writing; like ‘the bird haunted reed whispering fen’ (A, 382) of Norfolk that recurs in Woolf’s medievalist texts, Roberts’s marshlands and bogs point to whispered Welsh narratives that have never been inscribed in the history books. Though she attained some familiarity with the language through the influence of her Welsh-speaking husband, Keidrych Rhys, Roberts was unable to speak Welsh, and was therefore reliant on English translations for access to the medieval Welsh tradition. Reading the landscape, I suggest, offered her an alternative ‘way in’ to Welsh literary tradition, providing a more direct, phenomenological, and imaginative relationship with Welsh history and culture.

Roberts’s visioning of the Welsh landscape is inevitably bound up in her re-visioning of the territory of medieval tradition. In a lecture entitled ‘*Egwyddorion Cenedlaetholdeb*’

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<sup>93</sup> Laura Wainwright (Thomas), ‘New Territories in Modernism: Anglophone Welsh Writing 1930-1949’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Cardiff University, 2010), p. 80.

<sup>94</sup> H. Idris Bell, ‘The Welsh Poetic Tradition’, *Wales*, 3.1 (1943), 39-44 (p. 39).

<sup>95</sup> Robichaud, p. 3.



(1926; 'Principles of Nationalism'), Saunders Lewis presented the medieval past as a 'golden' time for Wales, a period of stability and independence in which a vital, monolingual Welsh culture was allowed to flourish.<sup>96</sup> While Roberts reiterates Lewis's conception of the Middle Ages as a period of great cultural vitality, she rejects his identification of the medieval past with authority, stability, and linguistic 'purity'. Instead, she depicts premodern Wales as a dynamic, multilingual space, shaped by travel encounters and cultural exchange – much like the Wales of her contemporary moment. In her selection of medieval sources, she tends to favour hybrid figures, writers who moved between different locations and cultures: Norman-Welsh writer Gerald of Wales (c. 1146-1223), who features importantly in her work, or Bishop Asser (died c. 909), a Welsh scholar and translator at the court of Alfred the Great.

Indeed, she frequently emphasises what she saw as the vibrant, cosmopolitan nature of early Christian monastic culture in Wales. In a discussion with Robert Graves over her novel *Nesta*, an imagined life of the grandmother of Gerald of Wales, she defends herself against Graves's complaint that her reference to fuchsia was anachronistic, explaining that 'at a time when monks travelled so much', she felt it likely that they would transplant and cultivate exotic flowers in the monastery garden at St David's.<sup>97</sup> By presenting Wales's medieval 'origins' as fluid, hybrid, and unfixed, Roberts deliberately 'deracinates' Wales, uncoupling it from the idea of a unified point of origin. The mythic figure of Taliesin afloat in his coracle, travelling through time and from age to age, recurs in her writing, articulating her conception of Welsh culture as inherently mobile – an artefact that, articulated in the passage in between different places, finds continuity in and through flux.

The premodern past offers a mirror for the political conflicts of the present in Roberts's writing. She devotes particular attention to a turbulent period in Welsh history that,

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<sup>96</sup> Lewis, 'Principles of Nationalism', p. 5.

<sup>97</sup> Lynette Roberts, 'Letter to Robert Graves', January 26<sup>th</sup> 1944 [wrongly dated], in *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, ed. by Patrick McGuinness, p. 174.

centred around the twelfth century, was marked by the colonising incursion of the Normans into Wales and its piecemeal separation into different domains governed by the Marcher Lords. Princess Nesta, or Nest (c. 1085-before 1136) lived through this period, and her story is indicative of how women were caught up in male disputes over territory, both as agents and objects of exchange.<sup>98</sup> Though *Nesta* was a ‘potboiler’ written in order to make money during the wartime years, its choice of theme reflects Roberts’s wider aim of re-inscribing medieval Welsh history and culture from a female point of view. In *Gods with Stainless Ears*, for instance, an allusion to ‘white starlings – suspended/On strings like Calder “stills”’ (V, ll. 66-7) gestures to the *Mabinogi* narrative of Branwen, daughter of Llŷr. In this story, as Roberts herself observes, the starling acted as a ‘dispatch rider’ for Branwen ‘when it flew and took her message from Ireland to Wales, so that she might be delivered of her unhappiness and *hiraeth* for Wales’ (78). Re-appropriating an ancient narrative of women’s exile and silencing at the hands of patriarchal culture, she uses it in order to protest against women’s contemporary entrapment within ‘chains of a barbaric civilisation’, and to signal her longing for her own voice to be heard.<sup>99</sup>

Roberts is predominantly concerned with the premodern as a form of living history, one that persists within the fabric of modern-day Wales. Specifically, her medievalism is often enfolded in her preoccupation with Welsh village life. In many ways, her work offers a specifically Welsh inflection on the back-to-the-village trend that marked British culture during the 1930s and 40s, an impulse which, as Alexandra Harris notes, saw many modernists calling for ‘a reinvigorated local culture based in, or at least based on, the English

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<sup>98</sup> The daughter of Rhys ap Tewdwr, the Welsh King of Deheubarth, Nesta (Nest) was married to Norman Castellan Gerald de Windsor, abducted by Owain ap Cadwgan, Prince of Powys, and had several powerful lovers, including Henry I of England. See John Davies, *A History of Wales* (London: Penguin, 2007).

<sup>99</sup> Lynette Roberts, ‘A Carmarthenshire Diary’, June 26<sup>th</sup> 1920, in *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, ed. by Patrick McGuinness, p. 25. All references are to this edition and henceforth will be given parenthetically in the text. Where ambiguity is possible, I use the abbreviation D.

village'.<sup>100</sup> Most of her poetry is written in, and out of, her experience of life in Llanybri, the Carmarthenshire village to which she moved after her marriage with Keidrych Rhys in October 1939, and her diary offers detailed observations on the customs, language, architecture, and personalities of the village. The widespread concern with village revival among Britain's writers and artists can be seen in part as a reaction against what many saw as a homogenising, technocratic, urban-based form of modernity. In Harris's account, villages such as Woolf's Rodmell, Sussex, or E.M. Forster's Abinger, Surrey, like Roberts's Llanybri or Dylan Thomas's Laugharne, became, paradoxically enough, spaces of resistance and 'centres for the avant-garde' during this time, with many artists and writers (Woolf included) choosing to inhabit villages and outlying farms over the metropolis, especially as the bombs started to rain down on Britain's cities.<sup>101</sup>

The village often appears in Roberts's poetry as a marginal, borderland site where time and timelessness intersect. While this duality is a recurrent feature of her poetic vision, it also reflects a popular conception of village life in Britain during the late 30s and 1940s, at which time, as Alexandra Harris notes,

[...] rural England seemed caught in the cusp. In some areas, and in some respects, not much had changed since the Middle Ages; elsewhere there was little left of the old ways, though they might remain in living memory.<sup>102</sup>

In a letter to Robert Graves, Roberts explicitly identified Welsh villages with the Middle Ages, noting admiringly that 'rural villages in Wales are still so medieval in craft & manner'.<sup>103</sup> She can thus be seen to draw on a Romantic line of thought – promoted in the

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<sup>100</sup> Harris, p. 169.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. Virginia Woolf was an important participant in the back-to-the-village movement during this period: not only did she take part in village life during her frequent visits to her country residence in Rodmell, Sussex, but in her novel *Between the Acts* she shifts her gaze from the metropolis to a 'remote village in the very heart of England' as the focus for her dazzlingly modernist re-vision of English culture and history. Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts*, ed. by Gillian Beer (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 13. All references are to this edition and henceforth will be given parenthetically in the text.

<sup>102</sup> Harris, p. 169.

<sup>103</sup> Roberts, 'Letter to Robert Graves', Jan 14 1944, in *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, ed. by Patrick McGuinness, p. 170.

nineteenth century by enthusiasts of folk culture in England, and in the early twentieth century by advocates of the *gwerin* in Wales – that presented marginal, secluded rural sites as repositories for a continuous premodern tradition, otherwise lost to modernity:<sup>104</sup> through her use of the adverb ‘still’, she conjures a sense of timelessness, presenting Llanybri as a place where they continue to uphold ‘the old ways’ despite the radical changes undergone by Wales in the twentieth century.

Indeed, Roberts’s representation of village life often reflects her preoccupation with continuity and survival. In a letter to Robert Graves, she claimed affinity with the material culture of the Middle Ages through her Catholic upbringing ‘in a French & Spanish convent’ in Buenos Aires.<sup>105</sup> Roberts often alludes to the great divide between her Argentinean childhood, with its intensity of colour and sun, and her present-day life ‘in this damp and stony stare of a village’, emphasising the difficulty of reconciling the two halves of her life.<sup>106</sup> The Middle Ages and its sensory Catholic culture were interesting for Roberts because, in her imagination at least, it provided her with a ‘continuous cultural link’ to her own past, just as Llanybri provided her with a ‘continuous cultural link’ to the past of the country that had become her home.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Georgina Boyes, *The Imagined Village: Culture, Ideology, and the English Folk Revival* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), p. 4, Juliette Wood, ‘Perceptions of the Past in Welsh Folklore Studies’, *Folklore*, 108 (1997), 93-102 (p. 98). Nineteenth-century folklorists Sir Laurence and Lady Gomme contrasted a timeless countryside with the city as a space of progress and change, contending that ‘[...] in every society there are people who do not progress either in religion or in polity with the foremost of the nation. They are left stranded amidst the progress. They live in out-of-the-way villages, or in places where the general culture does not penetrate easily; they keep to the old ways, practices, and ideas, following with religious awe all that their parents held to be necessary in their lives’ (Alice and Laurence Gomme, *British Folk-lore, Folk-songs, and Singing Games* [London: David Nutt, 1916], p. 10).

<sup>105</sup> Roberts, ‘Letter to Robert Graves’, Jan 14<sup>th</sup> 1944, in *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, ed. by Patrick McGuinness, p. 170.

<sup>106</sup> Lynette Roberts, ‘Royal Mail’, in *Lynette Roberts: Collected Poems*, ed. by Patrick McGuinness, p. 27, l. 22. All references to Roberts’s poetry are to this edition and henceforth will be given parenthetically in the text. Where ambiguity is possible, I use the abbreviation *CP*.

<sup>107</sup> Robichaud, p. 6.

Iorwerth C. Peate, the first curator of the Welsh Museum of Folk Life at St. Ffagans, stressed the cultural importance of rural villages during the 1930s, placing them at the heart of Welsh national culture. Peate identified the rural West as a kind of time-capsule, a retainer of 'Folk songs, superstitions, the gentle bearing of the poor, and a host of other things which are like the fragments of a dream lost in the uproar of industry's juggernaut'.<sup>108</sup> Drawing on Peate's concern with folk art, Roberts aligns the Middle Ages with devalued aspects of culture associated with oral, folk, and women's history. In particular, the culture of medieval Wales comes to be identified in her work with the 'subjugated knowledge' of the colonial periphery, concretised in practices such as botanical healing, folk ritual, and home-made craft. The Welsh village is seen by Roberts to offer a point of connection with these 'residual' medieval traditions, which, though fragile and fragmentary, can yet be restored through the practice of everyday life – making cawl with wild herbs, for instance, or writing an 'ode or elegy'.<sup>109</sup> For her, medieval folk tradition represents a form of knowledge that assimilates, rather than rejects, the traditions of the past, a culture in which embodied life – the impersonal and tactile – is paramount. As such, it offers an important means of resistance to an aggressive modern 'technocracy' that, in Roberts's view, valued profit and technology above human experience, isolation over social connection, which she considered as 'equivalent to death'.<sup>110</sup>

Roberts often places emphasis on the role of Welsh monasteries as centres for herbal knowledge during the Middle Ages; indeed, the very name 'Strata Florida' (*Ystrad Fflur*), a well-known Cistercian monastery situated in Ceredigion, Mid Wales, means 'layers of flowers'. She devotes particular attention to medieval monastic life, presenting it – much like

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<sup>108</sup> Iorwerth C. Peate, *Cymru a'i phobl* (Caerdydd: Gwasg Prifysgol Caerdydd, 1948), p. 2.

<sup>109</sup> Lynette Roberts, 'Poem from Llanybri', in *Collected Poems*, ed. by Patrick McGuinness, p. 3, l. 28.

<sup>110</sup> Lynette Roberts, 'Letter to Robert Graves', in *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, ed. by Patrick McGuinness, January 14<sup>th</sup> 1944, p. 170.

the Welsh village – as an important site of community and material culture. In an article on fourteenth-century Florentine artist Lorenzo da Monaco (‘Lorenzo the Monk’) published in *Life and Letters To-day*, she employs the ‘scene-making’ strategy favoured by Woolf in order to re-animate everyday life in a Camaldolese monastery:

We can imagine these monks hunched over a table, some working on powdered parchment lightly brushed over with a hare’s foot. Their puckered faces too near their work, tracing drawings first with sinopia, then colouring the endless legends which surround their monastery. In one corner calligraphers reshape their quills or make a new brush from the tails of miniver; whilst others the lesser accomplished grind and mix various colours. There is a hum of bees and smell of herbs with the humdrum of voices and murmuring of prayers.<sup>111</sup>

Through her imaginative re-animation of monastic culture, Roberts re-orientates medieval Welsh tradition away from the military and public, and towards the domestic, the sensual and tactile, in a manner that resonates closely with Woolf’s feminist historiography.

Following the mass unemployment of the 1930s, together with the rise of the Labour party and the mobilization of the British left in the Spanish Civil War, the linked questions of labour and community, and their relation to art and the artist, rose to the top of the cultural agenda by the end of the decade. Roberts’s art can be seen to reflect some of the key precepts of ‘intermodernism’, Kristin Bluemel’s term for the cultural production associated with the period deemed ‘late Modernist’, ‘outside’ or ‘after’ modernism.<sup>112</sup> She shows a marked concern with representing working-class cultures, one of the salient features of intermodernism. Furthermore, just as, for Bluemel, ‘intermodernists’ are defined by being ‘politically radical, “radically eccentric”’, so Roberts embraces a political position that is individual and difficult to pin down.<sup>113</sup> While socialist in inclination (she praises the Welsh miners for how they ‘fight for their rights’ (D, 4) and expresses outrage at the poverty

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<sup>111</sup> Lynette Roberts, ‘Lorenzo da Monaco’, *Life and Letters To-day*, 25.34 (1940), pp. 300-311 (p. 304).

<sup>112</sup> Kristin Bluemel, *Intermodernism: Literary Culture in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 4.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

endured by rural workers), she also embraces a tendency – shared by many medievalists of the nineteenth century – to celebrate feudalist social structures: in her diary she notes admiringly that the Llanybri villager seems to have retained ‘all the natural and true qualities of an aristocrat’ (D, 17). Notably, she felt that socialism should grow out of cultural forms and everyday life, rather than be imposed artificially, from above (D, 18).<sup>114</sup> Just as Iorwerth Peate saw Welsh craft as the product of a culture where ‘work and leisure, individual enterprise and co-operation were combined’, so Roberts presents a medieval Welsh craft tradition as the product of a more communitarian, creative, and liberated kind of society.<sup>115</sup> Furthermore, she explores how, through a revival of Welsh crafts, this kind of society might be brought into existence once again.

Roberts was a visual artist as well as a poet, and her work bears the influence of William Morris and the nineteenth-century Arts and Crafts movement, with which she would have been familiarised during her time at the Central School of Arts and Crafts in London. In works such as ‘Poem from Llanybri’ (1944), for instance, she can be seen to re-work a Victorian heritage that associated premodern material culture with organic growth, spirituality, and social harmony. Indeed, for Roberts, tradition was not only something known, but something lived; an art and a practice, as well as a point in history. Similar to poet David Jones, she roots her poetry in what Jones terms a ‘sacramental’ culture which, finding its expression in craftsmanship and ritual, is associated by both Jones and Roberts with the Catholic Middle Ages.<sup>116</sup>

Medieval Welsh culture provides Roberts with important analogues in her attempt to develop a socially-oriented poetics that, like craft, is both beautiful and useful to the

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<sup>114</sup> She asserts that ‘[s]ocialism should be a natural result of the people’s everyday life... and not a forced movement... only then will it become beneficial’ (D, p. 18).

<sup>115</sup> Peate, ‘The Social Organization of Welsh Rural Industries’, *Welsh Housing and Development Yearbook* (1928), 103-5 (p. 104).

<sup>116</sup> David Jones, ‘Art and Sacrament’, in *Epoch and Artist* (London: Faber & Faber, 1959), pp. 143-179.

community. Her sacramental sensibility can also be read as a response to the debasement of human *techne* by the brutality of modern ‘technocracy’. In David Jones’s poem *In Parenthesis*, the technological warfare of World War I is shown to entail ‘all burstings out; all sudden up-rendings and rivings-through – all taking out of vents – all barrier breaking –all unmaking’.<sup>117</sup> Similar to Jones, Roberts’s poetry establishes an ethics and aesthetics of human making that, rooted in domestic and female-oriented domains of experience, offers an alternative, and a corrective, to the devastating ‘unmaking’ of war.

Roberts shared T.S. Eliot’s and David Jones’s determination ‘to see the modern world in meaningful relationship to the past, and to the divine’.<sup>118</sup> She makes use of medieval culture in order to ‘re-enchant’ a secular modernity, to rediscover the spiritual within the everyday. Whether using Dante’s *Paradiso* as a model for a futuristic escape into ‘the strata of the sky’ (64) in the final section of *Gods with Stainless Ears*, or reinventing the swan – a love envoy in Dafydd ap Gwilym’s poem – as a sign of psychological peace in ‘Poem from Llanybri’, she utilises medieval forms in order to convey what Catholic intellectual Tom Burns called ‘the territory of the sacral in daily living’.<sup>119</sup> In her essay on representing African-American culture, ‘Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation’, Toni Morrison maintains that in order to give voice to her minority culture, a literature is required that can blend ‘the acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world at the same time with neither taking precedence over the other’.<sup>120</sup> As I show in Chapter 3, Roberts turns to premodern folk culture – as indicative of a repressed sensibility that fuses the real and the supernatural – in order to construct her own form of ‘minor literature’.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., David Jones, *In Parenthesis* (1937; London: Faber & Faber, 2010), p. 24.

<sup>118</sup> Robichaud, p. 119.

<sup>119</sup> Tom Burns, quoted in Robichaud, p. 105.

<sup>120</sup> Toni Morrison, ‘Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation’, in *Black Women Writers*, ed. by Mari Evans (Doubleday: New York, 1985), pp. 339-345 (p. 342).

<sup>121</sup> The term is Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s; see *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. by Dana Polan (1975; London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).



Though she identifies the Middle Ages with cultural wholeness and community, Roberts's medievalism is also dominated by the idea of the fragment, the partial, the incomplete. From the bombed-out 'Round Church built in a Round Age' of 'Crossed and Uncrossed' (20, l. 13), or the medieval 'shell tip' (23, l. 31) on which Old English poet Caedmon sits in her poem 'Orarium', the prevalence of the ruin in her poetry points to a postmodern sense of historical knowledge as what Bruce Holsinger terms 'willfully fragmentary'.<sup>122</sup> It also provides a means of registering the material devastation of the bombsite – a reality that, as Leo Mellor has argued, had unprecedented impact on the wartime imaginary in Britain.<sup>123</sup> Fundamentally, as I show, Roberts's historical fragments – rendered suddenly strange by being thrust into new contexts – are presented as inherently generative and creative: while on one level they announce the destruction and loss of a culture, they also provide the raw material for new constructions and combinations.

Despite her resistance to the 'relentless inevitability' of an increasingly globalised capitalist culture, Roberts does not reject modernity, and neither does she advocate a return to the medieval past. In fact, she approached the very notion of national tradition with caution, remarking in her diary that 'Tradition can be evil when the roots of its repetition is associated, as it is so much today, with FEAR' (D, 52). Like Woolf, she did not wish the present to be subordinated to the authority of an implicitly male past, but felt that the past should instead be mobilised to serve the needs of ordinary Welsh people, men and women, in the present. Through her poetic art, she seeks not to repeat, but to transform and re-make medieval tradition 'for practical use in our time' (D, 17), to set it in relation to the 'now'.

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<sup>122</sup> Holsinger, p. 5.

<sup>123</sup> Leo Mellor, *Reading the Ruins: Modernism, Bombsites and British Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 1-2.

Indeed, her writing can be seen to reflect upon and perform Eliot's conception of the cultural role of poetry in 'sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end'.<sup>124</sup> Hence, her return to medieval culture can be regarded as a kind of forward-looking nostalgia: through her engagement with ancient texts and traditions, she seeks to define a more expressive and coherent way of life, to discover in the medieval Welsh past the practical tools with which to repair, and transform, a broken, disconnected, disenchanting Western culture.

### **Key contexts**

As my thesis sets out to show, Woolf's and Roberts's approaches to the Middle Ages are multi-faceted and ambivalent: practical and poetic, nostalgic and forward-looking, all at once. In the section that follows, I briefly map out some of the wider cultural and political contexts informing these writers' engagement with the Middle Ages, outlining in the process the key critical models I have used in my interpretation of their complex medieval strategies.

#### **I. Neo-Medievalism**

Medievalism, I argue, can be regarded as modernity (and modernism's) unconscious, appearing as an imaginative invention – much like the Orient in Edward Said's analysis – through which modernity has thought itself.<sup>125</sup> Like Orientalism, medievalism often has to do with cultural elements repressed by modernity: the unconscious, the feminine, dream, the everyday. Bruce Holsinger observes that the Middle Ages is 'the historical period that modernity most consistently abjected as its temporal other'.<sup>126</sup> Seen as emblematic of a barbaric, superstitious past, its legacy was repressed in the West by a rationalist, increasingly atheistic modernity from the early eighteenth century onwards. This 'othering' of the

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<sup>124</sup> T.S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Poetry to Criticism in England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), p. 111.

<sup>125</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1978; London: Penguin, 2003).

<sup>126</sup> Holsinger, p. 5.

medieval period continues today: as Carolyn Dynshaw argues, ‘the Middle Ages is still made the dense, unvarying, and eminently obvious monolith against which modernity and postmodernity groovily emerge’.<sup>127</sup>

Furthermore, medievalism tends to emerge during moments of crisis and rapid social change. In the nineteenth century, the ‘medieval revival’ was seen a means of combatting the debasement of art by mechanical reproduction, as well as a way of countering the spiritual impoverishment of modern life. The Middle Ages were idealized by many Victorian writers as a time of organic connectedness, creativity, freedom and joy, and as such, were used in order to address a critique of the current, alienated social and economic order.<sup>128</sup> Despite its utopian elements, however, medievalism was often bound up in political reactionary and culturally conservative ideologies. As Alice Chandler, among others, has shown, the Middle Ages were used in order to project a ‘dream of order’, with writers vaunting the merits of a feudal system in which everyone knew their place.<sup>129</sup>

The neo-medievalism that emerged in modernist writings of the early twentieth century represented a similar response to crisis – specifically, the civilizational crisis posed by two world wars, which seemed to threaten the very life of Western culture itself. At a time when all the cultural traditions which had led to war came under question, the medieval became once again a site for finding alternatives. Importantly, however, the medievalism of the first part of the twentieth century was projected through a very different lens from that of the Victorian age. Partly through the influence of scholars such as Jessie Weston, medievalism became bound up in popular contemporary discourses such as anthropology, ritualism, psychoanalysis, and Bergsonism.<sup>130</sup> In the wake of Freud, the Middle Ages were no

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<sup>127</sup> Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham and London: Duke University Press), p. 16.

<sup>128</sup> Chandler, p. 7; Jennifer Harris, p. 16.

<sup>129</sup> Chandler, p. 1.

<sup>130</sup> Garrity, pp. 4, 243.

longer regarded as a distant ideal, but as a repressed, ‘primitive’ history, valorised by many Modernists as a vital, emotionally expressive part of Britain’s inheritance.<sup>131</sup> Furthermore, while the Victorians had stressed the separation and distinctiveness of medieval past from modern present, in modernist neo-medievalism, the temporal boundaries between the two were far more fluid and unstable.

In many ways, the medievalism of the interwar period articulates a longing for ‘the real’, provoked by a developing media age, a growing ‘society of the spectacle’. In his essay ‘Simulacra and Simulation’ (1981), Jean Baudrillard notes that

[W]hen the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity.<sup>132</sup>

Invoking an ‘originary’ medieval past associated with the authentic, the human (rather than the technological), the communal, writers such as Mary Butts and T.S. Eliot sought to redress the perceived loss of a ‘stable, authentic social ground’.<sup>133</sup>

## II. National identity

While modernist medievalism served as a frame for exploring the possibilities of community, it also, as I have already shown, provided a platform for interrogating national identity during

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<sup>131</sup> Robert Graves was one of these, incorporating, for instance, various elements of Celtic and medieval mythology into his seminal work of poetic myth-making, *The White Goddess*. Lynette Roberts, a close friend of Graves’s, collaborated extensively with him on *The White Goddess*, sending him important material and ideas. In fact, she played such a large part in the book’s conception that Graves later acknowledged in a letter to Roberts that ‘[a]s for *The White Goddess*; you’re largely responsible for my writing that book. It began with your sending me that inaccurate but discerning book of the Rev. E. Davies’s; that gave me a start and I began checking up all round’ (Robert Graves, ‘Letter to Lynette Roberts’, 26<sup>th</sup> April 1950, in *Poetry Wales*, 19.2 (1983), 51-124 (p. 111)). *The White Goddess* weaves together elements from Edward Davies’s *Celtic Researches* (the antiquarian study of ancient British culture sent to Graves by Roberts), Lady Charlotte Guest’s translation of *The Mabinogion*, and Margaret Davies’s *The Witch Cult of Western Europe*. Projecting this material through an anthropological prism modelled on J.G. Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, Graves uses his excavation of disparate ancient myths in order to posit the existence of a great maternal deity, a ‘White Goddess of Birth, Love and Death’ behind the different goddesses of Europe and the ancient Middle East.

<sup>132</sup> Jean Baudrillard, ‘Simulacra and Simulations’, in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, 2nd edn, ed. by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 365-377 (p. 369).

<sup>133</sup> Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars* (Berkeley, L.A., and London: University of California Press, 1999), p. 43.

the earlier twentieth century, bound up as it was in mythic conceptions of originary Englishness, or indeed, originary Welshness. In the period following World War I, the question of British national identity and the idea of national belonging loomed large in the popular and cultural consciousness. As Jane Garrity points out, the 1914 Treaty of Versailles consolidated the ‘principle of nationality’ in its re-mapping of European space, and set the tone for the nationalistic, militaristic, imperialistic culture that dominated in Britain (and indeed, in the rest of Europe), during this period.<sup>134</sup> Cultural materials idealizing English national character and the notion of an ‘authentic’ Englishness proliferated at this time, from poetry to posters, pamphlets, and guided rambles.<sup>135</sup> Even politicians waxed lyrical over their love of country: Stanley Baldwin, for instance, claimed in 1924 that

To me, England is the country. And when I ask myself what I mean by England when I am abroad, England comes to me through my various senses – through the ear, through the eye and through certain imperishable scents.<sup>136</sup>

The dream of England as the national/natural homeland was inextricably bound up in the reality of Britain as an imperial nation-state. National identity was conceived in expansionist terms, and if romanticised images of England were in part the preserve of English people who lived abroad, dispersed across the empire, they also served to promote an ideal of English- or Britishness among the inhabitants of Britain’s colonies. But there is another side to this story, of course, that of the rise of Welsh nationalism. Following World War I, many Welsh people noted that, as Kenneth O. Morgan puts it, ‘the “little five-foot-five nations” on whose behalf Lloyd George had said the war had been fought, conspicuously did not include Wales – certainly not at Versailles’.<sup>137</sup> Plaid Cymru, the Welsh Nationalist party, was the product of

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<sup>134</sup> Garrity, p. 14,

<sup>135</sup> Alun Howkins, ‘The Discovery of Rural England’, in *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880-1920*, ed. by Roberts Colls and Phillip Dodd (Breckenham, Kent: Croom Helm, 1986), pp. 62-88 (p. 77).

<sup>136</sup> Stanley Baldwin, ‘What England Means to Me’, speech to the Royal Society of St. George, 6<sup>th</sup> May 1924, quoted in Howkins, p. 82.

<sup>137</sup> Kenneth O. Morgan, *Modern Wales: Politics, Places and People* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1995), p. 209.

this surge in national feeling. The party laid stress on separatism, advocating an almost complete severance from the political and economic fabric of England, and stressed the central role of language and culture in ‘resist[ing] and revers[ing] all those trends that were assimilating Wales into England’, a mantle that Roberts often assumes in her poetry.<sup>138</sup>

In the wake of nationalist movements in Ireland, India, and Wales, Britain’s imperial identity began to look more fragile. In his influential study of modernism and national culture in England, *A Shrinking Island*, Jed Esty argues that many modernist writers, from Eliot and Woolf to John Cowper Powys, responded to ‘imperial contraction’ – the decline in Britain’s global control and sense of its own centrality as an imperial power that took place from the 1930s onwards – by way of a concerted reassessment, and reimagining, of British identity.<sup>139</sup> This found expression in an ‘anthropological turn’, by which writers moved their attention away from the geographic expanses of empire and towards the ‘insular’ culture of Britain itself. For Esty, this ‘anthropological’ turn had to do, not only with self-reflection, but with transformation: writers ‘measured the passing of British hegemony [...] in terms of a recovered cultural particularity that is, at least potentially, the basis of both social and aesthetic renewal’.<sup>140</sup> Furthermore, Esty contends that participants in the ‘anthropological turn’ laid stress on the role of culture, rather than simply art, in national renewal:

Taken together, their works of the thirties and forties begin to deemphasise the redemptive agency of art, which, because of its social autonomization, operates unmoored from any given national sphere, and to promote instead the redemptive agency of *culture*, which is restricted by national or ethnolinguistic borders.<sup>141</sup>

In this way, for Esty, the ‘anthropological turn’ in late modernism can be seen to anticipate the rise of cultural studies in the 1960s, defined as ‘an ethnographic and anti-elitist approach

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<sup>138</sup> D. H. Davies, *The Welsh Nationalist Party 1925-1945: A Call to Nationhood* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1983), p. vii.

<sup>139</sup> Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 2.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

to symbolic practices'.<sup>142</sup> Placing Roberts's and Woolf's medievalisms in the context of the impulse described by Esty, I suggest that their engagement with the medieval past reflects a common drive to deconstruct imperial myths of Britishness, to replace the universalising 'grand narratives' of the colonial era with a different national history, focused on what Alexandra Harris calls 'eccentricity, locality, difference'.<sup>143</sup> Furthermore, in their representation of premodern folk culture, both writers emphasise the role of what Raymond Williams calls 'a good common culture', rather than elitist forms of art, in effecting a 'post-colonial' national renewal.<sup>144</sup>

Woolf's and Roberts's positions on issues of national and cultural reinvention were, as I have indicated, informed and complicated by gender. Both writers identified themselves as outsiders within their own nation: in her essay *Three Guineas* (1938), Woolf emphasises her exteriority as a woman to the 'pageantry' of English national culture, calling on women to band together in an 'Outsiders' Society' to work towards 'liberty, equality and peace',<sup>145</sup> and Roberts similarly depicts herself as a 'stranger' in Wales, a figure who remains 'always observant and slightly obscure' (*CP*, 8, l. 3). Their shared sense of unbelonging points to the fact that, as Woolf argued in 1938, women remained 'step-daughters' to the nation during the earlier twentieth century, partially, but not entirely accepted into national culture, since 'their civil and social rights [were] so curtailed in comparison to those of men'.<sup>146</sup> Furthermore, this phenomenon was accentuated, rather than attenuated, by World War II. As Gill Plain argues, 'it would seem that women were not granted citizenship in the Second World War; rather, they were forced to negotiate for it'; because 'wartime women were assumed to be

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>143</sup> Harris, p. 11.

<sup>144</sup> Raymond Williams, 'Culture is Ordinary', in *The Everyday Life Reader*, ed. by Ben Highmore (pp. 91-100), p. 97.

<sup>145</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas*, in *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, ed. by Morag Shiach (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 153-414 (pp. 309, 310).

<sup>146</sup> Garrity, p. 1.

performing rather than inhabiting the identity of public citizen', they hovered somewhere between citizens and traitors in the perception of the state, and Roberts's writing in particular reflects critically on these tensions.<sup>147</sup>

Furthermore, and in a related sense, Woolf and Roberts remained similarly ambivalent about the concept of nationhood and national culture. In *Three Guineas*, Woolf appears to reject nationhood on the basis of its connection to patriarchal, capitalist values of ownership and control, claiming famously that 'as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world'.<sup>148</sup> Roberts often espouses a similarly borderless vision of solidarity. Her interest in rural Welsh life is telescoped into a wider concern for the conditions of a transnational class of rural peasantry, and when France was invaded by the Nazis in 1940, her first instinct was to 'sell' her British status and go 'running off to France' (D, 17) to help with the Resistance – an impulse that points to the radical contingency of her sense of British and/or Welshness.

Yet both writers also communicate a powerful sense of what Jane Garrity terms 'national desire and longing'.<sup>149</sup> In *Three Guineas*, Woolf acknowledges that 'still some obstinate emotion remains, some love of England' that, though irrational, will compel her 'to give to England first what she desires of peace and freedom for the whole world'.<sup>150</sup> Equally, Roberts articulates a passionate sense of allegiance to Wales and those whom she invokes as 'my people' (*GSE*, II, l. 1). Though she rarely voices her politics directly, *Gods with Stainless Ears* makes her nationalist agenda explicit in its depiction of a solitary hero figure 'free[ing] dragon from glacier glade', an image of national 'uplift' and revival (V, l. 166). It was this shared sense of double vision, of being on two sides at once, that allowed these writers to

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<sup>147</sup> Gill Plain, 'Women Writers and the War', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of World War II*, ed. by Marina Mackay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 165-178 (p. 168).

<sup>148</sup> Woolf, *Three Guineas*, p. 313.

<sup>149</sup> Garrity, p. 2.

<sup>150</sup> Woolf, *Three Guineas*, p. 313.



reflect critically upon their home cultures, to give voice to the ‘internal difference’ that lay within Britain and Wales.<sup>151</sup>

### III. Neo-Romanticism

If Woolf and Roberts reject jingoistic, paternalistic forms of nationalism, then, as I have suggested, both celebrate a form of ‘national feeling’ identified with the sensory interrelation of place, literature, and nature. In a letter to Ethel Smythe in 1941, Woolf owned that the London of ‘Chaucer, Dickens, Shakespeare and so on’ was her ‘only patriotism’, save ‘one vision [...] when we were driving back from Ireland and I saw a stallion being led, under the bay and the beeches, along a grass ride, and I thought this is England’.<sup>152</sup> A central, connecting thread running throughout my thesis is provided by the theme of Neo-Romanticism which, as I show, infuses and conditions Roberts’s and Woolf’s representations of the medieval past. Emerging during the latter part of the 1930s in Britain in the visual arts, Neo-Romanticism was an artistic impulse that reached out to influence many other domains of cultural production during the 1940s, including cinema, illustration and poetry.<sup>153</sup> Initiated by artists John Piper and Paul Nash, it fused a Romantic attention to the natural world with a modernist sensibility rooted in surrealism, expressionism and apocalypse.<sup>154</sup> In her seminal study *Romantic Moderns* (2010), Alexandra Harris contends that by the 1930s, a new generation of modernists were beginning to rebel against the unremittingly experimental ethos of high modernism, and ‘were wondering how to connect with the headily abandoned

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<sup>151</sup> M. Wynn Thomas, *Internal Difference: Twentieth-Century Writing in Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992).

<sup>152</sup> Virginia Woolf, ‘Letter to Ethyl Smythe’, in *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, 1936–1941*, ed. by Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, 6 vols (London, Hogarth Press, 1975), VI, 460.

<sup>153</sup> David Mellor, *The Neo-Romantic Imagination in Britain 1935–55* (London: Lund Humphreys, 1987), pp. 16–84. Examples include films such as Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger’s *A Canterbury Tale* (1944), Woolf’s collaging representation of rural Englishness, *Between the Acts* (1941), and the modernist paean to place offered by Eliot’s *Four Quartets* (1943).

<sup>154</sup> Clare Morgan, ‘Vanishing Horizons: Virginia Woolf and the Neo-Romantic Landscape in *Between the Acts* and “Anon”’, *Worldviews*, 5 (2001), 35–57 (p. 40).

past'.<sup>155</sup> The sense of an imminent ending, not only to country life, but to British culture as a whole as the bombs began to descend, provoked a kind of cultural stock taking, a 'last look round', which found expression in a return to nature and to ancient tradition.<sup>156</sup> Clare Morgan suggests that the Neo-Romantic generation was driven by a reaction against the 'peeved, pinched formalism' of Bloomsbury, which they felt was too abstracted from real life.<sup>157</sup> Instead, they considered, as Geoffrey Grigson and John Piper claimed, that 'Art should be more representative of, and referential to, the culture from which it comes'.<sup>158</sup> Neo-Romantics were drawn to patterns in the weather, to the ephemeral and imperfect, and were lured by 'eccentricity, locality, difference'.<sup>159</sup>

Fundamentally, this rebooted Romantic impulse found expression in what David Mellor terms a 'retopographising' of the British landscape, effected through a new attention to an ancient, primordial history.<sup>160</sup> Travelling around the countryside on the new routes opened up by the motorcar, Neo-Romantics sought to record forgotten traces of an ancient past, to map out 'an "other"' Britain to be re-discovered, walked and climbed over in all its regional fastnesses'.<sup>161</sup> This re-visioning of space, furthermore, went hand in hand with a re-imagining of time. Neo-Romantics aspired to a sense of temporal continuity, yet they also rejected the concept of the past altogether; for Grigson and Piper, '[t]here is no "past", there are no pictures painted "in the past", equally there is no Fair Isle of the present. There is only a human instant, a being. "Now" is inclusive'.<sup>162</sup> Moreover, as Clare Morgan observes, this Neo-Romantic 'now' encompassed 'specifically an English past and an English art sensibility

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<sup>155</sup> Harris, p. 11.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Morgan, p. 38. The quotation is from Geoffrey Grigson, 'Comment on England', *Axis*, 1 (1935), 8-10, (p. 10).

<sup>158</sup> Geoffrey Grigson and John Piper, 'England's Climate', *Axis*, 7 (1936), 6.

<sup>159</sup> Harris, p. 11.

<sup>160</sup> Mellor, p. 34.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>162</sup> Piper and Grigson, 'England's Climate', p. 9.

based in those ‘Middle ages’ when, Grigson and Piper argue, time did not exist the way it does in modernity’.<sup>163</sup> Roberts and Woolf similarly concentrate upon a ‘now’ that includes the medieval past (English and/or Welsh) and the modern present, as part of a shared effort to reconceive the linear, developmental time of the modern nation.

Indeed, the influence of Neo-Romanticism is prevalent throughout Roberts’s and Woolf’s work. Bloomsbury had always been ‘tainted’ by Romanticism for other modernists. As Bonnie Kime Scott points out, Wyndham Lewis saw Bloomsbury as too close to nature, which he relegated to an inferior, feminine position in relation to urban, technological art.<sup>164</sup> Interestingly, the case of Woolf suggests that Neo-Romanticism grew out of Bloomsbury, as well as being a reaction against it. Both Roberts and Woolf turn to a medieval past, embedded in the landscape, in order to effect a ‘remapping’ of the territory that renders national borders newly fluid and porous. As I suggest, landscape emerges in their work not only as a crucial locus of tradition, but also as a space in which the linked tensions of belonging and unbelonging, ancient and modern, continuity and rupture, find uneasy resolution.

#### **IV. Motherhood**

The first part of the twentieth century witnessed a reinvigorated interest in motherhood and maternal origins.<sup>165</sup> Both Freud, in his account of the development of the psyche, and classicist Jane Harrison, in her account of the Minoan-Mycenean cultures of Ancient Greece, postulated the existence of a lost, originary past dominated by femininity and the maternal. Indeed, Freud made an explicit connection between the obscure pre-Oedipal period of connection to the mother and recent discoveries in archaeology, stating that

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<sup>163</sup> Morgan, p. 39.

<sup>164</sup> Bonnie Kime Scott, ‘Virginia Woolf, Ecocriticism and Breaking Boundaries in Nature’, in *Woolfian Boundaries: Selected Papers from the Sixteenth Annual International Conference on Virginia Woolf* (Clemson, S. Carolina: Clemson University Digital Press, 2007), pp. 108-115 (p. 110).

<sup>165</sup> Garrity, p. 2. As Garrity notes, Woolf and many other women writers were influenced by an intellectual climate in which Freud and Harrison ‘were positing a primordial past dominated by femininity, nature, the irrational, and indeterminacy’ (p. 248). See also Hoberman, *Gendering Classicism*, p. 20.

[o]ur insight into this early, pre-Oedipus, phase comes to us as a surprise, like the discovery, in another field, of the Minoan-Mycenean civilization behind the civilization of Greece.<sup>166</sup>

This maternal realm came to be regarded as a kind of ‘culture before culture’,<sup>167</sup> an ‘undiscovered country’ whose importance to the development of the human psyche, particularly the female psyche, was acknowledged by Freud.<sup>168</sup> But while Freud maintained that the movement away from a non-rational maternal state into a rational patriarchal order was necessary for civilization, Jane Harrison suggested that the suppression of matriarchal cults by patriarchal religion entailed a loss of vitality, creativity, and collectivity in human life.<sup>169</sup> Harrison’s ideas – her location of the origins of Western culture in an archaic past of matriarchal rites and mysticism – were greatly influential during the first decades of the twentieth century, and were taken up by many modernists, including Eliot, Joyce, and Woolf, a friend and admirer of the feminist scholar.

Moreover, the medieval past was often conflated with Ancient Greece during the early twentieth century. Medievalist scholars such as E.K. Chambers postulated a continuous link between the classical world and medieval England,<sup>170</sup> and Jessie Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance* drew explicitly on the ideas of Harrison and anthropologist J.G. Frazer in order to link patterns in medieval romance with the initiatory rites of Greek mystery religions.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘Female Sexuality’ (1931), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. by James Strachey et al., 24 vols, (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1953-74), 21, XXI, pp. 225-26.

<sup>167</sup> Anne Golomb Hoffman, ‘Bodies and Borders: The Politics of Gender in Contemporary Israeli Fiction’, in *The Boom in Contemporary Israeli Fiction*, ed. by Allan Mintz (Hanover and London: University Press of New England), p. 56.

<sup>168</sup> The term is Virginia Woolf’s; see ‘On Being Ill’, in *Selected Essays* ed. by David Bradshaw, pp. 101-110 (p. 101).

<sup>169</sup> Jane Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1908), p. 164.

<sup>170</sup> In his study *The Medieval Stage*, a sourcebook drawn upon by Woolf in her writing of the 1940s, E.K. Chambers traces a medieval folk tradition of minstrelsy and drama back to Ancient Greece and Rome, seeing medieval culture as ‘the inheritance of a remote and ancestral heathenism’. E.K. Chambers, *The Medieval Stage* (1903; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. v.

<sup>171</sup> Jessie Weston, *From Ritual to Romance* (1920; Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1997). Explaining how she came to the premise for the book, Weston explains that ‘[t]he perusal of Miss J. E. Harrison’s Themis opened my eyes to the extended importance of these [classical] Vegetation rites. In view of the evidence there adduced I asked myself whether beliefs which had found expression not only in social institution, and popular

Under the influence of scholars such as Weston and Harrison, the medieval past became conflated during the modernist period with the idea of a ‘primitive’, maternal British prehistory. I argue that in the work of Virginia Woolf and Lynette Roberts in particular, the medieval past is projected as the equivalent of Harrison’s ancient Greece – a world of ‘nameless vitality’ (A, 398) that, half factual, half-imagined, serves as a frame for imagining alternatives to patriarchal individualism, and for exploring social formations that might allow space and articulation for women’s desire.

During the interwar years, the rise of fascism meant that nationalism was increasingly associated with paternity: allegiance to a single, strong father figure.<sup>172</sup> Roberts and Woolf both identify an underlying, unconscious sense of national identification in a realm of ‘maternal feeling’, associated with a child’s experience of sound, colour, and nature. In *Three Guineas*, for instance, Woolf reflects on the idea that ‘some love of England [is] dropped into a child’s ears by the cawing of rooks in an elm tree, by the splash of waves on a beach, or by English voices murmuring nursery rhymes’.<sup>173</sup> If, as Benedict Anderson and Homi K. Bhabha suggest, the nation can be seen as an ‘imagined’ or discursive entity, then medievalism serves both Roberts and Woolf as a vehicle for uncovering the repressed ‘maternal’ underside of the national text.<sup>174</sup> Through their re-visioning of the Middle Ages, they oppose a nationalism organised according to the phallic economy of the father with an alternative sense of national belonging, grounded in a nurturing, sensuous relation with the

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custom, but, as set forth in Sir G. Murray’s study on Greek Dramatic Origins, attached to the work, also in Drama and Literature, might not reasonably – even inevitably – be expected to have left their mark on Romance?’ (p. vi).

<sup>172</sup> In his book *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), Sigmund Freud held that a group (be that a ‘race’, a ‘nation’, or a ‘component part of a crowd of people’), was by necessity maintained by allegiance to the ‘authority of a chief’, and ‘a strong faith’ in an ideal (*Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1949), p. 3, pp. 20-21. As I show over the course of this thesis, both Woolf and Roberts looked to the medieval past in search of alternatives to this paternalistic, idealist model of national belonging.

<sup>173</sup> Woolf, *Three Guineas*, p. 313.

<sup>174</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections of the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1983, repr. 2006), p. 6; Homi K. Bhabha, ‘Introduction’ to *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 1-7 (p. 2).

maternal body. Positing a form of nationhood rooted in direct experience and interdependence, rather than narrative or ideology, their medievalism thus forms a central part of their feminist resistance to fascism.

Woolf and Roberts can also be seen to react against a contemporary discourse which placed motherhood at the heart of empire-building. In her seminal study of British women writers and the national imaginary, *Step-daughters of England*, Jane Garrity observes that during the interwar period,

British women were viewed primarily as mothers, not daughters, in the eyes of the state. Valued for their role as reproductive conduits, white Englishwomen's bodies were subjected to a variety of regulatory processes which sought to reconstruct them, physically as well as spiritually, as potential mothers of the British race.<sup>175</sup>

The writers addressed in this study share an awareness that constructions of national identity (like territorial disputes in war), are grounded in, and enacted on, passive, idealised constructions of the female body: on ideas of woman as virgin territory, or fruitful mother of the empire. By foregrounding and empowering the female body on its own terms, they strive to trouble the notion of stable female 'origins'. Challenging the ontological discourses that have kept women in place, they present the female body as an important site of resistance to the ideological foundations of nation and empire.

### **Why Woolf and Roberts?**

Why should a study interrogating the intersection of gender, nation, and medievalism in modernism choose to focus on Woolf and Roberts in particular? The pairing might appear incongruous, for both writers, as I have suggested, were very different. One is a novelist, the other a poet. Roberts was part of a younger modernist generation that was resistant to the elitism of Bloomsbury, and had no personal connections with Woolf.<sup>176</sup> Furthermore, while

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<sup>175</sup> Garrity, p. 1.

<sup>176</sup> She did, however, share a number of mutual friends and acquaintances, such as T.S. Eliot and Edith Sitwell, to whom *Gods with Stainless Ears* is dedicated.

Woolf was ensconced at the heart of Britain's cultural establishment through her literary and family connections, Roberts, on the other hand, was a 'colonial' writer whose cultural positioning can be described as markedly 'ex-centric': born to Welsh-descended Australian parents in Buenos Aires, her gender, education (she studied the visual arts, not literature), and Argentinean background relegated her, in certain respects, to the cultural margins of both England and Wales.

Roberts's writing deliberately sets out to challenge what Raymond Williams terms 'metropolitan perception', defined as the 'magnetic concentration of wealth and power in modern imperial capitals and the simultaneous cosmopolitan access to a wide variety of subordinate culture'.<sup>177</sup> Woolf, however, was inevitably implicated in this 'metropolitan perception': the few times she mentions Welsh culture in her novels, it is in connection with minor working-class characters, such as Duffus the builder in *The Years*, a man whom Eleanor Pargeter couldn't help liking on account of his 'singsong' Welsh accent, though she feels he 'cheated her at every point'.<sup>178</sup> Yet Roberts and Woolf were also contemporaries, whose lives, as I have indicated, were shaped and influenced by the same geopolitical circumstances, the same 'patriarchal British constitution'.<sup>179</sup> Furthermore, their creative stance *vis-à-vis* questions of national identity and tradition can be seen to mirror that of the other in illuminating ways.

On a simple level, I chose these writers because their engagement with the medieval past is pronounced in their work in comparison with other British women writers of the same period. In this respect, they offer good case studies for what I have identified as a wider trend

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<sup>177</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 44.

<sup>178</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Years*, ed. by Hermione Lee (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 98.

<sup>179</sup> Francesca Rhydderch, 'Cultural Translations: a Comparative Critical Study of Kate Roberts and Virginia Woolf' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Wales, Aberystwyth, 2000), p. 7. Lynette Roberts's and Woolf's literary careers overlapped: Woolf was completing her final novel, *Between the Acts*, in 1941, at the time when Roberts was producing the poetry that she would later publish in her first collection, *Poems* (1944).

in British modernism in general, and British women's modernisms in particular. There is also a recuperative impulse behind my decision to pair Roberts – a writer who, partly because of her gender and Welsh affiliations, fell into obscurity before the republication of her *Collected Poems* in 2005, and is still relatively unknown – with Woolf, a writer whose status is emphatically canonical. By placing them on a level of equality, I hope to evince Roberts's similar importance to British modernism. It is important to acknowledge that my thesis is written from the perspective of a minority culture – what Francesca Rhydderch terms a position of 'cultural rootedness'.<sup>180</sup> Like Rhydderch's study of Virginia Woolf and Kate Roberts, it seeks to avoid 'a straightforward comparison in which Woolf would retain her central position, while Roberts could only hope to remain a satellite, infinitely other'.<sup>181</sup> Instead, I hope to establish a two-way conversation between my chosen writers.

Reading Woolf in the context of Roberts invites, I suggest, a fruitful reassessment of Woolf's cultural politics and historical strategies, from the perspective of the cultural margins. For example, the more overtly socialist dimensions of Roberts's writing illuminate Woolf's underexplored interest in collectivism, labour, and community. Conversely, reading Roberts's work in light of Woolf's feminist polemics serves to underline the subtly gendered, feminist dimensions of Roberts's cultural vision.<sup>182</sup> Because Roberts's writing tends to be assessed in isolation, or in relation to the work of the male writers with whom she collaborated (Eliot, Robert Graves, Alun Lewis, Keidrych Rhys), the gendered aspects of her poetics are often neglected, and my study sets out to uncover the subtle ways in which her

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<sup>180</sup> Rhydderch, p. 4.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Although Roberts's feminism is often subsumed within her nationalist and socialist politics, it finds clear expression in a diary entry for August 15<sup>th</sup> 1945: 'war will continue in this human world. War will exist until women become freed from slavery... it will exist until they become no longer the slaves of men but their leaders towards a preservation of life' (D, p. 69). This statement is redolent of Woolf's line of argument in *Three Guineas*, which similarly connects structures of sexual inequality to war, and positions women 'outsiders' as potential redeemers of national culture.



gender identity intersected, and came into conflict with, her nationalist and socialist politics.

Furthermore, by placing Roberts alongside Woolf, I aim to challenge monolithic, Anglocentric accounts of British modernism, reiterating my chosen writers' own commitment to difference and particularity.<sup>183</sup> Gesturing to the 'four nations' approach developed within British Romantic Studies, I aim to show how the vexed question of national identity and tradition was being re-assessed from different angles, in different locations in the British Isles, during the modernist period.<sup>184</sup> Ultimately, I attempt to challenge the 'metropolitan perception' implicit in the centre/margin distinction with a far more localised, decentred vision of earlier twentieth-century British literary culture.

### **Structure and methodology**

Roberts's and Woolf's approach to the medieval past, like their approach to national identity more generally, is marked by an uncanny sense of duality and double vision: in 'The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn', Woolf juxtaposes the voice of a fifteenth-century Englishwoman with that of a modern-day historian, Rosamund Merridew, while in Roberts's writing, the medieval past is persistently projected as modernity's mythic 'double': in *Gods with Stainless Ears*, for example, contemporary Welsh soldiers train 'for another Cattræth' (I, l. 55), mirroring the battle of *The Gododdin*, while an image of local coracleman John Roberts 'row[ing] to and fro [...] / floating quietly on the tide' (I, ll. 29-30) merges into that of Taliesin afloat in his coracle. Indeed, their work establishes a movement 'to and fro' between the medieval and the modern, setting ancient past in dialogue with the present. My thesis has a similarly dialogic structure: it does not take a directly comparative approach, which usually

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<sup>183</sup> Specifically, I aim to show the specifically Welsh component to Esty's 'anthropological turn', suggesting that what he sees as a new 'Anglocentric culture paradigm' (p. 2) was not, in fact, so 'Anglocentric' after all.

<sup>184</sup> The 'four nations' or 'archipelagic' approach traces 'genealogic and microgeographic connections among the literatures and cultures of the British archipelago, a formation that includes England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland'. See Juliette Shields, *Nation and Migration: The Making of British Atlantic Literature 1765-1835* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 4.

involves drawing connections between both writers within the same chapter, but rather places them side by side, by means of alternating chapters on Roberts's and Woolf's writing. In this way, I hope to point to interesting patterns and convergences in my chosen writers' medievalisms, while preserving a sense of the difference and distinctiveness of their respective cultural visions.

I organise my discussion thematically, with chapters grouped according to some of the key themes that underpin Woolf's and Roberts's engagement with the medieval past, namely landscape and travel, the domestic and everyday, and language and literary tradition. My choice of texts is chiefly determined by the themes I selected – that is, of the wide range of medieval-influenced writings produced by both authors, I limited myself to those which best illustrated my chosen themes. In Woolf's case, I organize the texts chronologically, with Chapter 1 focusing on her early medievalist short story, 'The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn' (1906), and *The Voyage Out* (1915), and Chapter 5 addressing her late, wartime writings, 'Anon' (1941) and *Between the Acts* (1941). In this way, I aim to trace consistencies and developments in Woolf's medievalism across her career, while also demonstrating that the Romantic, revisionary turn to premodern tradition detected by critics in late modernism was present in Woolf's work much earlier. Because much of Roberts's most important writing was produced during a relatively narrow time-frame, it was not practical or possible to use a similarly chronological approach to her work. Instead, I address 'Poem from Llanybri' (1944) in my first chapter in part because it was the opening text in the original edition of *Poems*, and as such offers what Patrick McGuinness terms a 'portal' to the rest of her oeuvre. Chapter 5 addresses poems with overtly domestic and ritual elements; texts that, in Roberts's words, remain 'true of the everyday things I do',<sup>185</sup> such as 'Earthbound' and

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<sup>185</sup> Quoted in John Pikoulis, 'Lynette Roberts and Alun Lewis', *Poetry Wales* 19.2 (1983), 9-29 (p. 19).

‘The Shadow Remains’ (both 1944), while my final chapter on Roberts considers her essay ‘An Introduction to Village Dialect’ (1944) – essentially a literary history of Anglophone Welsh culture from its medieval origins to the present – as an equivalent to Woolf’s literary history, ‘Anon’. Because Roberts’s long, ‘heroic’ poem *Gods with Stainless Ears* (written over the years 1941-3, but not published until 1951) encapsulates so many of the core themes of my study, and because its sweeping vision of wartime Wales represents Roberts’s longest, most detailed and well-explained engagement with medievalism (it aspires to the same scale as Pound’s *Cantos* (1915-1962), another ‘poem about history’), I return to it throughout my thesis as a central point of reference.

It is important to reiterate that, rather than regarding Roberts’s and Woolf’s medievalism in terms of the study and adaptation of specific medieval texts or traditions, I consider it instead as a poetic structure for thinking about questions important to women’s lives at the beginning of the century – gender, domesticity, nationhood, and war. Because the Middle Ages emerge in both Woolf and Roberts’s work primarily through a nexus of poetic images, rhythms and motifs, I focus chiefly on Roberts’s poetry, rather than her prose or novels. While my decision to consider Woolf’s novels (*The Voyage Out*, *Mrs Dalloway*, *Between the Acts*) in tandem with Roberts’s poetry might again appear incongruous, it resides on an understanding of the distinctively poetic nature of Woolf’s novelistic vision. Woolf herself observed a growing poetic tendency in her writing during the composition of *Mrs Dalloway*, writing in her diary that ‘I think I grow more & more poetic. Perhaps I restrained it, and now, like a plant in a pot, it begins to crack the earthenware’.<sup>186</sup> Jane Goldman has argued that Woolf employs the poetics of Romanticism in her attempt to break free from the

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<sup>186</sup> Virginia Woolf, diary entry for 21st June 1924, in *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, II, 304.

strictures of the linear plotline, to convey aspects of experience that narrative realism could not reach.<sup>187</sup> Indeed, in her essay ‘Poetry, Fiction and the Future’, Woolf asked,

Can prose say the simple things which are so tremendous? Give the sudden emotions which are so surprising? Can it chant the elegy, or hymn the love, or shriek in terror, or praise the rose, the nightingale or the beauty of the night? Can it leap at one spring at the heart of the subject as the poet does? I think not. That is the penalty that it pays for having dispensed with the incantation and the mystery, with rhyme and metre.<sup>188</sup>

Woolf associated medieval culture with this ‘incantation’ and ‘mystery’ (PC, 14), what she termed ‘[t]he song... the call to our primitive instincts. Rhythm. Sound. Sight’ (A, 374).

Woolf’s thinking about the medieval, then, was bound up in her thinking about poetics, and how poetics might revolutionise novelistic form.

In her medievalist essay ‘Anon’, Woolf tries to write a different kind of literary history, focused on what she termed in her notes as ‘the growth; the surrounding; also the inner, current all left out in text books’ (sic; A, 374). My study similarly seeks to address this ‘inner current’: through an attention to the poetics of the medieval, I seek to show how the material experiences of war and changing perceptions of national space were registered by women on the level of the imaginary, through memories and dreams. Accordingly, I make recourse to critical approaches that, addressing the phenomenology of lived experience, emphasise the interrelatedness of the material world, poetic images, and personal identity: texts such as Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space*, or the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. Fusing these with an attention to anthropological paradigms, I adopt an approach described by Edith Turner as an ‘anthropology of experience’.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> Jane Goldman, ‘From *Mrs Dalloway* to *The Waves*: New Elegy and Lyric Experimentalism’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Susan Sellers, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 49-69. (p. 55).

<sup>188</sup> Virginia Woolf, ‘Poetry, Fiction and the Future’, in *Selected Essays*, ed. by David Bradshaw, pp. 74-84 (pp. 81-284).

<sup>189</sup> Edith Turner, ‘Preface’, in Victor Turner and Edith L. B. Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p. xv. As Elizabeth Clea Lamont points out, ‘[l]iterary critics have become increasingly fascinated with the ways in which theories in cultural studies (anthropology and ethnography, in particular) can open up texts and render readings in hitherto unforeseen ways’. Elizabeth Clea

Medievalism forms part of modernism's unconscious, officially repudiated but nonetheless incorporated into its imaginative framework. Hence, discovering medievalism in modernism often means reading 'against the grain' of a text, inducing wider trends from allusion and subtext. For this reason, I make extended use of poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theoretical models, particularly those adopted by Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, on the basis that they are well suited to uncovering subconscious, disruptive and/or contradictory parts of a text, as well as illuminating the theme – central to my thesis – of desire in language. Moreover, in keeping with the postcolonial perspective adopted in this study, I utilise the postcolonial theory of Homi K. Bhabha as a tool for understanding the sense of cultural slippage, doubleness, and 'in-betweenness' that informs Woolf's and Roberts's representations of national history. Finally, I apply the deconstructive theories of Jacques Derrida as a suitable model for understanding the writers' challenge to phallogocentrism (the authority of the Word), as well as their questioning of the idea of a pure, 'authentic' national past. Anticipating the position of Derrida, they both suggest that the Middle Ages (as a site of cultural meaning, and designated point of origin), can only ever be called into being after the event, through the *techné* of language. Ultimately, they both point to how language effaces its own origins, dispersing cultural meaning across the playful movement between different signifiers.

For all their troubling of national origins, however, Woolf and Roberts retain a preoccupation with a maternal past. As I show in this thesis, through their engagement with the Middle Ages, Roberts and Woolf attempt to recuperate a 'motherland' which is also an 'otherland', a space of otherness and difference within what was once considered familiar. Their re-writing of the medieval past allows them to engage with what Liedeke Plate terms

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Lamont, 'New Modernist Travels with Virginia Woolf', *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, 21 (2001), 161-181 (p. 162).

‘alter/native’ experiences, at once ‘travelling’ and ‘native’, that remain out of kilter with, or unassimilated by, mainstream colonial narratives.<sup>190</sup> Ultimately, they reject abstracted notions of national identity, articulated through notions of patrimony and genealogy, in favour of a different, ‘embedded’ sense of national belonging, articulated through the connections – what might be called the lifelines – linking people to place and to each other in the present.

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<sup>190</sup> Plate, p. x.

## **Part I: Landscape and Travel**

### **Chapter 1**

#### **Re-writing Romance in Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out***

It is dawn at Jerusalem while midnight hovers above the Pillars of Hercules.  
All ages are contemporaneous.  
Ezra Pound, *The Spirit of Romance*

Virginia Woolf began working on *The Voyage Out* (1915) in 1910, the same year that Ezra Pound's study of medieval romance was published. Collapsing past, present and future, Pound's book deliberately flouts the careful historical demarcations established by Victorian philologists. Woolf's first novel similarly pushes against the realist paradigms of Edwardian fiction, presenting a new world in which time is uneven, social identity is called into question, and, in Pound's words, 'the future stirs already in the minds of the few'.<sup>1</sup> In spite of its concern with 'uncharted territory', however, *The Voyage Out* also reflects an understanding that, just as each journey is also a rehearsal of journeys past, so new writing must always negotiate the legacy of those who have written before. Tracing a journey undertaken by a young Englishwoman onto the colonial rim of the British empire, the novel is a self-consciously intertextual work, composed of an unstable amalgam of different literary genres and styles. The interaction of the text with other forms of travel writing, including Elizabethan travelogues, modernist narratives of travel, Leonard Woolf's Eastern texts, and Homer's *Odyssey*, has been the object of significant critical scrutiny.<sup>2</sup> However, its significant engagement with medieval narratives of travel has been largely overlooked. The modern journey depicted in Woolf's text is shadowed by journeys of the medieval past, most

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<sup>1</sup> Ezra Pound, *The Spirit of Romance* (London: J.M. Dent, 1910), p. vi.

<sup>2</sup> Karen R. Lawrence, *Penelope Voyages: Women and Travel in the British Literary Tradition* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 173-174. Lawrence lists Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) among the literary models for Woolf's book; to this might be added E.M. Foster's *A Room with a View* (1908), a text that similarly addresses the question of female development.

notably those pertaining to pilgrimage and vernacular romance. These forms thematise, and underpin, the search for transcendence and ‘authentic’ experience that inscribe the novel’s narrative.

The formal structure of *The Voyage Out* has posed interpretative problems for readers. Most critics agree that the novel follows the realist, chronological contours of the nineteenth-century *bildungsroman* form, with Rachel’s ‘voyage out’ to South America acting as a trope for her development as a social and gendered subject.<sup>3</sup> Yet opinion is undecided as to why Woolf invokes, then cuts short, the development of the heroine, who dies toward the end of the novel. Rachel’s death, together with the confusion and fragmentariness attributed to the novel, is often read as a sign of Woolf’s inability to accommodate traditional narrative form to radically new novelistic material.<sup>4</sup> For Jed Esty, however, Woolf deliberately sets out to disrupt the ‘purposeful or smoothly clocked’ development of the *bildungsroman* through recourse to techniques such as ‘metamorphosis, dilation, truncation, consumption, inversion’.<sup>5</sup> These techniques, while radical for their time, were not altogether new. The

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Christine Froula posits *The Voyage Out* as a text exploring the cultural initiation of its female protagonist; Susan Stanford Friedman sees the novel as narrating ‘a failed *Bildung* for its protagonist... [but] a successful *Bildung* for its author’; Emma Sutton reads the novel as a kind of *künstlerroman* focusing on the develop of Rachel as a young musician, and Elizabeth Abel notes that *The Voyage Out* ‘adapted [Woolf’s] new conception of character to the linear structure of the *Bildungsroman*’. See Christine Froula, ‘Out of the Chrysalis: Female Initiation and Female Authority in Virginia Woolf’s *The Voyage Out*’, *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, 5 (1986), 63-90 (p. 74), Susan Stanford Friedman, ‘Spatialization, Narrative Theory, and Virginia Woolf’s *The Voyage Out*’, in *Ambiguous Discourse: Feminist Narratology and British Women Writers*, ed. by Kathy Mezei (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), pp. 119-136 (p. 109), Emma Sutton, ‘“Within a Space of Tears”: Music, Writing, and the Modern in Virginia Woolf’s *The Voyage Out*’, in *Music and Literary Modernism*, ed. by Robert P. McParland (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2006), pp. 50-125 (p. 56), and Elizabeth Abel, *Virginia Woolf and the Fictions of Psychoanalysis* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. xvi.

<sup>4</sup> Madeline Moore argues that *The Voyage Out* ‘is the novel in which Woolf is least able to transform her own material, and Rachel Vinrace her most unsuccessful creator figure’, while Michael Rosenthal claims that the text is ‘a misbegotten initial effort’ in which Woolf is limited in her vision by her adherence to the convention of the omniscient third person narrator. See Madeline Moore, ‘Some Female Versions of Pastoral: *The Voyage Out* and Matriarchal Mythologies’, in *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Jane Marcus (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1981), pp. 82-104 (p. 82), and Michael Rosenthal, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), p. 49.

<sup>5</sup> Jed Esty, ‘Virginia Woolf’s Colony and the Adolescence of Modernist Fiction’, in *Modernism and Colonialism: British and Irish Literature 1899-1939*, ed. by Richard Begam and Michael Valdez Moses (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 70-90 (p. 79, p. 72).



narratives of Middle English and continental romance – as embodied by the writing of Chretien de Troyes, or Sir Thomas Malory – can be seen to epitomize the ‘metamorphosis, dilation, truncation’ described by Esty. In this chapter, I argue that Woolf can be seen to mine medieval narratives of travel in order to develop a ‘feminine’ poetics of digression and wandering that for her reflected more closely the non-linear, non-chronological movement of consciousness. Like many other modernists, Woolf was highly sceptical about the ideology of Western superiority, rationalism, and progress embodied by the *bildungsroman* form.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, she considered that the linear plotline failed to account for the rhythms and temporalities of women’s lives.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, as Rachel’s death before her intended marriage to Terence Hewet might suggest, Woolf felt that the closure of the marriage plot cut off women’s lives before they had even begun. She invokes the medieval vernacular forms of pilgrimage and romance in order to navigate a ‘way out’ of the Victorian marriage plot, harnessing their nonlinear structures of repetition, circularity, and epiphany as more suitable modes for conveying women’s experience.

Anticipating T.S. Eliot’s use of the Grail narrative in *The Waste Land* (1922), the novel’s engagement with the model of Arthurian quest reflects a desire for spiritual and artistic renewal. Unlike Eliot, however, Woolf challenges the male-oriented dimensions of the romance ‘adventure’, converting the hero’s quest for the Grail into a young woman’s search for lost maternal origins. Rachel’s search for the truth about her own dead mother forms part of a wider search for a history and tradition on which to base her own fledgling identity as a woman.<sup>8</sup> In its preoccupation with maternal histories, the novel can be seen to

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>7</sup> In *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), Woolf suggests that any attempt to convey women’s desire in fiction necessarily involves ‘tampering with the expected sequence’ established by men. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, in *A Room of One’s Own and Three Guineas*, ed. by Morag Shiach (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 3-147, p. 106.

<sup>8</sup> Madeline Moore notes that in the earliest extant versions of the novel, ‘it is Rachel’s mother’s presence which hovers over the voyage and seems to be the mysterious force which Rachel will decipher as she journeys out into maturity and simultaneously attempts an inner voyage home’. See Moore, p. 84.

testify to the influence of feminist classicist Jane Harrison, who in texts such as *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1903) postulated the existence of a hidden, matriarchal ‘substratum’ of Greek religion, identifiable in a culture of ‘primitive’ spirituality that preceded the officialised religion of the Olympian gods. Conflating medieval culture with the ‘primitive spirituality’ described by Harrison, Woolf revives premodern forms in order to dramatise the ambivalent return of a female ‘native’ to an imagined ‘mother country’.

*The Voyage Out* is a text preoccupied, not only by questions of gender, but also by the social and psychological meanings of space and landscape. It offers an extended meditation on the connection between outer spaces – London, the ship, the hotel, the forest – and characters’ imaginative, inner worlds. Woolf’s translation of medieval motifs into the contemporary context of a modern tourist location reflects her desire to re-enchant space once again, to recast the landscape as sacred space, an act that challenges the imperial desire to demarcate and ‘know’ the colonial landscape. Pilgrimage and romance are shown to offer an alternative way of *seeing* the landscape, based on imagination and wonder, rather than knowledge and control: as I show, Woolf imbues the practice of wandering/wondering inherent to medieval travel with the potential to shape newly borderless and ‘deterritorialised’ conceptions of global space. While the medievalism of *The Voyage Out* gestures to the Victorian medievalism of literary predecessors like Alfred, Lord Tennyson and the aesthetics of the Pre-Raphaelites, it is modernist, or even postmodernist, in form and intent: making use of parody and pastiche, it points to the performativity of English history and culture, and acknowledges the ultimate unknowability of the past – even one’s own. Unlike many Victorian medievalists, who tended to evoke an idealized medieval culture as a fantasized ‘other’ to a degenerate modernity, Woolf uses medievalism as what Damien Keane terms ‘a

structure for experiencing and [re]imagining the present'.<sup>9</sup> In the section that follows, I outline the interrelation of medievalism with contemporary travel discourses during the early twentieth century, and elucidate the relevance of Woolf's early medievalist short story, *The Journal Mistress of Joan Martyn* (1906), to an understanding of *The Voyage Out*. I then proceed to analyse key scenes and spaces in the novel in light of these cultural and aesthetic contexts, showing how an attention to medievalism can suggest new ways of reading the intersection of gender, spatiality, and temporality in Woolf's first novel.

### **Modernism, travel, and medievalism**

The centrality of travel to modernist aesthetics is now a critical commonplace.<sup>10</sup> Woolf's first novel is the product of a time in which the British middle classes, encouraged by imperial expansion and the improvement of global networks of transport, were venturing out to explore increasingly exotic and far-reaching locations, and a burgeoning tourist industry acted both to promote, and to circumscribe, movements through global space.<sup>11</sup> Art was inevitably responsive to these unprecedented changes in travel and movement: as Helen Carr has suggested, travel and writing became closely interlocking practices between 1880 and 1930: travel was undertaken in order to write, and writing was often presented in terms of a journey.<sup>12</sup>

While critical accounts of modernism tend to emphasize the sense of temporal rupture and technological novelty associated with modern travel, they often neglect the significant

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<sup>9</sup> Damien Keane, 'Modernism and Medievalisms, Old and New' (review of *Paul Robichaud, Making the Past Present: David Jones, the Middle Ages, and Modernism* [2007]), *Journal of Modern Literature*, 32.2 (2009), 185-192 (p. 191).

<sup>10</sup> Daniel Williams affirms that 'it is by now a commonplace to note that the writers and artists of the early twentieth century [...] sought to capture the sense of speed, motion and rapidity made possible by trains, trams, cars, and other modern modes of transportation'. Daniel Williams, *Black Skin, Blue Books: African Americans and Wales 1845-1945* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012), p. 80.

<sup>11</sup> Helen Carr, 'Modernism and Travel 1880-1940', in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. by Peter Hulme (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 70-86 (p. 71).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

ways in which literary accounts of travel engage with the past, and more specifically, the medieval past, during the modernist period. Helen Carr presents Hilaire Belloc's *The Path to Rome* (1902), a text that traces a 'pilgrimage' on foot through Germany, France, and Italy, as indicative of developments in literary approaches to travel at the turn of the century.<sup>13</sup>

Belloc's rejection of administered forms of modern tourism in favour of a meandering 'pilgrimage' on foot to Rome can be connected to his own Catholic medievalism, as well as his close association with staunch medievalist (and fellow Catholic distributionalist) G.K. Chesterton.<sup>14</sup> In its concern with leafy byroads, the outdoor life, and meandering, slow forms of travel, Belloc's *The Path to Rome* can be seen to anticipate the resurgence in nostalgia for Romantic styles of transport during the modernist period. This development can be detected in publications such as Little Magazine *The Tramp* (1910-11), edited by Douglas Goldring. *The Tramp* was aimed at 'the open-air man, the artist, and the literary man, and the general reader', and combined articles on 'The Art of Vagabondage' and 'the gipsy life' with commentary on the 1910 post-impressionist exhibition and part of the futurist manifesto.<sup>15</sup> The slow, affective, Bergsonian travel espoused in *The Tramp* can be regarded as a kind of 'countercurrent' in modernist literature, existing in tandem with, and sometimes in opposition to, the modern celebration of speed, and is often celebrated by Woolf.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, as in the work of Belloc, this 'countercurrent', or 'countertravel', was often identified with the medieval past during the modernist period, a time prior to modern networks of transport,

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 79. *The Path to Rome* is interspersed with conversations between a 'Lector' and 'Auctor' – concepts used in the medieval period in discussions of the 'intricate dialectic' between reading and writing. See Albert Russell Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of the Modern Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 15.

<sup>14</sup> George Bernard Shaw helped to make Chesterton's and Belloc's names synonymous in the public mind through his invention of the hybrid 'Chesterbelloc'. See Michael Alexander, *Medievalism: the Middle Ages in Modern England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 216.

<sup>15</sup> Lisa Tickner, 'Men's Work? Masculinity and Modernism', in *Visual Culture: Image and Interpretations*, ed. by Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly, Keith Moxley (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), pp. 42-82 (p. 77).

<sup>16</sup> Louise Kane, 'The Tramp: Movement and Modernism', paper delivered at 'Modernist Moves' Conference, Brunel University, 7-8 December 2012 (7 December 2012).

when wandering along the by-ways was – in the popular imagination at least – the norm for all classes of society.

Ezra Pound's early work on medieval Provençal poetry offers a further example of the imbrication of medievalism and travel in the literature of the first decade of the twentieth century. Pound's lectures on medieval literature at the Regent Street Polytechnic in London during the first decade of the twentieth century became the basis for his first critical study, *The Spirit of Romance*, published in 1910.<sup>17</sup> Concentrating on the work of François Villon and other medieval poets in the romance tradition, *The Spirit of Romance* insisted on the contemporaneity of the Middle Ages, and compared art to a river – 'a fluid moving above or over the minds of men' – carrying 'certain forces, elements or qualities' from medieval past through to the present.<sup>18</sup> As Larry Scanlon argues, Pound's avant-gardism and his medievalism were deeply interrelated at the beginning of his career, leading him to postulate a model for the modern artist in the itinerant, aristocratic medieval troubadour.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, both medievalism and travel writing became swept up in the primitivism that grew in popularity during the later nineteenth century, and both literary modes were driven by an impulse to define alternatives to Western modernity.<sup>20</sup> In light of this, it is no wonder that travel and medievalism became so intertwined within the literary imagination. Pound's insistence on 'intermingled temporalities', as well as his identification of romance with 'a pattern... of cultural beginnings and rebeginnings', resonates with many of the central themes of *The Voyage Out*.<sup>21</sup> Yet, unlike Belloc, Chesterton and Pound, Woolf does not revive medieval forms in an attempt to re-establish social hierarchies, or to affirm the elite status of

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<sup>17</sup> Scanlon, p. 839.

<sup>18</sup> Pound, *The Spirit of Romance*, p. vi.

<sup>19</sup> Scanlon, p. 839. Scanlon notes that, for Pound, '[t]o make it new was quite often to make it medieval' (p. 839).

<sup>20</sup> Carr, p. 73.

<sup>21</sup> Richard Sieburth, 'Introduction' to Ezra Pound, *The Spirit of Romance* (New York: New Directions, 2005), pp. vii-xvi (p. vii).

the artist. Rather, she repeatedly uses the trope of pilgrimage in order to challenge social hierarchies, and imbues the ‘ordinary’ act of wandering ‘off the beaten track’ with subversive and transformative potential for the female subject.

The existence of Woolf’s medievalist short story, ‘The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn’ (written in 1906, shortly before she began to draft *The Voyage Out*), corroborates the suggestion that she was thinking about medieval themes around the time when she was formulating her first novel. This text, which imagines the recovery of the diary of a fictive fifteenth-century Englishwoman, offers an instructive context for Woolf’s medievalism in *The Voyage Out*. In many ways, the narratives of ‘The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn’ and *The Voyage Out* are very different: the first is concerned with history and tradition, the second with empire and modernity; while *The Journal* is set in the English heartlands of rural Norfolk, *The Voyage Out* takes place in the disjunctive expanses of Britain’s global empire. However, there are also many similarities: both texts are focalised through the eyes of a young, female protagonist (Rachel Vinrace is twenty-four, Joan Martyn twenty-five). Both Rachel and Joan are aspiring artists who reflect ambivalently upon their intended marriage, and both die young. The texts similarly meditate upon the interrelation of gender and questions of territory and empire, and historian Rosamund Merridew’s retrieval of Joan’s diary illuminates Woolf’s later preoccupation with a lost maternal history in *The Voyage Out*. Indeed, there is reason to suggest that for Woolf, the ‘voyage in’ to the medieval past was coextensive with the ‘voyage out’ to another country. Writing in her journal in August 1903, Woolf expressed frustration at the ‘eternal sameness’ of English culture, noting that ‘I am craving, I think, for the bareness & warmth & brilliance of a foreign land’.<sup>22</sup> Yet in her medievalist writings, she often imbues the medieval English landscape with a similar feeling

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<sup>22</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Passionate Apprentice: The Early Journals 1897-1909*, ed. by Mitchell A. Leaska (London: The Hogarth Press, 1990), p. 189.

of ‘bareness...& brilliance’. In ‘The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn’, ‘the whole country seemed empty, save for a few swift rabbits, but very chaste and very glad in its solitude’,<sup>23</sup> while in her essay ‘The Pastons and Chaucer’, Chaucer’s eyes are shown to rest upon ‘a virgin land, all unbroken grass and wood [...]. No villa roofs peered through Kentish tree-tops; no factory chimney smoked on the hill-side’.<sup>24</sup> In her essay ‘America, Which I have Never Seen’, Woolf discovers medieval England *in* America. Employing the perspective of an allegorical female figure, ‘Imagination’, she presents America as a ‘primeval country’ – a space that, in Jane Garrity’s words, ‘transcends national specificity’.<sup>25</sup> Woolf’s new world embodies ‘the past... [as well as] the future’ (59), and seen through the eyes of ‘Imagination’, is reimagined as an ‘Ancient English Village’ (59). Indeed, I suggest that Woolf’s representations of both the Middle Ages *and* South America serve to express her longing for an unmarked, uninhabited terrain, beyond the reach of patriarchy and imperialism. The medieval past and South America emerge in her writing as an ‘internalised feminised space’, an imagined site of creative possibility for the woman writer.<sup>26</sup>

### ***The Voyage Out* as a textual landscape**

*The Voyage Out* can be understood as a spatialised text, one that regards history and culture, not in terms of the ‘evolutionary-teleological’, but in terms of the ‘geographical spatial’.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Virginia Woolf, ‘The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn’, in *A Haunted House: The Complete Shorter Fiction*, ed. by Susan Dick (London: Vintage, 2003), pp. 33-62 (p. 52). All references are to this edition and henceforth will be given parenthetically in the text.

<sup>24</sup> Virginia Woolf, ‘The Pastons and Chaucer’, in *Collected Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Leonard Woolf, 4 vols (London: The Hogarth Press, 1967), III, 8. All references are to this edition and henceforth will be given parenthetically in the text. Where ambiguity is possible, I use the abbreviation PC.

<sup>25</sup> Virginia Woolf, ‘America, Which I have Never Seen’, *The Dublin Review*, 5 (2001-2), p. 58. All references are to this edition and henceforth will be given parenthetically in the text. Jane Garrity, *Step-daughters of England: British Women Modernists and the National Imaginary* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 17.

<sup>26</sup> Jane Garrity, *Step-daughters of England*, p. 16.

<sup>27</sup> Susan Hegeman, *Patterns for America: Modernism and the Concept of Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 37. Hegeman connects the ‘spatial turn’ in modernist perceptions of culture to developments in anthropology, and notes that it functioned as part of a questioning of ‘teleological Victorian evolutionary and historical narratives’. For a discussion of Hegeman’s theories and the ‘spatial turn’ in modern anthropology, see Daniel Williams, p. 122.

Like Pound, she does not see ancient past and modern present as discrete entities in a linear chronology, but presents them as elements juxtaposed within the same space. This spatialisation of time, or historicising of space, is exemplified in the narrator's depiction of the history of the hotel at Santa Marina:

Somehow or other, as fashions do, the fashion spread; an old monastery was quickly turned into a hotel, while a famous line of steamships altered its route for the convenience of its passengers.<sup>28</sup>

Superimposing the hotel's modern present onto its ancient past in the manner of a collage or palimpsest, Woolf presents the seemingly modern space of the hotel as a complex tissue of the historical and literary past. When Rachel and Helen first glance through its windows, they perceive its largest room, the lounge, as a medievalist set-piece, 'hung with armour and native embroideries, furnished with divans and screens, which shut off convenient corners' (90-91). Like the royal hall of romance, the hotel's lounge is the 'haunt of youth', a starting point for narrative adventure and a passageway to 'marvellous' experience for Rachel. The fragmentary and stylized nature of the room's medievalism could be seen to allude to what Helen Carr described as a growing awareness among travel writers that 'they were describing fragmented, hybridized cultures, the shabby remnants of the tapestry of otherness their predecessors had woven'.<sup>29</sup> Yet the eclectic objects decorating the hotel lounge also favour imaginative encounters with the past: the armour, embroideries, divans and screens have accrued many different meanings over time, and while each item recounts a different narrative, their incongruous juxtaposition acts to create new ones. As Alexandra Peat observes, Woolf calls attention to the ways in which travel disrupts ordinary temporality, giving rise to 'multiple layers of continually superimposed experience'.<sup>30</sup> One of these layers

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<sup>28</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Voyage Out* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 81. All references are to this edition and henceforth will be given parenthetically in the text.

<sup>29</sup> Carr, p. 6.

<sup>30</sup> Alexandra Peat, 'Modern Pilgrimage and the Authority of Space in Forster's *A Room with a View* and Woolf's *The Voyage Out*, *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, 36 (2003), 139-53, (p. 4, ejournal pagination).



of experience is made up by medieval romance, which, I argue, appears in *The Voyage Out* as an important premodern parallel to Rachel's journey.

### ***The Voyage Out* as neo-medieval romance**

Medieval romance is a loose, flexible genre. 'Romance', in a medieval context, could signify a classical story, a French story, or an English translation of either of these, but it generally came to signify 'reading matter in prose or verse depicting its heroes as medieval knights'.<sup>31</sup>

The main plotline of *The Voyage Out* can be seen to parallel the narrative conventions associated with premodern romance. As Kathryn Hume has observed, romance texts, despite their heterogeneity, frequently reveal a similar underlying narrative pattern: the hero is initially shown in a secure, domestic setting, before being separated from patrimony and propelled into a liminal space in which he must prove himself as a knight, usually through undergoing a form of quest.<sup>32</sup> In a similar manner, Rachel is divorced from her secure, domestic existence at home in Richmond with her aunts, and, as her problematic encounters with patriarchal culture suggest, is automatically alienated from patrimony by reason of her gender.

Rachel's journey, like the narrative that contains it, is frequently cast by critics as a kind of quest: Alexandra Peat formulates it as a 'quest for the new', while Patricia Lawrence argues that 'the novel stages a quest for poetry as well as plot'.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, the *Bildung* dimension of the narrative, which explores Rachel's initiation into English society and culture in the colony at Santa Marina, is frequently presented as a form of quest. St. John Hirst, a scholarly friend of Rachel's, lends her a copy of Gibbon as a kind of initiation rite

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<sup>31</sup> Kathryn Hume, 'The Formal Nature of Middle English Romance', *Philological Quarterly*, 53, 2 (1974), 158-180 (p. 160).

<sup>32</sup> Hume, p. 162.

<sup>33</sup> Peat, p. 10; Lawrence, p. 171.

into ‘male’ intellectual culture, asserting that ‘He’s the test, of course’ (141).<sup>34</sup> In this way, Woolf’s novel can be understood as a feminist re-writing of the male-oriented ‘imperial romance’: she presents a woman as the subject, rather than the object, of the quest, and challenges its heroic principles of ‘exploration, discovery, and conquest’.<sup>35</sup>

Though Jessie Weston’s anthropological study of the ritual underpinnings of medieval romance, *From Ritual to Romance*, was not published until 1920, five years after *The Voyage Out*, the novel contains many allusions to the ideas and images associated with Weston’s seminal text, including the now famous motif of the waste land and the quest for renewal. This consolidates the assumption that Weston’s ideas were in the air during the time of the novel’s inception due to the publication of such works as *The Legend of Sir Percival* as well as her entries in the 1911 *Encyclopedia Britannica* on topics such as The Holy Grail and the figure of Perceval.<sup>36</sup> The rhetoric used by Weston in *The Legend of Sir Perceval* anticipates her later theorisation of the Grail myth as a cultural survival of the Mystery cults of ancient Greece: in her introduction to the book, she notes that ‘we still stand but on the threshold of the sanctuary, while the secrets within elude our grasp’.<sup>37</sup> These Mystery cults had been

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<sup>34</sup> St. John Hurst is reminiscent of Woolf’s friend Lytton Strachey. His name also echoes St. John Rivers, Jane Eyre’s puritanical, idealist cousin in Charlotte Brontë’s eponymous novel.

<sup>35</sup> Woolf’s text can be seen to comply with what John McClure defines as ‘late imperial romance’: works that ‘sharply interrogate the popular romance of the civilizing mission and relate in its stead a counterromance of descent into realms of stubborn strangeness and dark enchantment’. John McClure, ‘Late Imperial Romance’, *Raritan*, 10 (1991): 111-122 (p. 111).

<sup>36</sup> Jessie Weston, *The Legend of Perceval*, 2 vols (London: David Nutt, 1906-09). See also ‘The Holy Grail’ and ‘Perceval’ in the 1911 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* <http://encyclopedia.jrank.org/> [accessed 9<sup>th</sup> May 2016]. Weston was the author of all of the Arthurian entries in the *Encyclopaedia*: aside from those already mentioned, these included ‘Arthur’, ‘Arthurian Legend’, ‘Guinevere’, ‘Lancelot’, ‘Sir Thomas Malory’, ‘Walter Mape’, ‘Merlin’, ‘The Round Table’, ‘Tristan’, ‘Wolfgang von Eschenbach’, and ‘Gawain’. See Helen Brookman, ‘From Romance to Ritual: Jessie L Weston’s Gawain’, in *Studies in Medievalism XIX: Corporate Medievalism*, ed. by Karl Fugelso (Cambridge: DS Brewer, 2012), pp. 119-144 (p. 136, p. 144). Weston’s description of the Perceval narrative as ‘the tale of the orphan lad, brought up by his mother afar from the haunts on men, whose initial simplicity provokes mockery, whose innate virtue and valour demand respect’ (*The Legend of Perceval*, I, p. xv), resonates with Woolf’s portrayal of the naïve Rachel Vinrace. Perceval/Percival, of course, emerges as a prominent figure much later, in Woolf’s novel *The Waves* (1931).

<sup>37</sup> Jessie Weston, *The Legend of Perceval*, I, p. xvi. Weston alludes to the idea that certain features of the Grail story ‘are explicable by reference to the Adonis-Tammuz Myseries’ (p. xiv). She reiterates this claim in her entry on The Holy Grail in the 1911 *Encyclopedia Britannica*, suggesting that part of the Grail story can be connected to ‘certain primitive forms of vegetation worship’ that found expression in the ‘so-called mysteries of Adonis’. See <[http://encyclopedia.jrank.org/GOA\\_GRA/GRAIL\\_THE\\_HOLY.html](http://encyclopedia.jrank.org/GOA_GRA/GRAIL_THE_HOLY.html)> [accessed 9 May 2016].

presented by classicist Jane Harrison as a vestige of Greece's supposedly matriarchal past: in *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, Harrison observed that '[i]n general mysteries seem to occur more usually in relation to the cult of women divinities', and claimed that the Eleusinian Mysteries were an offshoot the rites 'of immemorial antiquity' practiced in women-only festivals dedicated to the goddess Demeter.<sup>38</sup> Rachel's exploration of the separate rooms of female hotel guests bears allusions to the initiation rites of the Mysteries, for she longs that 'each new person might remove the mystery which burdened her' (239).<sup>39</sup> In the context of Weston and Harrison's scholarship, Rachel's restive exploration can be seen to pertain to a latent desire to rediscover an occluded past of female cultural and spiritual authority within the material spaces of modernity.<sup>40</sup>

Weston's ideas may also have held resonance for Woolf, as they did for Eliot, as a means of expressing the spiritual desiccation and stagnation associated with the modern metropolis.<sup>41</sup> At the beginning of the novel, London is presented from Helen's perspective as a material, moral and aesthetic 'waste land':

bold lovers, sheltered behind one cloak, seemed to her sordid, past their passion; the flower women, a contented company, whose talk is always worth hearing, were sodden hags; the red, yellow, and blue flowers, whose heads were pressed together, would not blaze. (5)

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<sup>38</sup> Jane Harrison, *Prolegomena*, p. 151, p. 120.

<sup>39</sup> Harrison tells us that a mystery is 'a rite in which certain *sacra* are exhibited, which cannot safely be seen by the worshipper till he has undergone certain purifications' (p. 151). As such, it chimes with the novel's wider preoccupation with patterns of female initiation.

<sup>40</sup> Harrison stressed the female-oriented nature of the Eleusinian Mysteries, noting that priestesses presided over the precious *sacra* (p. 151).

<sup>41</sup> It was *From Ritual to Romance* (as well as T.S. Eliot's response to it), that helped to make the trope of the 'waste land' famous in the twentieth century. But Weston's entry on the Holy Grail for the 1911 *Encyclopedia Britannica* also makes reference to the concept. The article notes that survivals from early Adonis ritual can be discerned in the following features, common to different versions of the Grail story: '[...] a castle on the sea-shore, a dead body on a bier, the identity of which is never revealed, mourned over with solemn rites; a *wasted country*, whose desolation is mysteriously connected with the dead man, and which is restored to fruitfulness when the quester asks the meaning of the marvels he beholds' [my emphasis]. See <[http://encyclopedia.jrank.org/GOA\\_GRA/GRAIL\\_THE\\_HOLY.html](http://encyclopedia.jrank.org/GOA_GRA/GRAIL_THE_HOLY.html)> [accessed 9 May 2016].

For Weston, ‘the weeping woman and the wasted land’ are central features of the Grail story,<sup>42</sup> and accordingly, the London that we perceive at the beginning is projected impressionistically through ‘a great welling tear’ (4) of Helen Ambrose, who is crying for a reason that her husband ‘can’t possibly understand’ (5). This passage evokes the exhaustion of heterosexual romance: its lingering nostalgia invokes a feeling of belatedness, in which the passion and joy articulated by the medieval *reverdie* (spring poem), or even the Victorian romance novel, are always already in the past. In contrast to South America, colours refuse to catch fire in this infernal city, a symptom of the generalized disenchantment of the modern metropolis.

The depiction of the place from which the *Euphrosyne* departs, a dank East End location through which the river flows with ‘a certain amount of troubled yellow light in it’, can be seen to invoke Dante’s depiction of the beginning of the journey up the Mount of Purgatory. As Helen and Ambrose Ridley make the journey across the water to the ship, the old ferryman recollects ‘an age when his boat, moored among rushes, carried delicate feet across to lawns to Rotherhidge’, echoing the topography of water, boat, and reeds evoked in Dante’s description.<sup>43</sup> Northrop Frye maintains that Dante’s topography is coextensive with the mythic landscape that conventionally accompanies the birth of the hero in romance,

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. by Robin Kirkpatrick (London: Penguin, 2002), Purgatorio, I, ll. 100-103:

Around this little island, all around  
Its lowest reaches where the breakers beat  
are rushes, borne up by the yielding ooze.

The old ferryman might also be read as a double for Charon, Dante’s ferryman of the Styx, the boatman who transports souls from the world of the living to the dead. As I show in Chapter 2, this figure reappears in Lynette Roberts’s *Gods with Stainless Ears*. See *The Divine Comedy, Inferno*, III. Lines 133-136 are apposite to the opening scenes of Woolf’s novel:

The tear-drenched earth gave out a gust of wind,  
Erupting in a flash of bright vermillion,  
That overwhelmed all conscious sentiment.  
I felt like someone gripped by sudden sleep.

suggesting that at this phase in his narrative ‘the soul is in that stage of a newborn infant’.<sup>44</sup> Woolf’s reworking of Dante can therefore be seen to announce the birth of her heroine, a mythical coming-into-being that is conditioned by, and commensurate to, a moment away from spaces of patriarchal dominance.

Gazing back at ‘London sitting on its mud’ as the ships pull away, Rachel’s attention is captured by the vision of ‘smooth green-sided monsters who came flickering this way and that’ in the waters below. Linden Peach suggests that *The Faerie Queene* is an important intertext for *The Voyage Out*,<sup>45</sup> and this scene elicits comparison with the monster-spawning mud passages of Spenser’s poem, in which ‘huge heapes of mudd’ give rise to the spontaneous generation of a myriad new forms of life: ‘Out of their decay and mortall crime/ We daily see new creatures to arize’.<sup>46</sup> As W.P. Cumming has argued, Spenser’s image of abiogenesis is derived from an episode in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* depicting the earth’s generation of fertile seeds of life out of the slime of the Nile left after a devastating flood.<sup>47</sup> Of particular relevance to Woolf’s text, perhaps, is Ovid’s depiction of the spontaneous creation of strange and monstrous forms: ‘*partimque figuras/rettulit antiquas, partim nova monstra creavit*’ (In part she brought back the ancient forms, in part she created new monsters’).<sup>48</sup> The themes of creativity and monstrosity are interlaced throughout Woolf’s novel: as Christine Froula has noted, Rachel is consistently aligned with the image of the sea-

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<sup>44</sup> Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, ed. by Robert D. Denham (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 2006), p. 184.

<sup>45</sup> Linden Peach, *Virginia Woolf* (Houndsmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), p. 53.

<sup>46</sup> Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. by A. C. Hamilton, rev. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2013), VII, vii, 18, 5-6 (p. 704).

<sup>47</sup> W.P. Cumming, ‘Ovid as a Source for Spenser’s Monster-Spawning Mud Passages’, *Modern Language Notes*, 45.3 (1930), 166-168 (p. 167). Cumming cites three passages from Ovid as sources for Spenser’s evocation of spontaneous generation: Met. I, 416- 437, Met. XV. 362-4, and Met. XV. 375-8. The connection of abiogenesis to the origins of life – and to literature – is a motif running throughout Woolf’s work; for instance, an early version of *The Waves* includes an expunged opening section that depicts the emergence from the sea of a ‘pullulating’ mass of human babies. It might be suggested that she moved towards a theory of spontaneous generation in order to challenge the Romantic tradition that posited the author as godlike originator of her/his text.

<sup>48</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, ed. by T. E. Page et al, trans. by Frank Justus Miller, 2 vols (London: William Heineman, 1951), I.I. 436-37 (pp. 32-33).

monster, and references to monstrous, hybrid forms abound.<sup>49</sup> Emblematic, perhaps, of Rachel's 'underdeveloped' identity, Woolf's formless sea monsters also point to an inchoate feminine realm in which divisions between gender and identities break down – a 'primeval' zone that, for Woolf as for Jane Harrison, was both destructive and creative.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, Ovid's depiction of the origins of life offers a suggestive metaphor for Woolf's new, modernist project: a revisiting or invocation of tradition (old forms), and through this, the spontaneous creation of new and hybrid 'monsters'.<sup>51</sup>

Woolf's channelling of the romance narrative is also germane to her depiction of the condition and experience of youth. In keeping with Victorian narrative conventions, *The Voyage Out* foregrounds the adventures and desires of resolutely youthful protagonists. Though Rachel is twenty-four, she is portrayed as particularly child-like due to her secluded upbringing as a bourgeois daughter: Helen observes that 'a hesitation in speaking, or rather a tendency to use the wrong words, made her seem more than normally incompetent for her years' (13). Jed Esty has suggested that the novel's concern with youth extends to its narrative form in Woolf's deliberate adoption of a 'diffusely adolescent principle of narration', expressed in the 'mobility of perspective' associated with unformed youth.<sup>52</sup> Romance similarly concerns itself with the exploits and initiation of young protagonists, and has also been formulated as an essentially youthful narrative mode. For Northrop Frye,

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<sup>49</sup> See Froula, p. 69. Rachel's father, Willoughby Vinrace, jokes that 'the monsters of the earth are too many for me' (15), and Mr. Pepper, an elderly family friend, disrupts the polite discourse of his fellow passengers with a visceral depiction of 'the white, hairless blind monsters lying curled on the ridges of sand at the bottom of the sea' (16).

<sup>50</sup> Notably, John Ruskin associated premodern 'Gothic' art with formless monstrosity that was nonetheless vital and creative: in his study of Venetian architecture *The Stones of Venice*, he urges his reader to 'examine once more the... formless monsters' of medieval art, suggesting that they convey a forgotten tradition defined by 'a freedom of thought, and rank in scale of being, such as no laws, no charters, no charities can secure; but which it must be the first aim of all Europe at this day to regain for her children'. John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn, 3 vols (London: George Allen, 1905), II, p. 161.

<sup>51</sup> Jane Harrison argued that female monsters of Greek mythologies, such as the siren and the Gorgon, were in fact debased versions of earlier, 'powerful earth goddesses'. She identified the worship of ghosts and monsters with early, matriarchal religion, identifying them with a psychic 'realm of proto-plasmic fullness and forcefulness not yet articulate into the diverse forms of its ultimate births'. *Prolegomena*, p. 164.

<sup>52</sup> Esty, p. 13.

romance at its most naïve ‘is an endless form in which a central character who never ages or develops goes through one adventure after another’.<sup>53</sup> The persistent youth of the romance hero can be seen to find a corollary both in Rachel and in Woolf’s later creation, Orlando. Seen as a formal strategy, Rachel’s ‘endless’ youth reflects the novel’s *resistance* to development, and allows Woolf to develop a more open-ended novelistic form, centred on anticipation and deferment. However, the theme of endless youth orients the novel towards the past, as well as the future; Frye contends that ‘the perennially childish quality of romance is marked by its extraordinarily persistent nostalgia, its search for some kind of imaginative golden age in time or space’, and Woolf’s novel is also infused with a search for origins that is nostalgic in nature.<sup>54</sup>

### Storytelling

The text’s preoccupation with the storytelling origins of the English literary tradition – conjured, perhaps, by Rachel’s desire to read ‘the book of the world turned back to the very first page’ – anticipates Woolf’s later exploration of premodern vernacular culture in her essay ‘Anon’ (1941). As I explore in more detail in Chapter 5, Woolf espouses the mobility and open-endedness of oral texts in this essay, suggesting that Malory’s *Morte Darthur* bears the traces of an antecedent oral culture:

There we tap the reservoir of common belief that lay deep sunk in the minds of peasants and nobles. There in Malorys [sic] pages we hear the voice of Anon murmuring still. The story is told with a child’s [sic] implicit belief. It has a child’s [sic] love of particularity. Everything is stated. The beauty is in the statement, not in the suggestion.... The world is seen without comment; did the writer know what beauty he makes us see?<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Frye, p. 173.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Virginia Woolf, ‘Anon’, in “‘Anon’ and ‘The Reader’: Virginia Woolf’s Last Essays”, ed. by Brenda R. Silver, *Twentieth Century Literature* 25.3/4 (1979), 356-441 (p. 384). All references are to this edition and henceforth will be given parenthetically in the text.

In *The Voyage Out*, Woolf can be seen to draw upon the vernacular, storytelling mode of romance in order to develop a newly visual, proto-cinematic mode in which the intervening, interpretative presence of the author is diminished, allowing the reader to partake in a more direct interaction with the text itself.<sup>56</sup> Like John Ruskin, Woolf identified the medieval artist with an enhanced clarity of vision in comparison to modern writers.<sup>57</sup> In an early draft of 'Anon', Woolf argues that because the medieval vernacular poet belonged to an 'out of door' tradition, 'the eye therefore was more active [than] in ourselves', adding that '[t]he eye is the young sense; the sense that is attached to the body' (403). In *The Voyage Out*, Woolf's can be seen to emulate the 'young' perspective of the medieval storyteller in order to regard her own culture anew, as if from the outside. Furthermore, because she celebrated sight as 'the sense that is attached to the body', she invokes premodern romance as a mode suitable for, and capable of, expressing the interrelation of the female body with the natural landscape.

In her short story 'The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn', Woolf explicitly identifies the vernacular tradition in which she places Malory's *Morte Darthur* with women and female-oriented spheres of culture. In 'The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn', Joan and her mother afford special patronage to an itinerant romance poet, and at the end of the story, Joan claims that 'if I ever write again it shall not be of Norfolk and myself, but of Knights and Ladies and of adventures in strange land' (62). Indeed, women's contribution to the romance tradition as both readers and composers is made explicit in Joan's memory of Dame Elsbeth Aske,

Who, when she grew too old to knit or stitch and too stiff to leave her chair, sat with clasped hands by the fire all day long, and [...] would tell you stories of fights and kings, and great nobles, and stories of poor people too, til the air seemed to move and murmur (62).

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<sup>56</sup> Weston's entry on the Holy Grail for the 1911 *Encyclopedia Britannica* refers her readers to books xiii-xviii of Malory's *Morte Darthur* for an understanding of the *Quete du Saint Graal*. This, together with the evidence of familiarity with Malory in 'Anon', suggests that Woolf may have had Malory in mind in her adaptation of the romance narrative in her early work. See <<http://encyclopedia.jrank.org/>> [accessed 9 May 2016].

<sup>57</sup> In *The Stones of Venice*, Ruskin claimed because medieval artists enjoyed an untrammelled view of nature, their art is defined by clear-sightedness and a 'love of veracity' (II, 194).



Through her depiction of figures such as Elsbeth Aske, Woolf implies that women's imposed stasis in the domestic realm enhanced their imaginative faculties, making them adept at conjuring fantastic locations, imagined journeys. Looking into Richard's illuminated book, Joan delights at how

The capital letters framed bright blue skies, and golden robes; and in the midst of the writing there came broad spaces of colour in which you might see princess and princesses walking in procession and towns with churches upon steep hills, and the sea breaking blue beneath them (56).

Throughout her literary career, Woolf directed her interest at the discovery of imaginative landscapes, or what she termed 'that curious thing, the map of the world in one's mind'; mental expansion rather than geographical expansion.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, as in 'The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn', her writing tends to blur the dividing line between inner and outer space.<sup>59</sup> E.M. Forster recognized the internal, symbolic nature of Woolf's geography in a contemporary review of *The Voyage Out*, noting that

It is a strange, tragic, inspired book whose scene is a South America not found on any map and reached by a boat that would not float on any sea, an America whose spiritual boundaries touch Xanadu and Atlantis.<sup>60</sup>

As Patricia Lawrence argues, Santa Marina can be understood as a fantasised 'place of the imagination'.<sup>61</sup> Kathryn Hume has called attention to the psychological dimension of romance spaces, suggesting that they often present a symbolic, 'psychic' landscape.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, romance narratives are often indistinct and confusing, prone to digressions and repetitions, and can in this sense be allied to dream and modern understandings of the unconscious. In an age dominated by empiricism and rationalism (what the narrator of *Mrs*

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<sup>58</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, III, 147.

<sup>59</sup> See Rachel Bowlby, *Feminist Destinations and Further Essays on Virginia Woolf* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997).

<sup>60</sup> E.M. Forster, 'A Survey of Virginia Woolf's Work', in *Virginia Woolf: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Robin Majumdar and Allen McLaurin (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 171-178 (p. 172). Excerpt from E.M. Forster, 'The Novels of Virginia Woolf', *The New Criterion* (1926), 277-86.

<sup>61</sup> Lawrence, p. 158.

<sup>62</sup> Hume, p. 165.

*Dalloway* disparagingly terms ‘Proportion’ and ‘Conversion’ [86]), romance may have offered a vehicle for the re-enchantment of space and the re-instatement of magic and the non-rational as a mode for understanding the phenomenological world.

Northrop Frye has identified a key stage in the romance narrative as the attempt to maintain the integrity of the innocent world against the assault of experience – a psychodrama that is similarly staged in *The Voyage Out*.<sup>63</sup> While other characters and the narrator persist in identifying Rachel by reference to the myth of self-contained virginity, she herself must undertake to defend her psychological and physical integrity against frequent incursions, often by men. Rachel emerges not as a passive defender of Victorian ‘virtue’, but rather as a champion of what Frye terms ‘invincible innocence or virginity’.<sup>64</sup> This is construed in Woolf’s novel not as the ‘virginity’ of the body but as the integrity or self-possession of the mind. Christine Froula has suggested that Rachel can only become herself by becoming a ‘warrior’, while her journey along the river to the jungle ‘allegorizes her search for symbolic “arms,” a language and culture with which to forge her destiny’.<sup>65</sup> Rachel takes on the position of a cross-dressing female knight, a modern-day Joan of Arc, in order to defend her own experience of the world against the plethora of texts and bodies imposed upon her by patriarchal English society: after retiring to a secluded exterior place in order to peruse her uncle’s books, Rachel returns to society ‘with her two books under her arm... much as a soldier prepared for battle’ (161).

The legacy of Alfred, Lord Tennyson, a close friend of the Stephen family, inevitably impacted on Woolf at the beginning of her career. She was also influenced by the medievalist aesthetic of Pre-Raphaelitism: her aunt, Julia Margaret Cameron, was a groundbreaking

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<sup>63</sup> Frye, p. 187.

<sup>64</sup> Frye, p. 188.

<sup>65</sup> Froula, p. 68.

photographer in the Pre-Raphaelite tradition, while her mother, Julia Duckworth Stephen, was associated in her youth with the members of the Pre-Raphaelite circle who met at her aunt Sara Prinsep's salon at Little Holland House, eventually sitting for Edward Burne-Jones and G.F. Watts.<sup>66</sup> In fact, Woolf recognized that the idealized Victorian constructions of womanhood to which her mother had subscribed were reflected and conditioned by the aesthetics of the Pre-Raphaelites. In some ways, Rachel's fate – her mental disturbance and eventual death – can be seen to replay that of Tennyson's 'Lady of Shalott' in his eponymous poem (1832). Tennyson's poem famously depicts a woman cursed to remain enclosed in a tower on the island of Shalott; because her curse forbids her to look outside her window, a mirror is her only connection with the outside world, and she weaves a tapestry to illustrate the wonders that she sees in the mirror's reflection. For Michel Foucault, the mirror is a space of unreality and misrecognition: in the mirror, as Foucault suggests, 'I see myself [...] where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself'.<sup>67</sup> The hotel at Santa Marina can be seen as a mirror-like space – a strange reflection of English life and culture – and, like the Lady of Shalott, Rachel lives a shadow-like, decentred existence within it. On a lethargic Sunday afternoon she passes seemingly without aim from room to room, and is finally overcome by a feeling of unreality in which 'she was no longer able to see the world as a town laid out beneath her. It was covered instead by a haze of feverish red mist' (245). The 'feverish red mist' signals Rachel's unarticulated frustration toward the bounded social world within which she is confined – a frustration that echoes the Lady's sense of entrapment within her chamber. Indeed, both Woolf and Tennyson deploy themes of enchantment and disenchantment in order to explore the possession, and dispossession, of self. When Rachel

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<sup>66</sup> Holman Hunt proposed to Woolf's mother, then Julia Prinsep, as Woolf herself recalls in her autobiographical essay. See Virginia Woolf, 'Sketch of the Past', in *Moments of Being*, new edn, ed. by Jeanne Schulkind (London: Pimlico, 2002), pp. 78-160 (p. 97).

<sup>67</sup> Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', p. 24.

undertakes to look beyond the mirror to catch a glimpse of the ‘real’ experience that exists beyond her circumscribed social space (a process which is figured by the journey to the jungle), a ‘curse’ comes over her in the form of an illness, and she dies for her transgression. The water imagery used in the depiction of Rachel’s illness and death invokes the death by water of a succession of romantic heroines, from Shakespeare’s Ophelia to Tennyson’s Lady of Shalott: ‘she fell into a deep pool of sticky water, which eventually closed over her head’ (322). In Tennyson’s work, the dead and floating body of the desiring woman – an image that recurs in his *Lancelot and Elayne* – can be seen as a figure for the repressed ‘feminine’, the gendered voices that must be silenced in order for the trajectory of the male hero to proceed, and Rachel’s death might similarly be considered to inscribe the repressed ‘feminine’ onto the surfaces of the realist novel.<sup>68</sup>

### **Pilgrimage**

Travel, for Alexandra Peat, can be seen to offer ‘multiple layers of continually superimposed experience’.<sup>69</sup> In Woolf’s text, the romance genre can be seen to overlap significantly with the practice and narrative tradition of pilgrimage, for both are centred upon a search for deeper knowledge, and both trace an edificatory journey of the self.<sup>70</sup> In their influential study *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (1978), Edith and Victor Turner suggest that in many different religious traditions, pilgrimage is often undertaken in the hope of effecting spiritual transformation and of gaining a more profound understanding of God.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, as Alexandra Peat relates, pilgrimage has traditionally been perceived as a ‘storied

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<sup>68</sup> Catherine LaFarge contends that in *Le Morte Darthur* ‘the disregarded problem of gender, particularly the role of the feminine, comes back to haunt the progress of the narrative, as Elayne’s own corpse floats back down the Thames’. Catherine Lafarge, ‘The Hand of the Huntress: Repetition and Malory’s *Morte Darthur*’, in *New Feminist Discourse: Critical Essays on Theoretical Texts*, ed. by Isobel Armstrong (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 263-79 (p. 265).

<sup>69</sup> Peat, p. 4.

<sup>70</sup> As Edith Turner suggests, ‘the pilgrim is on an adventure, a quest’ (p. xv).

<sup>71</sup> In their words, ‘[a] pilgrim is an initiand, entering into a new, deeper level of existence than he has known in his accustomed milieu’. Victor and Edith Turner, p. 8.

journey', a process given meaning by narrative, hence the narrated pilgrimages of premodern authors such as Margery Kempe.<sup>72</sup> In accordance with this, Woolf often uses the trope of pilgrimage in order to suggest a connection between travel, writing, and the expansion of female consciousness:<sup>73</sup> *A Room of One's Own* can be seen to take the reader on a kind of pilgrimage to the sites of English culture, while in *Mrs Dalloway*, the eponymous character's meandering walk through London is portrayed as an inherently creative process akin to storytelling or writing; notably, Woolf sketched out Clarissa Dalloway's fictional journey through London on the back of her reading notes for the *Canterbury Tales*, a connection I explore in more depth in Chapter 3.<sup>74</sup>

Alexandra Peat is one of the few critics to have called attention to the adaptation and complication of the pilgrimage trope in modernist literature. Analysing the reverberation of the pilgrimage motif in Forster's *A Room with a View* and Woolf's *The Voyage Out*, Peat maintains that both Woolf and Forster show a tendency to merge the practices of tourism and pilgrimage, with travel emerging as 'a quasi-spiritual experience' over the course of their narratives.<sup>75</sup> Peat's discussion illuminates, and provides a wider context for, Woolf's engagement with the sacred in her first novel. However, it fails to address the relevance of pilgrimage, seen as a physical, textual, and psychological practice, to questions of gender and social change in *The Voyage Out*. Moreover, Peat neglects the distinctly *medievalist* underpinnings to Woolf's engagement with pilgrimage at this time, as demonstrated by her medievalist short story, 'The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn'. This text includes a lengthy description, narrated by Joan Martyn in the first person, of a pilgrimage to Walsingham, demonstrating Woolf's awareness that the small Norfolk village was the site of a greatly

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<sup>72</sup> Peat, p. 3. See also Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. by B.A. Windeatt (London: Penguin, 1994).

<sup>73</sup> Peat argues that '[p]ilgrimage is a persistent preoccupation throughout much of Woolf's [...] fiction' (p. 2).

<sup>74</sup> Thacker, p. 154.

<sup>75</sup> Peat, p. 2.

important Marian shrine during the Middle Ages, designed as a replica of Mary's house in Nazareth.<sup>76</sup> In her representation of Joan's fifteenth-century journey, Woolf emphasises the fact that pilgrimage provided women with an important avenue for escaping the domestic realm and the limitations imposed on them in the ordinary social world because of their gender. Journeying by foot across Norfolk, Joan's exaltation at her newfound liberty is palpable:

Start with your spirit fresh like a corn fed horse; let her rear and race, and bucket you hither and thither. Nothing will keep her to the road; and she will sport in dewy meadows, and crush a thousand delicate flowers under her feet (57-8).

In fact, it is this journey, even more than arrival at the shrine, that enables Joan to reflect on, and construct a sense of self – a process she describes as 'enter[ing] within [her own] feelings and study[ing] them' (58). In the discussion that follows, I outline how Woolf assimilates a premodern tradition of pilgrimage into her narrative in order to explore, and define, a female 'authority of space'.

*The Voyage Out* is permeated by visual echoes relating to medieval pilgrimage: travelers on donkeys, a sacred mountain, and a forest redolent of a Gothic cathedral emerge like half-remembered memories within the text, inscribing a spiritual past within the fabric of the modern-day journey of the protagonists. While the novel addresses an impassioned critique toward conservative structures of gender, patriarchy, and colonialism, it could be suggested that Woolf's novel is most concerned, not with the transformation of the self or society per se, but with the transformation of space. As Michel Foucault has argued, 'despite the whole network of knowledge that enables us to delimit or formalize [it], contemporary space is perhaps not entirely desanctified'.<sup>77</sup> Woolf can be seen to project medieval

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<sup>76</sup> Little Walsingham in Norfolk was once the site one of the most important shrines to Mary in medieval Europe. Though the shrine was destroyed in the Reformation, the Walsingham pilgrimage was revived in 1897, after Charlotte Boyde bought the nearby slipper chapel following her conversion from Anglicanism to Catholicism. The Anglican pilgrimage was established in 1923 by the Anglican vicar of Walsingham, Father Hope Patten, and is still visited by many pilgrims today. See Turner and Turner, pp. 175-87.

<sup>77</sup> Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', p. 23.

pilgrimage as an imaginative mode of resistance to the forces that throughout the novel seek to dominate and circumscribe geographical, personal, and textual space, from politician Mr. Dalloway's physical propositioning of Rachel, to the British submarines that patrol the waters around the *Euphrosyne*.

Helen Carr asserts that travel writing of the modernist period often attests to a profound anxiety about the status of Western culture, and is frequently informed by an impulse to search out alternatives elsewhere.<sup>78</sup> Accordingly, the biblical, apocalyptic resonances attributed to London by Woolf's female travelers as they depart by ship lends a quasi-spiritual urgency to their 'voyage out' of Western culture. As I have shown, the depiction of the travelers' departure from London is indebted to Dante, a literary parallel that is sustained by the depiction of London as a Danteian inferno, a burning hell-fire:

It seemed dreadful that the town should blaze for ever in the same spot; dreadful at least to people going away to adventure upon the sea, and beholding it as a circumscribed mound, eternally burnt, eternally scarred (11).

London as burning hell-fire offers an ironic modernist counterpart to the idea of London as guiding centre of the 'enlightened' world: this patriarchal 'sun' is construed as destructive, rather than illuminating, and is implicated in oppressive stasis, not development. While pilgrimage can be associated with temporary dispossession – not only of material goods, but also, in moments of spiritual encounter, of the self – London's depiction as a 'burning spot' and a 'sedentary miser' bespeaks jealous possession, consumption, and self-consumption, and generates associated feelings of claustrophobia and entrapment on the part of the female travellers.

London as 'sedentary miser' also calls attention to Britain's over-accumulation of space, its centrifugal concentration of colonial power.<sup>79</sup> Colonial imagery such as 'a swarm of

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<sup>78</sup> Carr, p. 2.

lights with a pale yellow canopy above it' (10-11) remind us of England's status as a metropolitan centre of empire, while the narrative makes reference to the chains of production that link the West End to the rest of London and beyond: Helen's perception of the West End of London as 'a small golden tassel on the edge of a vast black coat' is informed by Karl Marx's theorisation of the obscured origins of production. In contrast to the centralization and assimilation enforced by London, Rachel embarks on a centripetal journey, a 'voyage out' of the centre. Karen Lawrence has suggested that Rachel's 'eccentric' movements invite comparison with the 'desire of wandering' that Milton famously ascribed to Eve in his *Paradise Lost*. Translating the figure of the transgressive Eve into that of the female pilgrim, Woolf recasts a sinful act of transgression as a 'sacred' and rejuvenating one.<sup>80</sup> Rachel's 'pilgrimage' is shown to provide a sense of spatial and temporal rupture that promises to free her, at least temporarily, from the all-encompassing culture of the modern metropolis.

### **New ways of seeing**

Viewed as a pilgrimage, Rachel's journey implies a very different attitude to space and travel to that espoused by imperialism. As Edith and Victor Turner suggest, the old pilgrim trails of medieval Europe traversed the boundaries of provinces, realms, and even empires.<sup>81</sup> Because pilgrim sites sprang up all over Europe and beyond, they effected a radical decentrication and dilation of space, blurring national borders without eradicating difference.<sup>82</sup> The first depiction of the South American landscape, viewed from the mobile perspective of the approaching ship, acts to visualize the dynamic spatial dispersal that Turner and Turner associate with pilgrimage:

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<sup>80</sup> Lawrence, p. 157. In Woolf this female 'desire of wandering' is shown to be both taboo and sacred.

<sup>81</sup> Turner and Turner, p. 6.

<sup>82</sup> Peat, p. 3.



Losing its shadow-like appearance it first became cleft and mountainous, next coloured grey and purple, next scattered with white blocks which gradually separated themselves. (78)

This new, impressionistic landscape can be seen to indicate the artistic possibilities implied by a new relation to space, and provides an open challenge to the spatial ideology of imperialism. As Alexandra Peat has argued, the modern pilgrimage of Woolf's novel implies an engagement with new ways of seeing and, indeed, vision and visibility are highly important to Woolf's narrative.<sup>83</sup> Like pilgrimage, the novel traces an edificatory journey in which new visual relations are continuous with new social relations.

Woolf's depiction of the English tourists' picnic trip to the nearby mountain Monte Rosa is permeated by Christian imagery, from the burning light of the mountain-top that inspires Terence Hewet to organise the excursion, to the donkeys that the tourists use to climb to the summit. In fact, the episode can be seen to echo Joan's pilgrimage in 'The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn': the endpoint of Joan's journey is also an illuminated hilltop ('as you approach through a plain that is rich with green, you see this high ground rising above you for some time before you get there' (58), and, like the journey of *The Voyage Out*, encompasses a disparate band of men and women, some on foot, and others on horseback. However, in Woolf's novel, the English tourists' journey is undertaken with the ostensible aim of surveying the landscape from a superior vantage point, a form of visual 'mapping' that Andrew Thacker associates with colonial ideology.<sup>84</sup> The trip is in one sense presented as a form of colonial parody: brave male troops are replaced by elderly women, the leader is an anxious old man, Mr. Pepper and, like Percival in *The Waves*, they ride not on horses but donkeys.

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<sup>83</sup> Peat, p. 8.

<sup>84</sup> Drawing upon the ideas of Michel De Certeau, Thacker contends that '[t]he map "colonizes space" and eliminates the movements of subjects who had initially produced these very spaces'. Thacker, p. 34.

This colonial satire acts to critique, and suggest the dissolution of, imperial ideals, yet it also demonstrates the contiguity of pilgrimage and colonialism within the Western imagination. As Alexandra Lawrence has observed, the myth of the ‘virgin territory’, and the ‘sanctifying’ or rejuvenating effects of treading on it, motivated and justified the colonial endeavour. Evelyn Murgatroyd – a young radical and aspiring ‘New Woman’ resident at the hotel in Santa Marina – consistently casts her desire for mental expansion in colonial terms: “‘I’d raise a troop and conquer some great territory and make it splendid’”.<sup>85</sup> The gaze of the tourists upon the landscape of Santa Marina initially recalls the colonial ‘survey’, mapping and organising what they behold:

The sea filled in all the angles of the coast smoothly, breaking in a white frill, and here and there ships were set firmly in blue [...]. “Amazingly clear”, exclaimed St John, identifying one cleft in the land after another (118)

This intertwining of colonial ‘mapping’ with the myth of sacred virgin space is subtly registered in the desiring gaze that Terence later directs toward Rachel:

He noticed that she was wearing a dress of deep blue colour, made of a soft thin cotton stuff, which clung to the shape of her body. It was a body with the angles and hollows of a young woman’s body not yet developed, but in no way distorted, and thus interesting and even loveable. (195)

However, on arrival at Monte Rosa, the colonial viewpoint is superseded by a new vision in which the landscape takes on an overwhelming immensity:

One after another they came out on the flat space at the top and stood overcome with wonder. Before them they beheld an immense space – grey sands running into forest, and forests merging in mountains, and mountains washed by air, the infinite distances of South America. (120)

Rather than controlling the landscape with their gaze, the tourists are ‘overcome’ by it; the choice of the verb ‘beheld’ suggests that they are ‘held’ by the landscape as much as they ‘hold’ it with their gaze, which in turn points to a newly embodied and relational way of seeing. By recasting the colonial performances of her characters in the mode of a pilgrimage,

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<sup>85</sup> Lawrence, p. 160.

Woolf re-writes the myth of the virgin land as sanctifying space, presenting the 'virgin territory' not as a real locality but as a mental space that, though subject to endless exploration, can never be fully 'known'.

As Edith and Victor Turner assert, 'a tourist is half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist', and Woolf's interweaving of pilgrimage with modern-day tourism serves to suggest that they are in a sense commensurate to one another.<sup>86</sup> However, she also calls attention to the ways in which premodern pilgrimage and modern tourism are at least superficially opposed. Pilgrimage can be associated with spiritual, rather than material aims, and, as Turner and Turner have shown, with the contestation and transformation of all fixed identities. In contrast, the tourists of Santa Marina frequently demonstrate materialist world views and an obsessive desire to consume and assimilate difference. Mrs. Flushing, a tourist that Rachel meets at the hotel in Santa Marina, is compared by Terence Hewet to 'a very persuasive shop-keeper' (225) as she tries to convince her fellow-travellers to accompany her on a trip along the river to the jungle. While Mrs. Flushing portrays this journey as a truly unprecedented adventure, the narrator's dry aside cuts across her discourse, implying that the experience offered by the trip is a mass-produced commodity like any other:

[e]very year at this season English people made parties which steamed a short way up the river, landed, and looked at the native village, bought a certain number of things from the natives, and returned again without damage done to mind or body. (250)

Unlike Rachel and Terence, who maintain a certain openness to the psychological changes wrought by travel, the other English tourists are shown to actively resist, and even fear, transformation through new experience. The hotel of Santa Marina is frequently interpreted as a microcosm of English culture, and the tourists' zealous upholding of afternoon tea and tennis matches in spite of the intense heat is suggestive of an anxious colonial performance designed to protect and secure a fixed notion of 'home' in the face of the physical and

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<sup>86</sup> Turner and Turner, p. 20.

ideological challenges posed by the colonial environment. As I show in the section that follows, it is the encounter of the ‘sacred site’ – relocated from the edifices of organised religion to the natural landscape – that allows Woolf’s young protagonists to transcend, at least momentarily, the entrenched cultural paradigms of middle-class Edwardian society.<sup>87</sup>

### **Sacred sites**

Rachel’s ‘pilgrimage’ is structured around a succession of sacred sites in which she encounters moments of what Peat terms ‘ruptured transcendence’: visionary apprehensions that are both violent and revelatory. These encounters are evocative of the ‘shocks’ or ‘moment[s] of being’ that Woolf relates in her autobiographical essay of the same name, and, like Woolf’s ‘shocks’, can be seen to signal ‘a revelation of some order... a token of something real behind appearances’, pointing to a deeper or alternative reality underlying the contrived social world of the English travellers.<sup>88</sup> For Alexandra Peat, it is through these moments of ‘extraordinary experience’ that Woolf’s protagonist seeks self-discovery.<sup>89</sup> The summit of Monte Rosa emerges as one of the several sacred sites of Woolf’s novel. Walking through the undergrowth there, Rachel and Terence witness a sexual encounter between Arthur Venning and Susan Warrington, an experience that is portrayed in epiphanic terms: ‘the impression of the lovers lost some of its force, though a certain intensity of vision, which was probably the result of the sight, remained with them’ (128). Rachel is unable to tell from Susan’s expression ‘whether she was happy, or had suffered something’ (128), and like a receptive viewer of a silent film, mimics the suffering that she suspects in Susan, owning that ‘I could almost burst into tears’ (128). Rachel’s first ‘vision’ offers a trope of sexual initiation

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<sup>87</sup> For the relocation of the novel’s emotional and aesthetic centre from interior to exterior spaces in the novel, see Peat, p. 3.

<sup>88</sup> Woolf, ‘Sketch of the Past’, p. 72.

<sup>89</sup> Alexandra Peat, ‘Pilgrimage and the Authority of Space’, p. 2.

that points forward to the unease and terror of Rachel's own 'romantic' encounter with Terence in the jungle and, ultimately, to her own death and suffering at the end of the novel.

The moments of 'extraordinary experience' portrayed in Woolf's novel mirror Joan Martyn's religious epiphany at the shrine of Our Lady:

[...]for one moment I submitted myself to her [the figure of Mary] as I have never submitted to man or woman, and bruised my lips on the rough stone of her garment. White light and heat steamed on my bare head; and when the ecstasy passed the country flew out like a banner unfurled (59).

In both *The Voyage Out* and 'The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn', the experience of epiphany halts the forward movement of clock time, creating a state in which, in the words of Judith Halberstam, 'the urgency of being [...] expands the potential of the moment'.<sup>90</sup> The 'ruptured transcendence' identified with spiritual sites is shown to be a means of transcending hegemonic social structures, so as to attain new ways of seeing the relation between self and landscape. Indeed, in both *The Voyage Out* and 'The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn', sacred sites open up a form of temporality that Judith Halberstam has defined as 'queer time', defined, not by the longevity of reproductive, 'generational time', but by 'curtailed futures' and 'intensified presents'.<sup>91</sup> A temporality rooted in what Charles Baudelaire called 'the transient, the fleeting, the contingent', queer time, in Halberstam's assessment, 'has the potential to open up new life narratives and alternative relations to space'.<sup>92</sup>

The medieval practice of pilgrimage was concerned with the reading of visual signs as a means of effecting spiritual transport and transformation. Accordingly, the story of Rachel's transformation is as much about reading as it is about journeying. Rachel is frequently presented as a reader, and her trajectory is shaped by a pattern of textual gift-giving and exchange that mirrors her own commodification within English culture; wishing to initiate

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<sup>90</sup> Judith (Jack) Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place* (New York: NYU Press, 2005), p. 2.

<sup>91</sup> Halberstam, p. 6, p. 5, p. 3.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

Rachel into the marriage market, Mrs. Dalloway, a fellow traveller with Rachel on the *Euphrosene* (and precursor to the more benevolent Mrs. Dalloway of Woolf's eponymous novel), proffers Jane Austen's *Persuasion*. Rachel's interest in history – her desire to read 'the book of the world turned back to the very first page' (160) – reflects her search for a narrative that might support and explain her own 'way of being in the world', yet she discovers that most texts in a male-dominated literary tradition serve only to legitimate her reification as Other.<sup>93</sup> In this way, the theme of pilgrimage serves to dramatise the problem that for women readers and writers, the 'voyage out' into the literary tradition must involve re-tracing the footsteps of male authors, a literary 'pilgrimage' that is fraught with tensions and anxiety. However, the act of pilgrimage is also used by Woolf as means of forging her own pathway within the literary landscape, for by re-enacting past narratives, she both participates in, and reinvents, the literary traditions of the past.

In both *The Voyage Out* and 'The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn', the landscape, much like the female body, is shown to be determined, or overdetermined, by the texts that have been written about it. Drawing upon the medieval trope of the book of nature, the tradition that held that 'all beings in this world are to read like a book and picture' in order to gain knowledge of God, she presents the landscape itself as a kind of text to be read.<sup>94</sup> Joan sees the Norfolk landscape as 'a soft and luxurious land, glowing like a painted book', while in *The Voyage Out*, as Alexandra Peat suggests, '[t]he pilgrimage up the river offers a palimpsest of literary and religious references'.<sup>95</sup> The Amazonian jungle to which Rachel and Terence journey by boat is presented both as a sacred site and a point of convergence in which Christian mythology and romance motifs coalesce. Within this location, the tension

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<sup>93</sup> Rich, p. 21.

<sup>94</sup> Alan of Lille, 'Psalterium Profanum', ed. and trans. (into German) by Joseph Eberle (Zurich: Manich Verlag, 1962), p. 126, quoted in and trans. by Ashlynn K. Pai, 'Various Degrees of Light: Bonaventure and the Medieval Book of Nature', in *The Book and the Magic of Reading in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Albrecht Classen (New York and London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 3-19 (p. 8).

<sup>95</sup> Peat, 'Modern Pilgrimage and the Authority of Space', p. 9.

between innocence and experience that Northrup Frye identifies as a central theme of romance is pushed to crisis point.<sup>96</sup> Christine Froula, detecting ominous shades of violence and transgression amid the depictions of the jungle's lush vegetation, suggests that Rachel and Terence re-enact the Fall of Genesis, and the scene does indeed appear to mark Rachel's initiation into adult sexual identity through her engagement to Terence and the associated commencement of her decline and death.<sup>97</sup> However, if the jungle is in one sense a childhood 'paradise lost', it also emerges as a spiritual space, its vegetation forming a natural cathedral which gestures to the origins of Gothic architecture in the vaulting branches of trees:

The vast green light was broken here and there by a round of pure yellow sunlight which fell through some gap in the immense umbrella of green above, and in these yellow spaces crimson and black butterflies were circling and settling. Terence and Rachel hardly spoke (256).

Christine Froula suggests that the jungle scene depicts Rachel and Terence's quest for a 'fountainhead of words from which to create their life together', and the solemnity and mystery of the forest aligns it with the myth of the Grail.<sup>98</sup> As Leon Surette has observed, Jessie Weston presents the Grail legend as 'a distorted and fragmentary survival of a forgotten initiation into the Mystery of life involving a frightening encounter with death, and into the Mystery of death involving an erotically formulated encounter with the Divine'.<sup>99</sup> In the context of Eliot's early redactions of 'The Waste Land', this esoteric component of the Grail legend finds expression, for Surette, in Eliot's initial inclusion of the quotation from Joseph Conrad ('The horror! The horror!') and the episode of 'the hyacinth girl':

I could not  
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither  
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,  
Looking into the heart of light, the silence.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Frye, p. 187. Fittingly, Frye suggests that Milton's *Comus* exemplifies this struggle between innocence and experience – the same text that Terence reads aloud to Rachel prior to the onset of her illness.

<sup>97</sup> Froula, p. 79.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>99</sup> Leon Surette, *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, and the Occult* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), p. 269.

<sup>100</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, p. 58, ll. 38-4.

Rachel and Terence's moment of crisis in the jungle echoes Kurtz's 'surrender', his 'supreme moment of complete knowledge', but like Eliot's narrator, it is the heart of silence, rather than the heart of darkness, that they encounter: for '[s]ilence seemed to have fallen upon the world' (256). While Christine Froula interprets their silence as a sign of linguistic failure or impotence, it can also be seen to reflect their shared desire to enter a realm beyond the limitations imposed by language.<sup>101</sup>

Despite its concern with silence and wordlessness, the jungle scene also offers a densely-woven tissue of references to texts, textuality, and the storytelling origins of narrative. Woolf's depiction of the jungle's narrowing pathways invokes Spenser's 'Wandering Wood', an archetypal locus of romance in which, as Patricia Parker observes, 'the direct route is obscured': 'The path narrowed and turned; it was hedged in by dense creeper which knotted tree to tree, and burst here and there into star-shaped crimson blossoms' (256).<sup>102</sup> Rachel and Terence lose sight of the singular 'purpose' of their journey, becoming immersed in, and even overwhelmed by, the 'wonders' of their immediate sensory environment. Syrinthe Pugh suggests that 'like the errant knights which people it, the romance narrative "wanders"', and Rachel and Terence's errancy similarly mirrors the movement of Woolf's narrative.<sup>103</sup> Poet and Aristotelian critic Torquato Tasso (1544-1595), commenting on the romance of Ovid, uses the image of a dark forest as a metaphor for poetry, and, more specifically, for the potential dangers that poetry poses:

the material [of poetry] is like a dark forest, murky and without a ray of light. Hence, if art does not illuminate it, one might wander without guide and perhaps choose the worse instead of the better... no forest was ever so full of such variety of trees as poetry is variety of subjects.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Froula, p. 80.

<sup>102</sup> Patricia Parker, *Inescapable Romance: Studies in the Poetics of a Mode* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 21.

<sup>103</sup> Syrinthe Pugh, *Spenser and Ovid* (Aldershot, Hants, and Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2005), p. 49.

<sup>104</sup> Torquato Tasso, *Discourses on the Heroic Poem*, trans. by Mariella Cavalchinio and Irene Samuel (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p. 21.



As Syrinthe Pugh observes, Virgil and the Aristotelians identified Ovid's romance with confusion, madness, and moral transgression, all of which are embodied in Spenser by the monstrous and notably female figure of *Erroure*.<sup>105</sup> Harnessing the meandering and circuitous narratives of romance, Woolf challenges the Virgilian ideal of textual control with a new, feminine aesthetic of errancy, error and wandering.

The jungle also engages in the medieval tradition of the love-garden or *locus amoenus*, traceable to medieval Persian poetry and the book of Canticles. Like the sanctified spaces of the Grail narratives, the *locus amoenus* was imagined to contain at its centre a sacred space described by Foucault as 'the navel of the world' containing a basin and water-fountain.<sup>106</sup> Susan Stanford Friedman has argued that '*The Voyage Out* both thematises and performs aspects of the Kristevan semiotic', and the sense of womblike enclosure and 'tones of strange unfamiliar sound which formed no words' (257) that characterize Rachel and Terence's experience of the jungle can be seen to gesture to the semiotic chora, the creative undertow of language and poetry that Julia Kristeva associates with the pre-oedipal relation to the maternal body.<sup>107</sup> For Kristeva, the chora is '[n]either model nor copy, [but] precedes and underlies figuration and thus specularization, and is analogous only to vocal or kinetic rhythm'.<sup>108</sup> According to this interpretation, the characters' seeming inarticulacy and silence does not indicate linguistic failure, but a return to the non-textual, non-verbal origins of language and art that promises to imbue the jaded Symbolic with renewed dynamism and creativity. Romance can be seen as instrumental to this textual project, for Fredric Jameson has argued that it pertains to 'some earlier, oral stage, some more passive symbiotic

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<sup>105</sup> Pugh, pp. 50- 51. The romance genre was defined by Camillo Pellegrino, a sixteenth-century Italian poet, as 'a monster of many heads and various irregular limbs that tires the intellect considering them'. Quoted in Pugh, p. 51.

<sup>106</sup> Foucault, p. 25.

<sup>107</sup> Stanford Friedman, p. 125.

<sup>108</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 90-136 (p. 94).

relationship with the mother in both the anxieties (the baleful spell) and the appeasement (the providential vision)'.<sup>109</sup> Foucault suggests that the literary *loecus amoenus* has a corollary in the rug or tapestry: 'the garden is a rug onto which the whole world comes to enact its symbolic perfection, and the rug is a sort of garden that can move across space'.<sup>110</sup> In a similar manner, Helen's embroidery mirrors, or rather foreshadows, Woolf's depiction of the jungle:

She was working at a great design of a tropical river running through a tropical forest, where spotted deer would eventually browse upon masses of fruit, bananas, oranges, and giant pomegranates, while a troop of naked natives whirled darts into the air. (25)

Helen's embroidery offers a metatextual image for Woolf's own visual storytelling. The historical association of weaving with female culture and textuality suggests that the jungle can also be read as a textual tapestry, a mobile imagetext that inscribes female experience and the female body within the domain of the Symbolic.

### **Liminality**

Many of the spaces depicted in Woolf's novel correspond to Michel Foucault's conception of the 'heterotopia'. In his essay 'Of Other Spaces' (1984 [1967]), Foucault speculates that

[t]here are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.<sup>111</sup>

The mirror, the ship, and the garden (jungle) are all cited by Foucault as examples of heterotopia, spaces that are always located 'outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality' (24). While Rachel's journey has characteristically been seen as a frustrated search for a 'place' as a woman and as an artist, it

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<sup>109</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre', *New Literary History*, 7.1 (1975), 135-163 (p. 154).

<sup>110</sup> Foucault, p. 26.

<sup>111</sup> Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', p. 24. Woolf's invocation of the model of the knight errant in her representation of Rachel is also expressive of the 'nomadic feeling' that she associated with women.

might more rightfully be seen as an exploration of the placelessness that Woolf saw as a condition of women in patriarchal society.<sup>112</sup> Specifically, Woolf's sacred spaces – the summit of Mount Rosa, the Amazonian jungle – correspond to Foucault's conception of 'crisis heterotopias': 'privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis'.<sup>113</sup> Foucault suggests that crisis heterotopias have historically presided over those moments of transition that can take place 'nowhere' in society. Female sexual initiation is cited by Foucault as one example of this, hence the existence of the 'honeymoon' trip.<sup>114</sup>

Importantly, Woolf's dramatization of the theme of pilgrimage suggests the transformative potential of liminality and boundary-crossing for female identity. Rachel's pilgrimage can be seen to offer up a liminal space within which conventional conceptions of gender and domesticity are destabilized and new alternatives generated. Edith and Victor Turner maintain that by undergoing pilgrimage, the subject 'passes through a realm or dimension that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state.' Pilgrimage, therefore, is the state of being 'betwixt and between', a state of transition.<sup>115</sup> Turner and Turner present the limen as inherently forward-looking and creative:

Liminality is now seen to apply to all phases of decisive cultural change, in which previous orderings of thought and behaviour are subject to revision and criticism, when hitherto unprecedented modes of ordering relations between ideas and people become possible and desirable.<sup>116</sup>

Woolf's novel can be seen to carry out the kind of 'reality testing' that Turner and Turner associate with liminality: utopian fantasies abound, Terence propounds a new idea of literature in his avowed aim to write a novel about '[s]ilence... what people don't say' (204),

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<sup>112</sup> The 'vacation village' and ship, two prominent locations in Woolf's narratives, are cited explicitly by Foucault as examples of the heterotopia, while Woolf's inclusion of hyperbolic depictions of character and dream-like sequences convey a pervasive sense of unreality and distortion.

<sup>113</sup> Foucault, p. 24.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., pp. 24-25.

<sup>115</sup> Turner and Turner, p. 2.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

and Evelyn suggests a new model for social action in her ‘club for doing things’ (303). By bringing Rachel’s life to an end before she can marry Terence, Woolf actively resists the re-establishment of stability and retains her narrative within a state of liminality, or, according to Jed Esty’s assessment, a state of permanent adolescence. While the liminality of the text can be seen to reflect Theodor Adorno’s conception of modernity as a stage of permanent transition, the formal organization of *The Voyage Out* acts to present the limen as a valuable process in itself, rather than a stage to be endured before stability is reaffirmed. From this perspective, Rachel’s death retains, rather than closes off, a state of revolutionary creativity in order that it might open out onto new literary forms. As Turner and Turner suggest, ‘liminality is not only *transition* but also *potentiality*, not only “going to be” but “what may be”’.<sup>117</sup>

The theme of epiphany is common to both pilgrimage and romance. Northrop Frye maintains that romance narratives often culminate in a moment of epiphany, which takes place at ‘the point at which the undisplaced apocalyptic world and the cyclical world of nature come into alignment’ and allows for ‘the magical movement from one world to another’.<sup>118</sup> While Rachel’s fatal illness is frequently interpreted as an act of protest or as a signifier of repressed trauma and desire, it can also be viewed as a form of epiphany. Citing Dantë’s Purgatory and – notably – Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, Frye identifies the mountain-top, the island, the tower, and the lighthouse as common sites of epiphany, and Woolf alludes to several of these mythical settings in her representation of Rachel’s illness. Rachel’s body is initially depicted as an island, cut off from the social world: ‘she found that her heat and discomfort had put a gulf between her and the world that she could not bridge’ (311). Then,

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<sup>117</sup> Turner and Turner, p. 3.

<sup>118</sup> Frye, p. 189.

as her condition worsens, her body takes on the form of the vertiginous landscape of Woolf's South America:

The wave was replaced by the side of a mountain. Her body became a drift of melting snow, above which her knees rose in huge peaked mountains of bare bone.... The room also had an odd power of expanding. (327)

Rachel's epiphanic visions and metamorphoses suggest that her illness can be understood as a process of 'magical transition from one world to another' rather a sign of failure and stasis.

As Kathryn Hume observes, a significant number of romances end with the hero's 'untimely and often violent demise'.<sup>119</sup> Northrop Frye connects this to the mythical narrative of the *sparagmos* or tearing to pieces, centring upon the dramatic death and disappearance of the romance hero prior to his reappearance and recognition.<sup>120</sup> In a characteristically modernist twist, however, Rachel as hero is not recognized but misrecognized – Mrs. Paley mistakes her identity for that of another young woman in the hotel – and the text, like Rachel's body and mind, fragments by continuing to trace inconclusive sub-plots. By refusing to secure resolution in what Frye terms 'the exaltation of the hero', Woolf subverts the individualist, hero-centred narrative structure that had hitherto dominated the Western literary tradition, from the poetry of Homer to the Victorian novel.<sup>121</sup>

As Clarissa Dalloway walks through London in Woolf's 1925 novel, she imagines continuing in 'a world without a self':

[...] somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she part, she was sure, of the trees as home; of the house there, ugly, rambling all to bits and pieces as it was; part of people she had never met (8).

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<sup>119</sup> Hume, p. 164.

<sup>120</sup> Frye, p. 178.

<sup>121</sup> Frye, p.187.

Like Clarissa Dalloway's house, the narrative of *The Voyage Out* 'rambl[es] all to pieces', but it nonetheless retains the possibility that Rachel may survive as part of other people by concluding with a mysterious vision of community:

All these voices sounded gratefully in St John's ear as he lay half-asleep, and yet vividly conscious of everything around him. Across his eyes passed a procession of objects, black and indistinct, the figures of people picking up their books, their cards, their balls of wool, their work-baskets, and passing him one after another on their way to bed. (353)

Frye suggests that the final stage of the romance narrative is the movement from 'active' to 'contemplative' adventure.<sup>122</sup> Within this stage, the framing of the narrative is made evident by the presentation of a group of people telling and listening to stories of which the preceding romance is but one, and has two recurrent aspects: the lonely old hermit in a tower, and an atmosphere of domestic comfort.<sup>123</sup> This final stage of romance illuminates Woolf's 'framing' of the end of *The Voyage Out*. While allowing the reader a certain degree of emotional distance from the trauma of Rachel's illness and death,<sup>124</sup> it also connects life, work, and art: though Rachel's short life – and the narrative that depicts it – might seem as insignificant as the books and balls of wool picked up by the hotel guests, it lives on as a narrative which other people memorialise.

Writing, journeying, and the development of female subjectivity are intricately intertwined in Woolf's first novel. As I have shown in this chapter, Rachel's 'voyage out' into geographical space acts as a trope for the evolution of her consciousness as a social and gendered subject, and as a wider metaphor for the writer's first foray into the literary marketplace. While her novel's layering of medieval past and modern present points to the

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<sup>122</sup> Frye, p. 188.

<sup>123</sup> Frye, pp.188-189.

<sup>124</sup> Frye, p. 189. Frye elaborates that '[t]he effect of such devices is to present the story through a relaxed and contemplative haze as something that entertains us without, so to speak, confronting us, as direct tragedy confronts us' (p. 189).

‘uneven temporality’ of the colonial periphery,<sup>125</sup> the ‘multiple layers of continually superimposed experience’ revealed by Rachel’s journey also suggest the possibility of negotiating a different relation with the past. In her first novel, Woolf revisits romance forms in order to develop a subjective literary style capable of conveying what Jameson describes as ‘a sequence of events which are closer to states of being than to acts’.<sup>126</sup> The trope of pilgrimage another form of literary quest allows her to explore the liminality and potentiality inherent to a female identity in rapid transition, while pointing to the possibility for a more collective, communal mode of literary expression for the future.

‘Home’ is also ‘abroad’ in this novel: colonial South America does not provide escape from the patriarchal structures of English society. Examining the ways in which gender is implicated in the construction of national identity, the text shows how the gendering of the land as a feminized territory acts to support the project of British imperialism. Woolf recognized that, as Claudine Herman puts it, ‘for man, the disposition of space is primarily an image of power’.<sup>127</sup> Through her appeal to medieval romance and pilgrimage, she manipulates space from a marginal, female angle, thereby challenging the spatial ideology of imperialism.<sup>128</sup> In addition, the narrative of the text is organised, not around the temporal end-point of Rachel’s death, but around the sacred sites visited by the novel’s English ‘pilgrims’, namely, the mountain, the river, and the jungle. Reading the novel from this perspective means that it does not appear as a declaration of impasse and failure, but as a celebration of a specifically female ‘authority of space’, inscribed by the transgressive act of wandering out of bounds.

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<sup>125</sup> A temporality inscribed by the unstable relation between modern, mercantile capitalism and ancient, indigenous forms of culture. See Esty, ‘Virginia Woolf’s Colony’, p. 71.

<sup>126</sup> Jameson, p. 139.

<sup>127</sup> Claudine Herman, *The Tongue Snatchers*, trans. by Nancy Kline (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), p. 114.

<sup>128</sup> Helen Southworth, ‘Women and Interruption in Between the Acts’, in *Locating Woolf*, ed. by Anna Snaith and Michael Whitworth (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 46-61 (p. 46).

An attention to the latent medievalism in *The Voyage Out* reveals the extent to which Woolf's interest in medieval culture informed her first foray out into the public sphere as a professional writer. Indeed, behind the excursion represented in the novel lies another, real-life journey: Woolf's visit to the small Pembrokeshire village of Manorbier in 1904, soon after the death of her father, where she stayed for four weeks with the other Stephen children. The former seat of Gerald of Wales, the twelfth-century Welsh writer favoured by Lynette Roberts, Manorbier is the site of an eleventh-century castle, built by Gerald's grandfather, Oto de Barri. Sheltered by curving hills and overlooking the bay, the small castle would have spoken to Woolf's fascination – maintained throughout her life – with the interleaving of landscape, medieval history, and domestic life. In fact, Quentin Bell has suggested that *The Voyage Out* 'had its beginnings... at Manorbier in 1904',<sup>129</sup> and Woolf herself recalls how '[t]hat vision [for the book] came to me more clearly at Manorbier aged 21, walking down the edge of the sea'.<sup>130</sup>

Woolf's first novel conveys a search for a lost maternal legacy, identifying this with a spiritual tradition rooted in the landscape, rather than a male-dominated literary tradition. Yet, through the influence of famous medieval scholar Fredric Maitland, a close friend and biographer of Woolf's father, medieval history was connected for Woolf to the ambivalent legacy – part enabling, part suffocating – of Leslie Stephen.<sup>131</sup> Re-writing the medieval narratives from her own perspective was for Woolf a way of negotiating, and coming to terms with, that paternal legacy in the wake of her father's death, as a means of clearing a space for

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<sup>129</sup> Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf*, 2 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1973), I, p. 125.

<sup>130</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, II, 197.

<sup>131</sup> The fact that the last book composed by famous medieval scholar F. W. Maitland (*The Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen* [1906]) was at the same time Woolf's first publication (she contributed a short piece to her father's biography at Maitland's request) is also suggestive of a kind of handing over of intellectual legacy. For Woolf's relationship with Fredric Maitland, see Leena Kore-Schröder, 'Who's afraid of Rosamund Merridew?', pp. 5-7. For Maitland's involvement in Bloomsbury and the role of his revolutionary historical strategies in the development of British modernism, see Norman E. Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1991), pp. 48-58.



her own literary voice: as Patricia Lawrence has suggested, '[t]he trope of the unchartered territory' that informs the novel's narrative 'anticipates the hope of a new reading and writing'.<sup>132</sup> In the chapter that follows, I trace another journey to West Wales: Lynette Roberts's ambivalent journey home to the village of Llanybri, which, as I show, is also a 'voyage out' to strange new literary worlds.

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<sup>132</sup> Lawrence, p. 160.

## Part I: Landscape and Travel

### Chapter 2

#### Travelling Medieval Cultures in the Poetry of Lynette Roberts

The bleached valley shone with its own springing light and the brown line of hedges strongly edged the field patterns of snow. My dog and I continued over the brow of the hill. I was still fascinated by the clear footprints as they sealed the whiteness of the snow. Paws first to one side, then to another, their bardic symbol keeping me snowbound until I reached the marshes, where I rested under the salt spray of the trees. Lynette Roberts, diary entry for January 3<sup>rd</sup> 1942 (D, 10).

Lynette Roberts's wartime diary testifies to her heightened 'sense of place', for it abounds with precise, luminous depictions of the South-West Walian landscape such as this. Started just after Roberts moved from London to Llanybri, the small Carmarthenshire village that lies across the Tâf estuary from Laugharne, her diary testifies to the great imaginative appeal found by Roberts in her new *milltir sgwâr*.<sup>1</sup> As Laura Wainwright observes, 'just as Capel y Ffin and the Black Mountains became sites of artistic inspiration for David Jones, Llanybri and the wider landscape of West Wales were formative to Lynette Roberts's poetry'.<sup>2</sup> Landscape emerges as a chronotope in her work, a time-space unit in which 'time [...] thickens, takes on flesh', and ancient and modern, time and timelessness, intersect.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, throughout her writing, the act of *reading* the cryptic signs of the landscape, just as she reads the 'bardic symbol' of the bird's footsteps on her journey to Cwmcelyn in the above description, is shown to offer a new, more direct and experiential avenue for participating in Welsh tradition for the woman outsider. If Roberts uses her poetry as a vehicle for 'travelling home' to Wales, the country of her parents' families, then this journey

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<sup>1</sup> Square mile.

<sup>2</sup> Wainwright, p. x.

<sup>3</sup> The concept of the chronotope is Mikhail Bakhtin's; see 'Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), p. 84.

is often expressed in Romantic terms, as a journey *through* the Welsh landscape. Cultural roots are also routes in Roberts's work, a passageway to new realms of poetry and experience. In her engagement with medieval Welsh tradition, Roberts often places emphasis on 'mobile' forms of culture, literary forms that have to do with travel and transition: in 'Poem from Llanybri' the theme of pilgrimage – imbued with medieval undercurrents – offers a metaphor and vehicle for the reclamation of a national culture, while in *Gods with Stainless Ears*, Dante's paradisiacal journey through the 'strata of the sky' (64) provides a model for a skyward escape from war, into a utopian Welsh future.

As Judith Kegan Gardiner has suggested, 'home' is always 'elsewhere' for the woman writer in exile; thus, to go home is simultaneously to estrange, to make that home 'other'.<sup>4</sup> In this chapter, I argue that in her engagement with medieval Welsh tradition, Roberts attempts to re-map, or 'retopographise' the Welsh landscape, from the perspective of the woman outsider.<sup>5</sup> While this act of creative re-mapping functions as an assertion of post-colonial self-definition, it can also be seen to facilitate Roberts's search for a 'place' and an identity as a writer: as Jane Marcus argues, 'on one's own map, one can be real; self and world are created in words'.<sup>6</sup> Importantly, the 'odyssey of ideas' found in Roberts's poetry – mythic, medieval, and modern – remains 'rooted in the immediate geography of Roberts's wartime home in the village of Llanybri', as Charles Mundy has observed.<sup>7</sup> Like Welsh modernist David Jones, her West Wales landscape is a stratified, archaeological space, both revealing and concealing complex layers of history: a site of 'buried treasure' and scattered, enigmatic fragments in which the ancient and medieval past lies in sedimented relation to the present. Roberts was

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<sup>4</sup> Judith Kegan Gardiner, 'The Exhilaration of Exile', in *Women's Writing in Exile*, ed. by Mary Lynn Broe and Angela Ingram (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), pp. 134-150 (p. 134).

<sup>5</sup> David Mellor, p. 34.

<sup>6</sup> Jane Marcus, 'Alibis and Legends: The Ethics of Elsewhereness, Gender and Estrangement', in *Women's Writing in Exile*, ed. by Mary Lynn Broe and Angela Ingram, pp. 269-294 (p. 275).

<sup>7</sup> Charles Mundy, 'Outside the Imaginary Museum: Mythology and Representation in the Poetry of Lynette Roberts and Keidrych Rhys', *PN Review*, 40.2 (2013), 23-29 (p. 23).

fascinated by the shaping interrelation between culture and its *ambit*, and she frequently presents the Welsh landscape as a kind of palimpsest, a cultural text on which traces of the medieval past are inscribed.<sup>8</sup>

The interlinkage of history, landscape, and visuality that shapes Roberts's poetry of place points to her participation in the Neo-Romantic impulse that, as I have indicated in my introduction to this thesis, infused and informed modernist culture during the 1930s and 1940s. Emanating from the modernist visual arts scene that gathered around Myfanwy Evans's journal *Axis* during the 1930s, Neo-Romanticism, as I have indicated in my introduction, found expression in a re-visioning, or 'retopographizing' of the British landscape, through travel writing, photography, and especially newly popular motoring guides such as the *Shell Guides*, authored by artists such as Paul Nash and John Piper.<sup>9</sup> Fusing the vision of William Blake and Thomas Bewick with the cubism of Picasso and Matisse's 'pattern-making in space', Neo-Romantic artists sought to radically transform perceptions of national space using the tools of the continental avant-garde.<sup>10</sup>

Roberts's attentiveness to the medieval traces inscribed upon the face of modern-day Wales reflects her drive, shared by many Neo-Romantics, to salvage parts of a vanishing national past.<sup>11</sup> Her lyrical evocations of south-west Wales sometimes evoke the trope of the 'Neo-Romantic Eden', conjuring a symbolic landscape of creative plenitude and equilibrium.<sup>12</sup> Yet though charged with a certain nostalgia and longing, her landscapes do not articulate a desire to return to a 'golden' national past, and neither do they provide an

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<sup>8</sup> For the Neo-Romantic concern for the relation between artist and her *ambit*, see John Piper, 'Lost: a Valuable Object', in *The Painter's Object*, ed. by Myfanwy Evans (London: Gerald Howe, 1937), pp 69-73 (p. 69).

<sup>9</sup> David Mellor, p. 34, Clare Morgan, p. 39.

<sup>10</sup> David Mellor, p. 16. For the Neo-Romantic interest in Bewick, see John Piper, *British Romantic Artists* (London: William Collins, 1942), p. 24.

<sup>11</sup> David Mellor notes that 'itemising, salvaging, "recording"' were key to the Neo-Romantic project (p. 34). See also Harris, p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> David Mellor, p. 16.

easy escape from the realities of war. Instead, they are sites of doubleness and paradox, the frontline in the battle between medieval and modern, repetition and change, fragility and endurance, that, for Roberts, made up the experience of nationhood in Wales. As I show, the Welsh countryside emerges as an arena for reconciling, at least in part, the linked dialectic of belonging and unbelonging that cadences Roberts's attitude to national culture.

In the discussion that follows, I explore how Roberts's experience of travel and displacement influenced the 'mobility of perspective' that can be discerned in her poetic representations of Wales, and outline some of the medieval underpinnings to her interest in travel and border-crossing. Identifying key political and aesthetic contexts informing Roberts's 'journey home', through poetry, to Llanybri and a Welsh poetic tradition, I then address several poems that epitomise Roberts's collocation of history and place, demonstrating how she manipulates medieval tropes of travel and exile (pilgrimage, Anglo-Saxon elegies, *The Divine Comedy*) in order to reimagine national space.

### **Roberts's itinerant imagination and the reclamation of national culture**

Lynette Roberts's past was permeated by the experience of travel and criss-crossed by multiple lines of identification: born in Argentina, her childhood was spent moving between England and South America (she attended schools in Bournemouth and Buenos Aires), and she wrote in and out of the small Welsh village of Llanybri.<sup>13</sup> The language of travel was inscribed in the lexicon of her childhood, for her father worked as head of Western Railways in Argentina; in her autobiographical notes, she recalls the thrill of accompanying her father on journeys across Argentina and Chile,<sup>14</sup> and her sonnet 'Argentine Railways' was written as a loving tribute to the man who 'drilled/Time in travelling into a close combine' (ll. 7-8).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> McGuinness, *Collected Poems*, p. xiii. See also Lynette Roberts, 'Notes for an Autobiography', in *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, ed. By Patrick McGuinness (pp. 191-219).

<sup>14</sup> Roberts, 'Notes for an Autobiography', pp. 194, 199.

Roberts's poetic fascination with migrating birds, her 'sudden sensation of flight in colour' (*D*, 44) on glimpsing a woodpecker on the Coomb road near Cwmcelyn, suggests that flight and travel were integral both to her poetic vision, and her sense of self.<sup>16</sup>

Nonetheless, in 1939 she left behind the cosmopolitan world of Fitzrovia bohemianism and the remembered distances of Argentina to live in a two-roomed cottage in a secluded village in West Wales. This move was borne in part of expediency: with the outbreak of war, Llanbri seemed a much safer place to live, and travel abroad became increasingly difficult – often to Roberts's frustration. However, it was also a conscious choice on her part, a declaration of the 'locally-oriented form of engagement' that Alexandra Harris presents as a feature of modernist Neo-Romanticism.<sup>17</sup> As I have indicated in my introduction, the new interest in place and locality that Harris observes in many artists and painters of the 1940s was a form of rebellion against the universalising tendencies of high modernism, with its tendency to erase all 'accidents of personality and environment' in favour of a language of pure form.<sup>18</sup> While for artist Geoffrey Grigson modernist art risked running off 'to nowhere through the dry spaces of infinity', Neo-Romanticism was an art that was *going* somewhere – somewhere real.<sup>19</sup>

Like many other Neo-Romantic artists and writers, Roberts directs luminous attention to what Piper termed 'the "country" that inspires painting' – a 'country' that in Roberts's case encompassed both the physical landscape, and Welsh national culture itself.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the localism of Neo-Romanticism should not be seen as a retreat from the idea of the nation, but rather, as a particularised re-engagement with national culture and history. For Alexandra

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<sup>16</sup> McGuinness, *Collected Poems*, p. xiii. See also Lynette Roberts, 'Notes for an Autobiography', in *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, ed. by McGuinness, pp. 191-219.

<sup>17</sup> Harris, p. 11.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.12, 16.

<sup>19</sup> Grigson, 'Comment on England', p.8.

<sup>20</sup> Piper, 'Lost: a Valuable Object', in *The Painter's Object*, ed. by Myfanwy Evans (London: Gerald Howe, 1937) pp. 69-73 (p. 72).

Harris, the art and literature of the ‘Romantic moderns’ can be seen to enact an imaginative claiming of a home country, an attempt, through art, to ‘travel home’.<sup>21</sup> The renewed desire on the part of British artists and writers to re-connect with the past and with tradition during the 1930s was accentuated by the outbreak of the Second World War. This was especially the case in Wales, where the conflict sparked a new wave of national self-reflection: in an editorial to the new series of the magazine *Wales* in 1943, Keidrych Rhys claimed that ‘the war has made the Welsh realise that they are a nation with a country, a people, a culture and a tradition *different* from England’s to fight for’.<sup>22</sup>

Ironically enough, it was the new modes of transport and technology associated with modernity, such as the motorcar and photography, that made possible an aesthetic reclamation of local tradition and rural culture during the late 1930s and 1940s. As automobile ownership became more widespread and tourism became increasingly limited to Britain’s borders as war loomed on the horizon, more and more people took off to ‘see something of our own country’, in the words of Edmund Blunden, and several artists undertook tours by car to record material for their art.<sup>23</sup> However, the form of travel espoused by the ‘Romantic moderns’ ran counter to the high-speed, technological transport that is usually associated with modernism; their preferred movement was slow, meandering, and careful, so that the traveller might take in as many details of her surrounding environment as possible. In this way, ‘Romantic Moderns’ became ‘pilgrims in their own country’, for Alexandra Harris.<sup>24</sup> Journeying through the landscape was often imbricated in the recovery of Britain’s medieval past, from the Norman carvings in the sleepy Dorset village of Toller

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<sup>21</sup> Harris, p. 10.

<sup>22</sup> Keidrych Rhys, ‘Editorial’, *Wales*, 3.1 (1943), 4-6 (p. 4).

<sup>23</sup> Edward Blunden, ‘On Pilgrimage in England: Voyage of Discovery’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 28 March 1942, 156-161 (p. 156). The artist John Piper and his partner Myfanwy Evans undertook a journey in 1936 to study and photograph hundreds of churches and monuments, many of which were medieval in origin. See Harris, p. 7.

<sup>24</sup> Harris, p. 14.

Fratrum that John Piper acclaims as modernist masterpieces in ‘England’s Early Sculptors’ (1936), to the medieval barn that is converted into a theatre in Woolf’s *Between the Acts* (1941).<sup>25</sup> Yet while Roberts’s imaginative ‘pilgrimage’ home to Wales conveys her desire to gain ‘the simple sight of parts of [her] inheritance’, as Edmund Blunden puts it, it also signals her desire to ‘journey out’ into different cultures, and is fundamental to her reconceptualisation of ‘home’ as a mobile space.<sup>26</sup>

Roberts opens her first book of poetry, *Poems* (1944), with ‘Poem from Llanybri’. Written in 1941, the poem is addressed to the soldier poet Alun Lewis, whom Roberts had visited at Longmore in Hampshire in the spring of that year.<sup>27</sup> Defined by McGuinness as ‘the portal of the book’, it offers a ‘way in’ to her poetics of place:<sup>28</sup>

*If you come my way that is...  
Between now and then, I will offer you  
A fist full of rock cress fresh from the bank  
The valley tips of garlic fresh with dew  
Cooler than shallots, a breath you can swank*

*In the village when you come. At noon-day  
I will offer you a choice bowl of cawl  
Served with a ‘lover’s’ spoon and a chopped spray  
Of leeks or savori fach, not used now,*

*In the old way you’ll understand (ll.1-10).*

Patrick McGuinness asserts that ‘this is poetry as dialogue, poetry as rooted tradition: a celebration of community, both in the village, here described for its uniqueness, and within the circle of poets’.<sup>29</sup> ‘Poem from Llanybri’ might indeed be seen to offer an affirmation of national culture that, turning away from the alienating abstractions of ‘the nation’, focuses instead on an experiential knowledge of the local and particular. Yet if the poem can be seen

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<sup>25</sup> Piper, ‘England’s Early Sculptors’, p. 118. Piper claimed that ‘[m]any a Picasso-like profile is to be found on twelfth-century fonts and capitals’ (p. 118).

<sup>26</sup> Blunden, p. 156.

<sup>27</sup> John Pikoulis, ‘Lynette Roberts and Alun Lewis’, *Poetry Wales*, 19.2 (1983), pp. 9-29 (p. 13).

<sup>28</sup> McGuinness, ‘Introduction’ to *Collected Poems*, p. xi.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*



as a celebration of what Patrick McGuinness calls ‘a rooted culture that is also a culture of rootedness’, it is also, fundamentally, about journeying.<sup>30</sup> Roberts held that the poem was issued as an ‘invitation’ for Lewis to visit Llanybri; it therefore enacts, in simultaneity, a traveller’s ‘voyage in’ to Llanybri and a host’s ‘voyage out’ to meet him.<sup>31</sup> Llanybri – like the poem itself – thus emerges as a meeting place, a point of intersection and dialogue. Tony Conran has observed that ‘Poem from Llanybri’ invokes a premodern bardic tradition of poetry as a social ritual; describing the poem as an ‘inverted “poem of asking” (*cywydd gofyn*), he suggests that ‘[l]ike the old bards [...] she is conscious that where two or three poets meet, there poetry is also’.<sup>32</sup> A number of scholars have voiced criticism of Roberts’s lapse into ‘obscurity’ and ‘private allusion’ in her poetry, seeing it as symptomatic of her isolation from other poets and her readers.<sup>33</sup> However, her ‘private allusion’ can be seen to project her view of poetry as something ‘interpersonal, between real people’; a shared avenue of emotional communication, rather than an elite form of cultural expression.<sup>34</sup>

At the end of the poem, journeying is explicitly conflated with the act writing of poetry:

You must come – start this pilgrimage  
 Can you come? – send an ode or elegy  
 In the old way and raise our heritage (ll. 27-9).

The ritual element of the poem observed by Conran is made evident by the call to ‘raise our heritage’. In fitting with this, the poet’s request that her interlocutor ‘start this pilgrimage’

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xii.

<sup>31</sup> Pikoulis, ‘Lynette Roberts and Alun Lewis’, p. 14.

<sup>32</sup> Tony Conran, ‘Lynette Roberts: The Lyric Pieces’, *Poetry Wales*, 19.2 (1983), 125-133 (p. 132-33). In the *cywydd gofyn*, the bard would traditionally ‘ask a patron for a gift (such as a horse, weapon, or garment, sometimes for himself but more often on behalf of a nobleman’. See Dafydd Johnston, *The Literature of Wales: A Pocket Guide* (Cardiff: University of Cardiff Press, 1998), p. 42. Discussing the bardic tradition of the fifteenth century to which the *cywydd* belonged, Philip Jenkins notes that ‘Welsh poetry of the period was not “literature” in the sense that it needed to be written or read; it was a social phenomenon, to be declaimed in a public setting’. Philip Jenkins, *A History of Modern Wales 1536-1990* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 61-2.

<sup>33</sup> See Conran, ‘The Lyric Pieces’, p.125, and Nigel Wheale, ‘Lynette Roberts: Legend and Form in the 1940s’, *Critical Quarterly*, 36.3 (1994), 4-19 (p. 13).

<sup>34</sup> Conran, *Frontiers*, p. 164.

suggests that the entire poem projects a form of pilgrimage. Though Edward Blunden's article 'On Pilgrimage in England: Voyages of Discovery' was not published until 1942, a year after 'Poem from Llanybri' was composed, it provides an insight into the interrelation of pilgrimage and localism in the shadow of World War II. Blunden observes that since 'that other war [...] we have been increasingly on pilgrimage toward those shrines which conceivably stand for the country we are now fighting for'.<sup>35</sup> While his rhetoric conveys shades of militaristic nationalism, it also suggests that the visiting of sites or shrines became in the 1940s a kind of reassuring ritual act, born of the anxiety and confusion generated by war. Blunden suggests that the 'new visions of England' offered by pilgrimage are fundamental to the 'project of national self-discovery' that had been rendered all the more urgent by the threat of invasion and destruction: translated into a Welsh context, the 'pilgrimage' home is shown by Roberts to promise cultural rebirth and renewal for Wales.<sup>36</sup>

Victor and Edith Turner claim that during the Middle Ages, the practice of pilgrimage in the Catholic tradition precipitated the phenomenon of *communitas*: a restructuring of normal social relations along communal, egalitarian lines.<sup>37</sup> The Walsingham pilgrimage, revived in 1923 by Father Hope Pattern, and described in Chapter 1 of my thesis, may have provided a contemporary parallel to this.<sup>38</sup> As Victor and Edith Turner relate, both pilgrimage and *communitas* were enmeshed in the local and the popular during the Middle Ages: 'spontaneously engendered' local pilgrimages broke out frequently all over Christendom, resisting the centralised control of Rome.<sup>39</sup> I would suggest that Roberts's poem proffers a model of *communitas* as a mode of resistance to the centralised, administered world that she often critiques in her poetry, as well as a means of structuring relations between poets.

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<sup>35</sup> Blunden, p. 156. A poet of the First World War, Edward Blunden was a friend of Robert Graves, with whom Roberts collaborated closely during the 1940s.

<sup>36</sup> Harris, p. 10.

<sup>37</sup> Victor and Edith Turner, pp.13, 250-55.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

Although Roberts asserted in a letter to Robert Graves that ‘I do not believe in group, collective gatherings – this sort of thing is acceptable to craftsmen – but not to poets’,<sup>40</sup> pilgrimage *communitas* can be seen to offer an alternative to the ‘groups’ and ‘movements’ that had dominated the British poetry scene of the 1930s, allowing for a kind of unity in difference that is shaped and conditioned by the fact of sharing a common purpose.<sup>41</sup> As a form of ritual, pilgrimage is, as Avril Maddrell stresses, a *process*.<sup>42</sup> Roberts’s poem shows national tradition, and the art that nourishes it, as a process, or, in the words of Lee Davis and Alex Jenkins, ‘something actively to be made, constructed, not something to be passively inherited’ – a theme that I will explore in more depth in the chapters that follow.<sup>43</sup>

As I have shown in my discussion of pilgrimage in Woolf’s *The Voyage Out*, the process of pilgrimage has to do with new ways of seeing: moving out of the ‘human experience of social structure’, pilgrims go off in search of an ‘extraordinary’ sight.<sup>44</sup> Accordingly, ‘Poem from Llanybri’ is structured around new ways of seeing, destabilising preconceived ideas of the pastoral and of Wales by ‘making strange’ that which should be homely or familiar. While several critics have been tempted to read the poem as a homely, domestic ‘offering’, the vivid, jewel-like colours evoked by the ‘garlic red with dew’ and the ‘lime-tree’ bring Argentina into west Wales, while the untranslated Welsh terms and unusual syntax (the result of emulating spoken Welsh dialect patterns) provide the slightly estranged effect of reading a text in translation – or indeed, from another time.

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<sup>40</sup> Lynette Roberts, ‘Letter to Robert Graves’, December 13 1943, in *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, p. 169.

<sup>41</sup> Avril Maddrell suggests that there is a tension or interrelation between a sense of participation and separation in pilgrimage; the subject may understand their experience as ‘part of the whole’ but might walk ‘to a different inner beat’. See Avril Maddrell, “Praying the Keills”: Rhythm, meaning and experience on pilgrimage journeys in the Isle of Man’, *Landabefid*, 25 (2011), 15-29 (p. 27).

<sup>42</sup> Maddrell, p. 16

<sup>43</sup> Davis and Jenkins, p. 9.

<sup>44</sup> Victor and Edith Turner, p. 7.

Several critics have remarked on Roberts's pronounced powers of observation, or what Patrick McGuinness terms her 'radical openness to the world around her'.<sup>45</sup> She often presents herself as an ethnographer, 'always observant and slightly obscure' (l. 3), as she puts it in her poem 'Lamentation'. In texts such as 'Poem from Llanybri', the speaker's pointed reference to local flora, geography, and village customs evoke the observant gaze of the ethnographer on a strange new culture. While scholars such as Laura Wainwright read Roberts's ethnographic gaze as symptomatic of her distance or estrangement from Welsh culture, in 'Poem from Llanybri', the speaker presents herself as *part* of the culture that is being perceived.<sup>46</sup> Offering hospitality and warning about the danger posed by traversing the fen, she adopts the position of translator or guide to the 'native' culture of Llanybri, encouraging the reader to enter into the difference of Welsh culture, as symbolised by 'the village'. In this way, the speaker's assumed role anticipates James Clifford's conception of the 'ex-centric' or 'hybrid "native"': a 'travelling "indigenous" culture-maker', who, first appearing as a 'native', later emerges as a traveller.<sup>47</sup> Described by Clifford as 'insider-outsiders, good translators and explicators', 'hybrid "natives"' can be seen to occupy the ambivalent, intermediary position often adopted by both Roberts and Woolf *vis-à-vis* their respective national cultures.<sup>48</sup> Additionally, while, as Clifford argues, traditional ethnological techniques obscure a culture's external relations/displacements through the practice of 'localisation', the 'hybrid "native"', in his view, demonstrates a culture's complex connections and relations with the wider world, illuminating the 'hybrid, cosmopolitan experiences' that for Clifford are as significant to the formation of a culture as its 'rooted'

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<sup>45</sup> Patrick McGuinness, 'Introduction' to *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, pp. vii-xvii (p. xv); see also Wheale, p. 103, and Tony Conran, Lynette Roberts: War Poet', in *The Cost of Strangeness: Essays on the English Poets of Wales* (Llandysul: Gomer, 1983), p. 202.

<sup>46</sup> Wainwright (Thomas) contends that 'it would be fair to say that Roberts effectively remained, as she suggests in 'Lamentation', a kind of cultural 'stranger' in Wales – a cosmopolitan outsider who produced avant-garde English-language poetry and prose' (p. 75).

<sup>47</sup> James Clifford, 'Travelling Cultures', in *Cultural Studies*, ed. by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 96-116 (pp. 101, 97).

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

ones.<sup>49</sup> In ‘Poem from Llanybri’, Roberts’s travelling ‘informant’<sup>50</sup> reveals the ‘elsewhereness’ at the heart of the local. This resonates with Judith Kegan Gardiner and Angela Ingram’s suggestion that for the colonial woman writer, the journey homewards is also the outward path, since no place is fully ‘home’.<sup>51</sup> ‘Poem from Llanybri’ suggests that the journey home is also a voyage out to a strange new place, and in the process, reformulates ‘native’ culture *as* travel.

In her poem ‘Plasnewydd’, Roberts animates the motif of the sacred white cow derived from early medieval inscriptions of Welsh legend in order to transform Llanybri from a ‘localised’ space into a mobile one.<sup>52</sup> At the opening of the poem, the speaker playfully adopts the role of Clifford’s ethnological ‘informant’:

You want to know about my village.  
You should want to know even if you  
Don’t want to know about my village (ll. 1-3).

The village is initially presented as a small, static location to ‘pass through’: ‘You could/ Pass it with a winning gait. Smile’ (ll. 4-5). Moving from the general (the whole village) to the particular, the speaker effects an abrupt shift of perspective, focusing in on a village cow:

WAR. ‘There’s no sense in it.  
Just look at her two lovely eyes  
Look at those big big eyes  
And the way she hangs her tail.  
Like a weasel. Ferret. Snowball  
Running away on the breast of a hill.  
WAR. There’s no sense in it [...] (ll. 21-27).

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p. 100, p. 101.

<sup>50</sup> Clifford, p. 97.

<sup>51</sup> Kegan Gardiner and Ingram, p. 518.

<sup>52</sup> The trope of the white cow was possibly inspired by Roberts’s collaboration with Robert Graves on his *The White Goddess* during the 1940s. In a letter to Robert Graves on December 13th 1943, Roberts wrote that ‘I am fascinated by your White Cow’s circular route’ (p. 167). Pointing Graves to a reference in *The Welsh People* by Sir John Rhys and David Brynmor Jones ‘to a White Bull with red ears’, she suggests a connection to ‘the white greyhound with red ears’ found in the ‘Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed’ story in the First Branch of the *Mabinogi* (p. 168).

While the passage perhaps invokes the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid, a more important source is surely the ‘Hanes Taliesin’, as collected in Lady Charlotte Guest’s translation of the *Mabinogion* (1838-45), in which Gwion Bach, sought after by a shape-shifting goddess Ceridwen, is chased and sought for his poetic powers, with both characters becoming subject to a dizzying array of metamorphoses into different animal forms.<sup>53</sup> The legendary narrative of Gwion’s transformation, originally recorded in the seventeenth century but of much earlier provenance, is used by Roberts in order to provide the effect of viewing the village through a kaleidoscopic range of changing perspectives: the cow’s anthropomorphic presentation serves to blur the division between human and animal, while the gaze of her ‘big big eyes’ on the viewing subject (the reader) blurs divisions between the viewing subject and her ethnographic ‘object’.<sup>54</sup> The cow’s sudden movement away over ‘the breast of the hill’ suggests the impossibility of fully ‘knowing’ the ‘other’ that is Llanybri. In this respect, the position of Llanybri and the Welsh culture it represents is shown to mirror Luce Irigaray’s conception of the ‘feminine’ as ‘already elsewhere than in the discursive machinery where you claim to take [it] by surprise’.<sup>55</sup>

Both the ‘hybrid “native”’ and the theme of pilgrimage are suggestive of a state of liminality. As I observed in Chapter 1, Victor and Edith Turner argue that pilgrimage allows the subject to enter a liminal phase that ‘has few or none of the attributes of the past or

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<sup>53</sup>*The Poems of Taliesin*, ed. by Ifor Williams and J.E. Caerwyn Williams (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1968). Roberts is likely to have read the second edition of Guest’s *The Mabinogion* (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1877), which remained the standard English version until the translation by Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones in 1948.

<sup>54</sup> Cows feature recurrently in late modernist texts and art, often in relation to reflections on war. David Jones’s painting ‘Cows in a Landscape: Caldey Island’ (1925) places grazing cows in the foreground of an ethereal natural landscape, and Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood* (1936) contains a passage that resonates strongly with Roberts’s portrayal of cows in ‘Plasnewydd’ and ‘Swansea Raid’: Dr Matthew O’ Connor, relating an incident during the First World War when he hid in a cellar to escape a bombing raid with an old Breton woman and her cow, recalls how ‘a flash of lightning went by and I saw the cow turning her head straight back so her horns made two moons against her shoulders, the tears soused all over her great black eyes.’ Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood* (New York: New Directions, 2006), pp. 26-27. Cows may have been interesting for anthropologically-informed modernists such as Roberts for their fusion of the mythic/ the sacred and the mundane.

<sup>55</sup> Luce Irigaray, ‘This Sex Which Is Not One’, trans. by Claudia Reeder, in *New French Feminisms*, ed. by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Brighton: Harvester, 1988), pp. 99-106 (p. 103).

coming state'.<sup>56</sup> Associating this phase with transition and transformation, they argue that the 'passage' or 'way through' offer 'a perfect metaphor for pilgrimage liminality'.<sup>57</sup> While 'Poem from Llanybri' may appear to ground itself in the 'timeless' traditions that were conventionally attributed to 'non-Western' cultures, its temporality is actually that of transition: the 'events' of the poem all occur in a conditional, imaginary time 'between now and then'. While this transitional temporality may reflect the experience of war as an interlude between a receding past and an uncertain future, it also replicates the experience of exile:<sup>58</sup> Mae Henderson proposes that Victor Turner's anthological model of liminality 'provides a handy conceptual model for the study of exile – or border crossing "betwixt and between" countries and/or cultures – as a processual rite'.<sup>59</sup> In this way, the journey 'over the threshold' of Llanybri becomes evocative of the 'border-crossing' of exile.<sup>60</sup>

### **The landscape as text: the archaeological imagination of *Gods with Stainless Ears***

In *The Voyage Out*, as I have argued, the modernist pilgrimage is seen to yield 'multiple layers of continually superimposed experience'.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, Roberts's poetry often presents place as 'the layering of time', in Patrick McGuinness's formulation.<sup>62</sup> She presents the Welsh landscape as a text to be read, with the past living on as a sediment within the present, as in a palimpsest – a translation into poetic form of Neo-Romantic artist John Piper's paper collages.<sup>63</sup> The notes that Roberts provides to her poem *Gods with Stainless Ears* reveals the

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<sup>56</sup> Turner and Turner, p. 2.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182.

<sup>58</sup> The title of David Jones's epic First World War poem, *In Parenthesis*, similarly implies that war involves a fluid form of temporality – an interlude, interval or hiatus bracketed off from the mundane temporality of peacetime.

<sup>59</sup> Mae Henderson, 'Borders, Boundaries and Frame(works)', in *Borders, Boundaries and Frames*, ed. by Mae Henderson (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 1-30 (p.5).

<sup>60</sup> Clifford suggests that pilgrimage and visiting are modes of travel that can be closely associated with women's lives, but are neglected in mainstream histories and narratives of travel (p. 106) – an idea explored in Woolf's depiction of a young woman's pilgrimage in the fifteenth century in 'The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn'.

<sup>61</sup> Peat, p. 4.

<sup>62</sup> McGuinness, *Collected Poems*, p. xxxvi.

<sup>63</sup> Harris, p. 12. Roberts refers emphatically and frequently to particular manuscripts in the main text and the notes to *Gods* (the Black Book of Carmarthen (p. 72), the Red Book of Hergest (p. 72), *The Lives of Cambro-*

distinctly medieval substratum of her modernist long poem: figures, encounters and events from medieval Welsh history and mythology frequent erupt in the modern landscape of her poem, contributing to what John Wilkinson refers to as its ‘dreamwise’ quality, its capacity to attend to reality while exaggerating, distorting, overcondensing and diverting it.<sup>64</sup> While the dream-like nature of Roberts’s text points to its status as an inner landscape, an evocation of Wales’s national unconscious, it also functions as part of Roberts’s manipulation of time in the poem, for as Jeremy Hooker suggests, in the dream-world of the mind, ‘history and myth are as “here and now” as “real” events’.<sup>65</sup>

Written over 1941-3, but not published until 1950, *Gods with Stainless Ears* is subtitled ‘A Heroic Poem’, and in it Roberts reaches for a radically new idiom capable of reflecting the experience of ordinary people, and particularly women, in total war. She achieves this partly by reformulating the structure of the classical epic, shifting the emphasis it places upon the individual male hero to focus instead on the experience of the people, and particularly the women, left behind. Homer’s epics, the urtexts of travel in the West, gender both travel and war as male, and define both of these in contradistinction to female stasis – the woman who waits at home. In *Gods with Stainless Ears*, however, Roberts collapses the binary model that associated the ‘home’ with stasis and the feminine, and the outside world with action and masculinity, conjuring a lived reality in which aerial bombing had transformed the ‘home front’ into the ‘frontline’ of war.

The first part of *Gods with Stainless Ears* offers a meditation on the mythical origins of Wales through the frame of the local landscape. It opens with a depiction of the ‘bay wild with birds’ (44), rendered strange and remote by the ruins that shadow it:

Today the same tide leans back, blue rinsing bay,

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*British Saints* in ‘Ancient Welsh and Latin MSS in the British Museum’, p. 70), which further blends the landscape depicted in her poem with the material text.

<sup>64</sup> John Wilkinson, *The Lyric Touch: Essays on the Poetry of Excess* (Cambridge: Salt, 2007), p. 179.

<sup>65</sup> Jeremy Hooker, *The Poetry of Place* (Manchester: Carcanet: 1982), p. 35.



With new beaks scissoring the air, a careaway  
 Cadence of sight and sound, poets and men  
 Rediscovering them. Saline mud  
 Siltering, wet with marshpinks, fresh as lime stud  
 [...]

This is Saint Cadoc's Day. All this Saint Cadoc's  
 Estuary: and that bell tolling, Abbey paddock.  
 Sunk. – Sad as ancient monument of stone.  
 Trees veil, exhale cyprine shade, widowing  
 Homeric hills, green pinnacles of bone (I, ll. 1-5, 11-15).

Here, the ancient history of Wales is brought to the surface by the 'siltering' waters of the bay; the legend of St Cadoc, the fifth-century Abbot of Llancarvan, exists as a sediment within the present time: 'This is Saint Cadoc's Day', and the present place: 'Abbey paddock./Sunk.'<sup>66</sup> The tolling bells, which are mimicked by the incantatory rhythm and repetition of the first two lines, provide a form of rhymical connection with a distant past. Like Ezra Pound's *Midi*, west Wales emerges at the very beginning of Roberts's as a space of what Peter Nicholls terms 'intermingled temporalities' and 'visionary locations', thus anticipating and setting the scene for the visual/visionary narrative that is to ensue.<sup>67</sup> It is also a site of new creation, as suggested by the dynamic image of 'new beaks scissoring the air', as if cutting new cloth.

While the 'Homeric Hills' of Roberts's coastal scene can be seen to affirm Roberts's intereraction with the *Odyssey* and *Aeneid*, she expands upon the reference in her notes by citing an extract from Gerald of Wales' *Itinerary through Wales* (1180):

Maenor Pyrr...that is, Mansions of Pyrrhus, who also possessed the Island of Chaldey, which the Welsh call Inys Pyrr, or the Island of Pyrrhus...distant about three miles from Pembroch (71).

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<sup>66</sup> St Cadoc's church in Llancarvan, Vale of Glamorgan is built on the site of a 7<sup>th</sup> century monastery. In 2007, elaborate fifteenth-century wall paintings were discovered under the limewash on the church walls – a fitting testimony to Roberts's archaeological imaginary.

<sup>67</sup> Peter Nicholls, 'Pound's Places', in *Locations of Literary Modernism: Region and Nation in British and American Modernist Poetry*, ed. by Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 159-177 (pp. 162-170).

Caldey Island, Gerald's *Inys Pyrr*, is a small island lying three miles away from Tenby, on the south-west coast of Wales. One of the holy islands of Celtic Christianity, its recorded history stretches back 1500 years, and is to this day the site of a Cistercian monastery.

Roberts was compelled by what she called the 'island enigma',<sup>68</sup> and she would have been interested by Caldey, both as a sacred site, and as a locus of living history, connecting Wales's present with its medieval Christian past.<sup>69</sup>

Nigel Wheale has observed that Gerald's reference also pertains to Pyrrhus Neoptolemus, the warrior son of Achilles.<sup>70</sup> Roberts suggests in relation to this that

There are historians who believe the Trojans came and settled on this coast. In years to come archaeologists may discover both the Temples and City as Sir Arthur Evans and Schlieman discovered Knossos and Troy – by studying the legends in the locality.

In this way, Roberts gestures to the originary myth – promoted by writer Geoffrey of Monmouth – that claimed that the Welsh were descended from the line of Aeneas of Troy, via Brutus: indeed, her 'Homeric hills' transplant the Mediterranean to Wales.<sup>71</sup> *Gods with Stainless Ears* frequently alludes to the ways in which history and imagination coalesce to ensure the survival of a nation – and particularly Wales.<sup>72</sup> Gerald of Wales's *Itinerary Through Wales* appears to have offered a kind of sourcebook for the poem, for he is cited as an influence or source of information on three different occasions in Roberts's notes.<sup>73</sup> It might be suggested that Roberts looks to Gerald's *Itinerary through Wales* in her effort to

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<sup>68</sup> Lynette Roberts, 'Letter to Robert Graves', 18 January 1948, in *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, p. 186. In the same letter, Roberts told Graves that 'I have never written so freely as when I stayed in Madeira. I think it is the sun, perhaps partly v. partly the wine, – & detachment from all other countries & culture.'

<sup>69</sup> Interestingly, Caldey is very close to Manorbier, the location that Woolf visited in 1904. Woolf's 'The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn', written two years after her visit to Manorbier, alludes to another Celtic monastic site – Carn Brea in Cornwall, a Neolithic granite outcrop and site of a thirteenth-century chapel, which is thought to have been the residence of monks. Just as Carn Brea also housed the earliest navigational beacon in Cornwall, mentioned in a record of 1396, so Caldey also houses a lighthouse, built in 1828.

<sup>70</sup> Wheale, 'Legend and Form in the 1940s', p. 10.

<sup>71</sup> Wood, p. 96.

<sup>72</sup> As Prys Morgan suggests, 'in the case of Wales, a people whose very existence has been precarious for centuries, it is hard to see how they would have survived at all without this elaborate structure of [myth and legend]'. Morgan, 'Keeping the Legends Alive', p. 40.

<sup>73</sup> Lynette Roberts, Notes to *Gods with Stainless Ears*, in *Collected Poems*, ed. by Patrick McGuinness, pp. 71-72.

construct a new cultural text that, crossing the divide between poetry, history, and myth, remakes all of these.

The idyllic opening scene of *Gods with Stainless Ears* is markedly visual and ekphrastic, as Nigel Wheale observes,<sup>74</sup> echoing contemporary Neo-Romantic landscape portraits such as John Craxton's 'Welsh Estuary Foreshore' (1943).<sup>75</sup> While Craxton's painting conjures an abundant natural landscape, it is also inspired by Picasso's *La femme qui pleure* (Weeping Woman), which affords it a subtext of sadness, and Roberts's peaceful pastoral scene is similarly shadowed by a sense of loss and suffering.<sup>76</sup> In Part I, The staccato syntax and punctuation of the first three lines of the third stanza ('All this Saint Cadoc's/ Estuary: and that bell tolling, Abbey paddock./Sunk. – Sad as ancient monument of stone. '), reinforces a pervasive sense of nostalgia: the full stop and dash after the verb 'sunk' disrupt the fluid rhythm of the previous clauses, causing a break that mirrors the irremediable gap between Wales's medieval 'civilisation' and the deserted landscape of the present. The 'widowing' hills and 'pinnacles of bone' also point forward, in an apocalyptic manner, to the end of Welsh civilisation – and civilisation itself.

In this uncanny landscape, trees come alive, 'vail[ing]' and 'exhal[ing] cyprine shade'. 'Vail' is an archaic term, in use during the Middle Ages, denoting 'to lower or cast down the eyes', or to lower a weapon; together with its homonym, 'veil', it accentuates the theme of mourning, while suggesting that the landscape and its past are veiled, remaining in some ways incomprehensible and inaccessible to the observing eye.<sup>77</sup> Part I yields another dream-like vision of moving trees:

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<sup>74</sup> Nigel Wheale, 'Beyond the Trauma Stratus: Lynette Roberts's *Gods with Stainless Ears* and the Post-War Cultural Landscape', *Welsh Writing in English* 3 (1994), 98-117 (p. 103).

<sup>75</sup> John Craxton, *Welsh Estuary Foreshore*, 1943, oil on burlap, 112.30 x 180.30 cm <[https://www.nationalgalleries.org/object/GMA\\_1257](https://www.nationalgalleries.org/object/GMA_1257) > [accessed 20 May 2016]. Although it invokes a pastoral idiom with its natural imagery, 'Welsh Estuary Foreshore' is a cubist composition, evocative of Picasso.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Laura Wainwright has similarly called attention to the 'funereal mood' of this part of Roberts's poem (p. 87).

[...] John Roberts covered with ligustrum,  
Always sanitary and discreet, rows to and fro from  
Bell house to fennel, floating quietly on the tide (I, ll. 28-30).

John Roberts was the local coracleman at Llanybri, and in her diary and short story 'Fisherman' (1944), Roberts emphasises the heroic status attributed to him for his navigational skills and important role in ferrying villagers cross the estuary to Laugharne. Here he is transformed, as Patrick McGuinness observes, into a mythical boatman, gesturing to Charon, the boatman of the Styx, a figure who mediates between the world of the living and the dead.<sup>78</sup> Both hero and folkloric 'green man', he is adorned with ligustrum, which, as Roberts tells us in her notes, is the botanical name for privet, 'one of the sacred trees mentioned in Taliesin's Battle of the Trees' (sic; 71). These allusions convert the 'pastoral' scene of the poem's opening into a battlefield, or at least shows the latter as the hidden face of the former, signalling the presence of violence and conflict somewhere just off-stage. Patrick McGuinness observes that in Roberts' poetry, 'the home front is not a refuge so much as a screen onto which the drama of war is projected and scattered, real but estranged, intangible but touching all aspects of life', and in *Gods with Stainless Ears*, Roberts can be seen to convey the simultaneous presence and absence of modern warfare through condensed, dream-like images derived from premodern folklore and history.<sup>79</sup>

Yet if the poem contains intimations of death, it is equally concerned with birth and rebirth. John Roberts's association with the figure of Taliesin takes the poem back to the birth of the fifth-century poet, and by extension, the birth of Welsh culture. A Brythonic poet of the period following the departure of the Romans, Taliesin is conventionally identified with

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<sup>78</sup> McGuinness, *Collected Poems*, p. xxix.

<sup>79</sup> McGuinness, *Collected Poems*, p. xxii. As Nigel Wheale observes, the 'Pyrrhus' of the 'Homeric hills' is in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* associated with 'a type of pitiless cruelty' for slaughtering King Priam ('Lynette Roberts: Legend and Form', p. 10). The subtext provided by the allusion to Homer and Gerald of Wales's 'Inys Pyrr' may point, therefore, to a parallel reality of barbarism and violence in existence at the same time as the peaceful track-shot of the bay; alluding darkly to a victory gained at too high a cost to both sides, it provides another example of an 'elsewhere' intruding within the 'here' of local place.

the origins of the Welsh language poetic tradition.<sup>80</sup> He lingers on the interstice between history and myth: no records of his life exist beyond his poetry, and his life has been subject to many legendary re-writings. Through his association with Taliesin, the mythic John Roberts offers a nourishing link between Wales's present and its medieval past, just as John Roberts the man connects the villages dotted along the west Wales coast.

### **Re-mapping the landscape**

Throughout Roberts's poetry and prose, the act of orientation within the landscape is shown to be essential, not only to the writing of poetry, but also to survival itself. Roberts's desire to mark her own co-ordinates can be seen as a response to a wartime context which, for her as for many others, was defined by a sense of confusion in the face of psychological trauma and physical displacement.<sup>81</sup> In her poem 'The Circle of C', the speaker attempts to read the cryptic signs embedded in the landscape of Cwmcelyn for a 'way' out of her distress and disorientation, but to no avail:

I walk and cinder bats riddle my cloak  
I walk to Cwmcelyn ask prophets the way.

'There is no way they cried crouched on the hoarstone rock  
And the Dogs of Annwn roared louder than of late.'

'Red fever will fall with the maytide blossom  
Fever as red as your cloak. Woe to all men.  
Food-ties will mellow in the bromine season  
Then willowed peace may be brought.' (ll.1-8)

Roberts loved textiles, and both she and Alun Lewis recall her tendency to wear a red cloak.<sup>82</sup>

In this poem, the cinders that 'riddle' the speaker's cloak turn it into a kind of mysterious map, that, inscribed with cryptic signs, merges self and landscape.<sup>83</sup> Edward Blunden writes

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<sup>80</sup> Emyr Humphreys, *The Taliesin Tradition* (Bridgend: Seren, 2002).

<sup>81</sup> In the preface to *Gods with Stainless Ears*, for example, Roberts explains that the poem responds to 'a period of muddled and intense thought which arose out of the first years of conflict' (p. 43).

<sup>82</sup> Alun Lewis wrote to his parents that Roberts was 'a queer girl, very gifted, wears a red cloak and is unaccountable'. Quoted in Pikoulis, 'Lynette Roberts and Alun Lewis', p. 14.

<sup>83</sup> Laura Wainwright notes in relation to 'The Circle of C' that 'to "riddle" can also mean "to talk in riddles",

that ‘among us we must undoubtedly, as the reward of so much various, trained and precise observing, acquire a sense of England capable of directing us fairly and fortunately’, and Roberts’s poem appears to enact a similar search for direction.<sup>84</sup> However, the speaker’s avenue of escape is barred: the prophets that emerge from the landscape refuse to reveal a way out of her situation, frustrating her with cryptic utterances that meld the prophesies of the medieval ‘Matter of Britain’ with the cadences of BBC weather predictions and military reports. This sceptical modern twist on the medieval tradition of prophetic revelation acts to satirize the propagandistic and military rhetoric that saturated the airwaves at the time. The psychological confusion and disillusionment in authority reflected in the ‘mad’ discourse of the prophets can be seen to reflect the experience of what Roberts in *Gods* terms ‘the pilotless [a]ge’ (II. ll.11-12). But the prophet’s antagonistic appearance also conjures, perhaps, Roberts’s sense of frustration at being ‘shut away’ from national culture by its patriarchal guardians.<sup>85</sup> From this perspective, the prophet’s refusal to allow the speaker passage mirrors the episode in *A Room of One’s Own* when the female narrator is told to get off the grass by a beadle of an Oxbridge college:

I found myself walking with extreme rapidity across a grass plot. Instantly a man's figure rose to intercept me. Nor did I at first understand that the gesticulations of a curious-looking object, in a cut-away coat and evening shirt, were aimed at me. His face expressed horror and indignation. Instinct rather than reason came to my help, he was a Beadle; I was a woman. This was the turf; there was the path.<sup>86</sup>

In Roberts as in Woolf’s work, the act of wandering away from the path is closely associated with the woman writer’s entry into the national ‘world of words’. In a wider sense, ‘The Circle of C’ may also be seen to critique the alienating effects of the language of the law, and

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suggesting that the Welsh environment is somehow conspiring to bemuse and exclude her’. ‘New Territories in Modernism’, p. 71.

<sup>84</sup> Blunden, p. 161.

<sup>85</sup> As I consider in more detail in Chapter 6, Roberts expressed frustration to Robert Graves at ‘the barrier all those people of authority put up’ to people trying to access historical archives (‘Letter to Robert Graves’, 7 May 1944, in *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, p. 176).

<sup>86</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, p. 6.

indeed, the Logos itself. In her correspondence with Graves, Roberts reveals the difficulty she has encountered in reading the journal *Epilogue*: ‘This isolation of words from the human and emotional element of man, *for me*, only conjures one thing – the Law – solicitors – & their fearful cryptic world’.<sup>87</sup> By reframing the ‘fearful cryptic world’ of modern technocracy within the non-rational, popular medieval narrative of prophesy, Roberts acts to restore them to a ‘human and emotional’ context, thereby shifting and undermining their power.

As Mae Henderson suggests, ‘borderland inhabitants are always considered transgressors and aliens’, and ‘Circle of C’ can be seen to put into play the double meaning of transgression – to ‘step across’ or ‘trespass’.<sup>88</sup> The speaker’s journey into the hinterland/borderlands of Llanybri reflects the exile’s drive to ‘push one’s work as far as one can go: to the borderlines, where one never stops walking on the edges.’<sup>89</sup> As George Steiner observes, the act of trespass involves ‘pressing for the unpleasant questions...the taboo questions’ that threaten cultural authority.<sup>90</sup> Trespassing ever further in the ‘borderlands’, the implicitly female speaker of Roberts’s poem risks becoming ‘wing felled and bogged’. But it is Rosie, a real-life friend of Roberts’s from Llanybri, who provides a ‘light’ for navigating this terrain: the speaker tells how she ‘Heard Rosie say lace curtained in clogs/I’ve put a Yule log on your grate.’(ll.15-18). While the ‘Circle of C’ can be seen to dramatise the woman writer’s exclusion from the ‘inner culture’ of patriarchal society, the speaker’s cyclical return home at the end of the poem proposes another kind of circle, enclosed yet open, like the letter ‘C’: the female-oriented realm of the village community, anchored by the voice of Rosie.

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<sup>87</sup> Roberts, ‘Letter to Robert Graves’, January 26 1944 [wrongly dated on original], in *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, p. 175.

<sup>88</sup> Mae Henderson, p. 2.

<sup>89</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, quoted in Henderson, p. 1.

<sup>90</sup> George Steiner, ‘The Responsibility of Intellectuals: a Discussion’, *Salmagundi*, 70-71 (1986), 194. Trespassing and transgression are recurrent themes in Roberts’s writing. One of her uncollected poems is entitled ‘Transgression’ (1948), and offers an ironical feminist re-writing of the Genesis myth (p. 84).

For Patrick McGuinness, the poem's juxtaposition of a 'mysterious prophetic mode' with the ordinary, domestic world means that 'life is experienced as a kind of doubleness, unfolding in a mythic-domestic continuum.'<sup>91</sup> This 'lived doubleness' can be seen to reflect the 'double consciousness' of the exile, who, in Mae Henderson's words, 'refuse[s] to occupy a single territory'.<sup>92</sup> But it also has to do with Roberts's transgression of generic categories. Like fellow 'Romantic Modern' Sylvia Townsend Warner, she rescues archaic ('exiled') forms from their 'genre limbo' and combines the homely with the strange in order to transform 'the fantastic into a kind of surrealism', in Jane Marcus's formulation.<sup>93</sup> Roberts's 'countercanonical' use of medieval Welsh literature and folklore thus creates an effect of disorientation that reflects the experience of exile. As in the work of Townsend Warner and Jean Rhys, the 'Circle of C' promises, but ultimately refuses to provide, satisfying reassurance to the reader, leaving her/him in a kind of limbo. The revolutionary implications of this technique are emphasised by Marcus, who suggests that by destabilizing genre, the woman writer in exile 'destabilizes gender, nation, community and order, language and history'.<sup>94</sup>

Locations, and the act of locating a place or person, are afforded great importance in *Gods with Stainless Ears*. In Part II, the speaker's coordinates are precisely laid out, drawing on the language of cartography and military positioning:

Under tincture of Myddfai Hills, west of  
Bristol glass, gold with bracken dust and black

Cattle notes and all chemical paradox:  
XEBO 7011 camouflaged in naval oilskin  
In all the gorgeous shades of Hades –  
By seiriol cat with Greenfield eyes.

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<sup>91</sup> McGuinness, p. xxiv.

<sup>92</sup> Henderson, p. 2; the concept of 'double consciousness' is W.E.B. Dubois's.

<sup>93</sup> Marcus, p. 285. In Roberts's work, the 'surrealism' of the woman writer 'in exile' shades into the 'surregionalism' attributed by Chris Wigginton to fellow Welsh modernist Dylan Thomas. See Chris Wigginton, 'Gothic Modernism and Surrealism in the Writing of Dylan Thomas', in *Dylan Thomas: New Casebook*, ed. by John Goodby and Chris Wigginton (London: Palgrave, 2001), pp 85-105.

<sup>94</sup> Marcus, 'Alibis and Legends', p. 286.



By kitchen rilled with distemper and grass (II, ll. 59-65).

Roberts frequently connects the cat to ‘other’ spaces, like the sea or the jungle; Part II of *Gods with Stainless Ears* evokes ‘seafield pools shivering/ With watercats’ (ll.15-16), while in Part III she connects the image of the ‘rhizome cat’ (l. 55) to the Welsh undergrowth and the jungle.<sup>95</sup> As in ‘The Circle of C’, the ‘seiriol cat with Greenfield eyes’ conflates a domestic image with a mythic/medieval one, for in her notes Roberts connects the image to the legend of Seiriol Wyn, summarizing this at some length:

[...] two monks that met at the well of Clorach, Llandyfrydog. Cybi had the morning sun in his face as he approached the well, so his face darkened; while Seiriol, coming from the other direction, had the sun on his back...and was pale, always. *Seiriol Wyn*, Seiriol the white, or pale. Cybi Felyn, Cybi the yellow, or sunburnt. (74)

For Roberts, names and poetic language are, like the landscape, inscribed with ancient narratives and journeys. The intertextual reference to the legend of Seiriol alludes, perhaps, to the meeting of different cultures and ethnicities in both ancient and modern-day Wales; placed within a modernist context, it is also suggestive of the meeting of two halves of the self.<sup>96</sup> Throughout her work, Roberts strives to uncover the forgotten medieval journeys that have shaped or ‘written’ the territory in the past. She weaves together fragments of medieval narrative and history in order to create new, mythical maps of Wales: her recourse to premodern legend can be explained by the idea that, for the women writer ‘in exile’, ‘the map or chart (fabula) always needs a legend that explains its relation to the real world’.<sup>97</sup> This imaginary cartography reformulates the relationship between the female subject, landscape, and history: challenging the empirical, ‘ideological geography’ of colonialism,<sup>98</sup> it enacts

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<sup>95</sup> She explains that ‘I used rhizome because it is an underground root just as this cat is of an underground root...there is also something about the jungle in the sound and spelling of rhizome’ (p. 76).

<sup>96</sup> The meeting of Seiriol and Cybi can be connected to the theme of pilgrimage, for St. Seiriol’s Well in Penmon on Anglesey was an historical site of pilgrimage and is now a tourist site, protected by *Cadw*.

<sup>97</sup> Marcus, ‘Alibis and Legends’, p. 272.

<sup>98</sup> As Damian Walford Davies notes, maps can appear ‘both as an imprisoning “spatial matrix” [...] and as sites of counter hegemonic “new vistas”’ (p. 4).

what Marcus terms '[a] female appropriation of new distance', lending space and visibility to 'the extraterritorial space[s] around the edges' of Welsh culture.<sup>99</sup>

As exemplified by the allusion to the legend of Cybi and Seiriol, Roberts's new admixture of history and myth acts to re-vision the medieval past as a culture of dynamic 'travel encounters'. Her reconceptualisation of Wales as an historical meeting-place of people and cultures resonates with D. Emily Hicks's definition of the 'border culture' as 'a culture that articulates borders between widely disparate traditions'.<sup>100</sup> For Tony Conran, '[n]owadays anywhere in Wales is frontier country'.<sup>101</sup> He maintains that Welsh Writing in English is the product of three different frontiers: the frontier between England's culture and that of the Welsh *buchedd*; the frontier between two 'civilizations', the Welsh and the English, and the frontier between two different languages.<sup>102</sup> Roberts, herself a colonial 'border writer', appears to have identified deeply with what she recognised as Wales's 'border culture'.<sup>103</sup> Moreover, the liminal status afforded to Wales (and Welsh writing in English) as a site of frontiers is associated in her poetry with a kind of productive instability that allows the past to irrupt within the present, and the visionary to emerge within the fabric of the mundane. An epigraph to *Gods with Stainless Ears* includes an inscription in Welsh from 'Cattwg the Wise', or St. Cadoc:

Brân a gant chwedl ar uwchder  
Derwen uwch deuffrwd aber,  
Trech deall na grymusder

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<sup>99</sup> Marcus, 'Alibis and Legends', pp. 275-270.

<sup>100</sup> D. Emily Hicks, *Border Writing: The Multidimensional Text* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. xxiv.

<sup>101</sup> Conran, *Frontiers*, p. vii.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> Writing in her diary on June 1940, she notes that she finds Welsh people 'on the whole, ambivalent. The Irish also possess this dual quality. They say one thing one moment and at another moment something else, yet they mean both. Then which do they mean? It's just that they have two visions instead of one' (*D*, 68-9). Theorists such as Homi K. Bhabha have subsequently recognised this 'double vision' as characteristic of postcolonial cultures. It is significant that the qualities that Roberts reads into an externalised 'Welsh people' – doubleness and ambivalence – are the same that inform her own writing. See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 137, and Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 36.

A crow sang a fable on the top  
Of an oak, above the junction of two rivers.  
Understanding is better than strength. (42)

Just as the ‘junction of two rivers’ gives rise to song, and with it poetry and knowledge, so the meeting of cultures is shown to give rise to new poetic forms.

The sea haunts the work of Lynette Roberts. Her poetry and prose almost always suggests the presence of the sea, even if it is not mentioned directly.<sup>104</sup> Roberts frequently merges the sea and the land, rendering the land as a space of flux and the sea as a solid passageway. She studied Old English poetry, and in *Gods with Stainless Ears*, references to ‘the whaleback of the sea’ (III, l. 34) and the ‘water-rail of tides’ (II, l. 9) echo the figurative Anglo-Saxon ‘word picture’ of ‘whale-road’ for sea.<sup>105</sup> Similarly, in her short story ‘Fisherman’, she recounts that John Roberts the coracleman crossed ‘the River Tâf, like St. Cadoc, through all its shifting sands and quagmires, without once entering his boat’, an image that conjures Moses parting the waters to allow his people to progress to a new land.<sup>106</sup>

In her poem ‘Ecliptic Blue’, Roberts draws on the Anglo-Saxon form of the elegy in order to present the sea, not as the feminized crucible of fate and destruction typical of Classical and Romantic poetry, but as a pathway toward mental ‘flight’ and consolation:

For sea gives more than it takes and spreads  
No stain of death on life of man, but treads  
The dead for further flight, as sea-mews know,  
As sea-mews go (ll.9-12).

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<sup>104</sup> This tendency may reflect the geography of Llanybri: though it is very close to the sea, it is situated in a gentle hollow, which means that the sea itself is not easily visible.

<sup>105</sup> Roberts’s knowledge of Anglo-Saxon poetry, at least in translation, is evidenced by her admission in a letter to Robert Graves that the rhythm and syntax of her poem ‘Orarium’ were influenced by ‘a reading of Anglo-Saxon writings which I had been studying the previous week in order to try & find out what *were* the first Saxon rhythms to be used’ (Roberts, ‘Letter to Robert Graves’, 18 December 1944, in *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, p. 181).

<sup>106</sup> Lynette Roberts, ‘Fisherman’, in *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, ed. by Patrick McGuinness, pp. 104-106 (p. 105).

Representations of Wales as a submerged or even drowned civilisation form a strand that threads throughout Roberts's work. Her poem 'Fifth of the Strata' provides an apocalyptic account of the sea's encroachment on Wales:

And the sea will insist  
Persuade a path to follow,  
Longs eagerly to cover  
The green valley pastures:  
To flow forward along  
The sunken ribbed coomb  
And dry river-bed... endlessly (ll.1-7).

This 'invasion' of Wales could be seen to reflect the constant wartime threat of the invasion of domestic space by foreign armies. However, the submersion of Wales in water is portrayed in positive, even utopian terms. The spacious rhythm and ellipsis convey the sense of luxuriously expanding space, an effect consolidated by the choice of diction in 'cover', 'flow along', and 'endlessly'. The image of the submersion of the homeland might be seen to evoke the exile's loss of home, and of memory of home. It may also reflect Roberts's own longing for 'boundlessness' or even 'homelessness', a particular kind of nostalgia that Gardiner associates with the colonial woman writer in exile.<sup>107</sup> In Virginia Woolf's 'The Mark on the Wall' the speaker similarly projects herself into '[a] quiet spacious world' free of patriarchal control ('A world without professors or specialists or house-keepers with the profiles of policemen'), visualising this utopian world as an underwater space:

Yes, one could imagine a very pleasant world [...], a world which one could slice with one's thought as a fish slices the water with his fin, grazing the stems of the water-lilies, hanging suspended over the nests of white sea eggs... How peaceful it is down here, rooted in the centre of the world and gazing up through the grey waters, with their sudden gleams of light, and their reflections [...].<sup>108</sup>

Woolf's fantasy of 'water-lilies' and clifftop 'nests of white sea eggs' is reflected, perhaps, in the imagery used by Roberts to depict Wales's reduction to the tip of Snowdon:

To leave nothing of Wales

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<sup>107</sup> Kegan Gardiner, pp. 144-45.

<sup>108</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'The Mark on the Wall', in *A Haunted House: The Complete Shorter Fiction*, ed. by Susan Dick (London: Vintage, 2003), pp. 77-83 (pp. 81-2).

But white island shining  
The crest of Snowdon  
Glittering with dark wintry-ice (ll. 13-16).

The image stretches backward, to the ice age and the flood of Genesis, and forward to a landscape that resembles the glittering, post-atomic vista imagined in the final part of *Gods with Stainless Ears*. It resonates, too, with the ‘beautiful ice-cold death images’ that accompanied what Alun Lewis described as an experience of a ‘strange and disturbing spiritual excitement’ that precipitated his composition of the poem ‘Peace’.<sup>109</sup> Fittingly, the poem ends with a dream-like vision in which a Welsh ‘home’ is constructed anew in the distant future of geological time:

[...] other and better banks  
Dry from ocean beds,  
[...]  
Will arise for our freedom  
For *our* feet to follow  
And this shall be always,  
As it is *never* (17, ll. 25-27, ll. 29-32).

Drawing on the biblical narrative of the Promised Land, Roberts presents the nation as a potentiality, always about to come into being.

The coracle is an important motif, not only in *Gods with Stainless Ears* but throughout her work, providing a focus for meditations on the relationship between ancient past and modern present, the status of Welsh craft and culture, and the nature of time.

Roberts’s essay ‘Coracles of the Towy’, first published in *The Field* in 1945, explores the coracle as a historical, practical, and aesthetic object. Blending history and myth, she presents the coracle as a starting-point of culture:

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<sup>109</sup> Alun Lewis, ‘Letter to John Petts’, April 1941, quoted in Pikoulis, ‘Lynette Roberts and Alun Lewis’, p. 23. Lewis told Petts that ‘I wrote a poem last Monday which so completely took possession of me that I’ve been nothing of the images which those words, repeating themselves day and night in my mind, evoked...I could see high upland pastures with white milky waters falling in foam-fans over the green rocks. And those pastures and those waters falling have been everything.’ (Quoted in Pikoulis, p. 23).

Perhaps the first recording of this craft was in ancient Jewish history, when Jochebed took ‘an ark of bulrushes, and daubed it with slime and with pitch...and laid it in the flags by the river’s brink’.<sup>110</sup>

The myth of Moses soon merges into that of Taliesin:

that he was cast into the sea in a bag of hide and left to drift until he reached the River Dyfi, seems reasonable enough, when we read that ‘three missionaries, in 878, sailed from Ireland to Cornwall in a coracle made of only two skins and a half’ (133).

The linear trajectory conventionally depicted by foundational nationalist narratives is replaced by drifting, meandering movement and a passive subjection to chance. The story of Moses and Jochebed gestures to the origins of women’s craft, and, in an associated sense, the coracle as cradle or womb, a space for the nurturance and preservation of life – ideas that underpin Roberts’s Arts and Crafts aesthetics, as I show in more detail in Chapter 4. Roberts’ essay is based on a (supposedly real-life) observation of the coracle in use on the river, and ends with a depiction of the disappearance of the coraclemen downriver:

‘Funny if we caught one straight away,’ one of them said, as they levelled up with each other. And, with the net subsiding into position, they travelled downstream rapidly out of sight (135).

This disappearance of the coracles downriver is suggestive both of the passage of time and the imminent destruction of Welsh craft and the culture with which it is entwined. Roberts’s coracle suggests that the liminal, fragile status of Welsh culture is what lends it mobility, and through mobility, endurance:

Perhaps, soon, a new coracle: lighter and tougher than the pair now floating downstream, one nearer to that fashioned by Jochebed, a coracle covered with synthetic textile made from the cellulose of reeds, and machine-sprayed with ICI plastics. (135-136)

Roberts represents the coracle as a living, almost breathing artefact: connecting it to a fable cited by Gerald of Wales describing a mythical people who ‘carry their horses home again on their shoulders’ (133), she emphasises the fusion of the coracle – as an ‘old’ technology –

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<sup>110</sup> Lynette Roberts, ‘Coracles of the Towy’, in *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, ed. by Patrick McGuinness (Manchester: Carcanet, 2008), pp. 133-138 (p. 133). All references are to this edition and henceforth will be given parenthetically in the text.

with the body of the coracleman. Rather than presenting the coracle as a relic of the past, she revives and makes it relevant for the present with new material and technologies. Patrick McGuinness presents her revival of the coracle as analogous to her modernist re-working of mythology: ‘Just as her poems are machine-age reworkings of old myths, so she imagines the venerable coracle as all the better for being reinvigorated with new material’.<sup>111</sup> The coracle is made to represent a travelling tradition that, like the rivers and tides on which the coracle floats, never stands still, but is constantly updated to fit the everyday experience of contemporary women and men. The emergence of the new coracle on the horizon just as the old one disappears downstream suggests a cyclical, rather than a linear conception of time in which past, present, and future feed into and nourish each other. McGuinness offers the Celtic knot as a figure for Roberts’s interlacing of past, present and future, a connection substantiated by a contemporary interest in the aesthetics of archaic British art.<sup>112</sup> Admiring the ‘interlacing patterns’ found on early medieval crosses, John Piper quotes Wilhelm Worringer to suggest that they represent ‘the godhead as a “continuous, centreless activity”’, adding that they signify ‘the continuity of life in a dangerous world’.<sup>113</sup>

Roberts often expresses an identification with the Jewish people. In *Gods with Stainless Ears*, the ‘semitic wings’ (I, l. 214) of a fighter aircraft gestures to the Jewish identity of the pilot, and in her gloss to the image, she writes that ‘not enough is said of the active part Jews took in this war. It is for this reason and no other, that I refer to a plane piloted by Jews’ (73). Jane Marcus has made an explicit connection between Jewishness and the ‘exile’ of gender, arguing that the ‘self-conscious woman writer [...] equat[es] exile by gender with the internationalism usually equated with Jews’.<sup>114</sup> Moreover, Roberts’s frequent

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<sup>111</sup> McGuinness, *Diaries, Letters, and Recollections*, p. xiii.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, *Collected Poems*, p. xxxvi.

<sup>113</sup> Piper, ‘England’s Early Sculptors’, p. 150.

<sup>114</sup> Marcus, ‘Alibis and Legends’, p. 273.

linkage of Jewish figures to Welsh culture can be seen as part of a wider cultural trend: Katie Gramich, among others, has observed that Welsh writing in English of the first half of the twentieth century often alludes to a linguistic and cultural ‘Hebrew-Welsh coupling’.<sup>115</sup> As Tony Conran argues, exile and loss form an essential part of Wales’s past and self-identity – a sense of cultural alienation that is further compounded for the Welsh subject who, like Roberts, does not know her or his own tongue.<sup>116</sup>

### **The visionary flight of the aeroplane**

Like the land, the sea is often presented as a place of crossings in Roberts’s poetry – of waters, of currents, of ships. The image of meeting waters in Cadoc’s ‘junction of two rivers’ in the epigraph to *Gods with Stainless Ears* is echoed in the ‘euripus wolds’ (I, 1.222) into which the fighter aircraft of the ‘semitic wings’ crashes at the end of Part I of *Gods*; as Nigel Wheale observes, this makes reference to a strait in the Aegean sea famed for its violent cross-currents in classical times.<sup>117</sup> Like Jean Rhys in her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Roberts associates the cross-currents of the sea with destruction, creativity, and ultimately, the elusive self-identity of the colonial woman writer.

Significantly, as Gillian Beer observes, another form of crossing loomed large in the popular consciousness in Britain during World War II: that of the aircraft.<sup>118</sup> The flight of the aeroplane challenged Britain’s sense of its own insularity and separateness as an island, its overhead drone signalling a new geography in which its boundaries with the European

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<sup>115</sup> See Katie Gramich, *Twentieth Century Women’s Writing in Wales: Land, Gender, Belonging* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), p. 104-105. See also Jasmine Donahaye, *Whose People? Wales, Israel, Palestine* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012).

<sup>116</sup> Conran, *Frontiers*, p. 72.

<sup>117</sup> Wheale, p. 12.

<sup>118</sup> Gillian Beer, ‘The Island and the Aeroplane: The Case of Virginia Woolf’, in *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 265-290. As Beer notes, the aircraft itself ‘rapidly entered the repertoire of dream and symbols’ during the interwar years (p. 265).



continent became indistinct and porous.<sup>119</sup> Neo-Romantic artists seized on the aerial viewpoint of the aeroplane, fascinated by its capacity to offer a new perspective on the landscape. From the window of a plane, as Alexandra Harris contends, known landscapes became newly fluid and dynamic: an aerial view suggested for Gertrude Stein ‘the mingling lines of Picasso, coming and going, developing and destroying themselves’.<sup>120</sup> Furthermore, as Kitty Hauser demonstrates in her study of the interrelationship of photography and archaeology in the twentieth century, *Shadow Sites* (2007), the relatively new practice of aerial cartography revealed ‘the shadows of ancient settlements: secrets from the past that could only be seen from the sky’.<sup>121</sup> Roberts’s work reflects in poetic form the ‘marriage of futurist flight and ancient archaeology’ that Alexandra Harris observes in John Piper and Myfanwy Evan’s Neo-Romantic art journal, *Axis*.<sup>122</sup> For Roberts, flight offers a new vantage point, a means to attaining an x-ray like view that can enter into the sediments of space and time. As Patrick McGuinness notes, she makes frequent use of images of height (assumption, ascent, flight – the ‘vertical axis of poetry’) and depth (geological drilling and descent), and both groups of images are imbued with dynamic movement.<sup>123</sup> As I show in the final section that follows, technological, natural, and mythical tropes of flight come together in Roberts’s poetry in an expression of individual, visionary experience, while also pointing to contemporary anxieties surrounding surveillance and control.

In the futuristic final part of *Gods*, Roberts’s lovers – the ‘gunner’ and ‘his girl’ occupying the foreground of the poem’s narrative – ‘rise through the strata of the sky to seek

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., p. 266. Beer suggests that Woolf’s later writing ‘shares the new awareness of island-dwellers that their safe fortress is violable’ (p. 273), an idea that I apply to my investigation of Roberts’s representation of domestic space in Chapter 4.

<sup>120</sup> Harris, p. 26. Gertrude Stein, *Picasso* (1938; London: Batsford, 1946), p. 50.

<sup>121</sup> Kitty Hauser, *Shadow Sites: Photography, Archaeology and the British Landscape 1927-55* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 151-99; the words are Harris’s, pp 26-27.

<sup>122</sup> Harris, p. 29.

<sup>123</sup> McGuinness, *Collected Poems*, p. xx.

peace and solace from the sun' (64). The apparition of birds, suspended in time and space, seems to announce the lovers' entry into a new, 'fourth dimensional state' (64):

[...] In such radium

Activity – white starlings – suspended  
On strings like Calder 'stills' – shivered  
Like morning stars in fresh open sky (V. ll. 65-68).

Roberts's notes attribute the image of the white starlings both to the myth of Branwen in the Mabinogi and to a real-life newspaper article ('there was a column in the *Western Mail* by an ornithologist saying that a white starling had been seen flying over Carmarthen' (CP, 78); the 'doubleness' that this implies highlights the starlings' position as mediators between different realms of experience or 'dimensions'. Birds appear to have formed part of Roberts's personal language and mythology.<sup>124</sup> Many of her poems make reference to birds, and her poem 'Displaced Persons', as Roberts herself suggests, likens the refugees of Europe 'to birds without winter food and dying of starvation' (D, 25). The gloss offered by Roberts to the myth of Branwen's starling carries similar resonances of exile and longing: 'The starling has appeared in Welsh mythology more than once: and was a 'dispatch rider' for Branwen when it flew and took her message from Ireland to Wales, so that she might be delivered of her unhappiness and *hiraeth* for Wales' (CP, 78). By voicing her suffering to her brother through the medium of a bird, Branwen broke out of the imprisonment imposed on her by her husband's family and by war. Drawing upon her story, Roberts uses the mythical image of the starling in order to meditate on the power of poetry (a similar vessel of communication) to liberate suppressed female voices.<sup>125</sup> The whiteness inherent to the name Branwen (literally 'white [or fair] crow') is echoed in the modern, futuristic images of whiteness and purity that

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<sup>124</sup> The majority of Roberts's published poems make significant use of avian imagery, including 'The Circle of C' (p. 7), 'Lamentation' (p. 8), 'Ecliptic Blue' (12), 'House of Commons' (p. 19), 'The Seasons' (pp. 21-22), and 'Royal Mail'; her collection *Poems* contains a sequence of poems named after birds ('Rhode Island Red', a breed of chicken [p. 12], 'Woodpecker' [p. 14], 'Curlew' [p. 15], 'Moorhen' [p. 16] and 'Seagulls' [p. 16]).

<sup>125</sup> I explore the theme of gendered voices further, as part of my discussion of Roberts's approach to language in Chapter 6.

define Roberts's postwar landscape, where 'prefabricated/Glass' and 'cubed ice' shine in the 'white/Electric sun' (V, ll.13, 28-29). Indeed, if her futuristic vista provides a space of freedom and transcendence for the female subject, it is also a self-consciously fabricated location: the starlings suspended 'On string like 'Calder "stills"' (V, ll. 66-67) gesture to the abstract animal mobiles of artist Alexander Calder, thereby holding in tension a sense of movement and stasis.

The lovers' journey through 'the strata of the sky' evokes the transformation and expansion of modern aerial space, acknowledging developments in physics as well as the burgeoning of air travel. Just as, in Part I, the air is 'planed' into 'Euclidian cubes' (V, l. 86), here the air offers up new dimensions for exploration. The lovers' trajectory has distinctively visionary elements: as in a dream vision, they gaze upon a kind of 'earthly paradise' in which the reality of the everyday world is aestheticised and heightened; passing through the 'trauma stratus' (65), they achieve a philosophical distance from the chaos raging below on earth.<sup>126</sup> Despite its dazzlingly futuristic materials and references, the final episode of *Gods with Stainless Ears* draws heavily on celestial modes of medieval travel. Nigel Wheale connects the journey through the sky in *Gods with Stainless Ears* to Troilus's flight to the heavens in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, when he dies and looks down on a war-torn world in a similarly peaceful way.<sup>127</sup> The 'sidereal eschatology' of *Troilus and Criseyde* is also evident

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<sup>126</sup> Dylan Thomas similarly informed Vernon Watkins in 1939 that he wanted a 'war-escaper' for Christmas, 'a sort of ladder, I think, attached to a balloon' (Dylan Thomas, *The Collected Letters of Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: Dent, 1985), p. 434.

<sup>127</sup> Wheale, 'Beyond the Trauma Stratus', p.104. Troilus's felicity on looking down on the earth is described thus:

And downe from thennes fast he gan avyse  
 This litel spot of erte that with the se  
 Embraced is, and fully gan despise  
 This wrecched world, and helde al vanite  
 To respecte of the pleyne felicite  
 That is in hevене above.

Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, V, ll. 1814-1819, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), p. 584.

in Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, on which Chaucer drew as a model of inspiration.

Accordingly, the lovers' journey of Part V also evokes the journey of Dante and Beatrice to heaven in the *Paradiso*, with the medieval depiction of the heavens as a series of concentric spheres found in Dante's text echoed in Roberts's own geometrical/geological image of the cosmos. The celestial nature of Roberts's strata is indicated by the presence of 'a multitude of birds' (an image suggestive of the flight of souls), and modern-day angels:

In Celestial Study to right and left lucid  
Eyes pay tribute, angel secretaries with  
Paper wings – and paper so scarce – dyed mauve-scarlet  
With chemical rings; speech blue behind aniline minds (V. ll. 97-100).

The journey of the *Paradiso* traces the soul's ascent to God, and culminates in Dante's arrival at the abode of God, a site that transcends material existence and the body. Although the divine trajectory in *Gods* appears to allow the lovers to separate themselves from the pain and anxiety of their physical existence on earth (the speaker passes 'Out of it. Out of it. To a ceiling and clarity/Of *Peace*' (V, ll. 46-47), their journey culminates not in the abode of God, but in the female speaker's own home. The lovers experience a moment of peaceful stasis, that, while appearing to take place beyond a physical universe which is in constant motion, is yet rooted in physical experience:

I contented in this fourth dimensional state  
Past through, him and the table, pursued  
  
My own work slightly *below* him. In  
Sandals and sunsuit lungs naked to the light,  
Sitting on chair of glass with no fixed frame  
Leaned to the swift machine threading over twill:  
'Singer's' perfect model scrolled with gold [...] (V, ll. 69-75)

However, just as she '[p]ast through' the table, so the speaker's Hollywood vision of domestic perfection is transitory, almost illusory: she is only 'passing through', and is compelled to fall back to the 'maimed cadaverous globe' (V, l. 122).

The journey through the strata in Part V of *Gods with Stainless Ears* dramatises Roberts's interest in pushing, testing, and reformulating boundaries and borderlines – of lived experience, of domestic space, and of art. In this, she reflects Trinh T. Minh-ha's conviction that '[o]ne has to push one's work as far as one can go: to the borderlines, where one never stops walking on the edges, incurring constantly the risk of falling off one side or the other side of the limit while undoing, redoing, modifying this limit'.<sup>128</sup> Re-imagining the borders and frames according to which identity is organized, the journey 'through the strata of the sky' offers up what Henderson terms a space of 'cultural limbo' in which the subject may 'pass through a place or period in which [she] experiences freedom from the constraints of normative or oppressive social structures'.<sup>129</sup> For Henderson, this move allows the writer to attain 'the cultural creativity and cultural authority to formulate new models, symbols and paradigms' – a moment reflected in Roberts's self-presentation, at the end of her poem as what McGuinness refers to as a 'machine-age Penelope' 'spinning' out new forms with her Singer sewing machine.<sup>130</sup>

John Pikoulis and Patrick McGuinness both situate the work of Roberts in relation to that of T.S. Eliot, with whom Roberts had a close working relationship.<sup>131</sup> Eliot edited Roberts's *Poems* and *Gods with Stainless Ears* on behalf of Faber & Faber; the writers corresponded over the publication of her poetry, and Roberts visited Eliot once in London in 1948.<sup>132</sup> It is likely, therefore, that Roberts's engagement with Dante was influenced by Eliot, who was an ardent champion of the Italian writer. In a 1929 essay, Eliot insists that 'there is no poet in any tongue – not even in Latin and Greek – who stands so firmly as a model for all

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<sup>128</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, quoted in Henderson, p. 1.

<sup>129</sup> Henderson, p. 5.

<sup>130</sup> McGuinness, *Collected Poems*, p. xxv.

<sup>131</sup> See McGuinness, *Collected Poems*, p. xvii, and John Pikoulis, 'The Poetry of the Second World War', in *British Poetry 1900-50: Aspects of Tradition*, ed. by Gary E. Day and Brian Docherty (London: Macmillan, 1995).

<sup>132</sup> See Lynette Roberts, 'Visit to T.S. Eliot', in *Lynette Roberts: Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, ed. by Patrick McGuinness (Manchester: Carcanet, 2008), pp. 149-53. Eliot was the godfather of her son, Prydain.

poets'.<sup>133</sup> He praises the *Divine Comedy* for its quality of being 'extremely easy to read', which for Eliot signals that 'genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood'.<sup>134</sup>

Twenty-two years later, in a statement that he wrote for the dustcover of *Gods with Stainless Ears*, Eliot makes similar claims for Roberts's work:

*Gods with Stainless Ears* is not an easy poem to grasp the meaning of. But it is astonishingly *readable*; having started it, we wanted to read to the end; and we found it had, even without the analytical 'argument' which the author has provided for each section, the quality of emotional communication, before it was understood.<sup>135</sup>

Eliot writes approvingly of Dante's 'visual imagination', which he attributes to the fact that 'he lived in an age in which men still saw visions'.<sup>136</sup> Citing the marginalization of the dream or vision in modern culture, Eliot's essay advocates the reinstatement of 'a more significant, interesting, and disciplined form of dreaming' as a means of refining and invigorating poetry in the modern world.<sup>137</sup> Roberts alludes to a similarly visual conception for her long poem in her preface to *Gods*, explaining in her preface to the poem that 'when I wrote this poem, the scenes and visions ran before me like a newsreel...the poem was written for filming, especially Part V' (43). Tony Conran's recollection of his own experience as a child at the time of the Second World War suggests a connection between aeroplane flight, newsreel, and vision:

I can remember that one of the real visionary experiences of being a child in wartime was the common newsreel shot of aircraft fighting high up, the earth and sky spinning around your head.<sup>138</sup>

In Part V of *Gods*, Roberts brings together aeroplane flight, the mobile images of cinema and newsreel, and the 'visionary imagination' of Dante in order to create a new, modernist visionary mode in which 'meaning' is subordinated to emotional 'communication'.

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<sup>133</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'Dante', in *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. by Frank Kermode (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), pp. 205-230 (p. 230).

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.

<sup>135</sup> Quoted in Pikoulis, 'The Poetry of the Second World War', p. 206.

<sup>136</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'Dante', p. 206.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> Tony Conran, *The Cost of Strangeness*, p. 189.

Read through the lens of Dante's influence, Roberts's white starlings allude to the episode of Paolo and Francesca, the lost lovers of the *Inferno*:

E come gli stornei ne portan l'ali,  
Nel freddo tempo, a schiera larga e piena,  
così quell' fiato gli spiriti mali  
(And as their wings bear along the starlings, at the cold season, in large full troop).<sup>139</sup>

Dante's *Divine Comedy* and modern film offer structures for exploring what I have already identified as Part V's central concerns – the expansion or reformulation of boundaries, and the exploration of new dimensions. Moreover, these concerns are conterminous with D. Emily Hicks's conception of the 'multidimensional' text. Hicks identifies this kind of text with 'border writing', 'the functional expression of the self-conscious attitude of a writer juxtaposed between multiple cultures'.<sup>140</sup> Border writers, she maintains, 'give readers the opportunity to practice multidimensional perception and nonsynchronous memory', specifying that '[b]y multidimensional perception I mean quite literally the ability to see not just from one side of a border, but from the other side as well'.<sup>141</sup> Eliot emphasises the 'multidimensional' quality of Dante's work, in contrast to that of the Victorians. While Tennyson's work 'has only two dimensions', 'Dante's sense has further depths'.<sup>142</sup> Dante can thus be seen to inform Roberts's attempt to move beyond the 'flat' surfaces associated with Victorian poetry by influential modernists such as Eliot and Woolf, and toward 'new dimensions' in poetry.

For Eliot, the last Canto of the *Paradiso* represented 'the highest point that poetry has ever reached or can reach'; and Part V of *Gods*, which occupies in spatial terms the 'highest point' in Roberts's poetry, can be seen to mirror this part of the *Divine Comedy* in

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<sup>139</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, V, ll. 40-42. English translation quoted by T.S. Eliot.

<sup>140</sup> Hicks, p. xxiii.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxiii.

<sup>142</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'Dante', p. 215.

particular.<sup>143</sup> The lovers' brief moment of domestic harmony, 'contented in this fourth dimensional state' (V, l. 69), can be seen to explore not only the dream of domestic bliss promoted by Hollywood and contemporary advertising, but also the state of beatitude that Eliot identifies as a central concern in Dante's poem. Just as the narrative of Dante's poem is structured, for Eliot, around 'states of feeling', so Roberts's poem narrates the experience of war not so much through events as emotional states.<sup>144</sup> Eliot suggests that Dante's achievement in the final canto of the *Paradiso* inheres in his capacity to '[make] the spiritual visible' through a masterful use of 'concrete' imagery, namely 'that imagery of light which is the form of certain types of mystical experience.'<sup>145</sup> Part V of *Gods* similarly uses 'concrete' imagery in order to 'make visible', and thus convey extraordinary experience in an easily graspable idiom: the speaker's ineffable state of beatitude is signalled through the physical images of 'Sandals and sunsuit lungs naked to the light' (V, l. 72) and 'Nails varnished with/Chanel shocking!' (V, l. 77-78). Furthermore, its concentration of catoptric and luminous imagery (evident, for example, in the references to a 'plate of ice' (V, l. 3), 'luminous dust' (V, l. 38), 'Catena shine round each cell of light' (V, l. 50) is suggestive, perhaps, not only of a utopian/dystopian postwar landscape, but also, of mystical experience.

Dante, then, may have influenced Roberts's use of clear, concrete visual images in order to make readers see, and thus, feel, a particular emotional state or condition. He may also have suggested a model for a vernacular poetry, a poetry expressed in the language of the people. Eliot insists that Dante's work emanated from a relatively united Europe, due, in part, to the bonds forged by a common religious culture, Christianity, and a common language, medieval Latin. According to Eliot, the proximity of fourteenth-century Florentine Italian to medieval Latin afforded Dante's work a 'universality' or 'internationalism' that

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., p. 216.

<sup>144</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'Dante', p. 228.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., p. 229.



transcended national boundaries.<sup>146</sup> Eliot's insistence on Dante's 'universality', his capacity to convey 'what men thought together', should be considered in view of a contemporary political reality defined by aggressive nationalism.<sup>147</sup> His account of Dante is reflected in Roberts's conception of the interdependence of the local and vernacular and the universal. Finally, Dante's influence may serve to illuminate Roberts's interposition of real people, historical personages, legendary figures and figures of ancient fiction in her work. As Eliot explains in reference to Dante's inclusion of Ulysses as a character in his poem: 'the real and the unreal are all representative of types of sin, suffering, fault, and merit, and all become of the same reality and contemporary'.<sup>148</sup> In accordance with this, Roberts transforms mythical and real figures alike through her poetry, allowing figures that sprang from human imagination and emotion the same reality as those existing in real life.

## Conclusion

Roberts saw the landscape of Carmarthenshire and west Wales as a space of liminality and double, even triple, vision. In her essay 'Simplicity of the Welsh Village', she claims that 'magnesium light' that 'alters the whole panorama of Wales' (DLR 130) is the result of three intersecting planes of light, refracted by the sea, the sun, and rain:

The rain, the continual downpour of rain, may also compensate us indirectly, by giving us that pure day which precedes it, which everyone in Wales must know. During those intervals the rain water is reflected back to us through a magnetic prism of light. The sea, which surrounds two-thirds of Wales, throws up another plane of light. And a third shaft of light reaches us at a fuller angle through the sun. Here, then, in Wales, we frequently get three concentrations of light, where normally most countries only have two.<sup>149</sup>

For Roberts, it is this three-dimensionality that makes Wales so attractive to painters. It also renders Wales as spiritual space, a location for new vision: '[t]he light magnifies, radiates

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., pp. 207-9.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., p. 209.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., p. 214.

<sup>149</sup> Lynette Roberts, 'Simplicity of the Welsh Village', in *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, ed. by Patrick McGuinness, p. 130. All references are to this edition and henceforth will be given parenthetically in the text.

truth and cleanses our dusty spirits'.<sup>150</sup> As I have shown, she draws upon medieval narratives of travel in her poetry in order to trace a mythical map that offers, in the words of Patrick McGuinness, 'a luminous guide to the contemporary'.<sup>151</sup> Using medieval culture and mythography as a starting point, she emphasises the emotional, aesthetic and imaginary qualities of place in order to draw up new, feminist cartographies of Wales.<sup>152</sup> This new cartography has to do, not only with the past, but also with the future. Replicating the sweeping aerial viewpoint of the angel or the aeroplane, she uses this expansive gaze in order to look beyond the confines of nationhood: as Gillian Beer observes, 'the patchwork continuity of an earth seen in this style undermines the concept of nationhood', doing away with 'centrality and very largely with borders'.<sup>153</sup>

Roberts's 'countercanonical' use of history and form reflects the experience of 'outsidership'.<sup>154</sup> Refusing reassurance to the reader and inviting her/him to inhabit several different worlds at once, she replays the experience of exile. Nonetheless, she also positions herself as an insider-outsider, a 'travelling native' opening out Wales to the wider world, revealing the otherness at the heart of the 'native'. The influence of twelfth-century travel writer Gerald of Wales also makes itself felt in Roberts's poetic inscriptions of the landscape. He, too, was 'of the border', his mixed Norman-Welsh heritage affording him a distanced gaze on his home culture, and his journeys, like those represented in Roberts's poetry, are non-teleological, full of digressions, diversions, and wonder.<sup>155</sup> Gerald's observation that '[I]f life here below lasts a brief moment and is always in a state of flux' resonates in Roberts's

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> McGuinness, *Collected Poems*, p. xxxvi.

<sup>152</sup> What Damian Walford Davies terms a map's 'emotive or aesthetic properties...the reverie it suggests to the gaze'. See Walford Davies, p. 5.

<sup>153</sup> Beer, 'The Island and the Aeroplane', p. 265-6.

<sup>154</sup> Marcus, 'Alibis and Legends', p. 286.

<sup>155</sup> Margiad Evans, quoted in Daniel Williams, *Black Skin, Blue Books: African Americans and Wales 1845-1945* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012), p. 127.

representation of Welsh culture.<sup>156</sup> Identifying Wales's medieval past with a 'mobile' culture of crossings, displacements, transformations and encounters, Roberts problematises notions of a 'native' tradition and a stable, originary past. Weaving together Gerald of Wales, Homer, Dante and Taliesin, she elaborates a new mythology of birth (and also, in a related sense, of rebirth), looking to the medieval in order to reformulate Welsh culture as itinerant, unfixed, and open-ended, rather than tethered to a single territory.

In her poetry, as I have shown, Roberts insists upon a sense of what Myfanwy Evans called 'the intenseness of the past as present': the medieval past erupts, not only to destabilise and estrange the modern-day landscape, but also, to offer clarity and vitality in the present day, situating the present-day war within a wider, more expansive historical context.<sup>157</sup> As I explore in the next chapter, Woolf's novel *Mrs Dalloway* similarly turns upon 'the intenseness of the past as present', and, like *Gods with Stainless Ears*, draws upon medieval and ritual models in order to link together the material and spiritual domains of women's experience.

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<sup>156</sup> Gerald of Wales, *The Journey through Wales*, trans. by Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin, 1978), p. 67.

<sup>157</sup> Myfanwy Evans, 'Paul Nash', *Axis*, 8 (1937), p. 10.

## **Part II: Re-enchanting Domestic Space**

### **Chapter 3**

#### ***Mrs Dalloway, William Morris, and Medievalism: Crafting a ‘Room of One’s Own in the Soul’***

Though Woolf has often been construed as an atheist writer, I would suggest that explorations of spirituality and religious experience are in fact crucial to the form and content of her writing. Pericles Lewis has argued that ‘far from promoting an irreligious literature, [Woolf] called for a more “spiritual” form of modern fiction’,<sup>1</sup> and as I have intimated in Chapter 1 of this thesis, Woolf’s ‘moments of being’, instants of mystical insight unveiling ‘some real thing behind appearances’, can be seen to form the backbone of her writing process and self-identity as a writer.<sup>2</sup> Rather than turning to spiritual domains of experience in order to escape or avoid questions of gender, Woolf’s work is centrally preoccupied with the question of women’s transcendence – that is, women’s gendered relation to the Divine.<sup>3</sup> Woolf saw the spiritual and the secular as deeply imbricated in one another, rather than as separate domains, and her writing poses women’s spiritual renaissance – the development of

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<sup>1</sup> Pericles Lewis, ‘Modernism and Religion’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, ed. by Michael Levensen, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 178-196 (178). Lewis expands on the thesis presented in this chapter in his monograph, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Virginia Woolf, ‘Sketch of the Past’, p. 85. In this essay, Woolf describes her ‘exceptional moments’ in quasi-spiritual terms: ‘I feel that I have had a blow; but it is not, as I thought as a child, simply a blow from an enemy hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life; it is or will become a revelation of some order, it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words’ (p. 85). Comparing these moments to psychic ‘shocks’, she owns that ‘I go on to suppose that the shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer’ (p. 85).

<sup>3</sup> See Elaine Showalter, ‘Virginia Woolf and the Flight into Androgyny’, in *A Literature of their Own. British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977). Showalter reads the figure of the room in *A Room of One’s Own* as emblematic of her retreat from a ‘troubled feminism’, while I see it as the locus for her exploration of women’s spirituality. Heather Ingman, too, maintains that Woolf’s moments of being ‘transcend gender’; see ‘Religion and the Occult in Modernist Women’s Writing’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Women Writers*, ed. by Maren Tova Linnett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 187-202 (p. 192). While I would agree with this, I would suggest that they are also enmeshed in Woolf’s gendered politics and textual practices.

a form of spirituality that celebrates, rather than suppresses, the female body – as a necessary prerequisite for social and political change.

Woolf's writing often demonstrates the tendency – prevalent during the nineteenth century – to identify medieval culture with spirituality. Partly through the intervention of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, the Middle Ages came to be associated with 'beauty, passion, spirituality' during the Victorian era.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the widespread influence of Morris's Arts and Crafts aesthetic meant that the medieval also came to be associated with domesticity – what Leena Kore-Schröder terms 'characteristics of obscurity, unpretentious domesticity and time-mellowed quaintness'.<sup>5</sup> In this chapter, I argue that Woolf harnesses the medievalist ideas and aesthetics associated with William Morris, Pre-Raphaelitism, and nineteenth-century Anglo-Catholicism in order to re-enchant domestic space, to seek out the spiritual dimensions in the ordinary, the material, and the quotidian domains of human experience.

Modernism frequently defined itself through the rejection of domestic space, hence the resonance of the figure of the exile and flâneur during the period, as Thomas Foster, Morag Shiach and other critics have shown.<sup>6</sup> Christopher Reed asserts that 'the avant garde (literally 'advance garde') imagined itself away from home, marching toward glory on the battlefields of culture'.<sup>7</sup> Reed, Griselda Pollock and others have called attention to the sexual politics inherent to the modernist rejection of domestic space.<sup>8</sup> Genviève Sanchis Morgan

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Robichaud, *Making the Past Present: David Jones, The Middle Ages, and Modernism* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007), p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Leena Kore-Schröder, '“The Lovely Wreckage of the Past”: Virginia Woolf and the English Country House', *English: Journal of the English Association*, 55 (2006), 255-280 (p. 261).

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Foster, *Transformations of Domesticity in Modern Women's Writing: Homelessness at Home* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 9, Morag Shiach, 'Modernism, the City and the “Domestic Interior”', in *Home Cultures*, 2.3 (2005), 251-268.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Reed, 'Introduction' to *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture*, ed. by Christopher Reed (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Griselda Pollock, 'Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity', in *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), Anne E. Fernault, 'The Domestic Side of Modernism', *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies*, 54.4 (2008), 827-836 (p. 828), Deborah Leslie and Suzanne Reimer 'Gender, Modern Design, and Home Consumption', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 21.3 (2003), 293-316. Deborah Leslie and Suzanne Reimer look at the gendered politics of Modernist design: their

suggests that the repudiation of the domestic sphere reflects a ‘gendering of art based [...] upon the ideology of separate spheres’, whereby domestic spaces were subordinated to the public spaces of cafes, theatres, and brothels as subjects of modernist art.<sup>9</sup> Yet in spite of modernism’s anti-domestic posturing, it was often particularly difficult for modernist women writers to abandon the concept of home, as Thomas Foster has observed. They tended, therefore, to ‘redefine the meaning of home’ without rejecting its significance entirely.<sup>10</sup> Many of Woolf’s narratives are located in the domestic sphere, and are infused with the rhythms associated with domestic experience.<sup>11</sup> Presenting the home as a site of modernist art, Woolf seeks transcendence in the mundane, domestic existence that many modernists claimed to reject. Focusing chiefly on her novel *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), I suggest that Woolf’s transformation of the home into a *modernist* form of sacred space acts to challenge Victorian conceptions of domestic space and of interiority itself. Sanchis Morgan claims that Woolf considered the home as ‘the locus of all great aesthetic, social, and political change’.<sup>12</sup> By presenting domestic space as a site of spiritual renaissance, she shows how society might be transformed by women and men ‘from within.’

In spite of the novel’s critique of organised religion, in part through the negative portrayal of the evangelical Miss Kilman, *Mrs Dalloway* reflects the view –shared by modernist David Jones – that ‘art is, at bottom, and inescapably, a “religious” activity’.<sup>13</sup>

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observation that ‘Modernism has been constructed in opposition to a set of binary “Others” – ornamentation, decoration, craft, and ephemerality – which typically are further mapped onto a masculine/feminine distinction’ (p. 295) is instructive for my thesis, because the medievalist design aesthetic taken on by Woolf and Roberts was identified with the ‘feminine’ ‘ornamentation, decoration, craft and ephemerality’ that Modernist architecture rejected.

<sup>9</sup> Geneviève Morgan, ‘The Hostess and the Seamstress: Virginia Woolf’s Creation of a Domestic Modernism’, in *Unmanning Modernism: Gendered Re-Readings*, ed. by Elizabeth Jane Harrison and Shirley Peterson (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1997), pp. 90-104 (p. 93).

<sup>10</sup> Foster, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> The domestic sphere offers the subject and location of the narrative in *Night and Day* (1919), *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), *The Waves* (1931) and *Between the Acts* (1941); *The Voyage Out* (1915), *Jacob’s Room* (1922), *The Waves* (1931), and many of Woolf’s short stories also engage repeatedly with domestic spaces and the practices associated with them.

<sup>12</sup> Sanchis Morgan, ‘The Hostess and the Seamstress’, p. 92.

<sup>13</sup> Jones, ‘Art and Sacrament’, p. 158.

Specifically, Woolf's novel anticipates the *sacramental* vision of David Jones – the idea, connected by Jones to the Catholic Mass, that art is a practical act of 'making' or 'doing' that 'shows forth' a different, spiritual reality.<sup>14</sup> For Jones, 'man is unavoidably a sacramentalist', a creative sign-maker, and the transfiguration of the Mass could be seen even in the most ordinary acts, such as baking a cake, or bowling a cricket ball.<sup>15</sup> Although an avowed atheist like her character Clarissa Dalloway, Woolf was fascinated by Catholicism.<sup>16</sup> On a visit to Sicily in Easter 1927, she told Vanessa how she had been captivated by the spectacle of Catholic ritual, observing that it seemed to her more art than religion:

I like the Roman Catholic religion. I say it is an attempt at art [...]. We burst into a service of little girls in white veils this morning which touched me greatly. It seems to me simply the desire to create gone slightly crooked, and no God in it at all.<sup>17</sup>

Suzette Henke has observed that 'just as medieval drama detailed the life and death of Christ through the Catholic liturgy, so Woolf's novel presents death and transfiguration within the frame of a pagan Mass'.<sup>18</sup> Building on this reading, I suggest that *Mrs Dalloway* can be read as a modernist reinvention of the medieval Mystery Play. Clarissa Dalloway, Septimus Smith, Woolf's 'chorus' of Londoners – all become actors in a modern-day drama that is also a ritualised expression of grief for a whole community.

Set on a single day in June in 1923, *Mrs Dalloway* is a text that grapples with the fallout left by World War I on ordinary people's lives: Clarissa Dalloway is attuned, as Josephine O' Brien Schaffer suggests, to 'the unshed tears the war and "this late age of world's experience" have bred in everyone',<sup>19</sup> while Septimus Smith, a young war veteran, is

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 150., p. 163

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 155, p. 164, p. 152.

<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth J. Gualtieri-Reed, 'Mrs Dalloway: Revising Religion', *The Centennial Review*, 2 (1999), 205-225 (p. 205).

<sup>17</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, III, 360-1.

<sup>18</sup> Suzette A. Henke, 'Mrs Dalloway: the Communion of Saints', in *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Jane Marcus (London and Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1981), pp. 125-147 (p. 126).

<sup>19</sup> Josephine O' Brien Schaeffer, 'The Great War and "This late age of world's experience" in Woolf and Cather', in *Virginia Woolf and War: Fiction, Reality and Myth*, ed. by Mark Hussey (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1992), pp. 134-150 (p. 144).

tortured by the fact that ‘he could not feel’ as a result of the trauma he has experienced.<sup>20</sup>

Manipulating a parallel between Septimus and Clarissa, the novel can be seen to muse upon women’s response to the epochal devastation and psychic disturbance occasioned by World War I. Clarissa Dalloway’s party – the emotional centre and end-point of the novel – emblazons Woolf’s refusal to ‘play the woman’s part’ and mourn the deaths wrought by the war. Declining, like her character Peter Walsh, to worship at the ‘shrine’ of the Unknown Soldier, and thus to endorse the nationalist ideology that led so many young men to their deaths, Woolf’s novel poses the female-oriented act of creative making – a gift that is offered, like Clarissa’s party, to the entire community – as a more appropriate, more therapeutic response to the devastation of war.<sup>21</sup> In this chapter, I explore some of the key aesthetic contexts, and theological ideas, through and against which I position my reading of *Mrs Dalloway*, from the socialism of William Morris to the feminist theology of Grace Jantzen. I then proceed to analyse the themes of domesticity and spirituality from three interlinked perspectives: ritualism and the crossing of the threshold from life to art; mysticism as a means of defining what Jane Marcus calls the ‘room of one’s own in the soul’, an inviolable inner space; *Mrs Dalloway* as medieval Mystery Play.<sup>22</sup> Throughout this chapter, I draw upon Woolf’s essay ‘The Pastons and Chaucer’ (1925) as an instructive point of comparison. Written around the same time as *Mrs. Dalloway*, this text similarly shifts the locus of national culture from the public and official to the private and domestic, and serves to illuminate Woolf’s presentation of the home as a locus of social change and artistic reinvention.

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<sup>20</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, rev. edn, ed. by David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 74. All references are to this edition and henceforth are given parenthetically in the text.

<sup>21</sup> Woolf’s novel is full of empty rooms/tombs: Peter Walsh sees a line of boy soldiers marching up Whitehall having laid a wreath on the newly completed Cenotaph (p. 43), while Doris Kilman, Elizabeth Dalloway’s governess, observes people ‘shuffl[ing] past the tomb of the Unknown Warrior’ in Westminster Abbey (p. 113). Gesturing to the continued presence of war in people’s lives, they also point to the death and aporia at the heart of the ideal of the nation.

<sup>22</sup> Jane Marcus, *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 121.



**‘When Sally gave her William Morris, it had to be wrapped in brown paper’: Morris’s medievalism as hidden subtext in *Mrs Dalloway***

William Morris (1834-1896) was a poet, craftsman, and political thinker, who applied his socialist views to his appreciation of the medieval past. As Jennifer Harris notes, his reevaluation of medieval history ‘provided the reformer with attractive pictures of the democracy of medieval institutions, of the fraternity of guilds, and of the creative freedom of the medieval craftsman’.<sup>23</sup> Morris’s ideas thus helped to consolidate the English tradition linking medievalism with social radicalism that, I argue, can be felt in Woolf’s work.<sup>24</sup> Officially, however, Woolf seems to repudiate the influence of Morris and his medieval-inspired design. In her personal memoirs, she identifies the Morris-inspired décor of her childhood houses with the ‘sepulchral interiors and cluttered rooms’ that, as Kate Flint suggests, were emblematic for Woolf of the oppressiveness of Victorian family life.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, *Mrs. Dalloway* contains several oblique references to Morris. His ideas are shown to have a prominent place in Clarissa Dalloway’s youth: she remembers that ‘Aunt Helena never liked discussion of anything (when Sally gave her William Morris, it had to be wrapped in brown paper’ (28), and recalls how

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<sup>23</sup> Jennifer Harris, ‘William Morris and the Middle Ages’, in *William Morris and the Middle Ages: a Collection of Essays, Together with a Catalogue of Works Exhibited at the Whitworth Art Gallery*, ed. by Joanna Banham and Jennifer Harris (Manchester and Dover, NH: Manchester University Press, 1984), pp. 1-17 (p. 3).

<sup>24</sup> The working-class Chartist Movement of the mid nineteenth century had also borrowed the rhetoric of medievalism to further their political cause: the name of the movement, for instance, was derived from the Magna Carta of 1215. See Clare A. Simmons, ‘Introduction’ to *Medievalism and the Quest for the ‘Real’ Middle Ages*, ed. by Clare A. Simmons (Abingdon, Oxon, and New York: Frank Cass, 2001), pp. 1-28 (p. 8). For the connection between English radicalism and medievalism during the Romantic period, see also Clare A. Simmons, *Popular Medievalism in Romantic-Era Britain* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001).

<sup>25</sup> Flint observes that an 1892 photograph of Woolf’s parents reading, with a young Virginia Stephen in the background, ‘gives a vivid impression of the fussiness of late Victorian domestic decoration: flowery, William-Morris style paper on the walls and on the panels on the back of the door; painted screens; and dark oil paintings in heavy gilt frames’. See Kate Flint, ‘Virginia Woolf and Victorian Aesthetics’, in *The Edinburgh Companion to Virginia Woolf and the Arts*, ed. by Maggie Humm (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010) pp. 19-34 (p. 22).

they sat, hour after hour, talking in her bedroom at the top of the house, talking about life, how they were to reform the world. They meant to found a society to abolish private property. (28)

Peter Walsh, who in his youth was very close to Clarissa and her friend Sally Seton, had been a ‘Socialist’ and something of an outsider, ‘sent down from Oxford’ (43). *Mrs Dalloway* can be seen to recall the democratic socialism and medieval aesthetics of William Morris in a new, modernist idiom. Through her depiction of Clarissa Dalloway’s party, Woolf emphasises the artistry inherent to everyday life, seeking, like Morris, to empower ordinary women and men as creators of culture. Projecting the world through Clarissa’s perspective, she imposes a newly ‘communal form [...] on the shape of reality’, and calls – subtly but powerfully – for radical change to the authoritarian social structures that, in Woolf’s view, stunted and suppressed human individuality, and thwarted the human desire to create.<sup>26</sup>

### **Jane Ellen Harrison and the ‘Ritual Theory’**

The elision of the spiritual and the political that Madeline Moore, among others, has noted in Woolf’s work testifies to the significant influence of Harrison’s ideas on Woolf.<sup>27</sup> Harrison’s account of ‘matriarchal’ Greek religion emphasized what she felt to be the important relation between women’s spiritual life and their sexual and social autonomy, holding that the suppression of one led to the impoverishment of the other. In *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf draws upon Harrison’s account of archaic, ‘matrilineal’ forms of culture and religion as a guide in her development of new forms of spirituality for women in the present. Woolf’s writing consistently speaks to Harrison’s ‘ritual theory’ – her conception of ritual as the ‘common

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<sup>26</sup> Henke, p. 142.

<sup>27</sup> Moore contends that ‘[t]he rhetoric used to address the problems of war, fascism, and women’s oppression [in Woolf’s work] is evocative of “religious or mystical panaceas”, rather than programmatic politics’, while Jane Goldman suggests that Woolf’s spiritualised ‘moments of being’ ‘record and resonate with the historical and material’. See Madeline Moore, *The Short Season Between Two Silences: The Mystical and the Political in the Work of Virginia Woolf* (Winchester, MA: George Allen & Unwin, 1984), p. 6, and Jane Goldman, ‘Virginia Woolf: Aesthetics’, in *Modern British and Irish Criticism and Theory: A Critical Guide*, ed by Julian Wolfreys (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), pp. 38-49 (p. 48).

human impulse' lying at the origin of all human culture and art.<sup>28</sup> In *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf incorporates ritual motifs derived from medieval Catholicism and non-Western cultures on the level of both form and structure in order to renew the relationship between art and spirituality. With its socialist vision and emphasis on material culture, Jane Harrison's account of Greek religion testifies to the influence of William Morris, whose ideas and designs were very much of the moment when she entered the newly-established Newnham College in 1875.<sup>29</sup> Drawing on Harrison's portrayal of ritual as an inherently communal practice in which 'all are actors, all are doing the thing done, dancing the dance danced', Woolf strives to develop a new form of fiction that, like ritual, is capable of providing an avenue for collective emotion and community in the present day.<sup>30</sup>

### **Becoming divine: Luce Irigaray, Grace Jantzen, and the search for women's transcendence**

While Woolf's approach to questions of religion and spirituality bears the imprint of Harrison's thought, her ideas also anticipate several important twentieth- and twenty-first century feminist revisions of Western religion. In her essay 'Divine Women', Luce Irigaray argues that women's problematic relation with the divine has prevented them from achieving a fully autonomous subjectivity in the past. For Irigaray, even in supposedly secular culture, the subject needs a concept of the divine in order to define and achieve full subjectivity: 'God is the other that we absolutely cannot be without', an ideal that suggests a 'goal or path in

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<sup>28</sup> Jane Harrison, *Ancient Art and Ritual* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1913), p. 18. Gutenberg ebook.

<sup>29</sup> A devotee of the Pre-Raphaelites in her youth, Harrison later became influenced by the Aesthetic movement that grew out of the ideas of Ruskin and Morris, and friends and acquaintances recall her fondness for William Morris wallpaper. See Annabel Robinson, *The Life and Work of Jane Ellen Harrison* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 20, and Hugh Lloyd-Jones, 'Jane Ellen Harrison (1850-1928)', in *Cambridge Women: Twelve Portraits*, ed. by Edward Shils and Carmen Blacker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 29-72 (p. 32).

<sup>30</sup> Harrison, *Ancient Art and Ritual*, p. 126.

becoming'.<sup>31</sup> Women, however, have been denied the right to become fully autonomous subjects due to their exclusion from the male divine. Irigaray insists that the redefinition of a female divine is essential if women are to attain personal and creative fulfillment:

Without the possibility that God might be made flesh as a woman, through the mother and the daughter, and in their relationships, no real constructive help can be offered to a woman [...], there can be no possibility of changing.<sup>32</sup>

For Irigaray, 'becoming divine' is the prerogative of both women *and* men:

Love of God [...] shows the way. God forces us to do nothing except become. The only task, the only obligation laid upon us is: to become divine men and women, to become perfectly, to refuse to allow parts of ourselves to shrivel and die that have the potential for growth and fulfillment.<sup>33</sup>

As Elizabeth Grosz points out, Irigaray sees the divine as a movement or process of continual 'becoming' undertaken by the subject in this life.<sup>34</sup> Grace Jantzen draws on Irigaray's concept of 'becoming divine' in her own revisionary account of Western religious culture. In *Becoming Divine* (1998), she contends that Western culture has been deeply influenced by a discourse (what she terms a religious 'symbolic') of 'necrophilia', defined by Elaine Graham as 'a morbid obsession with death, as much as by its neurotic avoidance and displacement as its explicit veneration'.<sup>35</sup> This culture, which is reflected and disseminated by the icons and narratives of Christianity, tends to repress reminders of human mortality, including the female body, and places great value on the flight from the body through disembodied reason and salvation after death. Natality, in contrast, is based upon an acknowledgment of birth, rather than death, as 'the basis of every person's existence', and bespeaks an understanding of human existence as 'material, embodied, gendered, and connected with other human

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<sup>31</sup> Luce Irigaray, 'Divine Women', in *Sexes and Genealogies*, trans. By Gillian C. Gill (1987; New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 55-72 (pp. 63-4).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 68-9.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Grace M. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 15.

<sup>35</sup> Jantzen, p. 135; Elaine L. Graham, 'Redeeming the Present', in *Grace Jantzen: Redeeming the Present*, ed. by Elaine L. Graham (Farnham, Surrey, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 1-19 (p. 2).

beings'.<sup>36</sup> Drawing on the work of Harrison and her own spiritual experiences, Woolf attempts, through writing, to imagine a 'feminised' divine – a mode of transcendence that, grounded in the body and material existence, provides the basis for women's 'becoming' as subjects and artists.<sup>37</sup>

*Mrs Dalloway* is often categorised as a 'domestic novel': Sanchis Morgan maintains that the text creates a 'poetics of domesticity', using the 'ordinary material' of domestic life as the stuff of modernist art.<sup>38</sup> Yet within her homely frame, Woolf projects a mythic drama of death and resurrection, focalized through the interlocking subjectivities of Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith. Suzette Henke argues that the novel's form is derived from a fusion of dramatic models from Greek drama and Christian liturgy, and the party with which it culminates brings together the themes of ritual, sacrifice and communion that pattern the novel.<sup>39</sup> Sketching out her ideas for the book in her notes, Woolf wrote:

Suppose the idea of the book is the contrast between life and death. The two minds of Mrs D. and Septimus...All must bear finally upon the party at the end; which expresses life, in every variety, while Septimus dies.<sup>40</sup>

While Suzette Henke views the novel as 'an allegorical struggle between good and evil', I would suggest instead that Woolf's novel opposes the competing values of death and natality.<sup>41</sup> The destructive effects of what Jantzen terms 'necrophilic' culture are exposed through Woolf's depiction of Septimus Smith, 'lately taken from life to death, the Lord who had come to renew society...the scapegoat, the eternal sufferer' (22), and it is chiefly through

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<sup>36</sup> Jantzen, p. 141.

<sup>37</sup> My conception of the "'feminised" divine' pertains to an inclusive form of spirituality that admits women, the female body, and material existence *without excluding* other kinds of body or gendered subjectivity.

<sup>38</sup> Sanchis Morgan, p. 91, p. 97.

<sup>39</sup> Henke, p. 125. The comparative anthropological techniques used by J.G. Frazer and Jane Harrison in their accounts of ancient Greek religion suggested a connection between pagan and modern-day Christian ritual. This meant that Christianity, and particularly Catholic Christianity, was often associated with questions of ritual, the body, and community during the modernist period.

<sup>40</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* holograph notes, 9 Nov 1922, in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library.

<sup>41</sup> Henke, p. 125.

Clarissa, Septimus's 'double', that Woolf explores the creative and healing potential of a culture of natality. Clarissa conceptualizes human life in terms of birth, rather than death and finitude: when the unexpected visit of Peter Walsh invites her to reflect on her past, she sees herself as

a child throwing bread to the ducks, between her parents, and at the same time a grown woman coming to her parents who stood by the lake, holding her life in her arms which, as she neared them, grew larger and larger in her arms, until it became a whole life, a complete life, which she put down by them and said, 'This is what I have made of it! This!' (36)

As Elaine Graham observes, in the philosophical tradition from Plato to Heidegger, 'the anticipation of the rupture of death defines our individuality'; by conceptualizing human life in terms of birth, Clarissa works out her own 'philosophy'.<sup>42</sup> She worships sensual, embodied existence, and, as her party would suggest, retains a sense of the interdependence of human beings: for Henke, the party that Clarissa holds at the end of the novel constitutes 'a sacramental paean to life and regeneration'.<sup>43</sup>

Harrison's depiction of matriarchal Greek religion resonates with Jantzen's concept of natality, for it similarly projects a culture in which human existence is understood as 'material, embodied, gendered, and connected with other human beings'.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, in *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, Harrison maintained that the mystical religion of the Orphics – connected, as I have shown in Chapter 1, to the ancient matriarchal rites that preceded the Olympian religion – was concerned not so much with immortality as with 'becom[ing] divine now'.<sup>45</sup> In *Mrs Dalloway*, the relative privacy of the domestic sphere provides Clarissa with a space in which to develop a 'religious symbolic' of natality that

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<sup>42</sup> Graham, p. 4.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5; Henke, p. 127.

<sup>44</sup> Jantzen, p. 141. J. G. Frazer associated religion with abstract thought and the rational, and magic with the material realm and practical experience, which he considered inferior. Harrison, in contrast, insisted on the complex spirituality of the so-called 'primitive' cultures that remained rooted in the material realm and practical experience. See Carpentier, p. 49.

<sup>45</sup> Harrison, *Prolegomena*, p. 477.

offers a mode of resistance to a hegemonic culture of death and war. By infusing her depiction of domestic space with ritual ascents and descents, dirges and dithyrambs, purifications and offerings, Woolf works toward a new aesthetic based on process and what Jane Harrison terms ‘a thing lived, experienced’.<sup>46</sup>

### **Woolf’s ritual rhythms: crossing the threshold from life into art**

The search for hidden origins – what Harrison termed *origines* – underpins Jane Harrison’s feminist project. In *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1908), she claimed that the patriarchal Olympians (gods of the ‘upper air’), were preceded by chthonic matriarchal deities, inhabitants of the underworld. Her work signals an attempt to delve beneath the patriarchal ‘face’ of culture in order to discover the repressed ‘feminine’ domains lying underneath. As Martha C. Carpentier observes, the ‘subterranean forces’ of culture and the psyche were to Harrison ‘not a threat but a salvation’.<sup>47</sup> Woolf similarly conceptualized the writing of *Mrs Dalloway* in terms of mining and tunneling into earth. In a diary entry in August 1923, she relates how writing *The Hours* has led her to a ‘discovery’:

how I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters: I think that gives exactly what I want; humanity, humour, depth. The idea is that the caves shall connect and each comes to daylight at the present moment [...].<sup>48</sup>

Woolf’s ‘tunneling process, by which I tell the past in installments’ forms part of her own attempt to explore those aspects of women’s psyche and experience that have been repressed or distorted under patriarchy.<sup>49</sup> In *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion* (1912), Harrison observes that

The Olympian gods – that is, the anthropomorphic gods of Homer and Pheidias and the mythographers – seemed to me like a bouquet of cut-flowers whose bloom is brief,

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<sup>46</sup> Jane Ellen Harrison, *Alpha and Omega* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1915), p. 205.

<sup>47</sup> Carpentier, p. 52.

<sup>48</sup> Virginia Woolf, diary entry for August 30<sup>th</sup> 1923, in *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, II, 263.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, diary entry for October 15<sup>th</sup> 1923, in *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, II, 273.

because they have been severed from their roots. To find those roots we must bury deep into a lower stratum of thought.<sup>50</sup>

Fittingly, we first see Clarissa Dalloway going out into London in order to buy some cut flowers for her party. Like the Olympian goddesses, she has been ‘cut off’ from her roots through her patriarchal marriage to Richard, and the novel traces her ‘lower stratum’ of thought through her recollection of youthful moments of pre-oedipal bliss and sensual rapture with Sally and Peter in her childhood home at Bourton.

*Mrs Dalloway* is replete with images of ascent and descent, fish and birds, flights into the air and descents into underworld spaces. Both Clarissa and Septimus are presented as ‘dying gods’ who descend to the underworld only to be reborn, and Septimus’s fatal leap from the window at the end is prefigured by Clarissa’s imaginative ‘plunge’ into the outside world at the beginning of the novel:

What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her when, with a little squeal of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air (3).

Harrison claimed that the ‘leaping inspired dances’ of the dithyramb allowed dancers to attain collective transcendence, and Martha C. Carpentier argues that ‘both Lawrence and Woolf employed Harrison’s trademark image of leaping as ‘a signifier of ritual and artistic expression’.<sup>51</sup> Clarissa, then, is the initiator of the musical dithyramb, the collective ‘dance’ of the novel. Harrison claimed that ritual offered a ‘bridge’ between art and life, and Clarissa’s imaginative ‘plunge’ into the air is also a leap from life into art, a moment of risk that can be both terrifying and enthralling. Martin Corner has observed that in *To The*

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<sup>50</sup> Jane Harrison, *Themis: a Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1927), p. xi.

<sup>51</sup> Carpentier, p. 17.



*Lighthouse*, the image of the leap offers a figure for Lily's first mark on the canvas.<sup>52</sup> When she first turns to painting,

She had a few moments of nakedness when she seemed like an unborn soul, a soul reft of body, hesitating on some windy pinnacle and exposed without protection to all the blasts of doubt.<sup>53</sup>

Harrison stressed the essentially creative, rather than merely mimetic, nature of ritual, and Clarissa's 'leap' reflects Harrison's and Bachelard's conception of art as what Jean Lescure terms 'a sort of new beginning, which makes its creation an exercise in freedom'.<sup>54</sup>

The novel's use of time and space is defined by a rhythmical or musical dilation and contraction, described by Maria Dibattista as an 'unstructured flow of movements' punctuated with brief halts or pauses.<sup>55</sup> This rhythm is suggested on a formal level by Woolf's predilection for the semicolon, but it is also conveyed in the tendency to hesitate before crossing a threshold that is shared by many of the novel's characters. Richard Dalloway, for instance, 'hesitat[es] to cross' Piccadilly (98), and Clarissa recalls often feeling, before entering her drawing room to join company, 'an exquisite suspense, such as might stay a diver before plunging while the sea darkens and brightens beneath him' (26). Harrison maintained that 'ritual acts...which depend on the periodicity of the seasons are acts necessarily delayed'.<sup>56</sup> Woolf's use of rhythm in the leaps and pauses of her characters and of her prose are suggestive of a collective, ritual time that confounds the authoritative 'shredding and slicing, dividing and subdividing' of clock time in the modern metropolis (87).<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Martin Corner, 'Mysticism and Atheism in *To the Lighthouse*', *Studies in the Novel*, 13.4 (1981), 408-423 (p. 409).

<sup>53</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 215.

<sup>54</sup> Quoted in Bachelard, p. xxxiii. David Jones similarly held that sacramental art was an expression of (wo)man's existence as a 'free agent'. 'Art and Sacrament', p. 148.

<sup>55</sup> Maria Dibattista, *The Fables of Anon*, pp. 32-22.

<sup>56</sup> Harrison, *Ancient Art and Ritual*, p. 53.

<sup>57</sup> Harrison claimed that art and ritual arose, not from mimesis, but from the desire to express shared emotion, and that this shared emotion found expression in *rhythm*. *Ancient Art and Ritual*, pp. 34-47.

## Ritual Purification and Threshold States

‘Plung[ing] out into London in order to buy some flowers, Clarissa’s joyful immersion within the ‘ebb and flow’ of city life evokes the ritual plunge of the goddess figure into the sea described by Harrison in *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*. Harrison placed the ritual act of purification at the heart of prepatriarchal religion, and this particular rite was thought to ensure the purification of society as a whole. As Harrison relates, the eradication of ‘pollution’ was understood as a condition of health and positive change, and was thought to usher in fertility.<sup>58</sup> In this way, Clarissa’s ‘plunge’ can be seen as part of the novel’s post-war work of collective healing. Her journey across central London can also be seen to position her as a pilgrim, in the tradition of Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*.<sup>59</sup> Several of the locations on her walk – Westminster, St James’s Park, Old and New Bond Street – have religious connotations, and over her walk, she can be seen to undergo the pilgrim’s temporary abandonment of social identity:

She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying, no more having children now, but only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them, up Bond Street, this being Mrs Dalloway; not even Clarissa any more; this being Richard Dalloway (9).

Woolf was working on her essay ‘The Pastons and Chaucer’, the first essay in her collection entitled *The Common Reader* (1925), at the same time as writing *Mrs Dalloway*, and as Andrew Thacker notes, she drew a map for Clarissa’s early morning jaunt on the back of her reading notes on *The Canterbury Tales*.<sup>60</sup> ‘The Pastons and Chaucer’ reflects Woolf’s preoccupation with questions of ordinariness, domesticity and dailiness during the mid-1920s: in it, she attempts to connect the ‘enchantment’ of Chaucer’s art to ‘the innumerable

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<sup>58</sup> Harrison, *Prolegomena*, p. 162.

<sup>59</sup> Pilgrimage, as Edith Turner stresses, can be regarded as a ‘kinetic ritual, replete with actual objects, “sacra”, and is often held to have material results, such as healing’ (p. xiii).

<sup>60</sup> Thacker, p. 154.

trivialities of daily life', as conveyed in the Paston letters.<sup>61</sup> Clarissa Dalloway's 'pilgrimage' across London can thus be seen an *ordinary* act of devotion to 'what she loved; life; London; this moment of June', a rite that occasions a feeling of submersion within a larger, collective life.<sup>62</sup>

June had drawn out every leaf on the trees. The mothers of Pimlico gave such to their young. Messages were passing from the Fleet to the Admiralty. Arlington Street and Piccadilly seemed to chafe the air in the Park and lift its leaves hotly, brilliantly, on waves of that divine vitality which Clarissa loved (6).

Descriptions such as these resonate with Woolf's own experience of what she called 'street haunting': 'I could wander about the dusky streets in Holborn & Bloomsbury for hours. The things one sees – & guesses at – the tumult & riot & busyness of it all – Crowded streets are the only places, too, that ever make me [...] think.'<sup>63</sup> Yet this also points to the idea of *communitas*, as evoked by Lynette Roberts in 'Poem from Llanybri', and defined by Edith and Victor Turner as '[a] relational quality of full unmediated communication, even communion, between definite and determinate entities' combining 'the qualities of lowliness, sacredness, [...] and comradeship'.<sup>64</sup> Imbued with mystical resonance, this mode of 'communication' is used by Woolf in order to challenge the existing social order, as I show over the course of this chapter.<sup>65</sup>

For all the 'lyrical metaphors of movement and multiple tropes of travel' that Elizabeth Clea Lamont detects in *Mrs Dalloway*, it is the home, rather than the city streets, that becomes the primary location for the rituals of purification that conclude with Clarissa's

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<sup>61</sup> Woolf, 'The Pastons and Chaucer', p. 16.

<sup>62</sup> Michel de Certeau emphasises the subversive potential of the city's 'ordinary practitioners', whose 'bodies follow the thick and thins of an urban 'text' they write without being able to read it'. Clarissa's 'pilgrimage' re-writes the city through her bodily experience and memories, offering a challenge to 'the clear text of the planned and readable city'. Michel de Certeau, 'Walking in the City', in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, ed. by Simon During (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 126-133 (p. 128).

<sup>63</sup> Virginia Woolf, diary entry for 16th January 1915, in *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, I, 9.

<sup>64</sup> Turner and Turner, p. 250.

<sup>65</sup> Edith and Victor Turner have called attention to connection between pilgrimage and mysticism, noting that 'If mysticism is interiorised pilgrimage, pilgrimage is exteriorised mysticism' (p. 7). They also emphasise the potential for revolution in the pilgrimage process (p. 193).

party.<sup>66</sup> As Sanchis Morgan suggests, Woolf saw the home as ‘the locus of all great aesthetic, social and political change’, and while the ‘purification’ of the home can be seen to work toward the ‘purification’ of society as a whole, it can also be seen to transform conceptions of domesticity itself.<sup>67</sup> In her memoir ‘22 Hyde Park Gate’, Woolf relates the darkness and heavy fabrics of the Victorian domestic interior to the oppression and concealment that she associates with patriarchal Victorian family life.<sup>68</sup> Clarissa’s acts of purification – her order for the door to be taken off its hinges, her bringing in of flowers with their ‘earthy garden sweet smell’ (11) usher in light and open up the house to the outside world, thereby transforming the home from an enclosed and static space into one of transit and change.

Acts of purification pertain to threshold states, and often serve to manage transitions between life and death or inside and outside spaces, as Mary Douglas has shown.<sup>69</sup> By opening up a threshold in her home through the act of taking the door off its hinges, Clarissa undermines the principles of privacy and separation according to which the middle-class home was structured prior to the beginning of the twentieth century. Victoria Rosner has underscored the subversive potentiality of the threshold within the context of the Victorian home:

[...] a way of life built around separation and specialization encounters difficulty when faced with transitional or in-between states that resist categorization. Such states are architecturally embodied in the threshold, the space that forms a bridge between two discrete rooms.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Clea Lamont, pp. 161-2.

<sup>67</sup> Sanchis Morgan, p. 92.

<sup>68</sup> ‘[T]he drawing room at Hyde Park Gate was divided by black folding doors picked out with thin lines of raspberry red. We were still very much under the influence of Titian. Mounds of plush, Watt’s portraits, busts shrined in crimson velvet, enriched the gloom of a room naturally dark and shaded in summer by showers of Virginia Creeper.’ Virginia Woolf ‘22 Hyde Park Gate’, in *Moments of Being*, rev. edn, ed. by Jeanne Schulkind (London: Pimlico, 2002), pp. 31-42 (p. 31).

<sup>69</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 4-8.

<sup>70</sup> Victoria Rosner, *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), pp. 61-2.

Throughout *Mrs Dalloway*, the room can be seen to emerge as a figure for the individual consciousness, a technique that renders ‘the transitions – the edges that join interior with exterior, that break open the individual rooms to the world around them’ hugely important.<sup>71</sup> Though Clarissa often attests to a mystical, holistic vision of the world, at the heart of the text’s spiritual vision is a sense of the essential otherness or difference of human beings. This is revealed to Clarissa by the sight of her elderly neighbour in the house opposite:

Let her climb upstairs if she wanted to; let her stop; then let her, as Clarissa had often seen her, gain her bedroom, part her curtains, and disappear again into the background. There was something solemn in it – but love and religion would destroy that, whatever it was, the privacy of the soul. (107)

The sacred ‘privacy of the soul’ suggested to Clarissa by the vision of the old woman can be related to what Woolf in *Three Guineas* terms ‘mental chastity’, the ‘purity’ that she associated with women’s intellectual autonomy.<sup>72</sup> For Clarissa, the ‘supreme mystery [...] was simply this: here was one room; there another. Did religion solve that, or love?’ (108). Rosner asserts that ‘the threshold [...] both creates difference and collapses it, and a moment of oppositional self-invention can also become one of mimetic identification’.<sup>73</sup> The play of thresholds that occurs as Clarissa gazes through her window at the old lady climbing upstairs not only affirms her difference, but also allows for a kind of communion that defies the division and separation of individuals imposed by domestic space. Toril Moi suggests that Woolf’s deconstructive vision presents meaning as ‘a ceaseless play of difference’, thereby undermining the ‘male-humanist concept of an essential human identity’; in accordance with

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<sup>71</sup> Karin de Weille, ‘Terra Incognita of the Soul: Woolf’s Challenge to the Imperialist’s Concept of Space’, in *Woolf and the Art of Exploration: Selected Papers from the Fifteenth International Conference on Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Helen Southworth and Elisa Kay Sparks (Clemson: Clemson University Digital Press, 2006), pp. 95-102 (p. 97).

<sup>72</sup> Marcus, *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy*, p. 117.

<sup>73</sup> Rosner, *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life*, p. 62.

this, Clarissa's identity is shown to be constituted through a 'play of difference' that undermines humanist conceptions of a stable self.<sup>74</sup>

### **Home as a sanctuary and a space of memory**

While Septimus is agonized by a feeling of utter exposure, his body 'macerated until only the nerve fibres were left [...] spread like a veil upon a rock' (58), Clarissa is what Gaston Bachelard describes as a 'sheltered being': as DiBattista observes, 'she allows her "self" to be sheltered and enclosed within the protective confines of the house'.<sup>75</sup> For Bachelard, the home is the primary source of the dreams and memories that constitute the self:

Not only our memories, but the things we have forgotten are "housed". Our soul is an abode. And by remembering "houses and rooms", we learn to "abide" within ourselves.<sup>76</sup>

Clarissa's home evokes and shelters memories of her childhood home of Bourton. For instance, the squeak of the door being taken from its hinges encourages her to re-enact her youthful memory of stepping through the French windows into the air at Bourton:

How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of the wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen; looking at the flowers, at the trees with the smoke winding off them and the rooks rising, falling (3).

Bourton represents a pre-oedipal space of plenitude and freedom that stands before her separation through marriage to Richard. It remains what Bachelard terms '[t]he first, the oneirically definitive house' for Clarissa, associated, like Woolf's earliest childhood memories, with 'maternal presence'.<sup>77</sup> For Bachelard, the 'councils of continuity [of the house] are unceasing. Without it, man would be a dispersed being'.<sup>78</sup> The regularity and intensity of Clarissa's memories of Bourton is suggestive of a kind of ritual contemplation

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<sup>74</sup> Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (New York and Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2002), p. 10.

<sup>75</sup> Bachelard, p. 5, DiBattista, p. 36.

<sup>76</sup> Bachelard, p. xxxvi.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13, Moore, p. 10.

<sup>78</sup> Bachelard, p. 7.

that, forging a sense of continuity with a past that seemed lost, sustains and protects Clarissa's selfhood.

Like Roberts's poem 'Circle of C', the novel is inscribed by a pattern of moving away from, and returning to, domestic space. The hall of the house seems 'as cool as a vault' (25) when she returns from her journey into London, evoking both a cave and cathedral. The space is depicted in sensory, rather than visual terms, suggesting the darkness of the interior after the brightness of the streets on the sunny June day:

As the maid shut the door to, and she heard the swish of Lucy's skirts, she felt like a nun who has left the world and feels fold round her the familiar veils and the response to old devotions. The cook whistled in the kitchen. She heard the click of the typewriter. It was her life, and, bending her head over the hall table, she bowed beneath the influence, felt blessed and purified (25).

Clarissa sees her home both as a sanctuary of intimacy guarding the 'privacy of the soul', and as a cathedral. Cathedrals are often conceived as patriarchal monuments: Woolf's aunt, Caroline Stephen, recounted that growing up in her father's house was like living in a cathedral, and Clarissa thinks of her husband, Richard, as the 'the foundation of it all' (25).<sup>79</sup> In 'A Sketch of the Past', however, Woolf places her mother at the centre of 'the great Cathedral space which was childhood', transforming the patriarchal cathedral into a space of memory re-calling 'maternal presence'.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, her evocation of the home as cathedral in *Mrs Dalloway* forms part of an alternative elegy for the lost mother – one that focuses on life and vitality, not death, and imagines the life and work of the mourned mother as a monument or cathedral.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Marcus, *Languages of Patriarchy*, p. 128.

<sup>80</sup> Woolf, 'Sketch of the Past', p. 93.

<sup>81</sup> See Marcus's commentary on Denise Levertov in *Languages of Patriarchy*, p. 119.

## The 'chastity of the mind'

Although Clarissa demonstrates a highly sensual relation to the world around her, she is on several occasions depicted as a nun. Climbing upstairs to her attic room, she is compared to 'a nun withdrawing, or a child exploring a tower' (26), and the ascetic depiction of her room posits it as a nun's cell:

There was an emptiness about the heart of life; an attic room. Women must put off their rich apparel. At midday they must disrobe. She pierced the pincushion and laid her yellow feathered hat on the bed. The sheets were clean, tight stretched in a broad white band from side to side. Narrower and narrower would her bed be (26).

Clarissa's nun-like tendencies are often read as a sign of the self-repression or 'frigidity' demanded of her by her role as middle-class wife, and this interpretation appears to be confirmed by the seemingly sterile image of 'an emptiness about the heart of life'. Following this view, Clarissa's narrow attic room is a place of exile and confinement that reflects the increasingly narrow space afforded to women within patriarchal society. Elaine Showalter argues that Woolf's concept of the private room has 'a darker side that is the sphere of the exile and the eunuch', and the depiction of Clarissa's attic room strangely seems to anticipate Showalter's critique.<sup>82</sup>

However, there is another, more positive side, to Clarissa's nun's cell. As Jane Marcus points out, Woolf associated seclusion with her writing process, describing herself as retreating to a nunnery when she wrote:

Often down here I have entered into a sanctuary; a nunnery; had a religious retreat; of great agony once; and always some terror: so afraid one is of loneliness: of seeing to the bottom of the vessel.<sup>83</sup>

Furthermore, Woolf's aunt Caroline Emelia Stephen, a prominent Quaker theologian whom Woolf called 'the nun', may have demonstrated to her the potentially empowering aspects of

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<sup>82</sup> Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (London: Virago, 1978), p. 285.

<sup>83</sup> Woolf, diary entry for 10<sup>th</sup> September 1928, in *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, III, 196.



religious life for women.<sup>84</sup> Jane Marcus argues that rather than presenting the nun as a figure of female repression under patriarchy, Woolf uses the nun as a metaphor in her construction of ‘an erotics of chastity’, a principle that transforms the Victorian ideal of physical chastity into one of ‘intellectual chastity’.<sup>85</sup> As Marcus explains, chosen celibacy during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries often signalled an attempt to escape from, or rebel against the patriarchal family, and from this perspective, Woolf’s new ‘chastity of choice’ is suggestive of power, both mental and physical.<sup>86</sup> Clarissa’s name is derived, perhaps, from the Clarissan nuns, an order of women who were married but signed vows of celibacy with their husband in order to live at home as secret nuns.<sup>87</sup> Her attic room and sexual refusal of her husband constitute a form of rebellion, undermining patriarchal social and family structures from within.

Both wife and nun, Clarissa is also a virgin mother: ‘she could not dispel a virginity preserved through childbirth which clung to her like a sheet’ (27). Kathy Newman suggests that in her depiction of Lily in *To the Lighthouse*, ‘Woolf faces and refutes the ‘choice’ between mother and virgin’ imposed on women by social ideology.<sup>88</sup> Accordingly, Clarissa’s fusion of the roles of wife and nun, virgin and mother, acts to unsettle and challenge the binary structures underpinning these roles. In *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, Jane Harrison suggests that female dualities and trinities of matriarchal religion allowed

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<sup>84</sup> Marcus, *Languages of Patriarchy*, pp. 115-135.

<sup>85</sup> As Marcus observes, this idea finds its fullest expression in *A Room of One’s Own*. See *Languages of Patriarchy*, pp. 116-117. Woolf’s concept of ‘intellectual chastity’ is elucidated most fully in *Three Guineas*, when she argues that ‘[i]t should not be difficult to transmute the old ideal of bodily chastity into the new ideal of mental chastity’ (p. 274).

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>88</sup> Kathy Newman, ‘Re-membering an Interrupted Conversation: The Mother/Virgin Split.’ *Trivia: A Journal of Ideas* 2 (1983) 45-63 (p. 59). The Virgin Mary can be seen to embody the mother/virgin dichotomy. Woolf can be seen to anticipate Irigaray in demonstrating the limitations imposed on female transcendence by the glorification of the mother, and by calling for a concept of the divine that expresses and synthesizes a fuller range of female subject positions.

women to aspire to a sense of ‘wholeness’ and transcendence.<sup>89</sup> While the goddesses of the Homeric Olympians mirrored women’s roles within the patriarchal family, the matriarchal goddess of Kore, ‘Mother and Maid in one’, reflected for Harrison a fuller range of female experience. Unlike the Olympian goddesses, Kore was not defined in relation to a male God, and reflected, for Harrison, an earlier society in which women enjoyed far greater autonomy. Woolf’s depiction of Clarissa as virgin mother gestures to Harrison’s figure of Kore in order to develop a model for autonomous female subjectivity.<sup>90</sup> Like Aphrodite, a later form of the goddess Kore, Clarissa never fully tolerates permanent patriarchal wedlock, and as her frequent dreams of childhood home of Bourton would suggest, she shares Aphrodite’s longing to return to her own home.<sup>91</sup> Her small, clean, impersonal room is echoed in the description of Peter Walsh’s hotel room later in the novel, suggesting that she, too, is in transit – a visitor in her patriarchal abode, not a permanent resident.

Harrison stresses that while Kore and Demeter are in origin the same goddess, Mother and Maid in one, ‘the Mother takes the physical side, the Daughter the spiritual – the Mother is more and more of the upper air, the Daughter of the underworld.’<sup>92</sup> Clarissa’s oscillation between social brilliance and mystical retreat reflects these interlinked roles. As DiBattista observes, Clarissa has the capacity to ‘plunge to the depths and then shoot “to the surface and [sport] on the wind-wrinkled waves”’,<sup>93</sup> just as Kore was thought to retreat to the underworld before being born again in the spring.<sup>94</sup> Like Kore, Clarissa ‘only feigns death’;

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<sup>89</sup> Harrison, *Prolegomena*, pp. 286, 260-263. In fact, Harrison implies that the concept of the trinity was originally associated with female, rather than male, deities (p. 286). Interestingly, Jane Marcus suggests that Harrison’s version of a female trinity influenced Woolf’s predilection for the pattern of three in her work: Harrison notes that it was considered a sacred number. Marcus, *Languages of Patriarchy*, p. 37; Harrison, *Prolegomena*, p. 288.

<sup>90</sup> The virginity that clings ‘like a sheet’ to her body recalls, perhaps, the maiden goddess ‘clad only in chiton’ depicted by Harrison in the *Prolegomena* (p. 309).

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 307. Harrison’s account of Kore-Aphrodite illuminates Woolf’s conception of virginity. As she relates, a goddess could be Kore, a maiden, without being physically chaste.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 275.

<sup>93</sup> DiBattista, p. 55.

<sup>94</sup> Harrison, *Prolegomena*, p. 275. Caroline Spurgeon defines mysticism as ‘an attitude of mind founded upon an intuitive or experienced conviction of unity, of oneness’. Caroline F. E. Spurgeon, *Mysticism in English*

after a serious illness that has left her 'very white' (3), she celebrates life on the streets of London with the wonder of one seeing it for the first time, and she rises phoenix-like from the ashes of humiliation to achieve the vision of her party.<sup>95</sup> Harrison asserts that '[v]irginity was to [the] ancients in their wisdom a grace not lost but perennially renewed, hence the immortal maidenhood of Aphrodite'.<sup>96</sup> Clarissa, too, is capable, of perpetual self-reinvention: 'For Heaven only knows who one loves it so, [...] making it up, building it round one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh' (4). Through Clarissa as Kore, Woolf suggests that unlike the chastity of the body, the 'chastity of the mind' is ever-renewable, and can therefore never be permanently taken away.

### **Mysticism: the 'Room of One's Own in the soul'**

Clarissa's attic room, then, provides a means of preserving the 'chastity' and 'privacy' of the mind' that she so prizes. As what Dibattista terms 'the final interiorization of subject space', it also offers an image of interiority itself.<sup>97</sup> By transforming the 'prison-house' of the individual into a sanctuary and space of mental freedom, Woolf offers what Thomas Foster terms a 'counter-narrative of interiority', transforming conceptions not just of the private room, but of the 'internal space' of the self.<sup>98</sup> In a lecture on 'Living Alone' delivered at Newnham College in 1906, Caroline Emelia Stephen stressed the mind's capacity to transform a constrictive space into an empowering one:

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*Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913), p. 3. Clarissa's intuitive sense of interconnection with the world would seem, therefore, to reflect the mystical, spiritual aspects of her personality. Peter Walsh recalls her 'transcendental theory' (129) that 'the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places, after death. Perhaps – perhaps' (p. 130). Stephanie Paulsell argues that Woolf's own mysticism falls into the category of pantheism, the concept that the world exists 'in' God or a hidden spiritual reality ('all-in-one-ism'). Stephanie Paulsell, 'Writing and Mystical Experience in Virginia Woolf and Marguerite D'Oingt', *Comparative Literature* 44.3 (1992), 249-267 (p. 252).

<sup>95</sup> Henke, p. 143.

<sup>96</sup> Harrison, *Prolegomena*, p. 312.

<sup>97</sup> Dibattista, p. 33.

<sup>98</sup> Foster, p. 7. Nancy Armstrong suggests that domesticity provides a model for the modern individual as a distinct, inviolable 'social unit'; see Foster, 2002, p. 4.

That there is in the human mind a power of making the 'iron bars' of our cage into a hermitage, and the empty spaces around us into a sanctuary, we all instinctively feel; but it needs some reflection to understand what is the spell by which such transformations need to be wrought.<sup>99</sup>

Although Woolf's aunt Caroline Emelia Stephen was portrayed dismissively by her brother Leslie Stephen in his 'Mausoleum Book' as a frustrated spinster,<sup>100</sup> her mystical studies *The Light Arising: Thoughts on the Central Radiance, Quaker Strongholds*, and *The Vision of Faith* had a significant impact on the thought and practice of British Quakers of the time.<sup>101</sup> Caroline Emelia Stephen also carried out a study of the history of sisterhoods in *The Service of the Poor* (1871), and, like the scholar Jane Harrison, pronounced publicly on the positive aspects of single life for women. Virginia Stephen stayed with Caroline Emelia following her breakdown after her father's death in 1904, and the influence of Caroline during this formative period of her life was significant: while the peace and regular rhythms of her home nursed Woolf back to health, Caroline, together with Woolf's Quaker friend Violet Dickinson, encouraged her to begin writing for small publications.<sup>102</sup> In a letter to Dickinson, Virginia Stephen affirmed that '[t]his is an ideal retreat for me. I feel as though I were living in a Cathedral Close, with the big bell of the Quaker's voice tolling at intervals'.<sup>103</sup> Woolf's aunt Caroline Stephen defined herself as a 'rational mystic', and Jane Marcus claims that her mystical writings strongly influenced her niece.<sup>104</sup> Clarissa can be seen to transform the restrictive space of her attic room into 'a room of one's own in the soul' by using it as a space for mystical encounter.

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<sup>99</sup> Caroline Emelia Stephen, 'Living Alone', quoted in Marcus, *Languages of Patriarchy*, p. 117.

<sup>100</sup> A biographical/ autobiographical text, described as 'Stephen's letter to Julia's children commemorating their mother' ('Leslie Stephen, Anne Thackeray Ritchie, and the Sexual Politics of Genre: Missing Her', in *Women's Lives, Women's Times*, ed. by Trev Lynn Broughton and Linda Anderson (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), pp. 121-141 (p. 122).

<sup>101</sup> Quaker historians have cited her as one of their most important religious figures of the Victorian period. See Marcus, 123.

<sup>102</sup> Marcus, *Languages of Patriarchy*, p. 122. As Marcus notes, Caroline wished for Woolf to become a historian.

<sup>103</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, I, 144.

<sup>104</sup> Marcus, *Languages of Patriarchy*, p. 118.

In her book *A Light Arising: Thoughts on the Central Radiance* (1908), Stephen conceptualizes mysticism in terms of radiant interiority, or ‘inner light’, defining the mystic as ‘either one who has, or who believes in, a certain illumination from within’.<sup>105</sup> Stephen’s contemporary Caroline Spurgeon quotes the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of the mystic as ‘one who believes in a spiritual apprehension of truths beyond the understanding’ in her study *Mysticism in English Literature* (1913), and like Emelia Stephen, she depicts mysticism as a nourishing inner light:

If a man has this particular temperament, his mysticism is the very centre of his being; it is the flame which feeds his whole life; and he is intensely and supremely happy just so far as he is steeped in it.<sup>106</sup>

Reflecting on her past and her sexuality in the privacy of her room, Clarissa evokes her desire for women in terms that recall both Spurgeon’s and Stephen’s accounts of mystic experience. For Clarissa, those moments when ‘she did undoubtedly [...] feel what men felt’ take the force of

a sudden revelation, a tinge like a blush which one tried to check and then, as it spread, one yielded to its expansion, and rushed to the farthest verge and there quivered and felt the world come closer, swollen with some astonishing significance, some pressure of rapture, which split its thick skin and gushed and poured with an extraordinary alleviation over the cracks and sores (27).

As Stephanie Paulsell suggests, medieval mystics believed that the contemplation of Christ’s passion might lead to the direct experience of God’s presence, and Clarissa’s contemplation of her passion for women similarly leads her to experience a hidden reality: ‘she had seen an illumination; a match burning in a crocus; an inner meaning almost expressed’ (27).<sup>107</sup>

Moreover, mystical experiences tend to be marked by a sense of transiency and passivity, and

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<sup>105</sup> Caroline Emelia Stephen, *The Light Arising: Thoughts on the Central Radiance* (Cambridge: W. Heffer, 1908), p. 1.

<sup>106</sup> Spurgeon, pp. 1-2.

<sup>107</sup> Paulsell, p. 255.

Clarissa's experience is defined by a sense of passivity (she is powerless to 'check' it), and transience: 'But the close withdrew; the hard softened. It was over – the moment' (27).<sup>108</sup>

Rather than representing a flight into the sphere of the 'eunuch', Clarissa's mysticism, therefore, pertains to a form of spirituality that seeks transcendence through the (female) body. Irigaray suggests that mysticism has throughout the history of the West offered a means of tapping into the subversive potential of female *jouissance*:

This is the place where 'she' – and in some cases he, if he follows 'her' lead – speaks about the dazzling glare which comes from the source of light that has been logically repressed, about "subject" and "Other" flowing out into an embrace of fire that mingles one term into another, about contempt for form as such, about mistrust for understanding as an obstacle along the path of *jouissance* and mistrust for the dry desolation of reason.<sup>109</sup>

Clarissa's mystic encounter establishes a kind of 'sensible transcendental',<sup>110</sup> anticipating Jantzen's call for a religious language that adopts 'the vernacular of sensuality rather than pure reason'.<sup>111</sup> Caroline Emelia Stephen suggests that 'people may experience inner light as 'flashes of revelation, which have changed for them the whole aspect of life as the blaze of lightning reveals the midnight'.<sup>112</sup> The 'revelation' of Clarissa's love for women offers a similar transfiguration of her everyday reality:

Then came the most exquisite moment of her whole life passing a stone urn with flowers in it. Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on the lips. The whole world might have turned upside down! The others disappeared; there she was alone with Sally. And she felt that she had been given a present, wrapped up, and told just to keep it, not to look at it – a diamond, something infinitely precious, wrapped up, which, as they walked (up and down, up and down) she uncovered, or the radiance burnt through, the revelation, the religious feeling! (30)

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 251.

<sup>109</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. by Gillian C Gill (1974; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 191.

<sup>110</sup> The term is put forward by Irigaray in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans by Caroline Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 32.

<sup>111</sup> Graham, p. 11.

<sup>112</sup> Stephen, *The Light Arising*, p. 5.

For Stephen, these transcendent moments, ‘to which as to as to a lodestone we *must* return again and again’ become ‘the keynote of life’.<sup>113</sup> Clarissa turns repeatedly to her ‘revelation’ in her memory, and her party, ‘her gift’ (103), can be seen to recreate and share the precious ‘present’ that she receives in her earlier revelation.

The images of luminous interiority that suffuse Woolf’s work (the lamp and the moth, the lighthouse) signal a mystical intuition of ‘some real thing behind appearances’.<sup>114</sup> For Stephen, ‘inner light,’ the capacity to receive mystic experience, is a universal disposition: there is given to all human beings ‘a measure, or germ, of something of an illuminating nature’.<sup>115</sup> But because it is grounded in emotion and intuition, rather than theological discourse or rational modes of thought, it is more accessible to the ‘inexperienced human spirit’ than to the learned one – hence why Clarissa, who ‘knew nothing; no language, no history; she scarcely read a book now, except memoirs in bed’ (7), is receptive to mystic experience.<sup>116</sup> By nurturing her own ‘inner light’, Clarissa turns her marginalized position in relation to patriarchal society and its systems of knowledge to her advantage. It is her partial ‘exile’ from culture, as signified by her attic room, which allows her to receive the mystical revelations that help her to establish her own inner authority.

Just as in *The Vision of Faith* (1911), Stephen uses the lighthouse beam as a figure for divine communication, in *The Light Arising*, she suggests that

there are things whose very nature is to intermit. I am inclined to think that emotions, and especially religions emotions, are among them. Certainly all intercourse of mind with mind is intermittent.<sup>117</sup>

Jane Marcus argues that Stephen elaborates a ‘language of the light’, a ‘spiritual demotic’ that is ‘both female and democratic’.<sup>118</sup> Intermittence is a motif running through *Mrs Dalloway*;

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>114</sup> Woolf, ‘Sketch of the Past’, p. 85.

<sup>115</sup> Stephen, *The Light Arising*, p. 2.

<sup>116</sup> Caroline Emelia Stephen, ‘The Faith of the Unlearned’, quoted in Marcus, *Languages of Patriarchy*, p. 130.

<sup>117</sup> Stephen, *The Light Arising*, p. 82.

<sup>118</sup> Marcus, *Languages of Patriarchy*, p. 130.

the occasional appearance of the old woman next door communicates the infinite mystery of the other to Clarissa, and Septimus's 'visions' are marked by intermittent light:

Going and coming, beckoning, signaling, so the light and shadow [...] seemed to Septimus Warren Smith lying on the sofa in the sitting room; watching the watery gold glow and fade with the astonishing sensibility of some live creature on the roses, on the wallpaper (118).

Though this intermittence appears to suggest change and instability, for Stephen it is a sign of an underlying constancy, and is 'capable of contributing to our highest welfare'.<sup>119</sup> In a similar manner, the intermittent appearance of Clarissa's neighbour offers her a sense of continuity and stability that consoles her during moments of distress and loss. Stephen presents spiritual insight as an alternative – and perhaps in some ways superior – mode of knowledge to that offered by rationalism:

It is impossible not to hold more firmly a belief by means of which one had been deeply stirred and touched than the same belief can be held by one who has studied it calmly as through a glass or at a distance.<sup>120</sup>

Clarissa, like Stephen, conceptualizes her mystic encounters in terms of nearness and touch. While one moment of revelation is precipitated by Sally kissing her on the lips, in another, she 'felt the world come closer' (27). Irigaray has stressed the potentially revolutionary implications of what she sees as a 'feminine' discourse of nearness:

*Nearness* [...] is not foreign to women, a nearness so close that any identification of one or the other, and therefore any form of property, is impossible. Women enjoys a closeness with the other which is *so near she cannot possess* it, any more than she can possess herself.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Stephen, *The Light Arising*, p. 81.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>121</sup> Irigaray, '*This Sex which is Not One*', trans. by Claudia Reeder, in *New French Feminisms*, ed. by Elaine Marks and Isobel de Courtivron (Brighton: Harvester, 1981 (99-106), p.103.



In this view, Clarissa's spirituality of touch and nearness acts to unsettle the capitalist notions of property and possession that in *Mrs. Dalloway* are shown to dominate both the economic realm and the concept of romantic love.

Within the spatial poetics of the novel, Clarissa's attic room emerges as a heart or soul. Clarissa's entry into her bare attic room is also a 'laying bare' of her soul, what DiBattista terms a 'ritual of self-confrontation': as she prepares to rest on her bed, Clarissa thinks to herself that '[w]omen must put off their apparel. At midday they must disrobe' (26).<sup>122</sup> This disrobing signals an attempt to shed the artifice associated with gendered social identity in order to clear the way for mystic experience. In her essay 'La Mystérique', Luce Irigaray analyses the psychological processes and imagery that often accompany women's accounts of mystical experience. She observes that

all properties (and proprieties) will have to be shed to continue this penetration. Love, wish, affection, delight, interest, profit, all must go as they are still related to the self-as-same, clothing it in a surplus value, whose deceptive and treacherous charms are felt only by one who has yet to experience union in its most outrageous nakedness.<sup>123</sup>

Woolf associated this 'outrageous nakedness' with anonymity. She famously battled with what she termed the 'damned egotistical self', which she felt was an obstacle to good writing. In her diary, she relates that the criticism of Ka Arnold Foster made her feel refreshingly anonymous, a feeling she compares to '[slipping] off all my ball dresses & [standing] naked – which as I remember was a very pleasant thing to do'.<sup>124</sup> Woolf suggests that her sense of anonymity, 'my old feeling of nakedness' is 'the backbone of my existence'.<sup>125</sup> Clarissa is shown to experience a comparable feeling of anonymity. She, too, feels that her 'essential' self is anonymous, dispersed among all seen and unseen forms of life, and as she walks through London, she apprehends that

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<sup>122</sup> DiBattista, p. 37.

<sup>123</sup> Irigaray, *Speculum*, p. 194.

<sup>124</sup> Virginia Woolf, diary entry for 19<sup>th</sup> June 1923, in *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, II, 248.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 249.

somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there, ugly, rambling all to bits and pieces as it was; part of people she had never met; being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, herself (8).

Mysticism is associated by Irigaray with the emptying out of personality, the dispersal of self: ‘the ‘I’ is empty still, ever more empty, opening wide in rapture of soul.’<sup>126</sup> The ‘emptiness about the heart of things’ represented by Clarissa’s attic can thus be seen to signal not sterility, but a liberating escape from the ‘damned egotistical self’, offering the anonymity that Woolf believed was a condition of all great art. Seen as a ‘flood that sweeps over the ‘I’ in an excess of excess’,<sup>127</sup> mysticism offers both Clarissa and Septimus a means to transgress the crypt-like walls of the individual self and the private room. If under the pressure of illness mystical vision threatens Septimus with destruction, in the case of Clarissa, it poses a practical mode of resistance to the imperial English culture of ‘Proportion’ and ‘Conversion’ (85) that Clarissa and Septimus so despise.

Mysticism’s usefulness as a political tool was underlined by Evelyn Underhill, who in her influential text *Practical Mysticism* (1914) held that ‘spiritual vision’ has the power to oppose the forces of aggression associated with war, and insisted that authentic mystics use their visions not to withdraw from life, but as a practical motivating force for action.<sup>128</sup> Evelyn Underhill contributed significantly to mysticism’s reappearance on the cultural agenda during the modernist period.<sup>129</sup> Furthermore, her interest in mysticism was derived from her study of medieval religious culture: Underhill’s book *The Essentials of Mysticism*

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<sup>126</sup> Irigaray, *Speculum*, p. 195.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *Practical Mysticism* (Guildford: Eagle, 1991), p. xiv., Ingman, ‘Religion and the Occult in Modernist Women’s Writing’, p. 191.

<sup>129</sup> Ingman, ‘Religion and the Occult in Women’s Modernism’, p. 190. Jane Harrison’s *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1903), together with William James’s *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), also served to generate new interest in mysticism during the modernist period.

*and Other Essays* (1920) contained a chapter on three medieval mystics, Angela of Foligno, Julian of Norwich, and Marguerite Porete.<sup>130</sup> Through the influence of scholars such as Underhill, Woolf may have been aware of the fact that mystical and religious visions formed part of a major cultural discourse in medieval Europe – one in which women, given their subordinate status in society, played a disproportionate role. Stephanie Paulsell has suggested that Woolf’s ‘moments of being’ bear resemblance to the experiences of Marguerite D’Oingt, a thirteenth-century French mystic,<sup>131</sup> and the original title for *Mrs Dalloway*, ‘The Hours’, echoes the title of a book Woolf held in her library, Robert Vaughan’s *Hours with the Mystics*, a text that addresses the flourishing of the mystical tradition in medieval Europe.<sup>132</sup>

### **Mrs Dalloway’s party: *themis* and sacrifice**

Woolf’s interest in the interrelationship of ritual, mystic communion, and community is expressed in the text through her use of a motif that Suzette Henke identifies as ‘the communion of saints’.<sup>133</sup> J. Hillis Miller suggests that Woolf’s text re-enacts the ‘collective resurrection of saints’ associated with the Catholic All Soul’s Day: Peter Walsh, Sally Seton and others are summoned and ‘rise from the dead to come to Clarissa’s party’.<sup>134</sup> The effect

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<sup>130</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism and Other Essays* (London and Toronto: JM Dent, 1920).

<sup>131</sup> Paulsell, p. 251.

<sup>132</sup> Following the mystical tradition from its origins in the Indian subcontinent, through Neo-Platonism to its apotheosis in medieval Christian Europe, *Hours with the Mystics* concentrates upon medieval figures such as Bernard of Clervaux and Hugo (Hugh) of St Victor. Robert Vaughan, *Hours with the Mystics: A Contribution to the History of Religious Opinion*, 7th edn., 2 vols (London: Gibbings, 1895). While Vaughan focuses mainly on male mystics, Evelyn Underhill’s *Mysticism* (1911) foregrounds ‘that long line of [medieval] women mystics – visionaries, prophetesses, and political reformers – combining spiritual transcendence with great practical ability, of whom St. Catherine of Siena is probably the greatest example’. Her text discusses in some detail a range of medieval women mystics, including Hildegard of Bingen, (1098-1179) Elizabeth of Shönau, (1138-1165) Mechthild of Hackborn (*ob.* 1310), Bridget of Sweden (1303-1373), and Julian of Norwich (1343 – after 1413). Underhill praises this line of women who, ‘exalted by the strength of their spiritual intuitions [...] emerged from an obscure life’ to ‘impose their wills, and their reading of events, upon the world’. Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Human Consciousness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2008), p. 419. Ebook.

<sup>133</sup> In relation this, Henke suggests that Clarissa Dalloway is shown to ‘offer her guests the illumination that will transfigure the gathering [Clarissa’s party] into a beatified communion of saints’ (p. 144).

<sup>134</sup> J. Hillis Miller, ‘Virginia Woolf’s All Soul’s Day: The Omniscient Narrator in *Mrs Dalloway*’, in *The Shaken Realist: Essays in Modern Literature in Honour of Frederick J. Hoffman*, ed. by Melvyn J. Friedman and John B. Vickery (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970), pp. 100-127 (p. 115).

of the world of the past mingling with that of the present is enhanced by Woolf's use of form: focalising the narrative in part through Clarissa's memory, living people and 'ghosts' from the past brush alongside each other: to her mind, people that she remembers from long ago in her youth ('Sylvia, Fred, Sally Seton – such hosts of people' [7-8]) are as alive in the London streets as Miss Pym the florist and Maisie Smith, the girl newly arrived from Scotland.

Peter Walsh concedes that Clarissa's parties show her 'genius' for bringing disparate social elements together in harmonious combinations, and the communion of 'souls' imaged both in Clarissa's party and her moment of union with Septimus at the end of the novel can be seen to elaborate a form of sacred community. While Woolf's conception of the 'communion of saints' is almost certainly indebted to Harrison's theorization of ritual communities, it also bears resemblance to Christina Rossetti's conception of the Christian community as set out in her last publication, *Verses* (1893).<sup>135</sup> Karen Dieleman has argued that in this work, Rossetti re-fashions the Anglo-Catholic ritualist idea of community, imagining both the worshipping community and the individual believer 'as "webbed", as interdependent, and not as hierarchically structured'.<sup>136</sup> Thomas Foster, citing Foucault's suggestion that contemporary space is "defined by relations of proximity between points or elements", argues that modernist women writers anticipated this 'network' ideal in their writing.<sup>137</sup> Bonnie Kime Scott has similarly argued that Woolf, like many modernist women writers, took the web as a model for her formal structure, and in *Mrs Dalloway* the image of a spider's thread is used to describe the lines of connection, simultaneously fragile and strong, that exist between different characters: Richard's mind settles on the idea of Clarissa 'as a single spider's thread after wavering here and there attaches itself to the point of a leaf'

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<sup>135</sup> Christina Rossetti, *Verses* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1893).

<sup>136</sup> Karen Dieleman, 'Christina Rossetti, The Communion of Saints, and *Verses*', *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies*, 15 (2006), pp. 27-49 (28).

<sup>137</sup> Foster, p. 3.

(97).<sup>138</sup> Woolf, then, uses mystic and ritual motifs in order to suggest a new, non-hierarchical form of community that, based on participation rather than subordination to a leader or doctrine, connects the dead with the living.

The working title of *Mrs Dalloway*, as I have shown, was *The Hours*. As Maria Dibattista reminds us, the Hours were ‘mythologically the daughters of Themis, goddess of Order, guardians of the gates of heaven’.<sup>139</sup> Clarissa similarly presides over the gates of an earthly paradise: she tells the guests at her party that ‘it is angelic – it is delicious of you to have come!’ (150), and on several occasions during the party a curtain ‘with its flight of birds of Paradise’ (144) blows out (an image, for David Bradshaw, of the flight of the soul).<sup>140</sup> Clarissa’s party can be seen to embody the concept of *themis* as outlined by Jane Harrison. In *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion* (1912), Harrison asserts that the goddess Themis embodied the social impulse that allowed religion to blossom:

Here is the social fact trembling on the verge of godhead. She is the force that brings and binds men together, she is ‘herd instinct’, the collective conscience, the social sanction.<sup>141</sup>

Themis provides the originary, collective and consensual version of the *polis*, the system of law and justice. In this way, the model of social inclusion and cohesion suggested by Clarissa’s party poses an alternative to the patriarchal *polis*, the system of ‘Proportion’ and ‘Conversion’ whose oppressive structures impose conformity and ‘[force] the soul’.

Clarissa’s party can be seen as a kind of sacramental social rite. It is conceived by Clarissa as an ‘offering’ (103), ‘her gift’ (103), and the agonies that she suffers when she fears that she has failed to realize her vision posit it as a kind of bodily sacrifice:

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<sup>138</sup> Bonnie Kime Scott, *Refiguring Modernism, Volume 1: Women of 1928* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. xv.

<sup>139</sup> DiBattista, p. 30.

<sup>140</sup> David Bradshaw, ‘Introduction’ to *Mrs Dalloway*, rev. edn (London: Penguin, 2000), pp. xi-xlv (p. xxxiv).

<sup>141</sup> Jane Ellen Harrison, *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927), p. 485.

Why, after all, did she do these things? Why seek pinnacles and stand drenched in fire? Might it consume her anyhow!...Why always take, never give? Why not risk one's little point of view? (142).

For Henke, Clarissa, like Septimus,

feels like a martyr, sacrificing herself for the momentary revelation made possible by her art. Consumed in flames, crucified by public criticism, she nevertheless returns to life like the Phoenix reborn from the ashes of immolation.<sup>142</sup>

If the end of Woolf's novel dramatizes the transfiguration of the Catholic Mass, it also offers a modernist re-vision of the medieval Mystery Play. Woolf was interested in medieval drama: as I show in Chapter 5, a significant part of her late medievalist essay 'Anon' was informed by her reading of E.K. Chambers's *The Medieval Stage* (1903). Furthermore, her weaving together of archaic ritual and medieval drama was informed by the comparative anthropology of Jane Harrison; in *Ancient Art and Ritual*, Harrison noted that while she chose to illustrate her 'ritual theory' through focusing on the rise of Greek drama from ancient Greek ritual, '[t]he rise of Indian drama, or the medieval and from it the modern stage, would have told us the same tale and served the like purpose'.<sup>143</sup>

The Mystery Plays were cycles of plays in English verse based on Biblical themes, put on by the whole community. They were part of a highly localized tradition, springing up across Britain in towns such as York, Wakefield, and Chester during the fourteenth century. Mystery Plays were usually performed in connection with the new early summer feast of Corpus Christi in June – around the same time as Clarissa's party – and may have developed from the processions held on Corpus Christi in honour of the Eucharist.<sup>144</sup> Medieval theatre often dramatizes the central place in history of Christ's life, sacrifice, and redemption of

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<sup>142</sup> Henke, p. 143.

<sup>143</sup> Harrison, *Ancient Art and Ritual*, pp. v-vi.

<sup>144</sup> A sacrament of thanksgiving commemorating Christ's sacrifice for the redemption of sin, in which Christ is held to be continually present.

mankind, and as I show, the end of Woolf's novel transposes these themes into a contemporary, secular setting.

Many critics have called attention to significant convergences in Woolf's representation of Septimus and Clarissa. Septimus's 'sacrifice' mirrors the 'offering' of Clarissa's party, and when Clarissa hears of Septimus's suicide, she re-enacts the suffering that she imagines Septimus to have undergone:

He had killed himself – but how? Always her body went through it, when she was told, first, suddenly, of an accident; her dress flamed, her body burnt. He had thrown himself from a window. Up had flashed the ground; through him, blundering, bruising, went the rusty spikes. There he lay with a thud, thud, thud in his brain, and then a suffocation of blackness. So she saw it (156).

If Septimus can be seen as a Christ figure, as critics such as Suzette Henke, Arthur F. Bethea, and Douglas L. Howard have observed,<sup>145</sup> then Clarissa's impulse to re-live his pains can be seen as a modern version of the medieval meditation on the Passion. Her response is reminiscent of the devotional practice known as 'affective piety', associated with mystical writers such as Julian of Norwich (1342-1416). Julian was an enclosed anchoress, living in a cell adjoining the Church of Saint Julian in Norwich. At age thirty, suffering from severe illness and on the brink of death, she experienced a series of religious visions, which she called revelations or *shewings*, and spent the rest of her life committing them to writing. Just as Clarissa both feels and *sees* Septimus's pain, so Julian apprehends a vivid image of Christ's passion:

And in this soddenly I saw the reed bloud rynnynge downe from under the garlande, hote and freyshely, pentuously and lively, right as it was in the tyme that the garland of thornes was pressed on his blessed head. Right so both God and man, the same that sufferd for me, I conceived truly and mightily that it was himself that shewed it me without anie meane.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Henke, p. 126, Arthur F. Bethea, 'Septimus Smith, the War-Shattered Christ Substitute in *Mrs Dalloway*, *The Explicator*, 68.4 (2010), 249-252, Douglas L. Howard, 'Virginia Woolf's Redemptive Cycle', *Literature and Theology*, 12.2 (1998), 149-158.

<sup>146</sup> Julian of Norwich, *The Showings of Julian of Norwich*, ed. by Denise N. Baker (London and New York: Norton, 2005), p. 8.

Affective piety was born of what Denise Baker describes as a ‘transformation of Western religious consciousness’ between 1050 and 1200, a period which, like the modernist period, was marked by an increased interest in individual experience and introspective analysis.<sup>147</sup> While an anterior tradition had portrayed Christ as a powerful warrior and judge triumphing over death, following the transformation described by Baker, an accent was increasingly placed on Christ’s humanity and suffering, and thus, his solidarity with humankind.<sup>148</sup> In this way, compassion for, and imitation of, Christ’s pains became a central component of Western spirituality. Just as Julian longs to discover, through suffering, ‘the kind of pain involved in the knowledge of, and sorrow for, sin, [and] the suffering involved in love’,<sup>149</sup> so Clarissa’s affective imitation of Septimus’s pain offers her knowledge of what Woolf in ‘A Sketch of the Past’ terms ‘the thing itself’:<sup>150</sup>

A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wretched about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day by corruption, lies, chatter. This he had preserved. Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate, people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them [...]. There was an embrace in death (156).

In her depiction of Septimus, Woolf replaces the powerful, chivalrous conception of masculinity promoted by middle-class gender conventions during the Victorian period with a suffering and vulnerable one. Moreover, through her engagement with affective piety, Woolf poses an ethics of mutual love and compassion as a new model for gendered relations. Drawing upon the example of writers such as Julian of Norwich, she presents affective piety as a more appropriate mode of relating to the suffering of others than that offered by

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<sup>147</sup> Denise N. Baker, *Julian of Norwich’s Showings: From Vision to Book* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 16.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>149</sup> Glasscoe, *English Medieval Mystics: Games of Faith* (London and New York: Longman, 1993), p. 216.

<sup>150</sup> Woolf, ‘Sketch of the Past’, p. 85.



Victorian ‘sympathy’, which she rejected on the basis that it failed to accept or understand the alterity of another’s pain.<sup>151</sup>

If Septimus is Jesus, the scapegoat and dying God, then Clarissa is the host(ess): by partaking of her body, her guests achieve a sense of communion that breaks down the division between self and other associated with the Symbolic order. She is both a traditional politician’s wife, an entertainer of middle-class London society, *and* a sacramental artist: a figure who gives gratuitously, for the sake of giving, a maker of beautiful things that ‘show forth’ a different, spiritual reality. Through her representation of Clarissa’s party, Woolf implies that the artist should be ever-present, yet nowhere to be found in her work, sacrificing her own ego in order to create a space for the expression of collective experience. The figure of the artist as hostess can be connected to Woolf’s identification of her writing persona with that of the (virgin) mother: both figures share the power to give her body up to/for another, without yet losing a sense of selfhood. Septimus, too, is depicted as a maternal artist: ‘[h]e strained; he pushed; he looked... We welcome, the world seemed to say; we accept; we create. Beauty, the world seemed to say’ (59). In many ways, Clarissa’s party can be understood as a rite of rebirth. Like one of Harrison’s ritual dancers, Clarissa’s re-presentation of Septimus’s death (‘always her body went through when she was told, first, suddenly, of an accident’ [156]) allows for the ‘dying god’ to be incarnated within her. This process can be related to Irigaray’s concept of the ‘sensible transcendental’: a pantheistic projection of the divine, ‘bringing the god to life through us’.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Defined by John Ruskin in *Fors Clavigera* (1873) as ‘the imaginative understanding of the natures of others, and the power of putting ourselves in their place’, sympathy – as a social practice and cultural discourse – was important to Middle-class Victorians. In her essay ‘On Being Ill’, Woolf explicitly disavows sympathy, stating that ‘we can do without it’ (p. 104). In her view, it creates the illusion of an oppressively homogeneous world, where ‘however strange your experience others have had it too, where however far you travel in your own mind someone has been there before’. While practitioners of sympathy pretend to know the other, in reality, ‘we do not know our own souls, let alone the souls of others. Human beings do not go hand in hand the whole stretch of the way. There is a virgin forest in each; a snowfield where even the print of birds’ feet is unknown’ (p. 104).

<sup>152</sup> Irigaray, *Divine Women*, p. 63.

Septimus and Clarissa both receive visions signaling ‘the birth of a new religion’ (19) based on natality, or life and interconnection; Septimus sees Rezia as a ‘flowering tree’ (125), feels ‘red flowers [grow] through his flesh’ (58), and receives the mysterious message that ‘men should not cut down trees’ (21). But while Septimus is tortured by his inability to communicate his revelations, the privacy of the domestic realm provides Clarissa with a space in which to reflect upon and transmute her visions into an art of life. Maria Dibattista remarks that in the novel, ‘female art consumes and transforms the apocalyptic hallucinations of the grief-stricken mind [...] into a “coverlet of flowers”’.<sup>153</sup> It is notable that in his engagement with the domestic art of hat-making, arranging flowers around the rim of the hat for wife Rezia, that Septimus attains a final moment of happiness and completion: ‘It was wonderful. Never had he done anything which made him feel so proud. It was so real, so substantial, Mrs Peters’ hat’ (122). The hat, and the craft of hat-making, put him back into contact with material existence, while its ‘wreath’ of flowers alludes to sacrifice, communion, and a ‘female-oriented’ ritual art that, healing social and psychological wounds, works toward the continuation of life.

## **Conclusion**

Clarissa’s domestic art projects a model of social relations based on difference, interconnection, and tolerance, rather than conformity and individualism. Unveiling the violence at the heart of British national life through her representation of Septimus Smith, Woolf uses the model of the Mass as a means of challenging, and transforming, the nationalist ethos of self-sacrifice that she felt impoverished and damaged the lives of both women and men. In a similar manner to the Pre-Raphaelite artists of the nineteenth century, she utilises medieval culture in order ‘bridge’ the gap between the spiritual and the mundane,

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<sup>153</sup> DiBattista, p. 58.

‘fleshly’ and spiritual realms of experience, as part of an attempt to open up a space for the female body in literature. Drawing upon a premodern mystical tradition identified by Evelyn Underhill with the legacy of medieval women writers such as Julian of Norwich, she presents mystical experience as a means of cultivating a sense of ‘inner authority’ for the woman writer, a ‘room of one’s own in the soul’. Moreover, *Mrs Dalloway* is concerned, not only with private interiority, but also with the borders and edges connecting the inner self to the world outside. Harnessing the ritual patterns of medieval drama, Woolf strives to shape her novel into a more democratic form, capable of giving voice to the shared emotion of the community.

The structure of *Mrs Dalloway* emulates that of a medieval diptych: Septimus’s and Clarissa’s narratives are placed alongside each other, and are ‘hinged’ together by the moment of recognition during Clarissa’s party. Woolf uses a similar strategy in her contemporaneous essay ‘The Pastons and Chaucer’, which places an account of the fourteenth-century Paston family alongside an analysis of Chaucer’s poetry, implicitly asking the reader to draw connections between them.<sup>154</sup> In its emphasis on the connection between art and ordinary life, ‘The Pastons and Chaucer’ echoes many of the concerns of *Mrs Dalloway*. Just as the renegade John Paston, a dreamer like Clarissa, is shown ‘constantly to put off, year after year, the making of his father’s tombstone’ (15), so *Mrs Dalloway* willfully puts off mourning for the nation’s dead in favour of a celebration of life. Chaucer was beloved of Pre-Raphaelite medievalists such as William Morris, and echoes of Morris’s politics, his ‘demand for an existence made meaningful through work and art’, finds expression in Woolf’s vision of the redemptive potential of human making.<sup>155</sup> As I show in the chapter that follows, the Arts and Crafts aesthetics of William Morris are also centrally

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<sup>154</sup> A narrative strategy that points subtly to how the characters’ different stories are implicated in one another.

<sup>155</sup> Jennifer Harris, p. 13.

important to Roberts's poetry, threading through her own performance of poetic 'home-making'.

## **Part II: Re-enchanting Domestic Space**

### **Chapter 4**

#### **‘Earthbound’: Rootedness and Re-enactment in the Shadow of War**

Roberts’s writing is in many ways motivated by her search for a ‘place’. Although most of her life was unsettled and nomadic, Lynette, as her daughter, Angharad Rhys, recalls, ‘always longed for a simple home – with a fire and a table – a place to look after friends in need’.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, domestic space, especially that of her two-roomed cottage, ‘Tygwyn’, has a central presence in Roberts’s poetry, radiating out to touch all other aspects of life. The home appears in her poetry as a point offering an ‘inner spiritual continuity’ with the Welsh past, and the habitualised return to the hearth becomes a way of *composing* the self – literally and figuratively – among the ‘ruins’ and havoc of war.<sup>2</sup> The spectacle of violence erupting within the confines of the ‘home front’ during the 1940s forced a new attention to everyday life during the 1940s, lending ordinary, daily rhythms a new importance and significance.

Thus, household tasks – drawing ‘water from the well’ (*CP*, 3), baking bread (*CP*, 4), or hang[ing]/Dishcloth over weeping hedge’ (*CP*, 7) – often take centre stage in Roberts’s poetry; presented in a heightened, ritualised form, they are imbued with pointed emotional significance. In this chapter, I argue that Roberts’s wartime poetry is crucially concerned with the act of home-making – both the making of a home, and the building of a nation. For Roberts, as for Hélène Cixous, ‘language is a country’: by incorporating the dialect, poetic forms, geography, and traditions particular to her Welsh locale into her high modernist prosody, she not only develops a new form of modernist poetics, but also creates an imaginative ‘home’ for the insider-outsider within a country of words.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Angharad Rhys, ‘Preface’ to *Lynette Roberts: Collected Poems*, ed. by Patrick McGuinness, pp. ix-x (p.ix).

<sup>2</sup> Robichaud, p. 108.

<sup>3</sup> See ‘Guardian of Language: An Interview with Hélène Cixous by Kathleen O’ Grady’, <<http://bailiwick.lib.uiowa.edu/wstudies/cixous/index.html>> [Accessed 12 February 2013].

Many British modernists of the interwar years (a list including John Cowper Powys, Mary Butts, T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, and David Jones), sought, through a practice described by Jed Esty as ‘home anthropology’, to simultaneously ‘re-enchant England and recover its ordinariness’.<sup>4</sup> This impulse can be seen as a response to the crumbling of Britain’s metropolitan status, reflecting a growing sense of Britain’s status as ‘an object of study like any other’.<sup>5</sup> As I have demonstrated in my analysis of Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*, by weaving together elements fragments of folk tradition and legend, magic and medievalism, modernist writers and artists looked to a premodern, preindustrial past in order to re-enchant, and through this, to re-imagine, national time and space in the British Isles. Roberts’s poetry is similarly concerned with transformation and re-enchantment, yet rather than focusing predominantly on public sites, as do T.S. Eliot or David Jones, like Woolf, she frequently concentrates on domestic space instead. As I show, Roberts’s poetry constructs an ‘anthropology of everyday life’ in order to ‘resacralise’ domestic space, converting the rhythms of mundane, everyday experience into meaningful ritual.<sup>6</sup> Challenging the binary structures underpinning the ideology of separate spheres, Roberts draws upon a premodern Welsh folk culture in order to re-vision the home as a site of both bodily existence and spiritual transcendence, reproduction and artistic creation. Indeed, Roberts, like Woolf, is intent upon challenging the divisions between ‘public’ and ‘private’ space. In her essay ‘Simplicity of the Welsh Village’, she argued that ‘every home is a separate unit and centre of the nation’s culture’.<sup>7</sup> Rendered ‘other’ by medieval folk culture and transformed into a space of modernist art, domestic space can thus be seen to emerge in her writing as a crucial site for the performance, construction, and transformation of Welsh national culture.

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<sup>4</sup> Esty, *Shrinking Island*, p. 122.

<sup>5</sup> Esty, *Shrinking Island*, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>7</sup> The identification of national culture with domestic space is exemplified by O.M. Edwards’s *Cartrefi Cymru* (1896), a text that constructs a Welsh national history through the ‘historic home[s] of its people’, and Iorwerth Peate’s *The Welsh House* (1940), a text cited by Roberts in her ‘Simplicity of the Welsh Village’.

Indeed, Roberts's poetry can be seen to enact the 'opening [of] the everyday onto history' that Maurice Blanchot identifies with periods of revolution and 'effervescence'.<sup>8</sup> Engaging the ideas of anthropologists H.J. Fleure and his disciple Iorwerth C. Peate, she presents domestic space as a 'refuge' for a folk culture she explicitly identifies with the Middle Ages.<sup>9</sup> Though for Peate this tradition might survive only as 'the fragments of a dream lost in the uproar of industry's juggernaut', Roberts suggests that it can be recovered and restored through art and the practice of everyday life.<sup>10</sup> Finding expression in a culture of home-made craft and botanical medicine, Welsh folk tradition is linked by Roberts to medieval Welsh monastic culture, and is venerated in her poetry for its healing and communal qualities. Moreover, as an 'unofficial' tradition rooted in everyday life, it is shown to have evaded metropolitan society's disciplinary structures in plain sight, and is thus presented as a repository for what Toni Morrison calls 'discredited knowledge': systems of thought and know-how identified, not only with Wales, but with women's experience, too.<sup>11</sup> Given public expression through poetry, this 'discredited knowledge' is mobilised as a practical mode of resistance to a 'technocratic' modernity that, in Roberts's view, devalued and exploited human labour, and repressed and destroyed the life of the body. Seeing folk culture as the expression of 'a pastoral root which is wholesome and cannot stimulate anything but the mind's conditioning', she argues in her diary that 'this is of a more vital significance than anything else since the pulse of humanity has been destroyed by the machines of monstrous war' (D, 51).

In her concern with continuity – her attempt to take up 'the thread of tradition' from the medieval past and extend it into the modern era – Roberts testifies to the influence of

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<sup>8</sup> Blanchot, p. 12.

<sup>9</sup> Pyrs Gruffudd, 'Back to the Land: Historiography, Rurality and the Nation in Interwar Wales', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 19.1 (1994), 61-77 (pp. 66-7).

<sup>10</sup> Peate, *Cymru a'i phobl*, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Morrison, p. 342.

John Ruskin, and particularly William Morris, whose work would have become familiar to her through her training at the Central School of Arts and Crafts.<sup>12</sup> Insisting, like Morris, that domestic craft is of equal, or even superior, value to ‘high art’, she celebrates it as an art that remains embedded in the ‘life of the people’.<sup>13</sup> As I have shown in the previous chapter, Woolf harnessed the patterns of the medieval Mystery Play to attain a more collective voice in *Mrs Dalloway*. Fittingly, ‘Mystery’ has an etymological connection to craft, for the word was used in the Middle Ages to denote a craft, art or trade – any activity requiring ‘a highly skilful or technical operation’.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, Roberts invokes a native or ‘naïve’ craft tradition in order to develop a more communal idiom in her writing.<sup>15</sup> Reconceiving poetry as craft, she presents poetry, not as a private outpouring of emotion, but as something that is at once beautiful and of real, practical use to the community. In the discussion that follows, I suggest some of the key contexts informing Roberts’s ‘anthropology of the everyday’. I then present a series of poems that centre upon domestic spaces, be that the home or the village: ‘Earthbound’, ‘The Shadow Remains’, ‘The Curlew’ and ‘Raw Salt on Eye’. Addressing Roberts’s approach to the relation between individuality and community in these works, I explore how she deploys enchantment and magic in order to defend the private life against the abuses of power.

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<sup>12</sup> William Morris, *The News from Nowhere and Other Writings*, ed. by Clive Wilmer (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), p. 333.

<sup>13</sup> As Jennifer Harris observes, William Morris insisted that ‘the history of art was the history of the people’ (p. 2).

<sup>14</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn [Online], <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/124644?rskey=j2QHwT&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>> [Accessed 10 May 2016]. As Karma Lochrie observes, ‘[t]he close association in medieval guilds between the concepts of misterium, ‘mystery’ or craft, and mysterium, the ‘secrets’ of the craft, gave work some of its value and gave the men who plied their craft a ‘comradely ethos’ and even a moral identity’. Karma Lochrie, *Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), p. 163.

<sup>15</sup> Tony Conran places Roberts within a ‘primitive’ vein of modernist art and poetry, ‘in the sense that we use the word of painters – poets without a training in literature, whose work therefore involves problems in appreciation’. Moreover, he argues that ‘primitives’ in this sense ‘seem to arise when cultures are in turmoil’, suggesting that theirs are ‘new and revolutionary ways of thinking about art’. Tony Conran, *Frontiers*, pp. 165-166.



## **Folk culture and the anthropology of the everyday: retrieving an ancestral past**

Medievalism and ‘folk’ culture merged together in the late modernist imagination, for both were identified with ‘primitive’ cultural forms and ‘unofficial’ social histories. Influenced by texts such as Wilhelm Wundt’s *Elements of Folk Psychology* (1916), Neo-Romantic artists and writers desired to ‘transcend time via the medium of a timeless “folk” history’, as Clare Morgan points out.<sup>16</sup> In Wales, a similar impulse manifested itself in the celebration of the life of the *Gwerin* – an idealised, classless rural peasantry – which became a defining feature of Welsh cultural nationalism in the first decades of the twentieth century.<sup>17</sup> However, the mythologizing of a timeless ‘folk’ was mitigated in Wales by a more scientific attention to traditional rural culture, carried out by anthropologist H.J. and his student, Iorwerth C. Peate. As Daniel Williams observes, anthropology was popular in Roberts’s Anglophone Welsh literary circle: Fleure’s article ‘The Welsh People’, for example, was published in the 1939 volume of *Wales*.<sup>18</sup> In her depiction of Welsh village life, Roberts draws upon Fleure’s notion of survivals, the idea that rural Welsh villages harbour ancient ‘thoughts and visions’ that remain discoverable in *material* form.<sup>19</sup> Yet, as I show, she also re-casts Welsh anthropology from the perspective of gender, using it in order to re-connect with a past rooted in the domestic, the ordinary and particular: what Margiad Evans termed ‘a corner cupboard history, a deliberate evocation, a summary of man’s odd needs’.<sup>20</sup> Drawing upon Wundt’s idea of folk culture as the physical expression of the inner, mental world of the community,

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<sup>16</sup> Clare Morgan, p. 39.

<sup>17</sup> Prys Morgan, ‘The Gwerin of Wales – Myth and Reality’, in *The Welsh and Their Country: Selected Readings from the Social Sciences*, ed. by I. Hume and T.R. Pryce (LLandysul: Gomer Press, 1986), pp. 134-152.

<sup>18</sup> Daniel Williams, p. 126, H.J. Fleure, ‘The Welsh People’, *Wales*, 10 (1939), 265-269.

<sup>19</sup> H.J. Fleure, *Wales and her People* (Wrexham: Hughes and Son, 1926), p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> Margiad Evans, ‘Review of *Welsh Border Country and Old English Household Life*’, *Wales*, 10 (1939), 285-286 (p. 286). Evans similarly meditates upon the connection between domestic culture in rural areas and ‘the dispersal of the monasteries’, and, like Woolf and Roberts, espouses a history focused upon the ‘common and lively’.

she shows how making things and practicing traditions in the space of the home can render a hidden ancestral past ‘newly tangible, and finally appropriable’.<sup>21</sup>

### **‘Earthbound’: organic roots and insular rites**

For Roberts, as for classicist Jane Harrison, history and tradition is a ‘thing lived, experienced’.<sup>22</sup> Like Harrison, she places an emphasis on the power of ritual to establish a sense of continuity with the past, and to contribute to a ‘meaningful shaping of social time and space’ in the present.<sup>23</sup> As I have suggested in the previous chapters, modernism’s ‘ritual consciousness’ was strongly influenced by Harrison’s ‘ritual theory’, the idea that the origins of Greek drama, and Western art in general, lay in so-called ‘primitive’ ritual acts. Harrison claimed that practical rites (what she called *dromenon*, the ‘thing done’) engendered the abstract thought that made art possible.<sup>24</sup> They also embodied a sense of communal life: thus, ritual dancers felt ‘not *mimesis* but “participation”, unity, and community’.<sup>25</sup>

The dramatic political, social, and economic upheavals that marked the 1930s, including the rise of socialism and the outbreak of the Spanish civil war, occasioned a shift to the left among writers during this period. As Kristin Bluemel has shown, questions pertaining to labour, political commitment, and community dominated the literary agenda as never before, and in this context, Harrison’s conception of ritual as the architect of community became newly relevant.<sup>26</sup> Harrison insisted that ritual acts retained a practical dimension, being considered by ‘primitive’ societies as a form of ‘communal work for all’.<sup>27</sup> Thus, by incorporating dramatic and ritual models into their work, modernists of the 1930s and 1940s

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<sup>21</sup> Hegeman, p. 37.

<sup>22</sup> Harrison, *Alpha and Omega*, p. 205.

<sup>23</sup> Maddrell, p. 16.

<sup>24</sup> Jane Harrison, *Ancient Art and Ritual* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1913), p. 26.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>26</sup> Maroula Jouannou, *Women Writers of the 1930s: Gender, Politics, and History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 3, Bluemel, *Intermodernism*, p. 12.

<sup>27</sup> Harrison, *Ancient Art and Ritual*, pp. 135, 3.

sought to introduce a collective, choric voice into their text, and through this, to negotiate a new relation between art and society. Moreover, while many writers were attempting to work out an idiom of commitment during the 1930s, as Kristin Bluemel has shown, it was women writers such as Storm Jameson, Winifred Holtby, and Sylvia Townsend Warner who made a particular attempt to ‘speak to and for community, in the language of the people’.<sup>28</sup> In Roberts’s poem ‘Earthbound’ (1944), the wreath made by the speaker to mark a village death forms part of a ritual that serves to integrate the solitary artist into the circle of her village community.

The poem’s opening depicts a domestic environment marked by a sense of mimesis and reflection:

I, in my dressing gown,  
At the dressing table with mirror in hand  
Suggest my lips with accustomed air, see  
The reflected van like lipstick enter the village  
When Laura came, and asked me if I knew. (ll. 1-5)

The speaker ‘suggest[s] my lips with accustomed air’ as the van comes into the village bringing news of a man’s death, replicating, perhaps, images of heroines from contemporary cinema. The multiple mirrors refracting her gaze are suggestive, perhaps, of the mediated, unreal nature of death in an age of mass media and mechanised warfare; in Keith Douglas’s poem ‘How to Kill’, for example, the machine gun’s glass dial, like the speaker’s hand-held mirror in Roberts’s poem, has a distancing effect on the experience of death, transforming it into spectacle.<sup>29</sup> The sense of controlled detachment that characterises her treatment of disastrous events, both here and in other poems such as ‘Swansea Raid’, can be seen as what Gill Plain terms ‘a strategy of preservation, its distancing effect making safe the appalling

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<sup>28</sup> Bluemel, *Intermodernism*, p. 12.

<sup>29</sup> Keith Douglas, ‘How to Kill’, in *War Poetry: an Introductory Reader*, ed. by Simon Featherstone (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 208. For a discussion of Douglas’s poetry in the context of other poets of World War II, see John Pikoulis, ‘The Poetry of the Second World War’, pp. 193-198.

experiences of bombing, displacement, and loss' that characterised World War II.<sup>30</sup> However, its precision of understatement is also evocative of the style of the medieval Welsh bardic poets, whom she admired for their power of getting 'to the point'.

'Earthbound' can be seen to reflect Roberts's conception of the poet as a public figure, administering for her community. Drawing upon medieval Welsh models, the text converts the private experience of death into a creative public ritual:<sup>31</sup>

We made the wreath standing on the white floor,  
Bent each to our purpose wire to rose-wire;  
Pinning each leaf smooth,  
Polishing the outer edge with the warmth of our hands.

The circle finished and note thought out,  
We carried the ring through the attentive eyes of the street:  
Then slowly drove by Butcher's van to the 'Union Hall'.

We walked the greaving room alone,  
Saw him lying in his upholstered box,  
Violet ribbon carefully crossed,  
And about his side bunches of wild thyme.  
No one stirred as we offered the gift. No one drank there again (ll. 13-24).

The marked shift in the poem from 'I' to 'we' suggests that the wreath comes to express the collective, unspeakable grief of the villagers, hinted at in the silence of the 'greaving room' [sic]. The external spectator of the poem's opening is transformed, through the act of offering the wreath, into an active participant in the life of her community: as Tony Conran has observed, 'the wreath becomes a symbol of participation; almost a symbol of the poem that has been made of it'.<sup>32</sup>

Roberts was an expert in the craft of flower-arranging, for she had trained as a florist with Constance Spry, and once set up a flower-arranging business named Bruska in her

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<sup>30</sup> Plain, p. 173.

<sup>31</sup> Esty, *Shrinking Island*, p. 17.

<sup>32</sup> Conran, 'The Lyric Pieces', p. 130.

private rooms in London.<sup>33</sup> The connection that Roberts draws between poetry and craft, both in this text and throughout her work, bespeaks her conscious engagement with Welsh and Welsh-language cultural traditions: Glyn Jones relates that in Wales, the poet has traditionally been conceived, not as a genius apart, at variance with her or his country, but as ‘a sort of craftsman, well integrated in the community of which he [sic] is a product’.<sup>34</sup> Accordingly, Roberts’s text shows how the artist’s body, infused into her craft through the ‘warmth of our hands’ becomes integrated, through her sacrificial gift, into the body of the community. Like many of her poems, ‘Earthbound’ draws upon her personal experience of the war; she records in a diary entry of 1941 how the poem was inspired by the act of making a wreath with a female evacuee friend for a ‘village death’ (D, 23). As Conran has argued, in the work of both Brenda Chamberlain and Lynette Roberts, ‘the boundaries between public and private are frequently transgressed’.<sup>35</sup> Thus, in this poem, Roberts posits the private space of the home as a site for the creation of a communal art that serves to mediate between public and private experience.

The ‘anthropological turn’ that Jed Esty ascribes to the modernism of the 1930s and 1940s was bound up in two, apparently contradictory impulses: the first was ‘re-enchantment’, marked, as I have shown, by reinvigorated interest in medievalism, magic, and folklore, and the second was a concern with the ordinary aspects of daily life. This interest in the ordinary and particular manifested itself in many cultural developments during this period, from the rise of the documentary and the Mass-Observation movement to the use of the ‘objet trouvé’ in the Surrealism of the 1930s.<sup>36</sup> The work of both David Jones and Lynette

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<sup>33</sup> See Roberts’s diary entry for 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1941, in *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, ed. by Patrick McGuinness, p. 32.

<sup>34</sup> Glyn Jones, *The Dragon Has Two Tongues: Essays on Anglo-Welsh Writers and Writing*, rev. edn., ed. by Tony Brown (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001), p. 121.

<sup>35</sup> Conran, *Frontiers in Anglo-Welsh Poetry*, p. 165.

<sup>36</sup> Andre Breton’s ‘Poèmes-Objets’ constructions, a fusion of poetry and assembled objects such as an egg or a wooden lock, offer one example of this.

Roberts offers, I would suggest, a synthesis of these different impulses, for both writers seek, in the words of Jones, ‘to in some sense make sacral, or give otherness to, the particular’.<sup>37</sup> In the preface to his collection of essays *Epoch and Artist* (1959), David Jones argued that while Western civilization was thought to have left behind the so-called ‘primitive’ tendency to confuse the absolute and the universal with the relative and particular, this tendency persists in ‘all of us’. Moreover, for Jones, the confusion of the divine with the human, the ideal with the real, should function as a foundation stone of poetry:

[...] poesis should and sometimes does make radiant “particular facts” so that they become intimations of immortality or, if the reader won’t stand for that, then intimations of some otherness of some sort.<sup>38</sup>

Roberts’s poetry often attempts to ‘make sacral’ the domestic sphere, a symbol and locus for the ordinary and the particular, and through this, to express the ‘otherness’ of Welsh culture. Like Woolf, she recognized the interrelation of domestic space with wider political systems, and by re-enchanting the domestic sphere, she sought to put everyday life back in touch with art, and thus, to bring into effect the spiritual and cultural transformation of the Welsh nation itself. However, she also undercuts her ‘sacral’ space by showing that it, too, is subject to the incursion of war. Indeed, her representation of the home, like her poetic style more generally, is hinged on paradox. As I explore in the section that follows, her poetry frequently stages a tension between the domestic sphere as a psychological haven, a site of strength and resistance, and the domestic sphere as a vulnerable and penetrable space.

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<sup>37</sup> David Jones, *Epoch and Artist* (London: Faber & Faber, 1959), p. 14. This, too, was consonant with the cultural agenda of the period; Alexandra Harris claimed that John Piper attempted to develop an ‘art that found some sanctity in ordinary, local things’ (p. 36).

<sup>38</sup> Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, p. 16.

### **‘The Shadow Remains’: Roberts’s ‘domestic paradox’**

While late modernist writers such as Roberts sought to encode the ‘discordant universe’ associated with modernity, they also sought to palliate this discordance through a return to organic roots. Indeed, the ‘home anthropology’ described by Esty can be viewed as part of a wider modernist compulsion to ‘return to the source’, in response to the war and an attendant sense of social crisis.<sup>39</sup> On one level, this might be seen as a projection of what Ernest Gellner terms the ‘deep desire to return to the sources of one’s vitality and true identity’; it was certainly integral to the modernist project of national renewal.<sup>40</sup> T.S. Eliot – a prominent campaigner for rural resurrection during the 1930s – claimed in his essay ‘The Idea of a Christian Society’ (1939) that ‘the purpose of reascending to [organic] origins is that we should be able to return, with greater spiritual knowledge, to our own situation’.<sup>41</sup> Roberts’s poetry retains a sense of the domestic as a material space, shaped and a maintained by the daily labour of women. However, it also acts to ‘make sacral’ the space of the home by re-imagining mundane domestic tasks as meaningful rituals. Drawing upon T.S. Eliot’s conception of ritual as the organic roots of art, she suggests that these rites, rooted as they are in community life, not only offer reconnection with a vanishing organic culture, but also open the way for new cultural growth in the future.

In her poem ‘The Shadow Remains’, ‘a good poem of my v. simple life’, domestic space, and domestic labour, provide a vehicle for re-connecting with ‘the sources of one’s vitality’ and a more authentic existence.<sup>42</sup>

To speak of everyday things with ease  
And arrest the mind to a simpler world  
Where living tables are stripped of a cloth

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<sup>39</sup> Marina Mackay, *Modernism and World War II*, p. 2.

<sup>40</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Nationalism* (London: Phoenix, 1998), p. 72.

<sup>41</sup> T.S. Eliot, ‘The Idea of a Christian Society’, in *Christianity and Culture* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1977), p. 49.

<sup>42</sup> Roberts, *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, p. 47.

Of wood on which I washed, sat at peace:  
Cooked duck, shot on an evening in peacock cold:  
Studied awhile: wrote: baked bread for us both.

But here by the hearth with leisured grace  
I prefer to speak of the vulgar clock that drips  
With the falling of rain: woodbine tips, and yarrow

Spill, lamp, packet of salt, and two pence of mace,  
That sit on the shelf edged with a metal strip,  
And below, brazier fire that burns our sorrow,

Dries weeping socks above on the rack: that knew  
Two angels pinned to the wall – again two. (ll. 1-14)

The poem traces a search for a culture in which body, world, and language are integrated, not fragmented. For Eliot, a unified soul was possible only within a ‘knowable’ community, while the fragmented society of the metropolis engendered, in contrast, only fragmented souls.<sup>43</sup> Here, the speaker’s participation in the domestic rhythms of her community allow for a moment of psychic harmony or peace. Roberts uses her diary to record moments when ‘even the most dreary tasks take on an ethereal quality’ (*D*, 26), and a similar transformation of daily domestic life can be seen in this poem.<sup>44</sup> Ordinary activities are imbued with a sacramental, ritual dimension: the consumption of flesh, and the sharing of bread, gesture to both pagan and Catholic rituals, while on a formal level the parataxis and repeated use of the colon in the second stanza imbue the text with an incantatory rhythm suggestive of both chanting and enchantment.

Roberts’s poetry often alludes to the ways in which the female body is positioned as a machine or automaton by the culture of mass modernity: in *Gods with Stainless Ears*, ‘aproned women’ work mechanically ‘in each striped tidy plot’ (I, l. 111), while the speaker depicts herself as a machine-like ‘black /Madonna with heart of tin’ (V, ll. 135-6). However, in poems such as ‘The Shadow Remains’, she replaces the mechanical rhythms imposed on

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<sup>43</sup> Esty, *Shrinking Island*, pp. 114-115.

<sup>44</sup> Roberts, *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, p. 26.



the female body with what she calls the ‘earth rhythms’ of ritual.<sup>45</sup> Gesturing to the ideas of Henri Bergson, who claimed that intuition was capable of joining together what was perceived as separate, discrete moments, the bodily rhythms involved in the speaker’s domestic rites allow her reconnect with the ‘roots’ of Welsh culture, and with the material grounds of existence itself.<sup>46</sup>

Gaston Bachelard has stressed the imaginative, affective resonance accrued to ordinary domestic tasks in fiction, maintaining that ‘[t]hey keep vigilant watch over the house, they link its immediate past to its immediate future, they are what maintains it in the security of being’.<sup>47</sup> The speaker’s re-enactment of the traditional rhythms of her community endows the present moment with what Frank Kermode terms *Kairos*: meaningful, shaped time, weaving together past, present and future.<sup>48</sup> Time takes on a physical, organic form as the tick of the clock is transformed into the dripping of rain, offering respite from the ‘homogenous, empty time’ of modernity that Roberts elsewhere associated with the onward tread of the soldier’s march.<sup>49</sup>

Culture and language are here entwined: the stripping back of the tablecloth or of one’s clothes for a wash entail a salutary stripping back of language. In her diary, Roberts

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<sup>45</sup> Lynette Roberts, ‘Visit to T.S. Eliot’, in *Lynette Roberts: Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, ed. by Patrick McGuinness, pp. 149-153 (p.150).

<sup>46</sup> See Eiko Nakano, ‘Katherine Mansfield, Rhythm and Henri Bergson’, in *Katherine Mansfield and Literary Modernism*, ed. by Janet Wilson and Jerry Kimber (London and New York: Continuum, 2011) pp. 30-41 (p. 30).

<sup>47</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p. 67.

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Esty, *Shrinking Island*, p. 116.

<sup>49</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (London: Fontana Press, 1992), pp. 245-258 (p. 252). See *Gods with Stainless Ears*, Part III:

...Such battles of mule  
Stubbornness; or retreat from vast stone walls,

Brought non-existence of past, present and  
Future 1, 2,1, 2,1, 2, left, right, left, right,  
Accumulating into a monotonous pattern  
Of dereliction and gloom (ll. 99-105).

provides the context for her poem in a weekly bathing ritual that she shares with Keidrych

Rhys:

Keidrych (that is my husband) and I wash once a week: we boil a bucket of water, strip-tease exposing a small bare patch of flesh, we scrub the exposed part violently, then cover the part with wool, and immediately attach another part. Soon, our whole body is cleansed from our head to our toes. We work thoroughly and methodically, each bending over his or her basin sharing the soap which rests between us on the kitchen table. (*D*, 9)

Roberts's poem can similarly be seen to project a ritual of purification that, stripping away artifice and language, offers a new awareness of the body, and Welsh culture, as a thing-in-itself.<sup>50</sup> For Mary Douglas, rites of purification can be understood as 'a creative movement, an attempt to relate form to function, to make unity out of experience', and Roberts's poem performs a similar role. Jane Marcus claims that Virginia Woolf develops a model of the artist as 'charwoman to the world', cleaning up mess, and it is notable that, in 'The Shadow Remains', the act of writing is similarly incorporated into domestic labour and the rhythms of female experience.<sup>51</sup> Punctuating her list of domestic activities with colons ('Cooked duck, shot on an evening cold:/ Studied awhile: wrote: baked bread for us both' (4, ll. 5-6), Roberts suggests the equivalence of writing, washing, and baking bread. Her use of punctuation also signals pauses in a speaking voice, pointing to the 'pause' for reflection and thought offered by her physical activity. Re-imagining mundane domestic tasks as meaningful ritual acts, Roberts breaks down the boundary between art and the everyday lives of women, and projects a new aesthetic based on process and everydayness rather than finality and completion.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> For a discussion of British writers' attempts to conceptualise English culture as a thing-in-itself, see Esty, *Shrinking Island*, p. 61.

<sup>51</sup> Marcus, *Languages of Patriarchy*, p. 56.

<sup>52</sup> Though I have found no concrete evidence that Roberts actually read Harrison, she was undoubtedly influenced by Eliot who, as Martha C. Carpentier has shown, engaged significantly with Harrison's ideas, particularly in his later work (See Martha C. Carpentier, *Ritual, Myth, and the Modernist Text: The Influence of Jane Ellen Harrison on Joyce, Eliot, and Woolf* (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach Publishers, 1998). Harrison, like Roberts, emphasized the everyday, domestic, female-centred aspects of Greek ritual. In her

As John Goodby points out, Lynette Roberts was a ‘non-nostalgic modernist’. Thus, although the ritual acts dramatized by ‘The Shadow Remains’ serve to place the speaker back in touch with the traditions of the past, they are also forward-looking,<sup>53</sup> effecting what Roberts terms a ‘cleansing purity and rebirth’ of language and of culture.<sup>54</sup> For Gaston Bachelard, domestic ‘care’ – the perfection of the beauty of domestic objects – makes objects perpetually new. Through poetic house work, therefore, the house discovers its ‘inner growth’: the dreamer, according to Bachelard, ‘can reconstruct the world from an object that he transforms magically through his care of it’.<sup>55</sup> Through her poetry-as-housework, Roberts strips the world down to its essential elements, in order to make it anew.

Roberts’s depiction of the domestic interior bears the influence of the Arts and Crafts movement that, initiated by William Morris during the 1860s, generated a new wave of enthusiasm among British writers of the 1930s and 1940s, as Alexandra Harris has shown, and was revived in Wales in the first half of the twentieth century through the activities centred around the Gregynog Press.<sup>56</sup> The ‘leisured grace’ and simplicity of ‘The Shadow Remains’ mirror the principles of Arts and Crafts design, summarized in the 1897 ‘Statement of Purpose of the Boston Society of Arts and Crafts’ as simplicity, dignity, and fittingness of materials.<sup>57</sup> The simple forms of her domestic interior are redolent of the woodcut

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*Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1908) she connected these domestic rites backward, to a matriarchal culture of the past, and forward, to the flowering of Greek spirituality in the Eleusinian Mysteries.

<sup>53</sup> John Goodby, in *The Cambridge History of English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 871.

<sup>54</sup> Roberts, ‘Visit to T.S. Eliot’, p. 150.

<sup>55</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, pp. 69, 70.

<sup>56</sup> The Gregynog Press was founded by the sisters Gwendoline and Margaret Davies in Gregynog House in 1922, and produced limited-edition, decorative texts, with the aim of showcasing Welsh literature and the best examples of Welsh writing in English. The Press’s espousal of craft and design was evidenced by the hand-made paper and hand presses or small letterpress machinery used to make the books, and the visual presentation of the editions, which included wood engravings by Blair Hughes-Stanton, Agnes Miller Parker, and David Jones. ‘The Gregynog Press’, National Museum of Wales website <<http://www.museumwales.ac.uk/en/1981/>> [Accessed 14 December 2012].

<sup>57</sup> Statement of Purpose of the Society of Arts and Crafts, Boston (1897), quoted in Beverly K. Brandt, *The Craftsman and the Critic: Defining Usefulness and Purpose in Arts and Crafts-Era Boston* (Amhurst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), p. 113.

illustrations that, informed by the medievalist aesthetics developed at William Morris's Kelmscott Press, gained popularity during the modernist period; the Gregynog Press, for example, commissioned several wood engravings by Blair Hughes-Stanton, Agnes Miller Parker, and David Jones.<sup>58</sup> Bachelard suggests that house images in woodcuts invite us to inhabit the 'the essential house', projecting a space that 'asks to be lived in simply, with all the *security* that *simplicity* brings'.<sup>59</sup> Roberts's painting of the interior of her own cottage, Tŷ Gwyn, identified by both Tony Conran and Patrick McGuinness as a form of naïve art, can similarly be seen to evoke 'the essential house', an imagined space that conjures a sense of psychological well-being and security.<sup>60</sup>

As I have shown in Chapter 3, Woolf used purity as a trope for women's intellectual and psychological integrity, the 'room of one's own in the soul'.<sup>61</sup> The ritual wash, purifying rain, and sense of peace evoked by the poem construct the domestic sphere a sanctified 'room of one's own' of the mind that remains undefiled by the distortions of the war machine. et while the ritual housework of 'A Shadow Remains' can be seen as an attempt to shape and maintain the borders of the house, it cannot prevent war from breaking in. In this poem, the cottage is both a Romantic space of detachment, and a stage upon which the 'shadow' of history is projected.

Unity and fragmentation, pairing and peeling apart, are strong themes in Roberts's work, reflecting, perhaps, the reality of separation and dislocation that marked many people's experience of the war. Indeed, Roberts herself was separated from Keidrych Rhys when he was called up to serve as a gunner of the South coast in 1940, an experience that was a source

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<sup>58</sup> 'The Gregynog Press', <<http://www.museumwales.ac.uk/en/1981/>> [Accessed 14 December 2012].

<sup>59</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, pp. 49, 50 (Bachelard's emphasis).

<sup>60</sup> Patrick McGuinness, *Collected Poems*, p. xxxiv.

<sup>61</sup> Marcus, *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy*, p. 121.

of great suffering and loneliness for her.<sup>62</sup> In ‘The Shadow Remains’, the meaning of unity and disunity is explored within a domestic context:

Spills, lamp, packet of salt, and twopence of mace,  
That sit on the shelf edged with a metal strip,  
And below, brazier fire that burns our sorrow,

Dries weeping socks above on the rack: that knew  
Two angels pinned to the wall – again two. (ll. 10-13)

The hanging socks by the fire signal the speaker’s ‘paired’ domestic life; figures for the ordinary, bodily existence of speaker and her partner, the socks are mirrored by a pair of hanging angels on the wall, images of the couple’s poetic, transcendent selves. Roberts relates in her ‘Notes for an Autobiography’ that ‘the two angels [referred to in ‘The Shadow Remains’] were given to me by Sonia Brownell symbolizing Keidrych and myself who have not been acknowledged in the literary world for over 30 years’.<sup>63</sup> Angels and images of flight recur in her writing, as I have suggested in Chapter 2; her painting of Llanybri’s old chapel, for example, includes an image of her friend Rosie as a flying angel wearing ‘her best harvest apron’. Roberts’s painting of the old chapel depicts both a space that Roberts considered sacred and fields spread with manure, and her homely angels offer a similar synthesis of the material and the spiritual.<sup>64</sup>

The socks depicted in ‘The Shadow Remains’ not only offer terrestrial doubles for the angels; they are also ‘weeping’ for them as figures that they once ‘knew’, which implies that the ‘angels’ are now gone, and perhaps dead. This points to the suggestion that, while the domestic realm can sometimes act as a peaceful haven for the poetic self, it can also ‘murder’ it: though Roberts often poses her cottage as a space of beauty and creative inspiration in her

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<sup>62</sup> Roberts’s diary entry from July 12<sup>th</sup> 1940 is suggestive of her ‘distressed condition’ at her separation from Keidrych. She relates that a villager, Rosie, having detected her suffering, offered her daughter Iris for Roberts to sleep with as a means of staving off loneliness (*D*, p. 28).

<sup>63</sup> Lynette Roberts, ‘Notes for an Autobiography’, pp. 212-3.

<sup>64</sup> Lynette Roberts, *Llanybri Old Chapel*. Image repr. in *Diaries, Letters, and Recollections*, p. 35.

poetry, she owns in her diary to feeling ‘cramped and barred from life, imprisoned’ by domestic labour and the ‘ties of marriage life’ (D, 9). The angels ‘pinned to the wall’ could also be seen to foreshadow the persecution of ‘outsiders’ under fascism, a group with whom Roberts identified as a poet.<sup>65</sup> Like the ‘society of outsiders’ imagined by Woolf in *Three Guineas*, the pinned angels are suggestive of cross-gender solidarity, a shared struggle against totalitarian forces within the space of the home. They can also be seen to convey anxieties about the place of the poet in the post-war world: in Part V of Roberts’s *Gods with Stainless Ears*, the ‘gunner and his girl’ return to earth from ‘love in harmony on cloud in fourth dimensional state’ to find a glittering postwar landscape, empty save for ‘pylons, telegraph wires, and a monstrous placard which reads: “Mental Home for Poets”’ (64). Like the characters in Woolf’s wartime novel *Between the Acts* (1941), Roberts’s angel figures appear ‘caught and caged; prisoners’ (101) within a patriarchal system that extends even to the apparent refuge of domestic space.

Yet in spite of the poem’s ominous undertones, the final image of ‘Two angels pinned to the wall – again two’ conserves a sense of optimism for the future.<sup>66</sup> Luce Irigaray defines angels as ‘[t]hese messengers who never remain enclosed in a place, who are also never immobile’.<sup>67</sup> Neither male nor female, angels, for Irigaray, are ‘endlessly reopening the enclosure of the universe, of universes, identities, the unfolding of actions, of history’.<sup>68</sup>

Roberts’s angels, then, might be understood as subversive figures, images for that part of the

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<sup>65</sup> In her diary, Roberts’s persistently figures herself and her husband as outsiders, both in their regard to the state and to the literary mainstream, lamenting ‘the little faith that the people have in dedicated writers’, and expressing frustration at the bars erected by government policy to their claiming of dole (p. 3).

<sup>66</sup> Mythical figures of flight also emerge as a motif in African-American Literature; in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, the figure of the Flying African gestures ambiguously both to impossibility of escape, and to the continued possibilities for transcendence available to the African-American subject.

<sup>67</sup> Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. by Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (London: The Athlone Press, 1993), p. 15.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* There is a connection to be made here, perhaps, with ‘the beautiful singing sexless angel’ that appears at the end of a series of hospital poems written by Alun Lewis in early 1943. See Pikoulis, ‘The Poetry of the Second World War’, p. 58.

self that can never be contained by gender, ideology, and domestic space. They also indicate, perhaps, a desire to break out of the mental enclosures imposed by war. Conjuring the ‘fate of a love still torn between here and elsewhere’, Roberts’s pinned angels express the condition of the wartime subject, suspended between a seemingly distant past and uncertain future, hoping for reinvention in the post-war world.<sup>69</sup>

### **‘The Curlew’ and ‘Raw Salt on Eye’: the intrusion of war into the home**

Domestic space is in Roberts’s work both rooted and thus strong, and infinitely fragile: like *Between the Acts*, her poetry presents a world in which, in the words of Alex Zwerdling, ‘the borders that separate us become permeable and sometimes disappear altogether’.<sup>70</sup> Her depiction of domestic space often reflects a sense of the omnipresence of war, what Gill Plain describes as its capacity ‘to permeate the boundaries of individual subjectivity, to distort, disrupt and displace the known parameters of self and society’.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, the new challenge posed by the war, and wartime propaganda, to the separation of inner and outer spaces was expressed in dramatic form by the image of the bombed house, its domestic interior now open for all the world to see – an image that was perceived as simultaneously surreally apocalyptic and revolutionary.<sup>72</sup> In her poem ‘Curlew’, Roberts draws on a tendency, popular in medieval Welsh narrative, to use anthropomorphized animals to convey human forces of disturbance

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Alex Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), p. 279.

<sup>71</sup> Plain, p. 173.

<sup>72</sup> For contemporary cultural perceptions of the bombsite, see Leo Mellor, *Reading the Ruins: Modernism, Bombsites and British Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). See also Woolf’s description of photographs of the devastation wrought by bombing campaigns against civilians in the Spanish Civil War in *Three Guineas*: ‘[...] that undoubtedly is the section of a house. A bomb has torn open the side; there is still a birdcage hanging in what was presumably the sitting-room, but the rest of the house looks like nothing so much as a bunch of spillikins suspended in the mid-air’ (p. 164). Patricia Laurence notices that ‘dead bodies and ruined houses’ (198) form an affective refrain that runs throughout Woolf’s *Three Guineas*; see Patricia Laurence, ‘The Facts and Fugues of War: from *Three Guineas* to *Between the Acts*’, in *Virginia Woolf and War: Fiction, Reality, and Myth*, ed. by Mark Hussey (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1992), pp. 225-245 (p. 234).

and destruction.<sup>73</sup> A bird's flight into the home signals the war's incursion not only into domestic space, but also into the precincts of the mind:

A curlew hovers and haunts the room  
On bare boards creak its filleted feet:  
For freedom intones four notes of doom,

Crept, slept, wept, kept, under aerial gloom:  
With Europe restless in his wing beat,  
A curlew hovers and haunts the room: (ll.1-6).

In this poem, as in 'The Shadow Remains', the presence of war is ghostly and disembodied, both there and not-there. In Roberts's work, birds, whether natural or mythological, are often used to evoke the movement of the airwaves and flight paths that shaped the spaces of war for civilians. Here, the curlew's insidious entry into the home reflects the fact that, given the rise of popular journalism and new media such as the radio, war could penetrate into the domestic sphere as never before. The intoning 'notes of doom' that accompany the bird signal, perhaps, the hum of the bomber jet. The noise brings the stretching expanses of Europe into the demarcated space of the room: inside becomes outside as the roof opens up to 'aerial gloom'. The speaker's domestic actions (or rather, non-actions), 'crept, slept, wept, kept' fall in tune with the mechanical throb of the plane, or the march of soldiers: she is, unwillingly but inevitably, part of the machine. The bird-plane's notes are sounded 'for freedom', yet they, and the war machine that they represent, seem to entrap the speaker. This flight for freedom announces doom because it is at the expense of other people's destruction; indeed, the rest of the poem acts out the domestic devastation that the bomber will cause somewhere in an 'enemy' territory:

Fouls wire, pierces the upholstery bloom,  
Strikes window pane with shagreen bleat,  
Flicking scarlet tongue to a frenzied flume

Splints his curved beak on square glass tomb (ll.7-10).

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<sup>73</sup> The monstrous boar 'Twrch Trwyth', who appears in the 'Culhwch and Olwen' story collected in Lady Charlotte Guest's *The Mabinogion*, offers just one example of this tradition.



Roberts writes against the (Western, Christian) poetic tradition evoking the bird as image of the soul. Gaston Bachelard has commented on the use of the ‘animal cry’ as a marker of ‘different types of aggression’ in poetry’,<sup>74</sup> and here it becomes an image for the bestial, atavistic aggression that Woolf associated with modern warfare in *Three Guineas*.<sup>75</sup> However, the curlew is also, perhaps, a ghostly shadow of the speaker herself, ‘[c]aptured, explod[ing] a shrill sky croon’ within the ‘glass tomb’ of the domestic sphere while the history of Europe is acted out somewhere else. In her diary, Roberts records her distress and frustration on hearing of the fall of France, and expresses a wish to sell her British status and go ‘running off’ to assist in the Resistance.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, there is something almost triumphant to the bird’s escape at the end of the poem, ‘Fluting voice and shade through cloud’s moist sleet’ (l. 17)

Gill Plain asserts that ‘wartime women [during the Second World War] were assumed to be performing rather than inhabiting the identity of public citizen’, and Roberts’s poetry explores the difficulties, as well as the regenerative potential, of the woman artist’s attempt to assume a place in society during wartime.<sup>77</sup> Like D.H. Lawrence in Metz during World War I, Roberts was suspected of espionage by the Llanybri villagers in 1942, and in her poem ‘Raw Salt on Eye’, the fate of the female outsider merges into a wider political story of suffering, betrayal, and denial:

Stone Village, who would know that I lived alone;  
 Who would know that I suffered a two-edged pain  
 Was accused of spycraft to full innate minds with loam,  
 Was felled innocent, suffered a strain as rare as Cain’s.

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<sup>74</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 44.

<sup>75</sup> The curlew’s destruction of the speaker’s controlled domestic realm evokes the war horse’s destruction of the garden in Eavan Boland’s poem of the same name: ‘This dry night, nothing unusual/About the clip, clop, casual /Iron of his shoes as he stamps death/Like a mint on the innocent coinage of earth.’ Eavan Boland, ‘The War Horse’, in *Contemporary Irish Poetry: an Anthology*, ed. by Anthony Bradley (Berkeley, L.A, and London: University of California Press, 1980), p. 346.

<sup>76</sup> Diary entry for June 17<sup>th</sup> 1940, in Lynette Roberts, *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, p. 17.

<sup>77</sup> Plain, p. 168.

[...]

Cold grate, who would know that I craved my love;  
Who would know that the pain fell twice; could realize  
My loss. Only the coloured cries of stars can prove  
The cold rise of dawn – understand and advise.

[...]

Hard people, will wash up now, bake bread and hang  
Dishcloth over the weeping hedge. I can not raise  
My mind, for it has gone wandering away with hum [sic];  
I shall not forget, and your ill-mannered praise. (ll. 1-4, 9-12, 17-20)

For Bachelard, human identity is sustained and held together through the dream-image of home, for '[i]ts councils of continuity are unceasing. Without it, man would be a dispersed being'.<sup>78</sup> The speaker, exiled from the village 'home' she had embraced, becomes a 'dispersed being', her mind wandering away from her body to join, along with her lover, the ghostly ranks of what Laura Wainwright terms 'the dispersive tide of the Second World War',<sup>79</sup> the refugees and dispossessed peoples with whom Roberts frequently identifies in her diary.

Roberts's poem explores the idea that even relatively egalitarian communities maintain their borders by 'abjecting' unstable or undesirable elements.<sup>80</sup> While Llanybri is sometimes presented by Roberts as a living, friendly interlocutor, 'reading' her as she 'reads' it (indeed, even in this poem the speaker attempts to confide in the stone of the 'White village' [l.13]), here it emerges as a blank prison, the fortress of an embattled Welsh community.<sup>81</sup> The fate of the female outsider among her own people is mirrored by that of Abel, the victim and scapegoat, and Cain, the fallen angel, suffering the 'strain' of being set

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<sup>78</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 7.

<sup>79</sup> Laura Wainwright, 'New Territories in Modernism: Anglophone Welsh Writing 1930-1949' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Cardiff University, 2010), p. 69.

<sup>80</sup> See René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. by Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1979).

<sup>81</sup> I am indebted to Prof. Katie Gramich for the idea of the 'embattled' Welsh community, defensively seeking survival in the face of pressures – linguistic, ideological – imposed by England as colonial power and the structures of global capitalism (Lecture on Kate Roberts, 29 November 2012, Cardiff University).

apart, banished and destined to wander the earth.<sup>82</sup> Her two-edged pain is symptomatic of her separation from the person she loves, but it is also a marker of her ‘divided sensibility’, a wound rendered raw by accusations of duplicity.<sup>83</sup>

As the village fills itself with lies and wraps itself in layers of concealment like armour, the speaker, like a sailor, turns to the stars for orientation; perhaps the sea is in a sense her ‘home’, for she claims that ‘Only the coloured cries of the stars can prove/The cold rise of dawn – understand and advise’ (6). The attempt to orientate the self through an upward gaze at the stars is a recurrent motif in Roberts’s work: in *Gods with Stainless Ears* the night sky appears to the speaker as ‘Braille in a rock of frost’ in a moment of anguish following her loss of both her husband and her unborn child. Though suggestive, perhaps, of the speaker’s desire to rise out of the place within which she is enmeshed, the upward gaze toward the stars can also be seen as part of an attempt to dwell authentically on the earth. For Heidegger, the process of dwelling is dependent upon ‘the upward glance [that] spans the between of sky and earth’.<sup>84</sup> This gesture, which Heidegger calls ‘measure-taking’, ‘gauges the between, which brings the two, heaven and earth, to one another’ – an idea reflected in Roberts’s depiction of the sky as a rock or cave.<sup>85</sup> For Heidegger, this form of ‘measure-taking’ is the means by which subjectivity is formed: ‘man, as man, has always measured himself with and against something heavenly. Lucifer, too, is descended from heaven’. Therefore, by ‘taking the measure’, the subject learns to dwell poetically within herself.<sup>86</sup> In

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<sup>82</sup> John Byron, *Cain and Abel in Text and Tradition: Jewish and Christian Interpretations of First Sibling Rivalry* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), p. 242. As Byron suggests, ancient interpreters of the Old Testament speculated that the Devil was Cain’s father; others held that he was the offspring of an encounter between Eve and some form of Angel of the Lord (pp. 15-16). The story of Cain’s wandering, furthermore, percolated into the medieval legend of the Wandering Jew; see *The Twelve Prophets*, ed. by Marvin A Sweeney and David W. Cotter, 2 vols (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2000), I, 102.

<sup>83</sup> See Katie Gramich, ‘Cymru or Wales? Explorations in a Divided Sensibility’, in *Studying British Cultures: An Introduction*, ed. by Susan Basnett (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 97-112.

<sup>84</sup> Martin Heidegger, ‘...Poetically Man Dwells...’ (1951), in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. by Albert Hofstadter (London and New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 92.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

‘Raw Salt on Eye’ the speaker, like Cain, is both rebel and fallen angel, ‘out of place’. By measuring herself against the heavenly, she attempts, in the words of Heidegger, to ‘measure out [her] dwelling, [her] stay on the earth beneath the sky’.<sup>87</sup>

In her diary, Roberts relates how her domestic ‘home’ sometimes appears narrow and constrictive, and sometimes cosmic and expansive:

I feel chequered with energy. Full of positive red squares and negative black ones. What shall I do? One moment I feel I could draw the moon from its zenith and the next I am unbearably listless, can find nothing to interest me in this bare stone village.<sup>88</sup>

The attempt to ‘draw the moon from its zenith’ can be seen as a form of measure-taking: a drawing together of the terrestrial and cosmic. In so doing, Roberts brings the cosmos into the home, a dynamic process that she associates here with creativity. Gaston Bachelard argues that a dynamic, poetic house ‘allows the poet to inhabit the universe. Or, to put it differently, the universe comes to inhabit his house’.<sup>89</sup> For Bachelard, ‘this house... is a sort of airy structure that moves about on the breath of time. It really is open to the wind of another time’, and is defined by its ‘weightless’ quality.<sup>90</sup> Accordingly, in *Gods with Stainless Ears*, domestic space breaks its tethers to the earth when the ‘gunner and his girl [...] rise through the strata of the sky to seek peace and solace from the sun’ (64).

### **‘Poem from Llanybri’: a cultural homecoming**

‘Poem from Llanybri’ was written for the Welsh soldier-poet Alun Lewis in 1941, when he was unhappily stationed at Longmoor in Hampshire. As I have suggested in Chapter 2, Roberts’s ‘Poem from Llanybri’ invites the reader to undertake a pilgrimage, a journey of cultural ‘homecoming’:<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Diary entry for 7 March 1940, *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, p. 8.

<sup>89</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 51.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>91</sup> John Pikoulis, ‘Lynette Roberts and Alun Lewis’, *Poetry Wales* 19/2 (1983), 9-29 (p.14).

If you come my way that is...  
Between now and then, I will offer you  
A fist full of rock cress straight from the bank  
The valley tips of garlic red with dew  
Cooler than shallots, a breath you can swank

In the village when you come.  
At noon-day I will offer you a choice bowl of cawl  
Served with a 'lover's' spoon and a chopped spray  
Of leeks or savori fach, not used now,

In the old way you'll understand. The din  
Of children singing through the eyelet sheds  
Ringing smith hoops, chasing the butt of hens;  
Or I can offer you Cwmcelyn spread

With quartz stones from the wild scratchings of men:  
You will have to go carefully with clogs  
Or thick shoes for it's treacherous the fen,  
The East and West Marshes also have bogs (ll. 1-17).

Katherine Mansfield famously wrote in her diary that 'I want for one moment to make our undiscovered country leap into the eyes of the old world', and 'Poem from Llanybri' conveys a similar desire to unveil an 'undiscovered country'.<sup>92</sup> Roberts's 'square mile' of Llanybri is offered up as a sacrifice or ritualised gift – to Lewis, to the reader, and to Western culture more generally.<sup>93</sup> As Tony Conran has suggested, the poem gestures to the medieval Welsh-language tradition of the *cywydd gofyn* or 'poem of asking', which was still in current use in Wales at the time of Roberts's composition.<sup>94</sup> In the *cywydd gofyn*, as Glyn Jones relates, the poet conventionally petitions his patron or friend for a gift, or thanks him for one already received.<sup>95</sup> The jewel-like imagery and carefully crafted construction of the poem evoke the

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<sup>92</sup> Quoted in Julia Van Gunsteren, *Katherine Mansfield and Literary Impressionism* (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Editions Rodopi B.V., 1990), p. 83.

<sup>93</sup> To the extent that the poem was written for, and sent to, Alun Lewis, Roberts's poem-as-sacrifice can be seen to invert what Mackay terms 'traditional paradigms of suffering and sacrifice' conventionally assigned to the soldier and the woman left at home ('Women Writers and the War', p. 166).

<sup>94</sup> Conran, 'Lynette Roberts: The Lyric Pieces', p. 132.

<sup>95</sup> Glyn Jones, *The Dragon Has Two Tongues*, p. 126.

early medieval conception of poetry as gift:<sup>96</sup> the entire text is composed of descriptions of the offerings the speaker would make to the visitor ‘*If you come my way that is...*’.

As in Part II of *Gods with Stainless Ears*, when the ‘girl’ offers ‘healing hand and images of home’ to ‘her gunner’, Roberts’s poem offers the ‘gift’ of ongoing life and vitality to the ‘death-haunted’ soldier, Alun Lewis. The gift is an inherently mobile object, and Roberts’s poem-as-gift may therefore suggest a model of poetry as something shared, something that can be freely passed on. As I have shown in Chapter 3, David Jones associated gratuity with medieval craft and religion, and suggested that free, ‘gratuitous’ making or offering, without need for personal gain, was at the heart of all real art.<sup>97</sup> Moreover, in Jones’s view, the predominantly ‘gratuitous’ culture of the Middle Ages contrasted starkly with the ‘utile’ culture of modernity, the utilitarian, profit-driven ‘technocracy’ that was seen to dominate the British ‘centre’. Roberts similarly deplored the Neo-colonial influence of what she terms ‘the money-goaders’ and ‘TAWDRY LAIRDS AND JUGGLERS OF MINT’ (61) in her poem *Gods with Stainless Ears*. Thus, ‘Poem from Llanybri’ may suggest not only an alternative poetic tradition, but also an alternative means of structuring social relations and human production.

Roberts’s depiction of Llanybri is grounded in her lived experience; in a letter to Alun Lewis she insisted that ‘My poem is real i.e. true of the everyday things I do’.<sup>98</sup> Yet it also has an elusive, imaginative quality, echoing Mansfield’s contention that the ‘undiscovered country’ should be imbued with ‘a sense of mystery, a radiance, an afterglow’.<sup>99</sup> Llanybri’s dream-like dimension is mirrored by the temporal structure of the poem; placing itself in a conditional time ‘between now and then’, it is orientated both to an imagined past (‘the old

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<sup>96</sup> Phillip Jenkins notes that ‘elaborate rules of rhyme and metre [...] made much Welsh poetry of the [late medieval] period as richly ornate as a Renaissance jewel (p. 61).

<sup>97</sup> Jones, ‘Art and Sacrament’, p 149.

<sup>98</sup> Quoted in Pikoulis, ‘Lynette Roberts and Alun Lewis’, p. 19.

<sup>99</sup> Quoted in Van Gunsteren, *Katherine Mansfield and Literary Impressionism*, p. 83.

way') and an imagined future ('raise our heritage'). The 'image of home' projected in 'Poem from Llanybri' corresponds to what Bachelard terms '[t]he first, the oneirically definitive house'; just as the poem is construed by McGuinness as a kind of portal (both to Roberts's book of poems, and to Llanybri itself), so the oneiric home sets one 'on the threshold of a day-dream in which I shall *find* repose in the past'.<sup>100</sup> For Bachelard, the lines of the oneiric house 'have force and, as a shelter, it is *fortifying*'; taking on an 'actuality of protection', it furnishes the subject with 'strong images, that is, with counsels of resistance'.<sup>101</sup> Roberts can thus be seen to offer what she in *Gods with Stainless Ears* terms an 'image of home' as a vital psychological resource for the soldier-poet as he prepares to embark on combat.<sup>102</sup>

Roberts's text acts to 're-enchanted' her own 'square mile' by engaging the literary trope of the *locus amoenus* or *paradys d'amours*, the enclosed love garden. Literary evocations of gardens flourished in Europe, as Stanley Stewart has observed, during the later medieval and early modern periods.<sup>103</sup> The *paradys d'amours* or love garden, and its Christian corollary, the earthly paradise, emerged as popular topoi in the texts of many medieval poets, from Dantë and Chaucer to Guillaume de Machaut and the Pearl-Poet. As Laura Howes relates, the *paradys d'amours* combined the enclosure of the Biblical *hortus conclusus* 'and its attendant exclusion of the imperfect outside world' with the sensuality and 'overall sense of well-being' associated with the classical *loecus amoenus*.<sup>104</sup>

The depiction of Llanybri provided by the poem can be seen to comply with this model; the 'treacherous fen' and bogs that the invited guest must cross if he is to 'come my way' can be seen to demarcate an enclosure, affirming Llanybri's status as a 'perfect spot' set

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<sup>100</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 13 (Bachelard's emphasis).

<sup>101</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, pp. 50, 45, 46.

<sup>102</sup> Plain, pp. 173-4.

<sup>103</sup> Stanley Stewart, *The Enclosed Garden: The Tradition and the Image in Seventeenth-Century Poetry* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), pp. xiii-xiv.

<sup>104</sup> Laura L. Howes, *Chaucer's Gardens* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), p. 19.

apart in space and time. Echoing medieval illustrations of gardens from the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, Llanybri is presented as a meeting-place for lovers, though the erotic desire gestured to by the vividly sensual imagery shades into a shared love, and desire for, place.<sup>105</sup> As in the *Roman de la Rose*, the enclosure or semi-enclosure of the village is designed to stimulate the dreamer's (and reader's) desire to enter into the village. Laura Howes asserts that in medieval literature, the garden of love and other metaphorical landscapes 'often draw heavily on the notion that to walk is to know or experience'.<sup>106</sup> In medieval dream poems such as *Pearl* or the *Roman de la Rose*, the dreamer is encouraged to read the spiritual signs of the landscape in order to achieve knowledge of the divine. Roberts's poem similarly presents the landscape of Llanybri as a form of sacred visual text, echoing Woolf's similar evocation of the 'Book of Nature' in *The Voyage Out*. The 'signs' with which it is inscribed – the flora, the well, the local stones – all have a practical function or meaning within the life of the village, which must be deciphered if the guest is to 'know' Llanybri. Roberts thus presents the act of 'reading' the landscape as central to the project of 'rais[ing] our heritage', for Llanybri, and the flora, geology and human activity that shape it, can be seen to inscribe the unwritten history of an emergent postcolonial culture.<sup>107</sup>

In Roberts's Llanybri as in medieval gardens, 'beauty in the botanical world is measured ultimately by functionality to humans, or by analogy to human crafts'.<sup>108</sup> I would suggest that Roberts draws on a medieval tradition of medicinal botany, conserved and transmitted into the twentieth century through a largely oral folk culture, in order to present Llanybri as a site of physical and spiritual medicine. As in *Gods with Stainless Ears*, which

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., pp. 33-4.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>107</sup> I am indebted to Gloria Maestripieri's analysis of the writings of Aimé Césaire, Derek Walcott, and Kamau Braithwaite for this idea. 'Modernist Moves' Conference, Brunel University, 7 December 2012. As Esty points out, the rose garden or *locus amoenus* was a favoured location for medieval allegory (*Shrinking Island*, p. 139).

<sup>108</sup> Peter Dendle, *Health and Healing from the Medieval Garden* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2008), p. 48.



sees the speaker calling up ‘Magic and Craft/To heel (II, ll. 71-2), ‘Poem from Llanybri’ posits the inherited cultural memory inscribed in the landscape as the means by which the wounds of exile and of war might be healed. In her diary, Roberts suggests that this ‘unofficial’ tradition of healing is still practiced in homes in the village of Llanybri, and, like Margiad Evans, she traces it back to the communal life of the medieval monastery.<sup>109</sup> Most of Part II of *Gods with Stainless Ears*, for instance, emulates the botanical ‘recipes’ of the Physicians of Myddfai,<sup>110</sup> herbalists connected to the Cistercian Abbey at Strata Florida, which, founded in 1154, was an important hospital and school for herbal knowledge in Wales during the twelfth century.

Moreover, in her essay ‘Lorenzo da Monaco’, Roberts emphasises the centrality of cultivation, not only in Wales, but in all aspects of European monastic culture, describing how

[...] most of the monks [in Lorenzo’s Calmaldolese Monastery, Santa Maria degli Angeli] were couched half the day over flowers, roots, and plants. These plants were used not only for eating and drinking, but also for textile dying, medicine, paints, and as an inspiration for linear design.<sup>111</sup>

She appreciated this tradition, not only for its ecological rootedness, but also for its ‘foreignness’. In a discussion with Robert Graves over her representation of a twelfth-century monastic garden in her novel *Nesta*, Roberts explains her choice of plants:

Potatoes! I had no idea that they were not introduced until the sixteenth century. There are so many other wild plants belonging to this same family that I thought they existed before the Britons. Fuscia – it grows wild in Tresco Scilly isles. There is the ruin of a monastery there, & at a time when the monks travelled so much thought I might

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<sup>109</sup> In her ‘Review of *Welsh Border Country and Old English Household Life*’ in *Wales*, Margiad Evans notes that ‘[m]onks were sly housekeepers. I cannot believe that they did not leave their peculiarly clever traces on the faces of the undergods’ (p. 286).

<sup>110</sup> The following lines provide just one example of this:  
 Take thou my lover 4 pints from the ‘Farmer’s Arms’  
 Or, if flat, 6 glass tankards from Jones  
 ‘Black Horse’. Not supplying either sip homeward

Sloe-gin from Merlin’s desk or board ‘Cow and Gate’  
 Lorry [...] (II, ll. 73-77).

<sup>111</sup> Roberts, ‘Lorenzo da Monaco’, p. 306.

accept the idea that a cutting had been raised from one foreign bed and sent to S. Wales. (174)

It might be suggested that Roberts positions the medieval tradition of botanical medicine as a repressed, maternal inscription upon the Welsh cultural landscape, hinted at in a ‘language of flowers’. In a note to Part II of *Gods with Stainless Ears*, Roberts explicitly connects this botanical tradition to a maternal legacy, explaining that ‘on the road from Llandovery over the Carmarthen Vans lies Myddfai and the Lake from which the mother of the physicians is supposed to have returned’ (74).

The *locus amoenus* and *paradys d’amours* were conventionally portrayed as the locus of a desired, or desirable, female lover, a tradition that was influenced, perhaps, by the *hortus conclusus* of the Song of Songs, which was interpreted from medieval times as a locus for, and symbol of, the Virgin Mary.<sup>112</sup> Roberts appears to connect the topology of South Wales with the Virgin: in *Gods with Stainless Ears* she includes a reference to ‘Mari o Llanybri’ from a Welsh poem by Dyfnallt entitled ‘Cri Madonna’, and in her prose ‘argument’ to Part IV of the poem, she compares the speaker’s suffering during her miscarriage to that of the Madonna, whom she posits as ‘the nucleus and theme of the whole poem’. In Part I of *Gods*, the appeal to ‘Mother Mild of Pembroke Streams’ is a reference to Roberts’s own mother, Ruby Garbutt, whose family was from Pembrokeshire, pointing to the suggestion that Roberts saw the Welsh landscape as a space in which to recover the longed-for maternal body.

The notion of the ‘home front’ as a feminised pastoral idyll was current in contemporary propaganda, but Roberts’s version of the garden takes on a contestatory, rather than a conservative, function. Michel Foucault cites the *loecus amoenus* as a form of heterotopia – a subversive site in which ‘all the other real sites that can be found within the

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<sup>112</sup> Howes, *Chaucer’s Gardens*, p. 19.

culture [...] are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted'.<sup>113</sup> Accordingly, Roberts undercuts her pastoral paradise, and the essentialised femininity traditionally associated with it, with a series of uncanny images: 'the fist full of rock cress' is suggestive both of a tender gift, and a gesture of power or aggression; 'the garlic tips red with dew' reflect the rising dawn and, perhaps, the blood of fallen soldiers. Moreover, her use of minute observation 'makes strange' what should be domestic or familiar, conveying the intensity of impression associated with viewing a foreign place for the first time – an aesthetic practice that Jane Marcus associates with the 'exiled' consciousness of the modern woman artist.<sup>114</sup> As Cristanne Miller has observed, H.D. in her poem 'Sheltered Garden' rejects the static, idealised female beauty of the Western poetic tradition, calling instead for a 'new beauty' – an aesthetic defined by harshness and strength, and conditioned by women's own experience. Roberts can thus be seen to develop a similar gendered aesthetic in her depiction of Llanybri.<sup>115</sup>

For the female 'colonial in exile', home is always 'here and elsewhere', as Judith Kegan Gardiner has argued.<sup>116</sup> In Roberts's writing, this quality of 'elsewhereness' makes itself felt on a formal level through the use of what Jane Marcus terms a 'superrealism', a 'specifically female juxtaposition of the alien and the cosy'.<sup>117</sup> The strangeness of Roberts's poem, amplified by her incorporation of Welsh dialect and words into her text, may illustrate what Laura Wainwright terms the 'culturally "deterritorialized"

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<sup>113</sup> Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', *Diacritics*, 16.1 (1986), 22-27 (p. 24).

<sup>114</sup> Marcus, 'Alibis and Legends', p. 275. Marcus cites the work of Georgia O'Keefe as an example of this. O'Keefe's close observation and oversized studies of flowers arguably transform an art-form once considered diminutive or decorative into something subversive. Marcus construes this practice as 'a female appropriation of new distance, [which] radically [alters] perspective by a close, enlarged, concentrated view of one object'. It reflects, for Marcus, 'the spatiality of female modernism' (p. 275).

<sup>115</sup> Cristanne Miller, 'Gender, Sexuality and the Modernist Poem', in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 68-84 (p. 73).

<sup>116</sup> Judith Kegan Gardiner, 'The Exhilaration of Exile', in *Women's Writing in Exile*, ed. by Mary Lynn Broe and Angela Ingram (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), pp. 134-150 (p. 134).

<sup>117</sup> Marcus, 'Alibis and Legends', p. 287.

position of the Anglophone Welsh writer'.<sup>118</sup> For M. Wynn Thomas, Anglophone Welsh writers shared the experience

...simultaneously [...] liberating and inhibiting – of belonging to a place apart; a historical region which was certainly not assimilable to England, but which could not be integrated into traditional Wales either.<sup>119</sup>

Llanybri's status as a linguistic and cultural 'place apart' reinforces its 'heterotopic' quality for, as Foucault relates, the heterotopia exists 'outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate [its] their location in reality'.<sup>120</sup> Wainwright maintains that the Anglophone Welsh writers of the earlier twentieth century were strangers within their 'own' language – both English and Welsh. Rather than lamenting this, however, they actively cultivated a position of exteriority to language and culture, harnessing this for its creative and liberating potential.<sup>121</sup> In this way, the 'insider's outsider's' gaze upon her Welsh 'home' serves to remodel the cultural landscape.<sup>122</sup>

In 'Poem from Llanybri', Roberts not only depicts, but actively constructs, a 'home' through her poetic labour:

Then I'll do the lights, fill the lamp with oil,  
Get coal from the shed, water from the well;  
Pluck and draw pigeon with crop of green foil  
This your good supper from the lime-tree fell.

A sit by the hearth with blue flames rising,  
No talk. Just a stare at 'Time' gathering  
Healed thoughts, pool insight, like swan sailing  
Peace and sound around the home, offering

You a night's rest and my day's energy. (ll. 18-26)

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<sup>118</sup> Wainwright, 'New Territories in Modernism', p. 76.

<sup>119</sup> M. Wynn Thomas, *Internal Difference: Twentieth-Century Writing in Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992), p. 26.

<sup>120</sup> Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', p. 24.

<sup>121</sup> Wainwright, 'New Territories in Modernism', p. 77.

<sup>122</sup> Roberts adopts a stance toward Llanybri akin to that of what James Clifford terms the 'hybrid native': 'Insiders-outsiders, good translators and explicators, they've been around'. Hybrid natives, for Clifford, are "'informants" [who] first appear as natives [then] emerge as travelers' (James Clifford, 'Traveling Cultures', in *Cultural Studies*, ed. by Lawrence Grossberg et al (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 96-116 (p. 97)).

The speaker performs what Michel de Certeau terms an ‘acting-out of place’, re-enacting tasks that are at once mythic and part of everyday village life: filling the lamp with oil, fetching water from the well.<sup>123</sup> Cultural identity is in this way shown to be something performed, constantly made and re-made. As Jane Marcus suggests, ‘for the exiled woman artist the making of a work of art is a reproduction of housekeeping. Like Rhoda [in Woolf’s *The Waves*] she “makes a perfect dwelling place”’.<sup>124</sup> For Bachelard, the imaginative resonance of housework allows us to ‘become conscious of a house that is built by women, since men know only how to build a house from the outside’.<sup>125</sup> While some of the male poets of the 1930s, in the view of Virginia Woolf, clung to the ‘leaning tower’ of their civilization, the poem’s speaker cultivates a new Welsh civilization ‘from the inside’.<sup>126</sup>

Emphasising the inherently creative – rather than merely mimetic – nature of ritual, Jane Harrison insists that ‘in the word *actor* we stress not imitating but acting, doing, just what the Greek stressed in his words *dromenon* [a thing done; rite] and *drama*’.<sup>127</sup> For Harrison, the ritual act is an expression of the desire to re-live a past event or to realize an event in the future. As a shadow of a past or future action, it is inherently creative and powerful because it is incomplete:

The thing delayed, expected, waited for, is more and more a source of value, more and more apt to precipitate into what we call an idea, which is in reality but the projected shadow of an unaccomplished action.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Analysing the popularity of the pageant form in modernist literature of the 1930s, Esty claims that it allowed writers to replace representation with ‘literal, territorial, and even genetic reenactment’ (*Shrinking Island*, p. 59).

<sup>124</sup> Marcus, ‘Alibis and Legends’, p. 275.

<sup>125</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 68.

<sup>126</sup> Harrison claimed that group ritual gave rise to religion, and not the other way around, arguing that ‘the abstract idea [of a god] arises from the only thing it can possibly arise from, the concrete fact [of the ritual dance]’ (*Ancient Art and Ritual*, p. 71). If the nation as a notion derived from the idea of Christ as the head of the church, can be understood as what Llywelyn terms ‘essentially a religious reality’, then, following Harrison’s ideas, communal ritual has the capacity to create /recreate the nation.

<sup>127</sup> Harrison, *Ancient Art and Ritual*, p. 47.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p.53.

Alain Badiou has construed modernism as a poetics of the wait, of the threshold not yet crossed.<sup>129</sup> ‘Poem from Llanybri’ can be seen as a threshold text: not only does it offer a point of entry into an unknown culture, but it bridges a time ‘between now and then’, looking forward to an uncertain postwar future.<sup>130</sup> Just as Badiou detects an affirmative, anticipatory quality in Beckett’s depiction of the wait,<sup>131</sup> so Roberts reconfigures waiting – an inescapable feature of the war experience for both soldiers and civilians – as something potent and creative rather than purely passive; in a diary entry for August 4<sup>th</sup> 1942, she confides that ‘my energy becomes consumed by my own creative waiting’.<sup>132</sup>

Ritual, and the art that supposedly sprang from it, was seen by Jane Harrison to express ‘the intense, world-wide desire that the life of Nature which seemed dead should live again’.<sup>133</sup> Similarly, Roberts’s text, in the words of Gill Plain, ‘[confronts] the inarticulable logic of war’s destruction with a regenerative logic of her own’.<sup>134</sup> Like Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*, ‘Poem from Llanybri’ confronts what Grace Jantzen characterises as a ‘necrophilic’ culture of violence and death with an alternative culture of natality, celebrating a civilisation that, rooted in what Jantzen terms ‘the embodied, gendered, situated self’ is defined by creation, flourishing (or process), and interdependence.<sup>135</sup> By revealing a culture of natality as the ‘unacknowledged and untheorized other’ of a dominant culture of death, Roberts, in the words of Jantzen, ‘opens the horizon for transformative possibilities’.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> William Watkin, ‘The Time of Indifference: Mandelstam’s Age, Badiou’s Event, and Agamben’s Contemporary’, *CounterText*, 2. 1 (2016), pp. 85-99.

<sup>130</sup> Gaston Bachelard claims that the ‘oneiric home’ – to which I have compared the depiction of Llanybri in this text – sets one ‘on the threshold of a day dream in which I shall *find* repose in the past’. *The Poetics of Space*, p. 13.

<sup>131</sup> Alain Badiou reads a tendency toward affirmation in the response of Beckett’s texts to the desire to welcome ‘tout ce qui arrive’ (Asja Szafraniec, *Beckett, Derrida, and the Event of Literature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 153. As Szafraniec points out in relation to Badiou’s reading of Beckett, ‘the “yes” of affirmation is directed ahead, toward the possible, toward that which arrives, toward the event’ (p. 153).

<sup>132</sup> Diary entry for 4 August 1942, *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, p. 47.

<sup>133</sup> Harrison, *Ancient Art and Ritual*, p. 26.

<sup>134</sup> Plain, p. 175.

<sup>135</sup> Grace Jantzen, *Becoming Divine* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 141.

<sup>136</sup> Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, p. 141.

‘Poem from Llanybri’ clearly reflects Roberts’s desire, evident throughout her work, to incorporate the individual voice within a larger, choric consciousness: indeed, the ‘ringing’ of the smith hoops and cyclical patterns of return that pattern the text draw speaker and reader into a kind of ritual dance. Yet the interpersonal occupies as important a position as the collective in this text. For Bachelard, ‘the house image would appear to have become the topography of our intimate being’, and Roberts similarly uses the domestic interior as a means of exploring the notion of intimacy itself.<sup>137</sup> The retreat to the hearthside is a recurrent trope in Roberts’s poetry, and is often figured as a response to trauma. The turn inwards to home and hearth can be understood as what Gill Plain terms as a ‘saving strategy’ – a ritualistic gesture that, like the act of writing itself, allows ‘a reassembling of the self in the face of its threatened annihilation’.<sup>138</sup> The hearth is a conventional emblem of domesticity, particularly in the Welsh literary tradition. Kate Roberts’s *Traed Mewn Cyffion* places it at the epicentre of both the home and rural Welsh society, and in Lynette Roberts’s writing the life of the hearth becomes coextensive with the vitality and continuity of Welsh culture itself.<sup>139</sup> In this poem, the hearth embodies a form of collective unconscious in which poets can meet and communicate without words. It is the poets’ ‘pooled insight’, what Jane Harrison terms the ‘sinking of their own personality’ within a deeper tradition that begets the swan, image of rebirth and transcendence.<sup>140</sup> The figure of the swan gestures, perhaps, to the *llatai* or love-messenger, a Welsh-language poetic form in which, as Glyn Jones relates, the poet describes the beauty of the one he loves and of the animal messenger (a seagull, swan, or salmon) that he sends to her in order to communicate his passion.<sup>141</sup> Thus, through her

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<sup>137</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. xxxvi.

<sup>138</sup> Plain, pp. 173-4.

<sup>139</sup> See Kate Roberts, *Feet In Chains (Traed Mewn Cyffion)*, trans. by Katie Gramich (Cardigan: Parthian, 2012).

<sup>140</sup> Jane Harrison, *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion* (1912, 1927), quoted in Martha C. Carpentier *Ritual, Myth, and the Modernist Text: The Influence of Jane Ellen Harrison on Joyce, Eliot, and Woolf* (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach Publishers, 1998), p. 174.

<sup>141</sup> Jones, *The Dragon Has Two Tongues*, p. 126.

engagement with a Welsh-language poetic convention, Roberts reconfigures the tiny inner space of the cottage as one of mental expansion and travel. Additionally, Roberts uses her poem-messenger in order to gauge, and bridge, the relation ‘between’: the final stanza of her poem imagines a state of equilibrium – a kind of togetherness defined neither by the loss of self nor the collapse of one personality into another, but by balance between two points.<sup>142</sup> Marina Mackay identifies the ‘rehabilitation of the private life against abuses of collective power’ as a defining trait of late modernism.<sup>143</sup> Here, the hearth shelters a salvific interiority that, though private, is shared rather than individualist in nature, and connected, through the image of the hearth, to the community outside.<sup>144</sup>

As Plain observes, Virginia Woolf, Storm Jameson and Naomi Mitchison urged both political and spiritual resistance to fascism, while Bowen wrote that ‘to survive, not only physically but spiritually, was essential’.<sup>145</sup> The poets’ contemplative stance by the hearth bespeaks a desire to stand back and reflect on the world, like a swan sailing on water. Yet, as spiritual thinker Evelyn Underhill argued in her 1914 study *Practical Mysticism*, mystical contemplation

[...] does not wrap its initiates in a selfish and other-worldly calm, isolate them from the pain and effort of the common life. Rather, it gives them renewed vitality.... Stayed upon eternal realities, that spirit will be far better able to endure [...].<sup>146</sup>

Refuting the assumed incompatibility of spiritual thought and practical action, Underhill maintained that in the case of female activists such as Joan of Arc or Florence Nightingale,

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<sup>142</sup> The figure of the tightrope walker was a recurrent trope in modernism/modernity, often used in order to express the process of crossing the void between mental and social space, or of spanning two different worlds.

<sup>143</sup> Mackay, *Modernism and World War II*, p. 14.

<sup>144</sup> In *Three Guineas*, Woolf linked patriarchal and fascist oppression due to their common insistence on mental conformity (what she in *Mrs Dalloway* terms ‘proportion and conversion’), their drive to ‘force’ the individual mind. Jane Harrison argued that in primitive matriarchal societies, cohesion was ensured by participation in group ritual, rather than in conforming to the ideas of any one leader. This meant that people were left to think as they liked. Similarly, Roberts suggests that the ritual structure of Welsh culture ensures a space of intellectual and imaginative freedom at its heart/hearth, a space that emerges as a crucial imaginative resource for the writer at a time of war.

<sup>145</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, ‘Preface’ to *The Demon Lover* (1945), quoted in Plain, p. 174.

<sup>146</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *Practical Mysticism*, rev. edn. (Guildford: Eagle, 1991), p. xiv.



‘their intensely practical energies were the flowers of a contemplative life’.<sup>147</sup> Thus, to use the words of Underhill, Roberts’s ‘intensely practical energies’ – her resistance of totalitarianism and reinvention of national culture – were made possible by her re-enchantment of ‘inner space’.

## Conclusion

Kate Roberts spoke admiringly of her parents’ ability to talk entertainingly on the hearth but not outside.<sup>148</sup> In accordance with this, Roberts’s writing poses the hearth as a space of self-revelation and performance of Welsh culture. Blending medieval Welsh tradition with the democratic art aesthetics of William Morris, she develops a new kind of poetry capable of integrating the private voice with that of the wider community. Her cottage ‘Tygwyn’, transformed into a ‘poetic house’, becomes a point of engagement with the wider world and the site for a new modernist art, grounded in ancient forms. It is also a space in which to re-connect with a repressed, female-oriented tradition, articulated in small acts, rather than grand works of art.

Vernacularity and craft is an important discourse, not only in Woolf’s writing, but also in African American culture. Commenting on Alice Walker’s ‘Everyday Use’, a short story which centres upon the quilt as cultural and historical object, Jane Marcus notes that ‘the quilt is itself a map of women’s history’,<sup>149</sup> and Roberts can similarly be seen to draw upon premodern folk tradition as a sign of cultural and gender difference. In her essay ‘Rootedness: the Ancestor as Foundation’, Toni Morrison observes that the world-view

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., p. xv.

<sup>148</sup> See Joseph P. Clancy, ‘Introduction’ to *The World of Kate Roberts: Selected Stories, 1925-81*, trans. by Joseph P. Clancy (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), pp. ix-xix (p.x).

Clancy notes that when asked what she had inherited from her parents and her community as a person and as a writer, Kate Roberts responded that ‘[a]s a person, I can’t say whether I have inherited my parents’ traits of character: their power to carry on in spite of everything, their outcry against every injustice [...] their readiness to help a neighbour, their ability to talk entertainingly (on the hearth but not outside)...’. In this act of reminiscence, she tacitly posits the hearth as a space of both self-revelation and dramatic performativity.

<sup>149</sup> Marcus, ‘Alibis and Legends’, p. 282.

inherent to Black folk culture is marked by ‘the acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world’.<sup>150</sup> Just as Morrison strives to express this different way of understanding reality in her novels, so Roberts employs a ‘homespun’ medieval tradition in order to reveal the sanctity of the everyday, placing the spiritual back in contact with the particular.

Rites of cleaning and purification feature importantly in Roberts’s poetry, echoing Woolf’s invocation of rites of purification in *Mrs Dalloway*. She draws upon the ‘longer, slower emotional rhythms’ of rural Welsh tradition in an attempt to palliate and purify what she saw as a destructive, dehumanised Western culture, so as to help it to grow again.<sup>151</sup> Yet although she was attracted to the idea, advanced by Saunders Lewis and Iorwerth C. Peate, that medieval Welsh folk art was the sign of an ‘organic’ national culture, growing out of the landscape and the life of the people, she also tacitly suggests that this tradition can be retrieved only through reinvention and performance. In fitting with the rhetoric of her day, her attitude to medieval Welsh tradition is one of ‘make do and mend’; salvaging the fragments that remain, she strives to reinvent them ‘for use in our time’, in the construction of a new form of Welsh national culture.

Roberts’s representation of domestic space is caught between solidity and ephemerality, permanence and change. For Maurice Blanchot, it is the ephemerality of the everyday that renders it a potentially subversive space. As he puts it, the ‘inexhaustible, irrecusable, always unfinished’ everyday always escapes the political structures design to contain it.<sup>152</sup> Thus, Roberts can be seen to turn to the everyday, domestic life of the rural Welsh village in order to open up a new cultural space capable of resisting, and offering an

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<sup>150</sup> Morrison, p. 342.

<sup>151</sup> Esty, p. 141.

<sup>152</sup> Blanchot, p. 13.

alternative to, a metropolitan culture defined by military aggression and dehumanising technocracy. Restoring and reinventing a premodern Welsh craft tradition, she uses this in order to show how technology might be harnessed to enhance, rather than destroy, the human and the social. As I show in the chapter that follows, Woolf takes up Roberts's concern with folk culture, identifying it, like her, with a repressed vernacular tradition, rooted in the rhythms of female labour. In her writing of the Second World War, she draws on medieval culture in order to re-imagine the nation by connecting it to the subversive play of the vernacular 'mother tongue'.

## Part III: Language and Community

### Chapter 5

#### **Anonymity, Culture and Community in Virginia Woolf's writing of the 1940s: The Fable of 'Anon'**

Literature is no-one's common ground; literature is common ground. It is not cut up into nations; there are no wars there. Let us trespass freely and fiercely and find our way for ourselves. It is thus that English literature will survive this war and cross the gulf – if commoners and outsiders like ourselves make that country our own country.<sup>1</sup>

Woolf's constant search to move beyond the bounds of the 'damned egotistical self' constituted an important part of her feminism. In *A Room of One's Own* she denounces the 'dominance' and 'sterility' of the male 'I', presenting its 'straight dark bar' as a kind of prison or enclosure serving to check women's self-expression and constrain the free play of the text.<sup>2</sup> While Woolf was working toward a more 'multipersonal subjectivity' during the 1920s, as I have shown in my analysis of her novel *Mrs Dalloway*,<sup>3</sup> the radical social and political shifts of 1930s placed the concept of 'the community of the mass' high up on the contemporary cultural agenda. As Woolf notes in 'The Leaning Tower', a talk given to The Workers' Educational Association in 1940, middle-class British writers became all the more conscious of their privilege at this time, with the result that their writing displays 'the longing to be closer to their kind, to write the common speech of their kind [...] to be down on the ground with the mass of human kind'.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'The Leaning Tower', in *Collected Essays*, ed. by Leonard Woolf, 3 vols (London: Chatto and Windus, 1967) II, 162–81 (p. 181).

<sup>2</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, pp. 131-132.

<sup>3</sup> The term is James Naremore's; see *The World Without a Self: Virginia Woolf and the Novel* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1973). Naremore's concept develops on Erich Auerbach's assessment of Woolf's 'multipersonal representation of consciousness' in his famous essay 'The Brown Stocking' (1946). See Erich Auerbach, 'The Brown Stocking', in *Mimesis: the Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), pp. 525-553 (p.536).

<sup>4</sup> Woolf, 'The Leaning Tower', p. 176.

Woolf's writing of this decade frequently interrogates the changing relation between the individual and the collective: in her 1931 novel *The Waves* she attempts to evoke 'a collective idea of character' through her representation of the interwoven subjectivities of a small community of friends, while in *Three Guineas* she contends that the 'private house' and the 'public world' are 'inseparably connected'.<sup>5</sup> As Patricia Laurence suggests, '[n]otions of the public, communal voice [...] and the private, human, artist's voice [...] are distinctions that Woolf questions, collapses, and redefines during this period'.<sup>6</sup> The outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 led Woolf to meditate even more deeply on the status of individual writer in relation to the wider community. The shared experience of total war, conditioned as it was by the devastation wrought by the German bombing campaign, promised to blast away the social 'hedges' that had kept people apart, while the 'unifying influence' of new mass media such as the radio further dismantled the division between self and society.<sup>7</sup> In her diary, Woolf noted that under the pressure of war, 'the common feeling covers the private, then recedes' and that 'the public world very notably [invades] the private'.<sup>8</sup>

In her 1941 novel *Between the Acts*, Woolf jettisons the individual 'I' altogether in favour of a polyphonic literary form capable of conveying the new 'communal voice' of war. She lays out this newly decentred vision in her early notes for the novel:

'I' rejected: 'We' substituted: to whom at the end shall there be an invocation? 'We' [...] we all life, all art, all waifs and strays – a rambling, capricious but somehow unified whole – the present state of my mind?<sup>9</sup>

*Between the Acts* is preoccupied by the survival of community and of art in the face of war and change. The action of the novel, which coalesces in the performance of a local pageant,

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<sup>5</sup> Jane Marcus, *Art and Anger: Reading Like a Woman* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1988), pp. 81–2; Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas*, p. 364.

<sup>6</sup> Patricia Laurence, 'The Facts and Fugues of War', p. 229.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 227.

<sup>8</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, V, 321, 131.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.135.

takes place in a remote rural village ‘in the very heart of England’ on a single day in June on the eve of the Second World War, and explores the elusive moments of unity and feelings of fragmentation experienced by the village community over the course of the day. Many critics have seen the novel’s concern with disintegration and fracture as a sign of Woolf’s ultimately pessimistic view of contemporary society, her sense of the impossibility of community in the modern world.<sup>10</sup> I suggest, however, that the novel offers an ultimately optimistic vision of community for the post-war future. I aim to demonstrate that in Woolf’s writing of the 1940s, she models a newly communal and anti-authoritarian world in which art and cultural expression is paramount, and that she does so primarily through the imaginative reinvention of medieval forms and traditions.

The latent medievalism of *Between the Acts* remains underexplored, despite the fact that echoes from the medieval past supply a crucial subtext to the novel and to the pageant. Although the village pageant-play gestures to the tradition of the Edwardian Empire Day pageant, it is also presented as a direct descendent of the Mummers’ performances and popular dramas of medieval England, and the anonymous chorus of pilgrims present in the background throughout the performance are strongly identified with the English Middle Ages. Chaucer, furthermore, is discussed at length in an earlier draft of the novel, and as Barbara Apstein has argued, several of Woolf’s characters are modelled on characters from the *Canterbury Tales*.<sup>11</sup> Reading *Between the Acts* in the context of Woolf’s essay ‘Anon’ (1941), I suggest that in her wartime writing, Woolf seeks to excavate, and to creatively *re-imagine*, a lost medieval culture of ‘anonymous minstrelsy, folk song, and [...] words that had no name attached to them’ (390). Drawing once again upon the medievalist utopianism of William Morris, she identifies this ‘common’ medieval culture with democracy,

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<sup>10</sup> For example, Marina Mackay claims that ‘the novel’s closing emphasis on disintegration and fracture is so extreme that no centre could hold these characters together’. Marina Mackay, *Modernism and World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 34.

<sup>11</sup> Barbara Apstein, ‘Chaucer, Virginia Woolf and *Between the Acts*’, *Woolf Studies Annual*, 2 (1996), 117–133.

community, and creative freedom, and posits it as the basis for a new social order in which art (rather than authoritarian control or prescriptive ideology) is the unifying factor. Woolf's approach to medieval culture in her wartime texts can thus be seen as both nostalgic and revolutionary: rather than advocating a return to an idealised past, 'Anon' and *Between the Acts* evince an interest in how the medieval past makes itself felt in the present, and how it can best be used, in the words of Lynette Roberts, 'in relation to today'.<sup>12</sup>

Woolf's reinvigorated medievalism of the 1940s can also be regarded as a response to a moment of personal crisis. She was beset with a sense of the futility of literary endeavour at the onset of the conflict, and felt increasingly isolated from her community of readers, who were rapidly turning away from literature in favour of the new mass media.<sup>13</sup> She worried about the survival of art and her writings, and her anxiety over her loss of readership reinforced her sense of the importance of readers to the creation of literary texts. Her representation of the artist in the medieval 'Anon', the anonymous voice 'singing out of doors' (382), not only provides an historical underpinning to the politics of anonymity that underpins so much of her fiction, but also, as I show in relation to *Between the Acts*, allows her to recalibrate the relation between artist and audience, reader and writer, as a means of ensuring literature's survival beyond the war and into the future.

As many critics have argued, the rural village community portrayed in Woolf's novel is presented as a kind of microcosm of the nation, and through her complex layering of history, language, and place, Woolf constantly questions 'what it meant to have a place in the country in the early years of the Second World War'.<sup>14</sup> *Between the Acts* anticipates Benedict Anderson's conception of nationhood as an 'imagined political community', constructed

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<sup>12</sup> Roberts, 'Letter to Robert Graves', January 14 1944, in *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, p. 169.

<sup>13</sup> Mitchell A. Leaska, 'Introduction' to *Pointz Hall: the Earlier and Later Typescripts of Between the Acts* (New York: University Publications, 1983), pp. 3–16 (p. 6).

<sup>14</sup> Mackay, p. 22.

through texts and the idea of a literary tradition.<sup>15</sup> Satirising the jingoistic myths and ritualised performances that make up English identity, the novel implies that both gender and national identity are caught up in certain ‘plots’, which, like the story of war, seem to repeat themselves in an endless dialectic: ‘[I]ove and hate’, thinks one of Woolf’s characters to herself, ‘how they tore her asunder. Surely it was time someone invented a new plot, or the author came out from the bushes’ (128).

In *Three Guineas*, Woolf argues that imperial English identity is grounded in male-centred narratives of heroism and conquest, and sustained by a literary tradition organised around the idea of what Ernest Renan calls ‘a heroic past, great men, glory’.<sup>16</sup> The problem with this national tradition, in Woolf’s view, was not only that it favoured war and aggression, ‘Law’ and ‘Property’, above human freedom, but also, that it laid stress on exceptional, male individuals, and implicitly excluded women and other marginalised groups from the idea of the nation.<sup>17</sup> Through her imaginative representation of medieval culture in ‘Anon’ and *Between the Acts*, she attempts to recuperate a democratic, collective literary tradition, to reposition English literature as ‘the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people’.<sup>18</sup> The idea of the English nation, in Woolf’s view, had been designed to suit the acquisitive interests of a privileged view, though it had been made to appear eternal and unchangeable. To redefine the territory of literary tradition, she felt, was to redefine the nation itself, and it was only through this that English culture might ‘survive this war and cross the gulf’ between ‘the dying world and the world that is struggling to be born’.<sup>19</sup> As I show, she uses her recreation of the medieval past to imagine a

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<sup>15</sup> Anderson, p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> Woolf, *Three Guineas*, p. 321; Ernest Renan, ‘What is a Nation?’, trans. by Martin Thom, in *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Homi K. Bhabha (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 8–22, p. 19.

<sup>17</sup> Woolf, *Three Guineas*, p. 249.

<sup>18</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, p. 85.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, ‘The Leaning Tower’, pp. 181, 179.



national culture in which ‘commoners, outsiders’ can participate in making and remaking national tradition anew.

Woolf’s medievalism of the 1940s bears the influence of the English Folk Revival, a cultural movement that came to prominence under the aegis of Cecil Sharp during the preceding decade. Like the Folk Revivalists, she presents medieval culture as the repository of a predominantly oral ‘folk’ tradition, identified with an elusive pagan past. Folklore was seen as ‘the means to elucidating the “unwritten history of the past” during the late nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries, and accordingly, her engagement with premodern tradition in ‘Anon’ and *Between the Acts* speaks of her quest for the hidden female voices lying ‘between the acts’ of official, masculinist histories.<sup>20</sup> As Pete Martin and Georgina Boyes point out, the tenets of the English Folk Revival were used in order to vaunt conservative nationalist discourses during the 1930s: Englishness was defined ‘not in terms of the urban industrial reality’ but through the idea of a fantasised, atemporal rural community associated with a medieval ‘Merry England’.<sup>21</sup> Yet if the Revivalists insisted on the authenticity and ‘purity’ of medieval culture, Woolf’s treatment of medieval culture in ‘Anon’ and ‘Between the Acts’ places an emphasis on cultural impurity and promiscuity. Through her indiscriminate mixing of medieval and modern oral forms such as the radio and gramophone, Woolf draws on oral traditions of the ‘unwritten past’ in order to define new forms of textuality and temporality for the future. Woolf was throughout her writing life compelled by the relationship between music, rhythm, and literature, and in *Between the Acts*, she explores the capacity of oral poetry and song to tap into a fundamental seam of shared, unconscious emotion. Drawing on Julia Kristeva’s theorisation of the pre-linguistic semiotic, I aim to demonstrate that Woolf draws on the oral traditions of the premodern past in order to re-introduce the semiotised,

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<sup>20</sup> *The Handbook of Folklore*, ed. by Charlotte Burne, rev. edn (1914; London: The Folklore Society, 1957), pp. 1–2.

<sup>21</sup> Pete Martin, ‘Preface’ to *The Imagined Village: Culture, Ideology and the English Folk Revival*, pp. vi–x (p. viii).

maternal body back into literary expression, and through this, to pose new possibilities for the relationship between self and other.

In the first part of my discussion, I analyse Woolf's re-visioning of medieval tradition in her 1941 essay 'Anon', exploring her complex approach to history and historical change in the essay. I then consider *Between the Acts* in light of Woolf's imaginative recreation of the Middle Ages in 'Anon', exploring how Woolf draws on medieval oral culture, and the figure of the anonymous medieval artist, in order to re-imagine culture and community for the post-war world.

### **'[T]he experience of the mass is behind the single voice': the fable of 'Anon'**<sup>22</sup>

On September 12, 1940, while out blackberrying, Woolf 'conceived, or re-moulded, an idea for a Common History book'.<sup>23</sup> In this text, which was to be called 'Reading at Random' or 'Turning the Page', she intended 'to read from one end of literature including biography; and range at will, consecutively', tracing the history of English literature from its inception to the present day.<sup>24</sup> The first essay in the volume, 'Anon', was one of the last pieces of writing to be completed by Woolf. In it, Woolf explores what she imagines to be the origins of the English literary tradition in an early medieval tradition of minstrelsy and song, represented by the figure of Anon, the wandering medieval minstrel, and attempts to trace the survival and transformation of this tradition into the modern age of print capitalism.

'Anon' is centrally concerned with the questions of historical change and that had preoccupied Woolf throughout her writing life. As the advance of war and technological change threatened to sweep away a more traditional way of life, many writers and artists, from T.S Eliot and E.M. Forster to Geoffrey Grigson and John Piper, experienced anxiety at

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<sup>22</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 85.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, *A Writer's Diary*, ed. by Leonard Woolf (London, New York, San Diego: Harcourt, 1982), p. 335.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

the prospect of the growing distance between past and present during this time. This often manifested itself in the drive to record and recuperate a rural and medieval past. Though Woolf was less pessimistic about the great changes sweeping British society than many of her contemporaries, she was similarly concerned about the severance of past from present during the War.<sup>25</sup> While she felt that the present shouldn't be imprisoned by the past, she also considered that a vital, critical, conversational relationship with the past was necessary if literature and society were to stay alive at all.

In 'Anon', Woolf attempts to trace a thread of continuity running from English literature's supposed medieval origins to the writing of the present day: 'the idea of the book', she wrote in her notes, 'is to find the end of a ball of string and wind out' (373). The writings that she made in preparation for the volume reveal her desire to shape an elastic historical form capable of conveying 'the influences: the affect; the growth; the surrounding, also the inner, current all left out in text books' (372).<sup>26</sup> Earlier in her diary, she had compared nineteenth-century historical narratives to Roman roads that, in their attempt to – carve out a linear trajectory, neglected to address the complexity of human experience that made up the landscape of the past. With 'Anon', she wished instead to explore the obscure, elusive territories that these texts left out – 'the forests & the will o the wisps [sic]'.<sup>27</sup> Throughout the essay, Woolf displays an interest in what she termed 'invisible presences' – the ordinary, anonymous men and women who in her view helped to shape English culture in the past.<sup>28</sup> Using her representation of medieval folk culture, she attempts to recuperate (or 'remould'), and actively to create ('conceive'), an alternative, collective literary tradition

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<sup>25</sup> As suggested when she observes in 'The Leaning Tower' that 'there is a deep gulf to be bridged between the dying world and the world that it struggling to be born' (p. 179).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 374.

<sup>27</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, V, 333. Jed Esty aligns Woolf's version of English history with her anti-imperial stance, arguing that she 'sides with "the will o the wisps" of local memory as against the imperial directness of the Roman road'. See Esty, *A Shrinking Island*, p. 249.

<sup>28</sup> Woolf, 'Sketch of the Past', p. 92.

running from past to present. Demonstrating how this tradition fed into, and shaped, the mainstream tradition of the English literary canon, Woolf presents Anon as a vehicle for a ‘counter-history’ that poses radically new ways of looking at the landscape of English literary tradition.

‘Woolf’s literary history is concerned with ‘deep time’ – the layers of meaning and history that make up contemporary English identity. She presents Anon as a hidden sediment buried within the cultural landscape, like the ancient ‘track along which the pilgrims rode to Canterbury’, grown over in the present day because ‘no one rides that way now’ (384). Existing as a kind of memory trace, a ‘scar’ on the body of the nation and the mind, Anon is defined in terms of both presence and absence in the essay. His song, which echoes throughout the text, comes to represent the elusiveness and strangeness of a past that has resisted the written inscription of history. And yet, Woolf calls attention to the power of the visual imagination to re-people the forgotten landscape of Anon, to imbue his world with material existence once more, arguing that ‘[b]y shutting out a chimney or a factory we can still see what Anon saw – the bird haunted reed whispering fen, the down and the green scar not yet healed along which he came when he made his journeys’ (382). Throughout her text, Woolf employs a historical strategy centred on subjective re-reading and imaginative reconstruction in order to fill the silence of the past with sound, to discover the domains that, like the fen, remain submerged or hidden.<sup>29</sup> As Gillian Beer has noted, Woolf’s representations of history ‘have something of the picture-book in them [...] a series of tableaux, a pageant’.<sup>30</sup> Woolf’s visualisation of the Middle Ages echoes both the pageant of *Between the Acts*, and the modern medium of the cinema: Anon does not remain static, but is (re)animated; his frequent portrayal as a figure moving through the landscape conveys what

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<sup>30</sup> Gillian Beer, *Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p. 8.

Woolf saw as the dynamism and vitality of medieval culture, as well as her sense of that culture's movement across time from the Middle Ages to the present day.

Woolf had always been compelled by the interpenetration of landscape and literature in the English tradition, and she makes the medieval artist speak of a time when literary culture enjoyed a more direct and symbiotic relationship with the natural world.<sup>31</sup> Anon, 'the common voice singing out of doors', is literally embedded in the natural landscape, living 'a roaming life crossing the fields, mounting the hills, lying under the Hawthorne to listen to the nightingale' (382). Allied to a revived nature, Woolf's depiction of the medieval artist testifies to her vestigial romanticism. Drawing on the ideas of Coleridge and Wordsworth, she presents his song as an 'organic form' that 'shapes, as it develops itself, from within'.<sup>32</sup> Anon follows no particular model or guide, apart from the rhythms and sounds of the natural world and the truth of his own emotions: he sings 'because he loves; because he is hungry, or lustful, or merry' (382). In this way, she can be seen to invoke the Romantic quest for more 'authentic' forms of language, attached to an idea of the 'common life'.<sup>33</sup> Anon is immersed, not only in nature, but also in a rural community of 'peasants', 'farm hands (383)' and 'maid servants' (383). Described as 'that babbling, child-like, story telling singer, that gossip at the back door [sic]' (404), he gestures to Woolf's interest in what she saw as the dynamic vitality of the working-class vernacular.

As Brenda Silver has pointed out, Woolf felt that in order to trace the history of English literature 'she would have to write as well the history of the society which had

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<sup>31</sup> See, among others, Charlotte Zoë Walker, 'The Book "Laid Upon the Landscape": Virginia Woolf and Nature, in *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, ed. by Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2001), pp. 143–161, and Bonnie Kime Scott, 'Virginia Woolf, Ecocriticism, and Breaking Boundaries in Nature', pp. 108–115. In her 'Notes for Reading at Random', Woolf spoke of her desire to explore 'the effect of country upon writers' (p. 373).

<sup>32</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, quoted in Jerrold E. Hogle, 'Romanticism and the "Schools" of Criticism and Theory', in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*, ed. by Stuart Curran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 1–33 (p. 6).

<sup>33</sup> William Wordsworth, 'Preface' to William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. by R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 243.

fostered that art, and responded to it',<sup>34</sup> and in her notes for the book, she remarks that 'I shd. therefore take a poem & build up round it the society wh. helps it. I shd. take a very old anon. poem' (376). Ruskin held that art was always a record of the society that produced it, and accordingly, Woolf presents the organic art of Anon as the product of an 'organic community' inscribed by a sense of cohesiveness and connection, as suggested by the 'tracks' that traverse the medieval landscape: 'If we could see the village as it was before Chaucers [sic] time we should see tracks across the fields joining manor house to hovel, and hovel to church' (383). Drawing upon the same Romantic models of historiography as Lynette Roberts, Woolf identifies the Middle Ages with the organic origins, not just of the English literary tradition, but of language itself, for Anon's voice is there from the very beginning: '[t]he voice that broke the silence of the forest was the voice of Anon' (382). Gillian Beer claims that for Woolf, history is 'playful, a "spume of language"', and indeed, it is language itself that lies at the heart of her vision of history in 'Anon'.<sup>35</sup> Woolf's wandering singer is portrayed primarily as a speaking voice, 'the only voice that was to be heard in England' during 'the silent centuries before the book was printed' (383); as a 'voice', he is simultaneously corporeal, embodied, and disembodied, able to transcend gender and, as I later show, time.

Like Lynette Roberts and other participants in the Neo-Romantic revival that suffused British cultural life during the 1930s and 40s, Woolf's vision of an organic community and 'unspoilt' natural landscape could be seen to articulate a sense of 'premature nostalgia' for a rural heritage that seemed poised on the brink of destruction during the 1930s and 1940s: In 1941, she noted in her diary a line from Walter de la Mare's 'Fare Well': 'Look your last on all things lovely'.<sup>36</sup> Yet rather than seeking to halt change, or to take flight into a

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<sup>34</sup> Brenda Silver, 'Introduction' to "Anon" and "The Reader", pp. 356-368 (p. 360).

<sup>35</sup> Beer, *The Common Ground*, p. 8.

<sup>36</sup> Jennifer Harris, pp. 1-2; Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, V, pp. 351-352.

more stable, cohesive past, as did some of the prominent Victorian medievalists, Woolf uses her nostalgia as a positive force for re-imagining culture and community for the postwar world, seeking in the shared emotions and rhythms encoded in literature a means of establishing a meaningful sense of connection between past and present, and between different people.

Though she might demonstrate a lingering nostalgia for a time when literature was not distanced from the natural world and the emotions of the body, Woolf cuts through the Romantic idealisation of the medieval past when she declares that ‘There never was, it seems, a time when men and women were without memory; There never was a young world’ (385). The medieval landscape does not appear as a changeless pastoral idyll in ‘Anon’, for it is peopled and always in flux, as wilderness becomes village green, and village green morphs into Elizabethan playhouse.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, although Anon’s ‘organic’ art is certainly celebrated by Woolf, it is ‘uncouth’, ‘ribald’(383), and ‘obscene’ (383) rather than harmonious, Dionysian rather than Apollonian; as a figure for the workings of language itself, Anon is presented as a revolutionary force of excess and transformation. Contrasting medieval literary culture with that of the early modern period, Woolf suggests that the vitality and creativity inherent to the tradition of ‘Anon’ is due, not so much to its connection to an idealised ‘nature’, as to the conditions particular to literary culture prior to the advent of print capitalism. Indeed, Woolf’s ‘Anon’ says as much about her aspirations for literary culture in the future as it does about that of the medieval past. Through her representation of the anonymous medieval singer and his relation to his audience, she attempts to pose ways in

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<sup>37</sup> Woolf’s image of a landscape inscribed by the ‘scars’ of social flux and transformation anticipates, perhaps, Raymond Williams’s conceptualisation of culture as ‘the finding of common meanings and directions [...] under the pressures of experience, contact and discovery, writing themselves into the land’ (‘Culture is Ordinary’, p. 93).

which modern literature might be revitalised and freed from the sterile realm of the ‘damned egotistical self’.

As her preparatory notes show, Woolf was concerned with exploring the role of the ‘chorus’ and ‘the importance of audience’ in the shaping of literary texts through time (377, 374). Drawing on E. K Chambers’ discussion of medieval folk culture in his *Early English Lyrics*, particularly his insistence on the early ‘dependence of poetry upon the throng’, she identifies the culture of the medieval vernacular with communal and participatory forms of literary production.<sup>38</sup> Arguing that the invention of the printed book in the fifteenth century transformed reading into a private, solitary, indoor activity, she peers through Anon’s eyes in order to imagine a time when English literature was not enclosed in the private house, but rather, took place outside, as part of communal experience, and the communal experience of nature: Anon’s ‘texts’ were ‘out of door songs’, because ‘there was no comfort indoors, little light, and no books’ (403). Woolf emphasises the idea that ‘Anon’ was not constrained by ideas of property (and, as I later show, propriety), suggesting that before Caxton’s printing press came along to usher in the idea of individual intellectual property, ‘texts’ (or songs) were the property of every-one and no-one, subject to alteration by each new person who sung them. In the oral world of Anon, members of the audience could continuously share in, and thus appropriate, literary ‘texts’ for themselves, ‘lifting a song or story from other people’s lips’ (382) in order to reinvent them. Indeed, in Woolf’s medieval vernacular tradition, ‘[t]he audience was itself the singer; “Terly, terlow’ they sang; and “By, by lullay” filling in the pauses, helping out with a chorus [sic]’ (382). Dissolving the boundary between

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<sup>38</sup> E.K. Chambers, ‘Some Aspects of Mediaeval Lyric’, in *Early English Lyrics Amorous, Divine, Moral and Trivial*, ed. by E.K. Chambers and F. Sidgwick (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1907), pp. 259–296 (p. 260). As Brenda Silver has pointed out, both the poems and Chambers’ historical commentary included in the anthology were early sources for the essay, and Woolf incorporates extracts from poems II, IV, and XXXIII into the body of her text. See Silver, notes to ““Anon” and “The Reader””, pp. 402- 404.



artist and audience, Anon's song is expressive for Woolf of a truly choric art form that, while in touch with the rhythms of the body, transcends sexual difference. The 'common voice' of Anon is 'sometimes man, sometimes woman', and because '[e]very body shared in the emotion of Anon's song, and supplied the story [sic]' (382), it is shown to offer a vehicle for deep-seated and transpersonal emotion, rather than the perspective of any one individual.

As I have demonstrated in relation to *The Voyage Out*, Woolf associated medieval culture with travel and patterns of mobility. Anon is also associated with fluidity and movement: he 'lives a roaming life crossing the fields' (382), and is frequently identified with the 'wandering minstrels' and 'Teutonic gleemen' described by E.K. Chambers in *The Medieval Stage* (1903), another source for the essay.<sup>39</sup> Allied to a pagan culture that saw 'peasants going on pilgrimages, setting up candles, worshipping pigs bones, and following Robin Hood [sic]' (387), he is frequently aligned with journeying, either through 'the track along which the pilgrims rode to Canterbury' (384) or 'the song of Chaucers [sic] Canterbury pilgrims' (385). He thus becomes evocative of an imaginary time, prior to the partition and enclosure of England's territory, when ordinary people moved in relative freedom across the landscape.<sup>40</sup> In Woolf's imaginative medieval landscape, Anon does not have to keep to borders and boundaries, but can wander at will, like a medieval flâneur. Indeed, like the flâneur, he is presented both as a model for the modern artist and as a figure for politics and poetics of errancy and wandering that, as I have indicated in previous chapters, she pioneered throughout her career.

The motility of Anon conveys what Woolf saw as the fluidity inherent to a medieval literary culture defined by textual *mouvance* – an oral and manuscript culture in which texts were never fixed, but instead were always on the move, since they were altered and every

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<sup>39</sup> E.K. Chambers, *The Medieval Stage*, 2 vols (1903; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), I, p. vi.

<sup>40</sup> Later on in the essay, Woolf's account of the sixteenth-century Bishop and travelling preacher, Hugh Latimer, includes a description of how '[h]e found the poor without a goose or a pig for the great were enclosing the fields' (386).

time that they were transmitted, ‘translated’ from person to person and from place to place. ‘Caxton’s printing press [...] foretold the end’ of the tradition of Anon, because it acted to fix the inherent mobility of the medieval text in the place, to mark it with the name of a single author; as Woolf puts it, the text ‘is now written down; fixed; nothing will be added’ (385). Walter Ong claims that the advent of print acted to impose a sense of fixity on the literary text, encouraging ‘a sense of closure, a sense that what is found in a text has been finalised, has reached a state of completion’.<sup>41</sup> Ong presents writing, and particularly the setting down of words in type, as ‘a pre-emptive and imperialist activity that tends to assimilate things to itself’, and Woolf similarly implies that print came to enact a colonising gesture on the English literary landscape, imposing a sense of control and fixity on the instability and free play of the text.<sup>42</sup> The modern novel is one of the primary products of print culture, and in her essay ‘Modern Fiction’, Woolf decries the concern with containment and closure evinced by the traditional realist novel, with its tight plotting and omniscient narrator. Directing her criticism at the ‘materialist’ writers Arnold Bennett, H.G. Wells, and John Galsworthy, she suggests that they

make a book so well constructed and solid in its craftsmanship that it is difficult for the most exacting of critics to see through what chink or crevice decay can creep in. There is not so much as a draught between the frames of the windows, or a crack in the boards. And yet – if life should refuse to live there?<sup>43</sup>

Woolf compares Bennett’s novelistic technique to a specular instrument of observation, a ‘magnificent apparatus for catching life’, suggesting that his attempts at fixing and containing life means that, inevitably and ironically, ‘Life escapes; and perhaps without life nothing else is worth while.’<sup>44</sup> For Woolf, life – human consciousness and experience – was inherently

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<sup>41</sup> Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 129.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>43</sup> Virginia Woolf, ‘Modern Fiction’, in *Virginia Woolf: Selected Essays*, ed. by David Bradshaw, pp. 6–22 (p. 7).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

mobile, unstable, and effervescent, ‘an incessant shower of innumerable atoms’, and could therefore not be adequately conveyed by the linear and atomising structures integral to the world of print:

Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible?<sup>45</sup>

Anon’s oral expression is celebrated by Woolf as an art-form centred, not on control, and completion, but on process, incompleteness, and open-endedness, a form that escapes from the ‘private house’ of fiction and ‘lets the light through’.<sup>46</sup> Because Anon’s ‘song’ is made anew each time it is performed, it is presented by Woolf as inherently capable of transformation, and as I later show in relation to *Between the Acts*, she seizes upon it as a form that, unlike the realist novel, is able to keep pace with the flux of modern existence. Ong observes that because medieval manuscript culture retained a connection with an antecedent orality, it conceptualised the book as a kind of utterance, ‘an occurrence in the course of conversation’.<sup>47</sup> The advent of print, in contrast, caused the text to be seen as something discrete – a container of information, generating a sense of the ‘private ownership of words’.<sup>48</sup> In using the image of an impermeable house of fiction as a metaphor for Bennett’s work, Woolf can be seen to offer an implicit critique of the print-based way of viewing the literary text (and, indeed, the world). In her new vision of literary tradition, she embraced instead the premodern conception of the book ‘an occurrence in the course of conversation’, insisting in *A Room of One’s Own* that ‘books continue each other, in spite of our habit of judging them separately’.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Woolf, ‘Modern Fiction’, p. 9.

<sup>46</sup> Gillian Beer has suggested that the levity with which Woolf often seems to approach her intellectual and literary heritage ‘is not superficial, but rather “lets the light through”’. See *The Common Ground*, p. 3.

<sup>47</sup> Ong, p.123.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p.128.

<sup>49</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, p. 104

As a ‘simple singer’, ‘Anon’ is representative of literature’s oral roots, conjuring the idea that language – and therefore literature – is originally ‘nested in sound’.<sup>50</sup> In Ong’s analysis, ‘no sensory field resists holding action, stabilization’ in quite the same way as sound due to the fact that it ‘is not simply perishable but essentially evanescent’, existing ‘only when going out of existence.’<sup>51</sup> Indeed, resistant to fixity of any kind, one of the pervasive features of Anon is his homelessness. He is presented, not only as a nomad, but also as a dispossessed figure, a social outsider ‘despised’ by the ruling establishment. Woolf associates his culture with the marginal and subaltern, with ‘the girl at the door’ (376), the jugglers and bear leaders ‘singing their songs at the back door to the farm hands and the maid servants in the uncouth jargon of their native tongue’ (383). Adopting the perspective of the aristocratic class (‘Anons words were as uncouth to the master and mistress as to us [sic 383]), she presents Anon’s English vernacular – his ‘native tongue’ – as strange, unintelligible, an ‘uncouth jargon’. In so doing, Woolf conveys an awareness of the social politics attached to the vernacular during the Middle Ages.<sup>52</sup> Anon is emblematic of a time when English had not yet been appropriated by the Latinate or French-speaking ruling establishment, but was instead a postcolonial language, marginalised and suppressed by colonial forces of power; as Woolf suggests, ‘Up stairs they spoke French [...]. Anon singing at the back door was despised. He had no name; he had no place [sic]’.<sup>53</sup>

Moreover, Woolf’s medieval artist is doubly dispossessed, doubly an outsider, for not

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>52</sup> Woolf’s sense of the linguistic diversity of the English Middle Ages was possibly derived in part from Chambers’s ‘Some Aspects of Mediaeval Lyric’, in which he describes the macaronic character of lyrics found in the Leominster manuscript and the mixed English and continental heritage of both anonymous English lyrics and the *balades* and *rondels* of Chaucer.

<sup>53</sup> In an earlier typescript, Woolf notes that ‘“English”, says the historian, ‘had gone underground for two centuries...’” (405), gesturing to Chambers’s claim in ‘Some Aspects of Mediaeval Lyric’ that ‘There is little hint of the folk-song beyond a few historic lays, and at the Conquest the vernacular goes underground for a couple of centuries, and England becomes for literary purposes a province of France’ (273). For further discussion of the linguistic politics of Britain in the later Middle Ages, see *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory 1280–1520*, ed. by Jocelyn Wogan-Browne et al (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999).

only does he sing in the derided vernacular, but he is aligned with a continental dramatic tradition whose pagan roots lent it from classical times onward associations with subversion, ribaldry, and resistance to authority. In his study of medieval secular and religious drama, *The Medieval Stage*, E.K. Chambers traces the medieval English folk-song tradition back through the figure of the wandering minstrel to the popular theatre of the Roman *ludi scenici*.<sup>54</sup> He describes how the tradition of popular Roman theatre was debarred at the onset of Christianity, with the result that its troupes of actors became the wandering minstrels and gleemen who moved from village to village entertaining ‘all classes of mediaeval society’ in Europe, often coming into conflict with the Church.<sup>55</sup> Accordingly, Anon’s aptitude for wandering also translates into a propensity for errancy and transgression. ‘Ribald, obscene’ (383), he is driven by an impulse toward excess and impropriety, using ‘the outsiders [sic] privilege to mock the solemn, to comment on the established’ (383), just as Woolf uses her outsider’s privilege to comment on the ‘pageantry’ of patriarchy and patriotism in *Three Guineas*.

The medieval folk singer becomes connotive in Woolf’s text of the ‘common’ people’s instinctual desire to go their own way; it was Anon who, despite the disapproval of the Clergy, led people to worship ‘[t]he old Gods [...] in their coats of green leaves, bearing swords in their hands, dancing through the houses, enacting their ancient parts’ (384). Indeed, Woolf presents the vernacular culture surrounding and sustaining the medieval folk singer as inherently subversive and revolutionary, not only because it is linked to the democratic impulses of the ‘folk’, but also because Anon’s oral art acts to dissociate words from writing, challenging the sense of control over language fostered by print culture.<sup>56</sup> Jed Esty has argued that during the 1940s ‘Woolf seems interested in trying to reclaim English tradition – what

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<sup>54</sup> E.K. Chambers, *The Medieval Stage*, I, p. v.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, p. vi.

<sup>56</sup> Ong, p. 14.

Dibattista rightly describes as an “adversary, anterior culture”– from an imperial Britishness that had appropriated the national past’.<sup>57</sup> Anon thus emerges as the figure for a repressed, subterranean cultural tradition that constantly crosses the bounds between English, ‘native’, and foreign, ‘other’. Through her depiction of medieval folk culture, Woolf can be seen both to reclaim, and actively to shape, an ‘adversary, anterior’ literary tradition – one that is collective, anarchic, and intent on rupturing the sacred ground of privilege.<sup>58</sup>

Woolf portrays the ‘anonymity’ of medieval literary culture as a kind of buried cultural treasure, ‘a great possession’ (397), for ‘[i]t gave the early writers an impersonality, a generality. It gave us the ballads; it gave us the songs. It allowed us to know nothing of the writer: and so to concentrate on his song (397).’ Anon might be a outsider figure ‘singing at the back door’, but he ‘had great privileges’, for

[h]e was not self conscious. He is not self conscious. He can borrow. He can repeat. He can say what every one feels. No one tries to stamp his own name, to discover his own experience, in his work (45).

Woolf’s persistent association of medieval vernacular culture with the outdoors (what she terms ‘the sense of the open air’ in ‘The Pastons and Chaucer’ [9]) testifies, as I have already suggested, to her sense of the creative freedoms afforded to the medieval artist and his audience by literary anonymity. In *A Room of One’s Own*, she argues that the nineteenth-century ushered in an era of pronounced self-consciousness and self-analysis in which ‘it was the habit of men of letters to describe their minds in confessions and autobiographies’.<sup>59</sup> This development, in Woolf’s view, imposed severe limitations on the writer and on literary culture: the meteoric rise in self-consciousness meant that ‘[l]iterature was strewn with the wreckage of men who have minded beyond reason the opinions of others’.<sup>60</sup> The creative

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<sup>57</sup> Esty, *A Shrinking Island*, p. 90.

<sup>58</sup> DiBattista, *Fables of Anon*, p. 193.

<sup>59</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, p. 66.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

mind, in her view, could not be impeded by fear of public scrutiny or judgement; in order to be truly creative, the mind must have ‘consumed all impediments and become incandescent’— something that could happen only when the author forgets herself and allows her ‘personal grievances and desire to protest’ to remain off the page.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, in *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf implies that anonymity is the source of real literary ‘genius’: because ‘we do not know’ Shakespeare as an individual, his poetry ‘flows from him free and unimpeded’; Charlotte Brontë’s writing, in contrast, is limited by the fact that ‘she will write of herself where she should write of her characters’.<sup>62</sup> Medieval anonymity is thus a ‘supreme gift’ for Woolf, because it removes the ‘burden’ of self-consciousness from the author, and gives readers the freedom to experience, and participate in, the text for themselves – to ‘stray and stare and make out a meaning for ourselves’ (13 ) as she puts it in ‘The Pastons and Chaucer’, without the mediating and controlling presence of the author.

Anon’s ‘impersonality’ could be seen to be indebted to Eliot’s suggestion in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ that ‘[t]he progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality’.<sup>63</sup> However, I suggest that for Woolf, anonymity does not entail an extinction of self, and neither does it imply the separation, as does to some extent Eliot’s theory of impersonality, of ‘the man who suffers and the mind which creates’.<sup>64</sup> Rather, it allows for a ‘freedom and fullness of expression’,<sup>65</sup> a kind of ‘laying bare’ that cannot happen when the writer is ‘self-conscious’. In her essay ‘Professions for Women’(1931), Woolf suggests that the expression of the body and the ‘truth’ of its unconscious ‘passions’ is, for both men and for women, central to literary creativity.

Accordingly, she argues that patriarchal culture’s insistence on making the woman writer

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., pp. 74, 90.

<sup>63</sup> T.S. Eliot, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ (1919), in *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. by Frank Kermode, pp. 37-44 (p. 40).

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>65</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, p. 100.

aware of herself as a body, and a body that must not unveil itself, acts to bring her imaginative explorations to an abrupt halt:

Now came the experience, the experience that I believe to be far commoner with women than with men. The line raced through the girl's fingers. Her imagination had rushed away. It had sought the pools, the depths, the dark places where the largest fish slumber. And then there was a smash. There was an explosion. There was foam and confusion [...] The girl was roused from her dream. She was indeed in a state of the most acute and difficult distress. To speak without figure she had thought of something, about the body, about the passions which it was unfitting for her as a woman to say.<sup>66</sup>

In this way, Woolf's conception of literary anonymity, and the 'impersonality' that she associates with it, can be seen to represent, not a flight from the gendered body and its 'passions', but an avenue towards '[T]elling the truth about my own experiences as a body', something that Woolf felt was pivotal for the the progression of women's literary creativity: in *A Room of One's Own*, she argues that the 'first great lesson' of women writers is learning how to write 'as a woman, but as a woman who has forgotten that she is a woman, so that her pages were full of that curious sexual quality which comes only when sex is unconscious of itself'.<sup>67</sup>

As I have suggested in my introduction to this chapter, the study of folk culture in Britain during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries served as a means of elucidating an 'unwritten history' – a history that was often seized upon in order to explain the present.<sup>68</sup> Right-wing Revivalist strands made the study of folklore serve to justify imperialism and class and gender stratification, and to naturalise assumptions regarding the superiority of white races and the inferiority of women. For Woolf, however, medieval folk culture offered a way, not only of evoking the experience of the anonymous collective, but also, of sounding the silenced voices of women hidden 'behind the acts' of official history. As Vanessa

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<sup>66</sup> Woolf, 'Professions for Women', in *Virginia Woolf: Selected Essays*, ed. by David Bradshaw, pp. 140–145 (p. 143).

<sup>67</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 121.

<sup>68</sup> *The Handbook of Folklore*, ed. by Charlotte Burne, pp. 1–2.



Manhire has observed, her reworking of the sixteenth-century ballad of ‘The Fower Maries’ in *A Room of One’s Own* serves, like the figure of Judith Shakespeare, to suggest the suppression of women’s voices in history, thus imposing a critique of the Folk Revival’s reactionary gender ideology.<sup>69</sup> In ‘Some Aspects of Mediaeval Lyric’, E.K. Chambers suggests that at the early inception of the folk-song tradition, ‘woman, not man, is the characteristic singer’. Indeed, for Chambers, the folk song originally grew out of conditions and rhythms particular to women’s experience, for ‘women’s are the greater number of the more leisured and rhythmical of the folk-occupations’. He traces the origins of the folk song to the spring festivals and primitive agricultural rituals in which women, ‘the primitive sower of the seed and planter of the herbs, has always been assigned the chief part’.<sup>70</sup> In accordance with this, Woolf famously speculates in *A Room of One’s Own* that ‘Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman’, suggesting that ‘genius of a sort must have existed among women as it must have existed among the working classes’ (63).<sup>71</sup> In *A Room of One’s Own*, medieval folk tradition, persisting in residual form into modernity, is linked by Woolf to the marginalisation and devaluation of women’s knowledge and creativity:

When [...] one reads of a witch bring ducked, of a woman possessed by devils, of a wise woman selling herbs, or even of a very remarkable man who had a mother, then I think we are on the track of a lost novelist, a suppressed poet, of some mute and inglorious Jane Austen.<sup>72</sup>

As Brenda Silver has observed, the suppressed role of women in the creation of civilisation and culture was a theme that preoccupied Woolf throughout the 1930s, and can be seen to provide one of the hidden subtexts to ‘Anon’.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Manhire, “‘The Lady’s Gone a-Roving’”, p. 236.

<sup>70</sup> E.K. Chambers, ‘Some Aspects of Mediaeval Lyric’, p. 261.

<sup>71</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, p. 63.

<sup>72</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, p. 63.

<sup>73</sup> In her ‘Notes for Reading at Random’, Woolf includes a cryptic reference to ‘Semiramus – more on Aspasia – witches & fairies’ (374). Semiramus was thought to have laid the foundations of the Mesopotamian civilisation, while Aspasia, companion of Pericles, was feted for her intelligence. Brenda Silver has suggested

Woolf's primitivist depiction of Anon as '[t]hat babbling, child like, story telling singer [sic]' resonates with Walter Benjamin's account of the premodern 'storyteller' in his eponymous essay, written five years before 'Anon', in 1936. The figure of the storyteller is for Benjamin emblematic of what he terms 'experience that goes from mouth to mouth'.<sup>74</sup> For Benjamin, this kind of communication was a crucial aspect of human life, but lamentably, it had been silenced by war and attenuated by technologized modernity: 'It is as if something that seemed unalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences'.<sup>75</sup> In her 1940 essay 'Coleridge: The Man at the Gate', Woolf similarly celebrates the poet's 'word of mouth' quality, asserting that this 'was, after all, better than writing – the "insemination" of ideas without the intermediary of any gross impediment'.<sup>76</sup> Just as Benjamin claims that 'the storytelling that thrives for a long time in the milieu of work – the rural, the maritime, and the urban – is itself an artisan form of communication',<sup>77</sup> so Woolf emphasises Anon's connection to the rhythms of labour, his emergence from a society in which people 'must fight together and plough together if they were not to be conquered by man and by nature' (383–4). Gesturing to the rhetoric of both Benjamin and William Morris, she presents the oral Anon as an artisan, a weaver of words, immersed in a social world in which culture, to use the terminology of Raymond Williams, is 'ordinary', part of the fabric of everyday life.

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that these historical figures gesture to the originary 'magical powers and knowledge possessed by women and to the rise of patriarchal civilisation, whether ancient or modern, which tried to deprive them of these powers' (371).

<sup>74</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Work of Nikolai Leskov', in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (London: Fontana, 1992), pp. 83–107 (p. 84).

<sup>75</sup> Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', p. 83.

<sup>76</sup> Quoted in Morgan, 'Vanishing Horizons', p. 37. Woolf returned once again to Coleridge while writing 'Anon' and 'The Reader'. The idea of unmediated communication resonates with Woolf's assertion, in her discussion of reading Chaucer in *Pointz Hall*, that 'the two minds [of reader and author] should be laid so close together that there was not a paper sheet nor a grape skin or the least other impediment between them; for even if there were a film, the light of the mind struck upon it, and discoloured pure understanding' (p. 49).

<sup>77</sup> Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', p. 91.

Anon's gender affiliations are complex and paradoxical. Persistently referred to using the male pronoun by Woolf, he gestures to the Romantic celebration of the male bard and the male-dominated troubadour tradition celebrated by Ezra Pound. Yet just as Anon is 'sometimes man, sometimes woman', so Benjamin presents the storyteller as a figure who resolves the dialectical tension between binary genders. The storyteller is for him is one of the 'earthily powerful, maternal male figures' whose 'bisexuality' offers 'a bridge between this world and the other'.<sup>78</sup> As a receptacle for the experiences of others, he represents a kind of meeting place between male and female, the corporeal and the spiritual: storytellers 'have in common the freedom with which they move up and down the rungs of their experience as on a ladder. A ladder extending downward into the interior of the earth and disappearing into the clouds'.<sup>79</sup> In this respect, Benjamin's storyteller resonates with Woolf's portrayal of Bernard in *The Waves*, who, in his extended monologue at the end of the novel owns that 'this is not one life; nor do I always know if I am man or woman, Bernard or Neville, Louis, Susan, Jinny or Rhoda – so strange is the contact of one with another'.<sup>80</sup>

Neo-Romantic expression was identified by Geoffrey Grigson as an art in which 'we are placing ourselves somewhere behind the contradictions of matter and mind, where an identity [...] may more primitively exist'.<sup>81</sup> In accordance with this, the Middle Ages are often telescoped by Woolf into an even earlier time identified by Gillian Beer as 'the primeval'.<sup>82</sup> Woolf's essay opens with a prehistoric scene derived from G. M. Trevelyan's *History of England*:

'For many centuries after Britain became an island' the historian says 'the untamed forest was king. Its moist and mossy floor was hidden from Heavens eye by a close drawn curtain woven of innumerable tree tops'. On those matted boughs innumerable

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 103

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>80</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, ed. by Kate Flint (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 216.

<sup>81</sup> Grigson, 'Comment on England', p. 8.

<sup>82</sup> Beer, *The Common Ground*, p. 6.

birds sang; but their song was only heard by a few skin clad hunters in the clearings.  
(382)

Anon is directly assimilated to this submerged, ordinary space, for ‘the voice that broke the silence of the forest was the voice of Anon’ (382), his song echoing the birdsong so directly as to almost be a part of it. Woolf’s return to the primeval past can be seen to encode contemporary anxieties about cultural degeneration and regression, the apocalyptic sense that modern civilisation was swiftly breaking down and returning to a ‘barbarous’, ‘precivilised’ state. As the German army threatened invasion, British people anticipated an impending return to a new ‘Dark Ages’, and Woolf’s prehistoric landscape with its ‘close drawn curtain woven of innumerable tree tops’ might be seen to mirror the darkness of the Blackout, imposed in Britain from September 1939.<sup>83</sup> Yet while contemporary cultural commentators saw only degeneration, Woolf’s revisitation of a ‘primeval’ past is essentially a movement of hope: as Jeremy Hooker has suggested, ‘the return to beginnings is, as in any crisis, essentially regenerative’.<sup>84</sup>

Drawing on the identification of medieval folk culture with what Chambers termed a ‘remote and ancestral heathenism’, Woolf frequently identifies Anon with a ‘primitive’ seam of British culture buried deep within the collective psyche.<sup>85</sup> Identified with the ritual rhythms that Jane Harrison claimed to lie at the origins of all art, his song is represented by Woolf as a primal ur-art, ‘the call to our primitive instincts’ (374). In her preparatory notes, Woolf links Anon to ‘the song-making instinct’ – what she saw as the deep-seated, instinctual desire to create shared by all human beings. For Woolf, as for her friend Jane Harrison, the instinct to create and the instinct for survival were one and the same: as I have suggested in Chapter 4, Harrison claimed that all art and ritual found its source in the ‘world-wide desire

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<sup>83</sup> Alexandra Harris observes that ‘These were indeed the Dark Ages: with the coming of war and the need for British self-sufficiency, the work of the Dorset farmers started to look less medieval and more urgently contemporary’. See *Romantic Moderns*, p. 185.

<sup>84</sup> Jeremy Hooker, *Poetry of Place* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1982), p. 39.

<sup>85</sup> E.K. Chambers, *The Medieval Stage I*, p. v.

that the life of Nature which seemed dead should live again'.<sup>86</sup> Anon's song can be seen to express what Woolf saw as the fundamental desire to make something out of nothing, to overcome silence and destruction to ensure the survival not just of the self, but of the community as a whole: 'Only when we put two and two together', she wrote in an earlier draft, 'two pencil strokes, two written words, two bricks do we overcome dissolution and set up some stake against oblivion' (403).

The idea of 'prehistory' is consonant with the themes and concerns of Woolf's essay, for the word can be used to describe the conditions of production and reception that determine the relationship between reader and writer, as well as the way in which a work of fiction creates its own past.<sup>87</sup> Beer contends that 'pre-history implies a pre-narrative domain which will not buckle to plot. Just as Freud said that the unconscious knows no narrative, so prehistory tells no story'.<sup>88</sup> In this way, the medieval-primeval is in Woolf's late work suggestive of oblivion and forgetfulness, gesturing to the areas of history that resist registration: folding the medieval and the prehistoric together, Woolf suggests that 'origins are always antecedent to language and consciousness', and thus, are essentially unknowable, recoverable only through imagining and reconstruction.<sup>89</sup> By tapping in to the primeval via the song of Anon, Woolf shapes a new myth of origins – one that has to do, not with great men or narratives of conquest, but with a state of sensual immersion in the natural world and in sound that can be connected to the maternal and/or semiotic. Indeed, just as the primeval precedes and exceeds language, so the Kristevan 'chora' is described as that which 'precedes and underlies figuration and thus specularisation, and is analogous only to vocal or kinetic rhythm'.<sup>90</sup> The ordering principle of the semiotic chora is supplied by the regulatory drives

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<sup>86</sup> Harrison, *Ancient Art and Ritual*, p. 26.

<sup>87</sup> Beer, *The Common Ground*, p. 9.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>90</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 94.

relating to the mother's body, and Woolf's 'primeval', prehistoric landscape can similarly be seen to pertain to early 'maternal sensations'. In her autobiographical essay 'A Sketch of the Past', Woolf evokes her own 'first impressions' – the early, formative memories that she persistently connects to the presence of her mother – in similar terms: 'Everything would be large and dim; and what was seen would at the same time be heard; sounds would come through this petal or leaf – sounds indistinguishable from sights.'<sup>91</sup> Thus, through her exploration of the cultural history of Anon, Woolf simultaneously uncovers a hidden literary tradition inscribed by the maternal and the semiotic, and creates a place for herself within that tradition, affirming her role and identity as a writer.

Yet this drive to recover lost origins is balanced, even superseded, by Woolf's sense of the continuance of the primeval, and, by extension, the continuance of the medieval 'Anon', into the present day. In both *Anon* and *Between the Acts*, the primeval-medieval is both strange and familiar, portrayed not only as part of the distant past, but also as contiguous to, and continuous with, the present day.<sup>92</sup> Anon's art – the medieval ballad and lyric – tap into 'something very deep – primitive. not yet extinct [sic]' (377), something 'drawn from the crowd in the penny seats and not yet dead in ourselves' (398). For Beer, prehistory can be said to lie '*beneath* history in the same spatial-geographical metaphor that Freud used to describe the relationship of consciousness and the unconscious which lies beneath', and Woolf persistently depicts medieval culture in terms of depth and hiddenness, claiming that '[t]hat is the world beneath our consciousness; the anonymous world to which we can still

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<sup>91</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'Sketch of the Past', p. 80. Woolf's depiction of the domain of 'Elevedon' in *The Waves*, an imaginative space that, standing before or beyond the Symbolic separation of self from other, self from nature, is closely associated with Woolf's own writerly identity: 'Now we have fallen through the tree-tops to the earth. The air no longer rolls its long, unhappy, purple waves over us. We touch earth; we tread ground [...] This is Elvedon. I have seen signposts at the cross-roads with one arm pointing 'To Elvedon'. No one has been there [...] now we tread on rotten oak apples, red with age and slippery. There is a ring of wall round this wood; nobody comes here. Listen! That is the flop of a giant toad in the undergrowth; that is the patter of some primeval fir-cone falling to rot among the ferns (p. 11).

<sup>92</sup> Indeed, Beer argues that, for Woolf, 'the strangeness of the past is all on the surface. At base, it is familiar'. *The Common Ground*, p. 8.

return' (385).<sup>93</sup> Anon, then, has to do a heritage that is felt more than it is known, a past which is also coexistent, and commingled with, the present.

As Clare Morgan has suggested, the imaginative landscape in which Anon is embedded, layered as it is with an archaic, 'native' history, evokes 'the Neo-Romantic desire for an identifiable nationhood'.<sup>94</sup> Drawing on the Revivalists' vaunting of the rural 'folk' as a bearer of 'authentic' Englishness, Woolf's meditation on medieval vernacular culture opens out, as I have suggested in my introduction to this chapter, onto a wider exploration of the meanings of Englishness in her writing of the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>95</sup> Anticipating Benedict Anderson's insistence on the central role of print culture in the imaginative construction of the modern nation, Woolf suggests that the very process which brought England into being – the rise of the printed book – simultaneously repressed the memory of 'those depths, those long years of anonymous minstrelsy, folk song, legend and words that had no name attached to them' (390).<sup>96</sup> But while print culture is shown to have 'killed' Anon, cutting us off from a fundamental aspect of the national past forever, it also preserved it: in reading Malory's *Morte Darthur*, 'we tap the reservoir of common belief that lay deep sunk in the mind of peasants and nobles. There is Malory's pages we hear the voice of Anon murmuring still' (384). As I will proceed to show in relation to *Between the Acts*, Woolf uses the formal techniques associated with modernist textuality in order to rediscover, or reconstruct, the oral consciousness of Anon. In so doing, she attempts to recuperate a national unconscious that,

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>94</sup> On January 12 1941, Woolf wrote to Ethyl Smyth telling her that the London of 'Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dickens' was 'my only patriotism: save one vision, in Warwickshire one spring when we were driving back from Ireland and I saw a stallion being led, under the May and the beeches, along a grass ride; and I thought that is England'. Both Chaucer and the grassy ride feature prominently in 'Anon', conjuring Woolf's own elusive, imaginative conception of Englishness. See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, VI, 461.

<sup>95</sup> Clare Morgan, 'Vanishing Horizons', p. 51. In the view of exponents of folk culture such as Cecil Sharp, the revitalisation of the nation could only come about through the rescue of a lost, organic heritage. As Pete Martin points out, the Revivalists' rhetoric defined 'authentic' Englishness 'not in terms of the urban industrial reality', but as a 'fantasised rural community', often located in the premodern past (Pete Martin, *The Imagined Village*, p. viii).

<sup>96</sup> Anderson, pp. 43-44

rooted in literature, the sensual experience of place and the maternal semiotic, offers a basis for new forms of national community.

***Between the Acts: the primeval voice sounding loud in the ear of the present moment'***

**(85)**

Many critics have remarked on Woolf's preoccupation with questions of national affiliation and national culture in her final novel, *Between the Acts*: Jed Esty, for instance, argues that the novel conveys 'Woolf's prickly rapprochement with national heritage', claiming that it elucidates her search for 'acceptable versions of national art' appropriate to a post-imperial world.<sup>97</sup> Through its playfully satirical dramatization of a village pageant-play, a ludic staging of English tradition from the Middle Ages to the present day, the novel explores different people's relation to territory and national tradition in the shadow of their seemingly imminent destruction.

*Between the Acts* is also a strongly intertextual work that, like the country house in which it is partly set (another traditional symbol of national culture, of course), reverberates with echoes from the literary past.<sup>98</sup> The text foregrounds the importance of a technologised print culture to the reproduction of nationhood, demonstrating how its characters' conception of national space and time is conditioned by their reading of history books and the newspaper. The kind of 'imagined community' re-presented in the mass print journalism, moreover, is shown to be predicated both on military violence and women's oppression: Batholomew Oliver uses his paper as a mask with which to terrify his young grandson, while Isa is troubled by an article in the *Times* about a young woman assaulted by soldiers after

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<sup>97</sup> Jed Esty, 'Amnesia in the Fields: Late Modernism, Late Imperialism, and the English Pageant-Play', *ELH*, 69.1 (2002), 245–276 (pp. 258, 249). Marina Mackay similarly suggests that the novel exemplifies the 'strange meetings between social radicalism and pastoral patriotism' generated in modernist literary works by the war; see *Modernism and World War II*, p. 26.

<sup>98</sup> Perry Meisel notes that Woolf 'was a markedly "learned" writer whose texts murmur with echoes of the English tradition at large'; Perry Meisel, *The Absent Father: Virginia Woolf and Walter Pater* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1980), p. xii.



being enticed into army barracks with the fantastical story of a horse with a green tail (25). Yet Woolf wrote in her diary in 1938 that 'Pointz Hall' (her early title for the novel) was to be built around 'a series of contrasts' between different forms of communication, ancient and modern.<sup>99</sup> Accordingly, she seizes upon the Neo-traditional genre of the pageant-play as a means of channelling the antecedent oral culture of 'Anon': as Barbara Apstein notes, it represents 'a different kind of text, one that is received communally, in public', and like the ephemeral compositions of Anon, it is 'shifting and unstable in contrast with the stability of the book'.<sup>100</sup> By embedding the pageant-play within the frame of her modernist novel, Woolf sets up a contrast, and a dialogue, between modern print culture and a reconstructed oral tradition, derived from the medieval past. This transcultural, transtemporal dialogue is used by Woolf as a means of re-ordering history and of defining a new sense of emplacement and coherence in the present for the entire community.

The village pageant that takes up the greater part of the novel can be seen as a modernist re-visioning of the genre of the Edwardian pageant-play. Founded by Louis Napoleon Parker in 1905, these pageants became widely popular in England during the earlier twentieth century.<sup>101</sup> Conservative and nostalgic in form and intent, they sought to link the history and traditions of a particular English places to wider narratives of empire and colonial action, and tended to '[dissolve] history into a seductive, symbolic continuity of rural folkways and national traditions'.<sup>102</sup> Woolf's pageant, however, is designed not to reiterate, but to attain critical purchase on these mythological conceptions of England. Using mimicry, parody, and laughter, the text suggests that the concept of an atemporal 'Merry England' is in fact a construct that says more about people's need for stability and identity in the present than it does about the past. Throughout her depiction of the village pageant, Woolf, like the

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<sup>99</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, V, 159.

<sup>100</sup> Apstein, p. 159.

<sup>101</sup> Esty, *A Shrinking Island*, p. 248.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

artist figure of the novel and fictional author of the pageant, Miss La Trobe, delves beneath the national myth of a medieval ‘Merry England’ in order to access an ‘adversary, anterior’ medieval culture lying hidden beneath. La Trobe realises that ‘another play always lay behind the play that she had just written’ (40), and this ‘play [...] behind the play’, I would suggest, is the medieval popular drama. Indeed, the pageant can be seen as the inheritor of the medieval Mummers’ plays, village festivals, and religious pageants described by E.K. Chambers in *The Medieval Stage*, evoking what Chambers calls ‘the deep-rooted mimetic instinct of the folk’.<sup>103</sup>

The anonymous villagers in attendance at the play’s opening (later identified as ‘pilgrims’ or ‘Canterbury pilgrims), singing and ‘tossing hay on their rakes’ (50), have a recurrent, if intermittent presence throughout the performance; ‘continu[ing] their march and their chant in the background’ (54), they are strongly evocative of Woolf’s Anon. Like the medieval minstrel, they are embedded in the natural landscape, half-hidden by the trees, and their ‘song’ speaks of an originary interaction between language, silence, and the human experience of the natural world. Representative of an intangible oral past, their words are elusive, almost inaudible, interleaving with the ambient birdsong and the sound of the wind to the extent that ‘only a word or two was audible’ to the audience’ (50). Melba Cuddy-Keane has suggested that the anonymous medieval pilgrims take up the role traditionally occupied by the chorus of Greek tragedy, a nonindividualised group that would accompany the various acts of the play, providing a continuing song and dance in the background.<sup>104</sup> As I have demonstrated in previous chapters, Jane Harrison held that the chorus was a trace testifying to the origins of Greek drama in communal ritual dances – rites identified with the matriarchal

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<sup>103</sup> Chambers, *The Medieval Stage I*, p. vi.

<sup>104</sup> Melba Cuddy-Keane, ‘The Politics of Comic Modes in Woolf’s *Between the Acts*’, *PMLA*, 105 (1990), 273–285 (p. 275).

religion that in her view preceded the patriarchal religion of the Olympian gods.<sup>105</sup> In an earlier version of her essay Anon, Woolf dwells more explicitly on the connection of medieval drama to an antecedent pagan ritualism:

The sun was a God; the earth a goddess. Even if the old gods were losing their names, the instinct remained when spring came, or in the cold of winter to do them homage; to placate them; to win crops, husbands, health, destruction of foes. The desire to enact was coupled with the other desire – to make something useless; something unconnected with the daily struggle. to bring out into the day light embodied their own natural love of play (406–407).

Through her invocation of Anon as choric voice, Woolf seeks to tap the ‘primitive’ ritual consciousness that she felt was embedded in the medieval form of the pageant in order to project new forms of national community. For Harrison, the ‘primitive’ ritual group was defined by its ‘inchoateness’ and ‘undifferentiatedness’; it reflected a truly collectivist culture in which ‘the individual was nothing, the choral band, the group, everything’.<sup>106</sup> In his *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), a text that Woolf read in 1939, Freud, drawing on the ideas of Gustave Le Bon, claimed that the group manifested an instinctual ‘thirst for obedience’, positing it as ‘an obedient herd, which could never live without a master’.<sup>107</sup> In contrast, Harrison held that the ritual group was sustained, not by adherence to a single leader or ideology, but by the collective performance of an integrative action – what she called a *dromenon* or rite. While Ernest Renan claimed that, in the case of nation, ‘[u]nity is always effected by means of brutality’,<sup>108</sup> Woolf recognised that Harrison’s leaderless ritual community allowed for the possibility of unity without violence or the need for conformity; as Harrison asserts, the ancient Greeks ‘in their greater wisdom saw that

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<sup>105</sup> Walter Ong identifies ritual with oral culture, suggesting that ritual and chanting act to facilitate the oral memorialization central to the retention of cultural knowledge and wisdom in oral communities (*Orality and Literacy*, p. 64).

<sup>106</sup> Jane Harrison, *Ancient Art and Ritual* [20.1.2015] (p. 159).

<sup>107</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1949), p. 21.

<sup>108</sup> Ernest Renan, ‘What is a Nation?’, p. 11.

uniformity in ritual was desirable and possible; they left man practically free in the only sphere where freedom is of real importance, i.e. in the matter of thought'.<sup>109</sup>

Melba Cuddy-Keane contends that medieval 'chorus' becomes central to the meaning of *Between of the Acts*, since the choric voice of the villagers is extended to include all voices in the novel, including those of the modern-day audience.<sup>110</sup> Indeed, at certain points in the text, the disparate subjectivities conveyed via the use of free indirect discourse appear to merge into a wider, choric consciousness:

Feet crunched the gravel. Voices chattered. The inner voice, the other voice was saying: How can we deny that this brave music, wafted from the bushes, is expressive of some inner harmony? 'When we wake' (some were thinking) 'the day breaks us up with its hard mallet blows.' (73)

In this way, the pageant can be seen to perform a shift in historical perspective whereby background becomes foreground, and the medieval 'marginalia' of English history comes to occupy the centre of attention. Attached to Woolf's conception of 'the populous undifferentiated chaos of life which surged behind the outline' of history, the unsung oral past of Anon is diffused and dispersed throughout the 'now' of the pageant's performance.<sup>111</sup> The 'medieval' voices summoned by the pageant are frequently shown to merge and clash with the sounds of modern technology – the '[c]huff, chuff, chuff' (48) of the gramophone, the 'zoom' (115) of the aeroplane, the voice of the newspaper reporter (114). Establishing a parallel between the 'primary' orality of the past and the 'secondary' (print-based) orality of the present, Woolf uses the culture of Anon in order to suggest how a newly technological 'secondary orality' might be harnessed for democratic and creative, rather than destructive and disciplinary, effect. Placing an emphasis on the transformation and adulteration of tradition through time rather than its 'purity' or origin, Woolf combines primary, 'organic'

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<sup>109</sup> Jane Harrison, *Prolegomena*, p. 156.

<sup>110</sup> Cuddy-Keane, 'The Politics of Comic Modes', p. 275.

<sup>111</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, p. 192.

orality, and secondary, ‘technological’ orality in order fabricate new, decentred and borderless, forms of culture and community for the present day.

For Woolf, oral culture serves as a means of ‘sound[ing] collective experience’, albeit only momentarily: ‘still for one moment she [Miss La Trobe] held them together – the dispersing company’ (60).<sup>112</sup> Ong claims that in contrast to vision, ‘the dissecting sense’, sound has a unifying and centring effect: if the visual ideal, as promoted by modern, scientific print culture, is ‘clarity and distinctness’, then the auditory ideal is ‘harmony, a putting together’.<sup>113</sup> Suspended between the past and an unknown future, the members of the audience articulate a sense of alienation and displacement, feeling ‘a little not quite here or there’ (90). In its deployment of sound and the voice, the pageant enables the community to ‘centre’ itself in time and space, providing an enabling sense of stability and coherence: as Ong relates, ‘[w]hen I hear [...] I gather sound simultaneously from every direction at once: I am at the centre of my auditory world, which envelops me, establishing me at a kind of core of sensation and existence’.<sup>114</sup> This renewed sense of integration between self and lifeworld is suggested by an unknown voice in the audience:

‘Sheep, cows, grass, trees, ourselves – all are one. If discordant, producing harmony – if not to us, to a gigantic ear in a gigantic head. And thus [...] we reach the conclusion that *all* is harmony, could we hear it.’ (104)

Yet rather than articulating a perfect harmony of ‘natural’ sound, the anonymous medieval chorus – like the wider chorus of voices to which the pageant extends – conveys a discordant ‘mellay’/ ‘medley’ (57) of vocal snippets and snatches. Indeed, the novel as a whole oscillates constantly between harmony and disharmony, ‘*Unity*’ and ‘*Dispersion*’ (119). While the song of the anonymous villagers seems to be ‘expressive of some inner harmony’, their ‘[w]ords without meaning’ (125), half-lost on the wind, threaten at times to veer towards

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<sup>112</sup> Beer, *The Common Ground*, p. 124.

<sup>113</sup> Ong, p. 71.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

madness or non-sense,<sup>115</sup> and the Christian/Romantic conception of nature as harmony is shattered by pageant's cacophony of different sounds and the 'drone' (115) of the warplanes flying overhead, 'like a flight of wild duck' (114)<sup>116</sup> Yet, as Cuddy-Keane contends, Woolf's text offers 'the radical interrogation of what harmony might be if it is *not* harmony in the traditional sense'.<sup>117</sup> Ong suggests that in oral culture, 'knowledge is ultimately not a fractioning but a unifying phenomenon, a striving for harmony', and Woolf's novel similarly projects unity more as an aspiration or movement rather than an end in itself.<sup>118</sup> Invoking the participatory, collective model of art offered by Anon, Woolf's text seeks to 'mobilize and redraft' the listener as producer: the pageant's audience – and the reader herself – are invited to listen attentively and 'cosmically' to historical sounds conventionally dismissed as 'noise' or 'interference', and to shape new meanings for themselves.<sup>119</sup>

Brenda Silver claims that '[t]he portrayal of Anon in [Woolf's] essay enlarges her portrait of the artist, Miss La Trobe [...] and provides a historical ancestry for the creator of the mid-summer village pageant in *Between the Acts*'.<sup>120</sup> Often referred to as 'Miss Whatsername' by other characters, Miss La Trobe, like Anon, is immersed in the world of her text, yet keeps her individualised personality 'off the page', remaining hidden behind the trees in the background during the length of her play.<sup>121</sup> At moments, she takes on the obsession with control identified by Woolf with the novelistic form: nicknamed 'Bossy' (125) by the other villagers, she is compared to a dictatorial 'commander pacing his deck'

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<sup>116</sup> The anonymous chorus can be connected to the 'village idiot', Albert, who also has a role in the pageant: they similarly engage in gestural and vocal play, and Albert's 'mopping and mowing' (53) mirrors the '[d]igging and delving, ploughing and sowing' (75) of the medieval villagers. 'Leering' at the audience and 'pinching the Queen's skirts' (54), Albert can be seen to perform the subversive role of the medieval court fool.

<sup>117</sup> Melba Cuddy-Keane, 'Virginia Woolf, Sound Technologies and the New Aurality', in *Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, ed. by Pamela Caughie (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 69–96 (p. 92).

<sup>118</sup> Ong, p. 70.

<sup>119</sup> Cuddy-Keane, p. 92, drawing on the words of Bertolt Brecht.

<sup>120</sup> Brenda R. Silver, "'Anon' and 'The Reader': Virginia Woolf's Last Essays", p. 380.

<sup>121</sup> Roberts, 'Preface' to *Gods with Stainless Ears*: 'The subject is universal, and the tragedy one of too many. Here I would add that my own, though part may be expressed, is outside the page' (p. 43).

(39) as she prepares for the performance, and she becomes enraged, ‘growl[ing]’ (50) and ‘gnash[ing] her teeth’ (74) when she senses that the performance is slipping from her grasp, her audience ‘slipp[ing] the noose’ (74). Yet in its ultimate subordination of control and completion to process, her ‘text’ has more in common with the art of Anon than that of the novel: victory for La Trobe is in giving and creating, rather than in a completed, perfect work of art:<sup>122</sup>

Glory possessed her – for one moment. But what had she given? A cloud that melted into the other clouds on the horizon. It was in the giving that the triumph was. And the triumph faded. Her gift meant nothing. If they had understood her meaning; if they had known their parts; if the pearls had been real and the funds illimitable – it would have been a better gift. Now it had gone to join the others (124).

Establishing a parallel between Anon and the artist figure of the novel, Woolf attempts to reflect upon the role of the modern writer – particularly the modern woman writer – in relation to her readers, and to imagine ways in which the developing ‘society of the mass’ might be harnessed for creative, rather than destructive ends. Woolf’s attitude both to her readership and to the idea of a mass society was complex and ambivalent during the 1930s and early 1940s. On the one hand, she feared the ‘herd instinct’ and the incursion of a homogenising mass culture into the private life, exclaiming in her diary ‘How torturing the life in common is! Like trying to drink a cup of tea and always it is dashed from one’.<sup>123</sup> In *Three Guineas*, she explicitly positions herself as a social outsider, both as a woman, and as an artist, arguing that this position afforded a beneficially critical perspective on the internal operations of British culture.<sup>124</sup> Thus, Miss La Trobe’s anguish at being ‘the slave of my audience’ (125) could be seen to reflect Woolf’s own resentment at the pressure of her readers’ expectations and the limitations imposed by these expectations on her self-expression. Yet, as I have suggested, she was also longing for a

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<sup>122</sup> See Cuddy-Keane, ‘The Politics of Comic Modes in *Between the Acts*’, p. 279.

<sup>123</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, V, 239.

<sup>124</sup> Woolf, *Three Guineas*, pp. 313-4. As Silver notes, throughout the 1930s and into the 1940s Woolf’s diary records her increasing alienation from the patriarchy and ‘self-proclaimed stance as an outsider’. ‘Introduction’ to ‘“Anon” and “The Reader”’, p. 371.

renewed sense of community and connection with her readership by the end of the 1930s. Mitchell A. Leaska has observed that she was beset at this time by a sense of enforced isolation as a writer: the war had taken away her audience, her ‘echo’, and having no ‘echo’ was for her “part of one’s death”.<sup>125</sup> Accordingly, in *Between the Acts*, Woolf’s narrator muses on the empty library of Pointz Hall, observing that for the wartime generation, ‘the newspaper was a book’ (15). As her representation of Anon makes clear, Woolf felt that the ‘call and response’ between artist and audience, writer and reader, were central to ensuring the vitality and survival not just of her own writing, but of literary culture more generally. As Leaska puts it, ‘without the crucial presence of the reader to infuse her text with life, her artist’s offering of the imagination remained inert on the page – unsponsored and irrelevant’.<sup>126</sup> Woolf’s conception of textual anonymity – as articulated in her literary reconstruction of medieval vernacular culture and in the figure of Miss la Trobe – offers a way out of this impasse, suggesting an avenue through which to reconcile her longing for community and communication with her need for dissent and detachment.

Miss la Trobe is an eccentric figure, an outsider whose homosexuality (‘since the row with the actress who had shared her bed and her purse the need of a drink had grown on her’ [125]), bohemian lifestyle, and refusal to conform to norms of femininity mean that she is relegated to the margins of her small village community; as she herself acknowledges, ‘[s]he was an outcast. Nature had somehow set her apart from her kind’ (125). La Trobe’s foreign surname further emphasises her unhomey status: as Mitchell Leaska points out, the *Larousse Dictionnaire étymologique des noms de famille et de prénoms de France* states that ‘the name “La Trobe” means invention and is possibly a troubadour’s surname’.<sup>127</sup> As I shown in relation to Roberts’s writing in Chapter 4, women’s relationship to the national community

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<sup>125</sup> Mitchell A. Leaska, *Pointz Hall: The Earlier and Later Typescripts of Between the Acts* (New York: University Publications, 1983), p. 6.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> Mitchell A Leaska, *Pointz Hall: The Earlier and Later Typescripts of Between the Acts*, p. 209.



was continually problematised during the Second World War, and La Trobe's status reflects Susan Gubar's contention that 'irrespective of her wartime utility, woman remains a foreign body within patriarchal constructions of nationhood'.<sup>128</sup> As I have demonstrated, Anon is also an archetypal outsider, yet paradoxically, as Brenda Silver observes, it is his social isolation which allows him to 'say out loud what we feel, but are too proud to admit' (383) – a capacity that affords him tolerance and a 'place' in the community.<sup>129</sup> Similarly, Miss La Trobe's 'gift' (124), her ability to bring people together and stir in them their 'unacted part' (92), lends her a role in her community and a place in which to create her art.

Benedict Anderson contends that while the modern nation purports to 'loom out of an immemorial past', the evolutionary, progressive temporal model that underpins the conception of the modern nation implies 'an almost Heraclitean hostility to any idea of continuity' – an idea that is reflected in the discrete, discontinuous scenes from English history presented in the pageant.<sup>130</sup> Articulated in the interweavings of the pageant's anonymous chorus, the voice of Anon can be seen to encode Woolf's search for continuity within the discontinuous fabric of the modern nation. Weaving their way 'in and out in single file [...] between the trees' (48) and between the separate scenes from English literary history, the medieval villagers can be seen to restore a sense of continuation and duration to Miss La Trobe's vision of English history. Woolf, as Beer has suggested, was compelled by the new technology of the radio, particularly its ghostly capacity to disjoin body and voice.<sup>131</sup> Evocative of what Woolf terms 'certain emotions always in being: felt by people always'

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<sup>128</sup> Quoted in Plain, p. 167. As I have shown in my analysis of Roberts's poetry, women experienced 'a tension between pragmatic inclusion and fundamental distrust characterized almost all dimensions of women's entry into the public sphere [during the war], and in women's writing it resulted not so much in a "literature of citizenship" as an interrogation of such a concept' (Plain, p. 167).

<sup>129</sup> See Silver, 'Introduction' to 'Anon and 'The Reader', p. 380.

<sup>130</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 11.

<sup>131</sup> Beer, *The Common Ground*, p. 114

(374),<sup>132</sup> the disembodied voices of the anonymous villagers convey an ‘inner current’ of emotion and experience that, transcending the bounds of the individual self and the individual body, runs from past to present, connecting up the compartmentalised scenes of history.

As Cuddy-Keane points out, the ‘language’ of the anonymous chorus is music and rhythm.<sup>133</sup> During the 1930s Woolf increasingly drew connections between developments in the world of physics and the idea of rhythm in prose,<sup>134</sup> and was compelled by the idea, promoted by James Jeans in his popular science books of the 1930s, that the universe consisted only in waves, or what French physicist Louis de Broglie called *ondes fictives*.<sup>135</sup> Gillian Beer suggests in relation to *The Waves* that ‘assonance, overlap between words, iteration and internal rhyme all [...] express the wave-like fluidity of a newly imagined universe’ – a new conception of space and time that simultaneously ‘etherealised’ and decentred the ego, ‘snatch[ing] it away from a single base’.<sup>136</sup> Rhythm and rhyme are, of course, important components of oral composition due to their mnemonic function, and are a defining feature in Woolf’s use of language throughout *Between the Acts*. Take, for instance, the audience’s reaction to the play: ‘What a cackle, a cacophony! Nothing ended. So abrupt. And corrupt. Such an outrage; such an insult. And not plain. Very up to date, all the same’ (109). Woolf claimed in a letter to Ethyl Smith that ‘the rhythmical is more natural to me than the narrative’, and in *Between the Acts*, she draws on the rhythm and repetition proper to oral composition in order to free herself from the strictures of the linear plotline.<sup>137</sup> Revealing ‘improbable likeness and affinity’ between seemingly unrelated elements, rhythm and rhyme

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<sup>132</sup> In this respect, they bear witness to what Benjamin terms ‘a collective experience to which even the deepest shock of every individual experience, death, constitutes no impediment or barrier’ (‘The Storyteller’, p. 101).

<sup>133</sup> Cuddy-Keane, ‘The Politics of Comic Modes’, p. 281.

<sup>134</sup> Books by ‘Eddington, Darwin or Jeans’ are listed alongside *The Antiquities of Durham* and *The Proceedings of the Archaeological Society of Nottingham* in a description of the Pointz Hall library (p. 14).

<sup>135</sup> Quoted in Beer, *The Common Ground*, p. 115. See also James Jeans, *The Universe Around Us* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1929).

<sup>136</sup> Beer, *The Common Ground*, p. 121.

<sup>137</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, IV, 204.

offer what Beer calls ‘a cryptic guide to connection’, allowing Woolf to weave a sense a continuity of time and tradition out of the disparate fragments of the past that remain.<sup>138</sup>

Read in the context of Anon, Woolf’s anonymous chorus projects an alternative mode of relating to, and conceptualizing, national tradition. As Benjamin suggests, ‘what can be handed on orally [...] is of a different kind from what constitutes the stock in trade of the novel’.<sup>139</sup> He claims that in oral culture, it is shared memory, rather than the inheritance of property or texts, that ‘creates the chain of tradition which passes a happening from generation to generation’.<sup>140</sup> In this way, the oral storyteller suggests a model of tradition, not as a direct, (patri)lineal pathway, but as a web: memory ‘starts the web which all stories together form in the end. One ties onto the next, as the great storytellers, particularly the Oriental ones, have readily shown’.<sup>141</sup> Because in oral culture texts are memorised by the listener and re-told in a new form, the oral storyteller can be seen to offer model of tradition based on assimilation and retransmission, rather than possession. E.K. Chambers notes that birds, associated with spring *renouveau*, occupy a prominent role in the early medieval *chanson populaire* and *chanson d’aventure*: nightingales, symbols of ‘amorous passion’, represent ‘the go-between who bears messages heart to heart’.<sup>142</sup> The birds and birdsong that feature prominently in the novel, ‘syllabbling discordantly life, life, life, without measure, without stop’ (124), can be seen in this way to point to the cultural inheritance of the dispossessed – a heritage that, transferred from ‘heart to heart’, is assimilated into the embodied experience of the individual and reinvented constantly in the ‘now’ of reperformance.

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<sup>138</sup> Beer, *The Common Ground*, p. 116.

<sup>139</sup> Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller’, p. 87.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>142</sup> E.K. Chambers, ‘Some Aspects of Mediaeval Lyric’, p. 270.

Woolf can be seen to draw on medieval orality in order to suggest how contemporary technological orality such as the radio might be harnessed for democratic and participatory purposes.<sup>143</sup> Yet conversely, the new apprehension of sound associated with the ‘secondary orality’ of modernity is also shown to offer a new way of ‘reading’ the distant past. Cuddy-Keane contends that ‘technology has produced our current understanding of sound’, and remarks that in the earlier twentieth century, new auditory technology served to refocus attention on sound as an entity in itself, rather than as something seen in relation to human ‘fears and desires’.<sup>144</sup> Woolf’s renewed interest in sound chimes with contemporary European avant-garde practices in radiophonic art. In their 1933 Manifesto ‘La Radia’, F.T. Marinetti and Pino Masnata called for a new auditory artform based on ‘the use of noises of sounds of chords harmonies musical or noise simultaneities of silences’.<sup>145</sup> In *Between the Acts*, Woolf, like Marinetti, places an emphasis not only on sound, but also on silence – what Marinetti termed ‘the silent or semi-silent atmosphere that enwraps and gives shading to a particular voice sound noise’.<sup>146</sup> In fact, in Woolf’s last novel, silence emerges an alternative way of encountering the ancestral past. In *Between the Acts*, it is the listeners, rather than the ‘talk producer[s]’ (24), who successfully retain an avenue of communication with the alterity of the distant past; for Clare Morgan, it is the quiet, introspective Lucy Swithin who ‘hears ancestral sounds and seeks to understand’.<sup>147</sup> Woolf’s depiction of Pointz Hall frequently places an emphasis on silence and resonance: an unknown ‘lady’ in a picture hanging next to the portrait of a male ‘ancestor’ leads ‘the eye up, down [...] through glades of greenery and shades of silver, dun, and rose into silence’ (24); the room in which the paintings are held

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<sup>143</sup> Cuddy-Keane, ‘Sound Technologies and the New Aurality’ p. 74. Cuddy-Keane notes that Woolf connected technological development with ‘a liberating expansion of space’ and the end of narrow concepts of nationhood’ (p. 76).

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., p. 70, p. 71.

<sup>145</sup> Fillippo Tommaso Marinetti and Pino Masnata, ‘La Radia’, in *Futurism: an Anthology*, ed. by Lawrence Rainey et al, pp. 292-295 (p. 295).

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., p. 295.

<sup>147</sup> Clare Morgan, p. 43.

becomes a 'shell, singing of what was before time was' (24), like the 'vase [that] stood in the heart of the house, alabaster, smooth, cold, holding the still, distilled essence of emptiness, silence' (24). In so doing, she encourages her readers to listen for something that is no longer there: as Morgan observes, the room is the 'shell' of a ruined house, the crumbling structure of a receding way of life, but it is also a natural artefact, a centreless (de-centred) interior space 'singing' of the primeval, pre-linguistic realm from whence it came.<sup>148</sup>

Yet, as I have already indicated, it is language, even more than silence, that is central to Woolf's vision of English history, and *Between the Acts* persistently explores the interrelationship of language, personal identity, and national community.<sup>149</sup> Woolf's representation of Anon gestures to her sense of the dynamic vitality of working-class language – a quality that she often ascribed to working women's speech in particular, as discernible in her depiction of the nurses' speech in *Between the Acts*:

The nurses after breakfast were trundling the perambulator up and down the terrace; and as they trundled they were talking – not shaping pellets of information or handing ideas from one to another, but rolling words, like sweets on their tongues; which, as they thinned to transparency, gave off pink, green, and sweetness (9).

The concreteness of the metaphor and simile used in this passage emphasises the material, tactile quality of the women's speech, as well as the sensual pleasure that the women take, not so much in the sense of the words, but in their sound and feel. The speech of Woolf's nurses, 'rolling [...] like sweets', can be connected to the senseless, sensual syllables of the 'battered woman' (69) singing outside Regent's Park Tube station in *Mrs Dalloway*, or the song of the housekeeper Mrs McNab in the 'Time Passes' section of *To the Lighthouse*, 'like the voice of witlessness, humour, persistency itself, trodden down but springing up again' (107). In her essay 'Craftsmanship', based on a BBC radio address that she gave in 1937,

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid. p. 45. , and Mellor, *Reading the Ruins*, p.114.

<sup>149</sup> In *Nation and Narration*, Homi. K. Bhabha invites us to consider 'the Janus-faced ambivalence of language itself in the construction of the Janus-faced discourse of the nation' (p. 3). Freud similarly emphasised the centrality of language to the experience and effects of group consciousness, arguing that the group as a unit was particularly 'subject to the truly magical power of words' (*Group Psychology*, p. 19).

Woolf portrays language – words – as inherently changeable and promiscuous: because they have been ‘out and about, on people’s lips, in their houses, in the streets, in the fields for so many centuries’(88), they are ‘full of echoes, of memories, of associations – naturally’ (88); they live ‘[v]ariously and strangely, much as human beings live, by ranging hither and thither, by falling in love, and mating together’ (89), and are ‘highly democratic’(90), for ‘they believe that one word is good as another; uneducated words are as good as educated words, uncultivated words as cultivated words, there are no ranks or titles in their society’ (90).<sup>150</sup> Satirising the rhetoric of the Folk Revivalists, Woolf suggests that ‘the less we enquire into the past of our dear mother English the better it will be for that lady’s reputation’ for ‘she has gone a-roving, a roving fair maid’, implying that English has more in common with the figure of the wandering, ‘ribald’, desiring woman than the pure and virginal maiden.<sup>151</sup> Fluid, unstable, ‘full of echoes’ and ‘associations’, Anon can be understood as a figure for the workings of language itself.<sup>152</sup> Indeed, both ‘Anon’ and *Between the Acts* can be seen to reiterate Mikhail Bakhtin’s contention, articulated in his ‘Discourse in the Novel’ (1934–35), that ‘[l]anguage – like the living concrete environment in which the consciousness of the verbal artist lives – is never unitary’, an idea that, as I show in the chapter to follow, has particular resonance in Roberts’s writing.<sup>153</sup> The multiplicity of voices in *Between the Acts* gestures to Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia – the diversity of voices, styles of discourse, and points of view that for Bakhtin is intrinsic to the novelistic form. The

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<sup>150</sup> Virginia Woolf, ‘Craftsmanship’, pp. 85–91, pp. 88–89, p. 90.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid, p. 90. The figure of the woman ‘gone a-roving’ can be connected to Chaucer’s Wife of Bath, who famously ‘koude muchel of wandrynge by the weye’ (knew a great deal about wandering by the wayside; Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson rev. edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 23–328 (p. 31, l. 457). Barbara Apstein notes that Woolf was reading Chaucer again in 1938–9 in preparation for ‘Anon’, and suggests that the Wife of Bath offers a possible model for the sensual Mrs Manresa, ‘the self-acclaimed wild child of nature’: the phrase ‘the jolly human heart’ is repeated by her like a kind of talisman, echoing, perhaps, the Wife’s ‘joly body’ (Apstein, p.129).

<sup>152</sup> Woolf, ‘Craftsmanship’, p. 88.

<sup>153</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, ‘Discourse in the Novel’, in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 269–422 (p. 288).

multiple, often contradictory viewpoints that are collaged together in Woolf's text reflect the fact that 'when all verbal communication must be by direct word of mouth, involved in the give-and-take dynamics of sound, interpersonal relations are kept high – both attractions and, even more, antagonisms'.<sup>154</sup> In this way, Woolf's attention to oral language serves to emphasise her vision of history *and* tradition as multiplicity and dialectic.

Woolf's concern with the corporeal rhythms of the English vernacular can be seen to form part of a Neo-Romantic desire to bring language back to the phenomenological body, to strip away rhetoric and abstraction in order to rediscover more 'authentic' forms of expression. Yet as I have suggested, her tendency to focus on the speaking subject of enunciation also pertains to her attempt to explore, and recuperate, the semiotic dimensions of language. In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva distinguishes between two modalities or 'dispositions' indispensable to the signifying process: that of the symbolic – systems of grammar, syntax, and signs based on a series of separations between self and world – and the semiotic, which exists as a trace or imprint within the realm of the symbolic, and articulates a sense of continuum or interrelation.<sup>155</sup> Kristeva's semiotic, like the art of Anon, is defined by motility, and as in the case of the anonymous medieval chorus, encodes both continuance *and* disruption, unity and disunity. 'Constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases', the semiotic chora is a disposition that,

Though deprived of unity, identity or deity [...] is nevertheless subject to a regulating process [reglémentation], which is different from that of the symbolic law but nevertheless effects discontinuities by temporarily articulating them and then starting over, again and again.<sup>156</sup>

Just as, for Kristeva, the text is always a dialectic between the semiotic and the symbolic, so Miss La Trobe's pageant stages tradition as a dialectical interaction between a 'symbolic'

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<sup>154</sup> Ong, p. 44.

<sup>155</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 100.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

nationalism connected to narratives of ‘a heroic past, great men, glory’, and an extra-narrative national ‘unconscious’ rooted in nature, art, and the maternal semiotic. Clare Morgan contends that Woolf’s later work articulates her search for ‘the realm of mythic simplicity before the word, or at least before both the individuated word and the printed word: that is, language itself became ‘fixed’ in the cause of underpinning identity, culture, nationhood’.<sup>157</sup> In mining and reconstructing the tradition of Anon, Woolf attempts to raise the semiotic dimension of the national ‘text’ to the surface level of the socialised body. Furthermore, she posits this semiotic ‘unconscious’ as the basis for a national tradition based, not on unification, but on ‘negativity, difference, and disruption’, not on detachment and separation, but on connection and continuation.<sup>158</sup>

While Kristeva contends that the symbolic dimension of language is dependent on the semiotic in order for communication to be made possible, Woolf similarly shows that the mainstream English canon was invigorated by the subterranean energies of Anon: without Anon ‘singing at the back door’, the English, she suggests, ‘might be a dumb race [...] who left behind them stone houses, cultivated fields and great churches, but no words’ (383). Yet Kristeva’s semiotic is also a disruptive force, composed of destructive charges and stases – what she terms ‘negativity – that erupt into discourse in order to break up and remodel the symbolic.’<sup>159</sup> Moreover, because the semiotic is ‘always already social and thus historical’, inviting the irruption of the semiotic into the symbolic has the potential to destroy and transform conventional sociality.<sup>160</sup> In Woolf’s novel, the ‘gestural and vocal play’ of Anon emerges as a kind of semiotic ‘counterlanguage’ – one that splits up imperial narratives of nationhood in order to open out new modes of belonging.<sup>161</sup> As Helen Southworth suggests,

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<sup>157</sup> Clare Morgan, ‘Vanishing Horizons’, p. 42.

<sup>158</sup> Toril Moi, ‘Introduction’ to *Revolution in Poetic Language*, in *The Kristeva Reader*, p. 89.

<sup>159</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 107, p. 103.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 117–118.

<sup>161</sup> Cuddy-Keane, ‘The Politics of Comic Modes’, p. 281.



‘[t]he sub-plot (the unheard, the unsaid, the barely heard, the murmur, the hum, the whisper) unwrites, puts into question, derivates [...] from the “formal railway line of the sentence”’, just as it unwrites, and puts into question, the linear narrative of the modern nation.<sup>162</sup>

Yet Woolf’s recuperation of the semiotic dimensions of culture in *Between the Acts* has as much to do with remembrance as with making things new. Ernest Renan argues that ‘the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things’.<sup>163</sup> When in *Between the Acts* Isa Oliver muses on ‘The burden [...] laid on me in the cradle; breathed by restless elm trees; murmured by the waves; breathed by restless elm trees; crooned by singing women; what we must remember; what we must forget’ (93), she can be seen to invoke a repressed national tradition that is half-remembered, half-forgotten. The act of recovery of this ‘maternal’ past is for Woolf both a process of remembrance and forgetting – of entering into an unconscious world which ‘still exists in us, deep sunk, savage, remembered’ (381). This ‘deep-sunk’ space, moreover, is inherently transformative and regenerative, like the fecund mud out of which the words of Miss La Trobe’s next play emerge at the end of the novel:

She raised her glass to her lips. And drank. And listened. Words of one syllable sank down in the mud. She drowsed; she nodded. The mud became fertile. Words rose above the intolerably laden dull oxen plodding through the mud. Words without meaning – wonderful words (125).

Through her tacit engagement with the vernacular culture of the British Middle Ages, Woolf poses literary tradition as a collective *practice* rather than private property: drawing on Ruskin’s account of the great edifices created by anonymous medieval craftsmen, she asks that we take ‘a wider, a less personal view of modern literature, and look indeed upon the

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<sup>162</sup> Helen Southworth, ‘Women and Interruption in *Between the Acts*’, in *Locating Woolf: The Politics of Space and Time*, ed. by Anna Snaith and Michael Whitworth (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 4–61 (p. 59).

<sup>163</sup> Ernest Renan, ‘What is a Nation’, p. 11.

writers as if they were engaged in some vast building, which being built by common effort, the separate workmen may well remain anonymous'.<sup>164</sup> The voice of 'Anon', diffused throughout the spaces of *Between the Acts*, conveys Woolf's search for a new connection between past, present and future. This connection serves to re-order the past, and points the way toward cultural rebirth. For Woolf, the survival of literature and the survival of community were interlinked, for literature 'has the same endearing quality of that which we are, that which we have made, that in which we live'.<sup>165</sup> Invoking the model of textual *mouvance*, she suggests that the boundary-lines of the book, like the boundary-lines of the past, are fluid and 'never clear-cut'.<sup>166</sup> Through her creative re-imagining of medieval culture, glimpsed at in the gaps, fissures, and silences in her texts, she attempts to access an alternative, 'borderless' national tradition as an alternative to the narrow plotlines offered by national memories of a heroic past. In her evocation of medieval culture, she foregrounds not the glory of individual men, but the contactual, the collective, and the ordinary in an attempt to construct a new national narrative that includes and celebrates the feminine.

In *A Room of One's Own*, the cross-road appears as the shrine of 'Shakespeare's Sister', the woman writer who 'died young, alas, she never wrote a word', and who now 'lies buried where the omnibuses now stop, opposite the Elephant and Castle' (62) – a figure for an untapped, but nonetheless potent, female creativity. Roberts, as I show in the next chapter,

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<sup>164</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'How it Strikes a Contemporary', in *Virginia Woolf: Selected Essays*, ed. by David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 23–31 (p. 30). This statement bears resemblance to John Ruskin's suggestion that the sculptures on Gothic Cathedrals are 'signs of the life and liberty of every workman who struck the stone; a freedom of thought, and rank in scale of being, such as no laws, no charters, no charities can secure; but which it must be the first aim of all Europe at this day to secure for her children'. *The Stones of Venice*, II, 161.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>166</sup> Michel Foucault, 'The Archaeology of Knowledge', in *Literary Theory: an Anthology*, ed. By Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, pp. 90-96 (p. 92). Foucault contends here that 'the frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network' (p. 92).

also expresses her vision of poetic language in terms of the junction or cross-roads between ancient past and modern present.

## Part III: Language and Community

### Chapter 6

#### **‘Unlocked the padlocked lungs’: the idea of the vernacular in the writing of Lynette Roberts<sup>1</sup>**

During a visit to T.S. Eliot’s Faber office in June 1948, later recounted in her memoirs, Roberts told Eliot of ‘a conflicting issue of crossroads’ that saw her caught between two very different poetic impulses:

[...] that of returning to the elemental words and simple voices of living – i.e. basic rural cultures, earth rhythms...what we will be forced back to if the atom bomb arises. A cleansing purity and rebirth of sound, recreation refolding of the world such as we had the refolding of the various strata, Icelandic stone and bronze age etc. And...hitting against that view which is one of isolation, severe pruning. The whole discordant universe, the cutting of teeth, one rhythm grating against each other, the metallic convergence of words, heavy, colourful rich and unexplored.<sup>2</sup>

This dilemma illuminates the dual, conflicted nature of Roberts’s approach to poetic language. On the one hand, she wished to return to what she sees as the primal, organic origins of language, located in the human relationship with nature (‘basic earth cultures’) and the body (‘earth rhythms’). On the other hand, she was drawn to everything in modern-day language that is built-up, convoluted, artificial. Combining the ‘rootless’ language of modern science with the strange words of geology, the sounds of jazz with the cacophony of modern journalese, texts such as *Gods with Stainless Ears* remain, in Patrick McGuinness’ words, ‘charged and eclectic and full of disparate material’.<sup>3</sup> In fact, her poetic language emerges as a battle-ground in which the conflict between competing aspects of Wales’s identity – medieval and modern, organic and mechanical, ‘native’ and international – play out, often to spectacular effect.

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<sup>1</sup> Roberts, ‘Broken Voices’, l. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Roberts, ‘Visit to T.S. Eliot’, p. 150.

<sup>3</sup> Conran, *Frontiers*, p. 173; McGuinness, *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, p. xvi.

In this chapter, I argue that Roberts's perception of Welsh history and culture is bound up in her fascination with language. Focusing on her essay 'An Introduction to Village Dialect' (1944), I suggest that, like Woolf, she presents the Welsh nation as an essentially imagined, discursive entity, constructed in and through words, and thus inherently multiple and unstable. As articulated in language, Wales is shown to have all the permanence of an inscription in stone, and yet all the ephemerality of a snatch of speech or a half-remembered line from a folk song. Furthermore, like language, it can be re-modelled and re-made. Roberts can be seen to subscribe to the constructivist vision of language – the idea that language not only reflects, but actively constructs new forms of social reality, hence her frequent depiction of language as something as solid and tangible, like a stone or 'a piece of quartz'. By coining strange new words, or creating new 'collocations of meaning/music',<sup>4</sup> she strives to voice an emergent cultural identity that remains 'rich and unexplored'.

In her long, experimental poem *Gods with Stainless Ears*, Roberts aims to lend articulation to the body in war: both the individual female body, and the body of the people. While what Wainwright sees as her 'exploded, defamiliarised English syntax' sometimes threatens to drag her language into the realm of incomprehensibility and non-sense, it also seeks to convey the inexpressible: the experience of bodily pain.<sup>5</sup> Elaine Scarry claims that pain realizes a 'shattering' of language, 'bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned'.<sup>6</sup> This process is not entirely destructive, however. Taking the subject to a place beyond language, pain allows the subject to 'see' language in a different way, to experience it

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<sup>4</sup> Wheale, 'Lynette Roberts: Legend and Form in the 1940s', p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Wainwright, p. 80.

<sup>6</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: the Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 5, p. 4.

in its sensory, visual, and aural dimensions. Woolf dramatizes this idea in her representation of war veteran Septimus Smith in *Mrs Dalloway*:

‘K...R...’ said the nursemaid, and Septimus heard her say ‘Kay Arr’ close to his ear, deeply, softly, like a mellow organ, but with a roughness in her voice like a grasshopper’s, which rasped his spine deliciously and sent running into his brain waves of sound which, concussing, broke (p. 19).

Roberts shares this outsider’s sensitivity to the sensory materiality of words: as Wainwright observes, she ‘experience[s] and explor[es] their sound, texture, and composition, almost as if she were turning objects never before seen over in her hands’.<sup>7</sup> Concentrating on ‘An Introduction to Village Dialect’, a text that traces the emergence of Welsh culture from a medieval folk tradition of music, circular dance and song, I suggest that Roberts responds to the pain of war and of exile by returning to what she perceives as the material origins of language. ‘Delv[ing] back to the foundations of language and the social’, she seeks out those ‘elemental words’ and ‘earth rhythms’ that, connected to the (maternal) body, are imbued by Julia Kristeva with the power to make language a ‘new device’.<sup>8</sup> As in the writing of Woolf, the rhythms of the premodern vernacular are harnessed by Roberts in order to establish a connection between otherwise conflicting parts of Welsh culture, to introduce a sense of coherence without yet trying to make those different parts whole.

Emphasising the liminality, ambiguity, and fragmentation that inscribe the life of the nation, both Woolf and Roberts anticipate the emergence of the poststructuralist critical paradigms that have dominated the academy, and made a great impact on national theory, over the past decades. In previous chapters, I have sought to excavate Roberts’s and Woolf’s approaches to medieval history and tradition by paying attention to their writing on a close, textual level. In this final chapter, however, I consider Lynette Roberts’s writing in relation to a number of key theoretical models, with the aim of pointing towards the broader, conceptual

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<sup>7</sup> Wainwright, p. 85.

<sup>8</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 117.

implications of the ideas that have been raised over the course of this thesis. Starting from Kristeva's proposition that 'foreignness is within us: we are our own foreigners, we are divided,'<sup>9</sup> I draw upon both Kristeva and Mikhail Bakhtin in an effort to understand Roberts's embrace of dialogism and representation of linguistic 'internal difference'. In addition, by harnessing the poststructuralist vision of textuality and of culture advanced by Jacques Derrida, Homi K. Bhabha, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, I point to new ways of reading Roberts's work, indicating how she moves away from modernist preoccupations with an 'absent totality' in order to anticipate postmodern and postcolonial perceptions of language and national culture.<sup>10</sup>

Roberts's language, in the words of John Wilkinson, 'puls[es] with sociolinguistic intensities': she is chiefly concerned with the speaking subject, with 'language as it occupies subjects and subjects as they occupy language'.<sup>11</sup> Paying close attention to the varieties of local sounds and speech in and around Llanybri, she stresses that, in Bakhtin's words, 'language is something real [...] a process teeming with future and former languages'.<sup>12</sup> In her essay 'An Introduction to Village Dialect', she returns to a multilingual medieval past, juxtaposing disparate voices in order to convey a vernacular world in which, prior to the standardisation of a national language, 'there was no language-centre at all'.<sup>13</sup> Through her Welsh literary 'counterhistory', she presents English as one of the many social languages that have overlapped to shape modern-day Wales, thereby evincing the claim of Anglophone

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<sup>9</sup> Kristeva, quoted in Marilyn Edelstein, 'Toward a Feminist Postmodern Poléthique: Kristeva on Ethics and Politics', in *Ethics, Politics and Difference in Julia Kristeva's Writing*, ed. by Kelly Oliver (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 196-214 (p. 200); Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 181.

<sup>10</sup> Esty observes that 'If the metaphor of lost totality is one of the central deep structures of imperialism and modernism, it follows that the end of empire might be seen to augur a basic repair or reintegration of English culture itself. Such a turn of geopolitical events would therefore reflect those aspects of modernist style that were based on lost social totality with a new – or newly imagined – sense of spatial and cultural consolidation' (*Shrinking Island*, p. 7).

<sup>11</sup> John Wilkinson, 'The Water-Rail of Tides', in *The Lyric Touch: Essays on the Poetry of Excess* (Cambridge: Salt, 2007), pp. 189-194 (p. 193).

<sup>12</sup> Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', p. 356.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 273.

Welsh culture to a place in national life.<sup>14</sup> Roberts does not attempt to resolve the issue of conflict in Welsh culture, or her ‘problem of cross-roads’ in language. Rather, she looks to the medieval past in order to show how the ‘lines of conflict’ that ensue from Wales’s ‘divided sensibility’ might be harnessed for creative ends, and to suggest how the voices of Wales – ‘cramped’ (*CP*, 6), and ‘constrained’ by the strictures of imperial ideology – might be ‘unlocked’ and set free through the art of poetry.

In the discussion that follows, I first proceed to outline some of the important political and aesthetic contexts informing Roberts’s singular approach to language, namely, the nature of her engagement with Romantic perceptions of language as expressive of ‘common life’ and ‘elementary feelings’, and the imbrication of language in discourses of authenticity and political resistance during the 1940s.<sup>15</sup> Following this, I turn my attention to ‘An Introduction to Village Dialect’, presenting this overlooked essay as a complex, innovative piece of work that seeks, not only to construct its own Anglophone Welsh tradition, but also to articulate, by means of its gaps and silences, the ‘culturally muted’ experiences of the subaltern.<sup>16</sup> Finally, I turn my attention to *Gods with Stainless Ears* in order to explore how Roberts emphasises the materiality of her text – its visual, tactile, aural dimensions – in order to open out language to the possibility of revolutionary new meaning-making, in which each reader can participate.

### **Romanticism and language: the ‘elemental words and simple voices of living’.**

As I have shown over the course of this thesis, the theme of the return to roots remains a resonant one in Roberts’s writing. Her interest in what she termed the ‘languages of the soil’ (*VD*, 119) revives a Romantic tradition that posited rural speech as a more immediate and

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<sup>14</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> Wordsworth, ‘Preface’ to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, pp. 245, 243.

<sup>16</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: a Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 189.



emotionally authentic kind of expression, a direct conduit for what William Wordsworth termed ‘essential passions’ and ‘elementary feelings’.<sup>17</sup> Her concern with condensing poetry back to basics can be also seen to invoke an Imagist aesthetic.<sup>18</sup> Ezra Pound’s treatise ‘A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste’ laid out a manifesto for a poetics of brevity, calling for the radical sweeping away of the heavy drapery of Victorian rhetoric. The ‘Imagistes’ sought the distillation of the pure essence of meaning, and, in a related sense, direct, untrammelled communication. Roberts’s poetics places a similar emphasis on direct communication, an impulse that reflects her desire, at once personal and political, to overcome silence and isolation; in her poem ‘The Fifth Pillar of Song’, for instance, she cries that ‘I strive to each you O people of Cambria/ For I have something to say’ (ll. 3-4). Weaving together snippets derived from recorded speech, film, radio, print, and music, her poetry anticipates Raymond Williams’s assertion that, because a culture can never be predicted or prescribed in advance,

all the channels of expression and communication should be cleared and open, so that the whole actual life, that we cannot know in advance, that we can know only in part even while it is being lived, may be brought to consciousness and meaning.<sup>19</sup>

As I show in the section that follows, her poetry seeks to ‘[bring] to consciousness and meaning’ the historically complex and culturally muted experiences that make up modern-day Wales.

The priority given by Roberts to the human voice and ‘earth rhythms’ in her discussion with Eliot speaks of her desire to access what Jerrold E. Hogle terms a ‘more complex body-language’, repressed by social codes of language and gender.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the

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<sup>17</sup> Wordsworth, ‘Preface’ to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, p. 245.

<sup>18</sup> For Pound, the poet should ‘[u]se no superfluous word, no adjective, which does not reveal something’. Ezra Pound, ‘A Few Don’ts by an Imagist’, *Poetry*, 1.6 (1913): 200-206 (p. 201). Pound also advised aspiring modernist poets to ‘read as much of Wordsworth as does not seem too unutterably dull’.

<sup>19</sup> Raymond Williams, ‘Culture is Ordinary’, p. 96.

<sup>20</sup> Jerrold E. Hogle, ‘Romanticism and the “schools” of criticism and theory’, in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*, 2nd edn, ed. by Stuart Curran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 1-33 (p. 21). As I have intimated in chapters 3-5, the body - be that the wild, sensual, boundless body, or the fragile and suffering wartime body - emerges as an organizing motif in much of the Neo-Romantic cultural production of the 1940s. See David Mellor, p. 16, pp. 22-4, pp. 25-9.

search for forms capable of ‘telling the truth about my own experiences as a body’ is centrally important to Roberts’s gender politics.<sup>21</sup> In *Gods with Stainless Ears*, the battle for territory and dominance raging around the peaceful landscape of west Wales is inscribed upon the surface of the female body. As Conran suggests, the poem’s primary theme is ‘of birth. Of Uneventful birth’ (60); centring upon her personal experience of miscarriage in March 1940, Roberts presents this as representative of the painful loss of countless other mothers in the war, echoing David Jones’s use of the line *seinnysit e gledyf ym penn mameu*, taken from Aneurin’s *Y Gododdin*, in his poem *In Parenthesis* (1937).<sup>22</sup>

The concept of the ‘birth of sound’ recurs in Roberts’s writing, and is frequently identified with Wales; her unpublished poem ‘The Fifth Pillar of Song’, for instance, praises the Welsh people for ‘produc[ing] the birth of sound within me’ (l. 1). Conveying her sensitivity to the new soundscapes of technological modernity, the concept of the ‘birth of sound’ also signals Roberts’s fascination with the idea of pre-linguistic origins – the moment of language’s emergence out of an elemental world of natural sound. Indeed, for Roberts, the renewal of culture promised by the reconnection with ‘pastoral root[s]’ was coextensive with the ‘recreation’ of modern language. Domestic images of paring down, laying bare, rinsing and refolding abound in her work, reflecting a cultural and linguistic renewal defined more by ‘making and mending’, repetition and reworking, rather than creation *ex nihilo*.

Her Romantic yearning for a lost, sensual connection between words, thoughts, and things can be viewed in the context of a growing sense of unease over the perceived arbitrariness of language during the 1930s and 1940s. Set against the backdrop of an emergent ‘society of the spectacle’ in which the ‘real’ seemed increasingly to be sliding out

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<sup>21</sup> Woolf, ‘Professions for Women’, p. 144.

<sup>22</sup> ‘His sword rang in the heads of mothers’. Taken from the sixth-century *Y Gododdin*, this was used by David Jones as the epigraph to his poem *In Parenthesis* (1937; London: Faber & Faber, 2010). For a discussion of the relevance of this line in relation to Roberts’s work, see Conran, *The Cost of Strangeness*, p. 193.

of view, Roberts's appeal to language's imagined 'roots' in the body and the earth – what she called 'the life of the soil' – can be read as an attempt to redress an overriding sense of social and political unreality.<sup>23</sup> In his 1946 essay 'Politics and the English Language', George Orwell placed the question of language at the heart of concerns about political corruption and social anomie, claiming that '[o]ur civilization is decadent and our language – so the argument runs – must inevitably share in the general collapse'.<sup>24</sup> Arguing that the political elite deployed 'bad English' in order 'to make lies sound truthful and give an appearance of solidity to pure wind', he held that clarity could be nonetheless be regained – and political regeneration achieved – through recourse to a 'vivid, homemade turn of speech', and by paying attention, collectively, to the meanings of words.<sup>25</sup> Roberts was similarly resistant to the rhetoric of what she perceived as an urban, metropolitan political establishment; connecting political rhetoric to the imposition of a 'bourgeois and shallow town culture' (*D*, 15) on the 'wholesome ways' of Llanybri, she sought a democratic corrective for this in the speech patterns of her local community. In a diary entry for June 17<sup>th</sup> 1940, she contrasts the speech of the Llanybri villagers favourably with the 'corrupt' rhetoric of a London-based government, asserting that

If MPs could see the faces or hear the remarks of these folk when their own high educational voices are broadcast, it would do them a world of good, for the officials speak at their own low level, and do not understand the wise and simple minds of the agricultural community (17).

Like Wordsworth and Virginia Woolf, Roberts's interest in rural working-class language is often couched in aesthetic terms. Her valorisation of the 'simple voices of living' might thus be seen to efface the individualised voices of the real inhabitants of Llanybri.

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<sup>23</sup> The term is Guy Debord's. See *La société du spectacle* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1992). I also gesture here to Jean Baudrillard's identification of the age of mediatised mass modernity as one of 'simulacra and simulations' in which traditional distinctions between the 'real' and the 'imaginary' have broken down. Jean Baudrillard, 'Simulacra and Simulations', p. 369.

<sup>24</sup> George Orwell, 'Politics and the English Language', *Horizon*, 13.76 (1946), 252- 265 (p. 252).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 243, 265, 261.

Importantly, however, her concern with ‘languages of the soil’ also forms part of her commitment to the cause of rural workers, invoking the socialist politics associated with the Mass Observation movement. Mass Observation was a social project that, set up by Charles Madge and Tom Harrisson in 1937, encouraged people to note down what they saw and heard around them in order to create an ‘anthropology of ourselves’.<sup>26</sup> As I show, Roberts’s observations on the speech patterns and idioms of rural west Wales, and her incorporation of these into her poetry, can be seen to reflect her desire to make the voices of the rural periphery audible to the metropolitan centre of power.

Moreover, as I have suggested, Roberts’s commitment to rural language as an arbiter of community and a site of authenticity was balanced and complicated by her sensitivity to ‘the discordant universe’ of modernity. For if on one level she wished to return to the ‘living voice’ and ‘verbal concision’<sup>27</sup> that she often associates with medieval Welsh culture, then she was also driven by a need to bring language up-to-date, to use words, as she put it in a letter to Robert Graves, ‘in relation to today’.<sup>28</sup> Her longing to ‘speak of everyday things with ease’ and ‘arrest the mind to a simpler world’, as expressed in her poem ‘The Shadow Remains’, is in some ways an aspiration, a movement of desire rather than a materially achievable actuality. Indeed, her poetry demonstrates her recognition that the dream of an organic tradition and linguistic coherence – often located in a mythic or premodern past – is always the product of a fractured, complex present. Turning to ‘An introduction to Village Dialect’ and *Gods with Stainless Ears*, I show how she recovers a ‘usable’ medieval past with

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<sup>26</sup> Quoted in John Storey, *From Popular Culture to Everyday Life* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 40. See also Penny Summerfield, ‘Mass-Observation: Social Research or Social Movement?’ *Journal of Contemporary History*, 20. 3 (1985), 439-452. As Summerfield observes, this initiative sprang from the belief that the official interpretation of public life, reported in the media, was one-sided, and at odds with what ordinary people really thought and felt (p. 440).

<sup>27</sup> Conran, *Frontiers*, p. 173.

<sup>28</sup> Roberts, ‘Letter to Robert Graves’, December 18 1944, in *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, p. 181.

which to make her language ‘new’, even as she uses a polyphonic modernity as a lens through which to re-vision medieval Welsh history.

### **An Introduction to Village Dialect**

‘An Introduction to Village Dialect’ was published by Keidrych Rhys’s Druid Press in 1944, as an accompaniment to a series of impressionistic short stories written by Roberts and depicting aspects of contemporary Welsh village life and custom. Like the stories themselves, the article is concerned with the interweavings of history, culture, and language that make up a particular place, and a particular time.<sup>29</sup> In the article, Roberts endeavours to prove that ‘Welsh dialect [...] has both a tradition and root’ (107) by connecting the everyday speech of Welsh people with what Gillian Beer terms ‘wider arcs’ of history and tradition.<sup>30</sup> Her interest in dialect can be placed in the context of a growing ethnographic interest in local language variation in the British Isles during the late thirties and 1940s; Naomi Mitchison, for example, wrote stories in the dialect of the Kintyre fishing village of Carradale in which she stayed during the wartime years, and the *Shell Travel Guides* offered detailed information on the spoken idioms and speech of particular English counties.<sup>31</sup> In ‘An Introduction to Village Dialect’, Roberts shows how spoken dialect can reveal the different cultural forms and processes of ‘historical becoming’ that have helped shape a culture in time and space; her investigation of dialect, therefore, is coextensive with her desire to ‘tell the truth’ about Welsh culture to a metropolitan literary centre that, in her view, tended to occlude or distort Welsh cultural difference: in a letter to Robert Graves, she insists that ‘I had to do it [to write

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<sup>29</sup> Though designed to illuminate the short stories of the volume, the ‘Introduction’, which is of significant length, does not refer to these stories directly, and functions in many ways as a stand-alone piece of literary and cultural criticism in its own right. For these reasons, and for ease of reference, I will refer to it as an article in this chapter – as does Roberts in her correspondence with Robert Graves (see her letter of December 13<sup>th</sup> 1943, in *Diaries, Letters and Recollections* (p. 167)).

<sup>30</sup> Beer, *Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground*, p. 116.

<sup>31</sup> Naomi Mitchison, *Among You Taking Notes: The Wartime Diary of Naomi Mitchison 1939-45*, ed. by Dorothy Sheridan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 101. The *Shell Guides* also offered an account of local geology, ‘flora and fauna’, and food. See, for example, Paul Nash, *Dorset Shell Guide* (London: Faber & Faber, 1936), which opens with a map of the county followed by a poem by Thomas Hardy.

the article] to correct all the false misinterpretations found in short stories written by foolish pimps such as Henry Treece'.<sup>32</sup>

Importantly, Roberts uses the term 'Welsh dialect' to refer to Anglophone Welsh speech.<sup>33</sup> Exploring the connection between language and material cultural practices – the use of the hand plough at Cwmcelyn, the making of mead – she sets out to demonstrate that Anglophone Welsh literature and language have not been superimposed on Welsh culture through industrialization, as Saunders Lewis claimed, but rather, are enmeshed in a deep relation with Welsh culture in all of its historical and 'sensuous particularity'.<sup>34</sup> In this way, her text can be seen to channel the cultural agenda of Keidrych Rhys's *Wales*, which evinced the importance of Anglophone Welsh writing to Welsh national identity and emphasised its role in what Rhys called a 'Welsh renaissance'.<sup>35</sup>

Roberts returns to the Middle Ages, particularly the period following the Norman conquest in the twelfth century, in order to piece together a premodern tradition of Anglophone Welsh writing. To this end, she brings together a wide range of texts and writers connected to borderland geographies and hybrid, cross-cultural forms, such as Nennius, the putative author of the *Historia Brittonum* (c. 830), Layamon and Wace, Geoffrey of Monmouth, and the Chester Mystery plays. Emphasising the fluid nature of her 'Anglophone Welsh' tradition, Roberts uses it as a platform for exploring a broader literary counterhistory – one that, rooted in a folk tradition that, articulated from the position of the cultural

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<sup>32</sup> Roberts, 'Letter to Robert Graves', December 13 1943, in *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, p. 167.

<sup>33</sup> Contrasting 'Welsh' with 'Cymric', that is, Welsh-language expression, she rejects the term 'Anglo-Welsh' due to its 'having no origin but a superficial one' (p. 107).

<sup>34</sup> The term is Edward Said's; indeed, Said's conception of 'worldliness', where 'sensuous particularity as well as historical contingency [...] exist at the same level of surface particularity as the textual object itself' is apposite to Roberts's representation of the connection between literature and national culture in 'An Introduction to Village Dialect'. See Edward Said, *The World, the Text, the Critic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 39.

<sup>35</sup> Keidrych Rhys, 'Editorial', *Wales*, III (1943), 4-6 (p. 4).

borderlands, serves to challenge traditional perceptions of national culture as unitary and unified.

The word ‘dialect’ takes its root in the ancient Greek term for ‘discourse’ or ‘conversation’.<sup>36</sup> Accordingly, Roberts’s article is primarily concerned with establishing connections and relations between Welsh- and English-language traditions, popular and high forms of culture, medieval past and modern present. To this end, her article adopts an impressionistic, conversational style that allows her to range between a wide array of seemingly disconnected material, thereby unearthing unexpected correspondences. She begins by introducing the figure of Gildas, a sixth-century monk and polemical historiographer, asserting that ‘Gildas, we are told, is British. Yet his habit was twisted by the Saints of Demetia with whom he conversed, by Saint Cadoc, in particular!’ (107). Following the example of Gildas, Roberts ‘twists’ the ‘habits’ of early twentieth-century male literary historians, appropriating traditional conventions of historical scholarship in order to meet the needs of her own creative reconstruction.

### **Storytelling as a ‘new’ form of historiography**

While, as I have shown, the opening of Woolf’s literary history ‘Anon’ ventriloquizes historian G.M. Trevelyan’s *History of England* (1926), Roberts’s ‘counterhistory’ takes George Saintsbury’s *A Short History of English Literature* as a point of departure, a text that, published in 1898, remained authoritative in Roberts’s day. Saintsbury, Roberts observes, locates the origins of his literary history in ‘Widsith’, a tenth-century Old English poem conveying an idealized portrait of a Germanic *scop* or minstrel.<sup>37</sup> As Juliette Wood suggests, early twentieth-century depictions of medieval Welsh culture owed much to the conception of

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<sup>36</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keynotes: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fantana, 1983), p. 105.

<sup>37</sup> The *scop* is a nomadic figure who, wandering from kingdom to kingdom, is welcomed in many mead halls by those ‘discerning of songs’.

an early heroic age popularized by literary scholars such as H.M. Chadwick.<sup>38</sup> Reiterating this association, Roberts contends that ‘there is an identity to be made’ between *Widsith* and Taliesin. Quoting extendedly from the *Hanes Taliesin*, she invites the reader to draw her own connections between the ‘heroic boast’ of Taliesin and that of the *Widsith*-poet by laying out The Old Welsh alongside a parallel English translation, thus:

Bym mi ym arca	I have been in the ark,
Gan Noah ac Alpha;	With Noah and Alpha;
Mi gwelais ddiva	I have seen the destruction of
Sodom a Gomorra;	Sodom and Gomorra;
Bum ym Africa	I was in Africa
Cyn seiliad Roma	Before the foundation of Rome (108)

Taliesin’s voice is mirrored here, not by *Widsith*, but by its modern English equivalent.

Replacing the voice of the *Widsith* speaker with that of Taliesin, Roberts implicitly posits the Brythonic poet as an/other origin for the English literary tradition - a move that acts to assert the ‘otherness’ at the very heart of that tradition. This can be seen in part as an attempt to re-orient a hegemonic narrative of British literary tradition around a Celtic, rather than solely an ‘Anglo-Saxon’ axis, a task undertaken by David Jones in his poem *In Parenthesis* (1936), as his preface to the text makes clear.<sup>39</sup> Yet Roberts also chooses to include the line, again from Taliesin, ‘I am a wonder/whose origin is not known’, alluding to the elusiveness of a Welsh

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<sup>38</sup> See Juliette Wood, ‘Perceptions of the Past in Welsh Folklore Studies’, *Folklore*, 108 (1997), 93-102 (p. 94). Chadwick’s works of literary history include *The Origin of the English Nation* (1907), *The Heroic Age* (1912), *The Ancient Literatures of Europe* (1932) and *The Oral Literature of the Tartars and Polynesia* (1940). ‘An Introduction to Village Dialect’ takes up Chadwick’s interest in national identity, early literary history, and orality, corroborating the suggestion that these interlinked concerns were very much in the air during the 1940s.

<sup>39</sup> Commenting on what he calls the ‘“Welsh” element’ in his dense web of literary allusions, Jones identifies ‘the Boar Trwyth, Badon Hill, Troy Novaunt, Elen of the hosts’ – characters and locations identified with a nexus of Welsh-affiliated texts (*The Mabinogi*, Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain* (c. 1136) and other texts connected to the medieval Arthurian cycle) – as ‘that elder element [which] is integral to our [i.e. British] tradition.’ See ‘The Preface to *In Parenthesis*’, in David Jones: *Epoch and Artist* (London: Faber & Faber, 1959), pp. 32-38 (p. 36).



past that remains largely unrecorded in writing, as well of the mysteriousness of Taliesin's provenance itself.

In a letter to Robert Graves, she cites from the same section of the *Hanes Taliesin*, adding,

What puzzles me is what does he mean by I was born 'Under the region of the summer stars'. As the legend carries the tale in various versions that he was shipwrecked & found in a coracle, or like Moses cradled in reeds, I have often wondered if it may have meant the Southern Hemisphere or tropical stars.<sup>40</sup>

Origins are always elsewhere in Roberts's work, and here, the 'puzzle' of Taliesin's origins merges with the puzzle of her own past. She was born in the Southern Hemisphere, in Buenos Aires, and she also experienced a shipwreck in April 1939 when, travelling back to Britain from a stay in Madeira, her ship ran aground in dense fog off Anglesey.<sup>41</sup> Taliesin's catalogue of places and events can be seen as a creative form of historiography: inserting himself imaginatively into his culture's past, the medieval bard can be seen to actively participate in history through the performative act of storytelling. This technique finds its corollary in Roberts's tendency to interweave her own lived experience with her historical narrative in 'An Introduction to Village Dialect'.<sup>42</sup>

In her representation of Taliesin, Roberts can be seen to invoke the idea of what Katie Trumpener terms a 'bardic memory': the Romantic conception of an unbroken line of tradition that, running from the time of the premodern *traddodiad* to the present day, was

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<sup>40</sup> Roberts, 'Letter to Robert Graves', February 10 1944, in *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, p. 173.

<sup>41</sup> See Lynette Roberts, 'Parts of an Autobiography', *Poetry Wales* 19.2 (1983), pp. 30-40. Roberts recalls that 'Celia Buckmaster and I returned home from the Scilly Isles on the 'Hilary' just before Christmas. At one point, when entering Liverpool no pilot had arrived so the Captain proceeded forward without one. In the early morning there was a huge crunch and we were on the rocks. A lifeboat was called and we went aboard. Alas, we lost everything except my canary' (p. 30). Charles Mundye describes this event as an 'unexpected homecoming' for Roberts. 'Lynette Roberts and Dylan Thomas: Background to a Friendship', *PN Review* 220, 41.2 (2014), 20-23 (p. 20).

<sup>42</sup> For example, in a discussion of the importance of the pig in early Christian Wales, Roberts relates that 'About two years ago a pig ran straight through my cottage; I was told it was a good omen' (111).

thought to be conserved by secluded rural communities.<sup>43</sup> Commenting on the *Hanes*

*Taliesin*, Roberts observes that

This dramatic recitation of events, genealogy, travelogue, is still demanded by the quieter villagers when a boy, returning from the forces, enters the pub – that diminishing Bardic Hall – and is encouraged to relate his adventures. I have been...I was over...I have seen...I was with the Huns (quoted from Widsith) and repeated by an ex-sailor one evening at the *Black Horse*... (108)

Saunders Lewis laid out his interpretation of ‘bardic memory’ in his lecture ‘Is there an Anglo-Welsh Literature?’ (1938), arguing that

there belong to [Welsh] society traditions and experiences and a secular mode of life as well as a literary heritage which have impressed themselves not only on the language but on all those who so use it that their use of it is seen to be literature.<sup>44</sup>

In her evocation of the returning soldier’s speech, Roberts draws on Lewis’s holistic sense of national culture as a ‘total way of life’. Dissolving the boundaries between heroic poetry and everyday speech, her use of the adverb ‘still’ reinforces a sense of temporal continuity between ancient past and modern present. The young soldier’s speech is evocative of the ‘Dai’s Boast’ section in David Jones’s *In Parenthesis* (1937), in which a Welsh private claims to have been part of every major battle in history from the fall of Lucifer to the present day:

This Dai adjusts his slipping shoulder straps, wraps close his misfit outsize greatcoat – he articulates his English with an alien care.

My fathers were with the Black Prinse [sic] of Wales  
at the passion of  
the blind Bohemian king  
[...]  
I was the spear in Balin’s hand  
that made waste King Pellam’s land.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: the Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. xv. Juliette Wood notes that the rural *gwerin* were projected by contemporary folklorists such as Iorwerth C. Peate as the ‘idealised upholder of Welsh tradition’; see ‘Perceptions of the Past in Welsh Folklore Studies’, p. 98.

<sup>44</sup> Saunders Lewis, ‘Is there an Anglo-Welsh Literature?’ (Cardiff: Urdd Graddedigion Prifysgol Cymru, 1939), p. 3.

<sup>45</sup> David Jones, *In Parenthesis* (1937; London: Faber & Faber, 2010), p. 79.

Like Jones, Roberts conjures a soldier's boast in order to integrate the 'deep time' of tradition into the fabric of everyday life, showing how the ancient past is recapitulated in the present in the form of memory-traces inscribed in language.

Like Taliesin and Widsith, her returning soldier is presented as a kind of storyteller, narrating a shared history at the bequest of his community. Indeed, storytelling emerges as an alternative mode of encountering the national past in Roberts's essay: dilatory and circular in nature, it offers a way out of the confines imposed by the linear historical plot. Furthermore, it can be seen to signal Roberts's desire for a shared, communal history, linked to the 'body of the people'. In his essay 'The Storyteller', Walter Benjamin, as I have demonstrated in Chapter 5, presents what he construes as a premodern tradition of oral storytelling as a vehicle for a different kind of heritage to that represented by literary texts – namely, 'experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth'.<sup>46</sup> Accordingly, oral narration is associated by Roberts with the people's *bodily* experience of history;<sup>47</sup> representative of a history anchored in, and assimilated to, the direct experience of ordinary people, rather than the totalising abstractions of 'grand narratives', the 'fabrications' of oral storytelling are shown to offer different truth claims to those of traditional historiography.

For Benjamin, the medieval storyteller is also a listener, who 'sinks' the tales of his culture into his own life, only to bring them forth again in new forms.<sup>48</sup> This concept that is reiterated in Roberts's positioning of herself as a listener in the pub, recording a bodily history that comes to her through hearsay. In Woolf's *Between the Acts*, as I have shown, the experience of overhearing 'voices talking' in the village pub enables the novel's artist figure,

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<sup>46</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the works of Nikolai Leskov', in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (London: Fontana, 1992), pp. 83-107 (p.11).

<sup>47</sup> David Jones proffers a similarly corporate/corporeal conception of history in his preface to *In Parenthesis*, describing the soldiers in his platoon - an admixture of Londoners and Welshmen – he observes that '[t]ogether they *bore in their bodies* the genuine tradition of the Island of Britain, from Bendigeid Vran [sic] to Jingle and Marie Lloyd' (my emphasis). 'Preface to *In Parenthesis*', p. 33.

<sup>48</sup> Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', p. 91.

Miss La Trobe, to reconnect with a hidden, archaic tradition - a process that stimulates her next literary creation:

She thrust her suit case in at the scullery window and walked on, till at the corner she saw the red curtain at the bar window. There would be shelter; voices; oblivion. She turned the handle of the public house door. The acrid smell of stale beer saluted her; and voices talking. They stopped. They had been talking about Bossy as they called her – it didn't matter [...]. She raised her glass to her lips. And drank. And listened. Words of one syllable sank down into the mud. She drowsed; she nodded. The mud became fertile. (125)

Here, oral culture is shown to offer access to a fertile seam of language that endures precisely because it is 'sunk' in the collective unconscious; Freud, of course, had already shown that 'everything conscious was subject to a process of wearing-away, while what was unconscious was relatively unchangeable'.<sup>49</sup> For Roberts and for Woolf, storytelling offers an avenue for participating in national history for the woman writer. Exploiting her marginal position as a listener or onlooker, Roberts, like Woolf's fictive Miss La Trobe, is able to channel the experiences of the collective, and give voice to a kind of corporate/corporeal retrospection.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, throughout her work, Roberts presents literary tradition as something felt rather than rationally known, something to be listened to and assimilated to one's own experience, rather than imitated or appropriated directly. Writing to Graves about her poem 'Orarium', a text that draws heavily on tropes and forms derived from her study of Anglo-Saxon poetry, she insisted that 'the poem was written straight off almost subconsciously; though that which I expressed in its final phrase is something which I had accepted & believed it *intuitively*: not through my study of mythology or penetration into science.'<sup>51</sup>

Nonetheless, implicit in Roberts's depiction of the pub as 'diminishing bardic hall' is the suggestion that full integration with a 'people's tradition' remains more an aspiration than

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<sup>49</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis (the "Rat Man")', 1909', in Sigmund Freud, *Case Histories*, vol. III, ed. by Angela Richards (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979), p. 57.

<sup>50</sup> 'Corporate' in the word's archaic sense as 'united into one body'. See the *Oxford English Dictionary* <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/41829?rskey=IRwQmr&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid>> [accessed 12<sup>th</sup> January 2017].

<sup>51</sup> Roberts, 'Letter to Robert Graves', December 18 1944, in *Diaries, Letters and Recollections* (p. 180-181).

a reality. For Walter Benjamin, ‘narratable’ human experience had been silenced by the trauma of war and the technological shifts of modernity, for ‘never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, [...] bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power’.<sup>52</sup> Roberts’s account of the soldier’s ‘boast’ in the pub emphasizes storytelling as a practice that is always already in the past. The coherence and energetic forward momentum of the first sentence of Roberts’s depiction of the pub as modern-day ‘bardic hall’ ([t]his dramatic recitation of events, genealogy, travelogue, is still demanded by the quieter villagers when a boy, returning from the forces, enters the pub – that diminishing Bardic Hall’) is stalled and broken up by a proliferation of ellipses in the second (‘I have been...I was over...I have seen...I was with the Huns’), conjuring a diminishing of sound into silence, a loss of radio frequency disjoining past from present.

For all Roberts’s longing for continuity, ‘An Introduction to Village Dialect’ works to undermine the vision of cultural continuity proffered by conservative nationalists such as Saunders Lewis. The form of Roberts’s essay, which leaps from textual fragment to speech fragment, from modern to medieval periods, ‘interrupting’ her scholarly analysis of literary texts with the ‘noise’ of contemporary voices (the ex-sailor in the *Black Horse*, Amelia Phillips, Roberts’s neighbour in Llanybri, voices from letters ‘in the Carmarthenshire dialect’) acts to break up the smooth linearity of time longed for by conservative cultural nationalists such as Saunders Lewis. Roberts’s own vision of Welsh culture is marked by an overwhelming sense of slippage, dislocation and doubleness. Taliesin is presented as the ‘double’ of the Germanic *scop* Widsith; Widsith is doubled by the young Welsh soldier narrating his war experiences in the pub; the idioms used by ‘a dark farmer hidden in the corner’ (108-9) of the pub recall those found in the premodern ‘MS of St Beuno’ (109). For

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<sup>52</sup> Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller’, p.84.

Homi Bhabha, ‘the ghostly magical spirit of the double’ haunts colonial and postcolonial texts, embodying the gulf between competing, incommensurable levels of meaning that is a feature of the colonial experience.<sup>53</sup> The double’s presence, for Bhabha, is inherently subversive: ‘culture’s double returns uncannily – neither the one nor the other, but the imposter – to mock and mimic, to lose the sense of the masterful self and its social sovereignty’.<sup>54</sup> Through Roberts’s complex doubling of medieval past and modern present, literary and spoken voices, it becomes unclear as to which is the ‘copy’ and which the ‘original’. In so doing, she turns tradition on its head, subtly calling into question the very notion of an originary culture or language.

### **A question of form**

As I have indicated, the relation between past and present is fundamentally unstable in ‘An Introduction to Village Dialect’, shaped as much by disjuncture and conflict as by connection and continuity. This sense of dislocation is reinforced, furthermore, by the article’s visual form. It is structured around a multitude of broken quotations, sometimes of one line only, and Roberts’s phrasing is similarly truncated and often objectless, often dissolving into sentence fragments. The ellipses and blank spaces that pervade the text can be seen to convey a sense of words lost in the process of recording oral speech, or a moment of pause:

And when I asked this same person, Amelia Phillips, to give me the date of her eightieth birthday, she said ‘Indeed, I do not know.’ And when I asked her if she knew the date of her daughter’s, she said slowly and with difficulty:

‘On the...First...Day....of the...Last...Month...of the Year’ [sic]. (118)

Roberts was an arch-formalist, capable of great precision in her composition, as testified by her experiments with the *englyn* form and the villanelle.<sup>55</sup> The incomplete, deconstructed

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<sup>53</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 136.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>55</sup> According to Roberts, her poem ‘Rhode Island Red’ was ‘[a]nother attempt at the Welsh *englyn* with its intricate inner rhymes and alliteration’ (*D*, p.5); she tells us in her preface to *Gods with Stainless Ears* that she adapted the Villanelle form in Part I (pp. 43, 47).

style of her article can thus be seen as a conscious strategy, designed to make her text resistant to easy interpretation and paraphrase. Challenging the metropolitan desire to ‘know’ the otherness of Welsh culture in its entirety, the article’s resistance to paraphrase also underscores the fact that the article’s material *form* is immediately important to its significance. Take, for example, its description of the social structure of the Welsh village, which begins with a quotation from Gerald of Wales:

In the village the foundations of the *teulu* remain somewhat unchanged. A certain distance is kept, and, with exceptions, a certain recognition and grace among themselves is strictly adhered to. The word friend...life friend...pal...is not understood in its English sense – they are a community. To those they like they speak to: to those they dislike, they remain silent [sic]. (113)

The proliferation of white spaces and ellipses in the text point to the gaps and silences in colonial history, pointing to the fragmentation of memory under the pressure of war and colonial influence. They also conjure what Benjamin terms an ‘untranslatable’ kernel of cultural difference – those thoughts and experiences particular to Wales that evade the capability of the English language to describe them.<sup>56</sup>

‘An Introduction to Village Dialect’ appears as a tissue of quotations: Roberts’s argument proceeds largely through the citation and juxtaposition of texts, rather than explanation and direct statement, and shifts restlessly between different discourses from moment to moment – dialect, folklore, medieval history, literature, anthropology. This unsettling technique conveys Roberts’s refusal to impose unified meanings on Welsh culture, thereby encouraging the participation of her reader in the construction of cultural meaning. Discussing features common to ‘Welsh dramatic speech’, she tells her reader that ‘so as not to appear dogmatic I will quote from the translation of the Latin and Cymric MS on the Life of Saint David, and in this way, leave the suggestion open for discussion’ (109). The open-

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<sup>56</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘The Task of the Translator’ (1921), in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (London: Fontana, 1992), pp. 70-82 (p. 81).

ended or ‘incomplete’ nature of her text resonates with Woolf’s suggestion that the ‘messier’ the artwork, the more its relation to its human, material environment is brought into focus. In *A Room of One’s Own*, she compares the literary text to a spider’s web, ‘attached to life at all four corners’, arguing that:

[...] when the web is pulled askew, hooked up at the edge, torn in the middle, one remembers that these webs are not spun in mid-air by incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the house we live in.<sup>57</sup>

The ‘rough edges’ discernible in Roberts’s patchwork of fragments can in this way be seen to direct attention toward the hidden labour and ‘grossly material things’ that in her view helped to shape Welsh literary history, as conveyed in the article by her description of the use of the ‘hand plough’ at Cwmcelyn, or the making of mead in Llanybri.

An Introduction to Village Dialect’ is far more concerned with density than narrative linearity, building up layers of textual and speech fragments like a verbal collage. This free-associative technique is exemplified by Roberts’s depiction of the tradition of the bee in Welsh culture, which slips between different, loosely related ideas:

The reverence for the bees by the Saints, and the many legends about them, ‘For the honey comb proclaims his (*St David’s*) wisdom, for as the honey is in the wax, so he will hold a spiritual sense in an historical instrument.’ The superstitions arising out of the swarms in the village today: of the swarm that sailed to Ireland on the prow of a ship...on the making of mead, *Medd*. I was told only a few months ago how to brew mead in the village: with all the asides as to how the wax was melted down and poured into wooden moulds and sold to the chemist for extra things [sic].

The sense of accretion and proliferation that marks Roberts’s rendition of Welsh culture speaks to Jacques Derrida’s conception of supplementarity, an operation that Derrida posits as integral to the workings of language. In Derrida’s analysis, ‘the supplement adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude [...]. It cumulates and accumulates

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<sup>57</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, p. 53.



presence'.<sup>58</sup> Language, as 'sign and proxy', constantly 'adds only to replace', 'insinuat[ing] itself in-the-place of' what is in fact a gap or void in the origin – just as the wax is poured into the emptiness of the wooden moulds in Roberts's description.<sup>59</sup> Demonstrating how culture is constructed by means of a 'plenitude' of different signs and meanings, Roberts 'cumulative' style suggests that the 'grounds' or 'origins' of a culture's meaning are not one, but many, and are called into being through an open-ended system of difference.

### **The poet as antiquarian: accessing an 'unsyntaxed past'**

A poststructuralist theoretical apparatus proves useful in accounting for the sense of instability, slippage, and doubling that inscribe Roberts's depiction of Welsh history and culture, as exemplified by 'An Introduction to Village Dialect'. Nonetheless, it should be acknowledged that she retains a residual attachment to the notion of authenticity, an underlying faith in the power of language to 'tell the truth', as Woolf's puts it, and this cannot be fully accounted for by poststructuralist paradigms.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, Roberts's accumulation of textual and material fragments, and her assemblage of these into a text that remains 'rough around the edges', also gestures to an older epistemological paradigm – namely, Romantic antiquarianism.

In its preoccupation with scraps of oral culture, manuscripts and material culture, 'An Introduction to Village Dialect' can be seen to re-cast the tenets of Romantic antiquarianism within a modernist idiom. Antiquarianism had existed in Britain as an important mode of understanding the past from as early as the Middle Ages, and saw a surge in popularity during the eighteenth century. Moreover, as I have indicated in my introduction to this thesis, it was revived during the wartime period by Neo-Romantic artists such as John Piper, Paul

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<sup>58</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997), p.144.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>60</sup> Woolf, 'Craftsmanship', p. 89.

Nash, and David Jones as part of their own mission to recover an ‘other’ national past. The popular image of the antiquarian as a marginal figure, an eccentric who collects and ‘doatingly’ reassembles the piecemeal relics of the ancient past, resonates with Roberts’s self-portrayal as ‘[a]lways observant and slightly obscure’, ‘roam[ing] the hills of bird and stone’ and ‘[r]escuing bees from under the storm’ in her poem ‘Lamentation’ (ll. 3-5).<sup>61</sup> Viewed in the context of the war, Roberts’s predilection for historical ruins and fragments as what Gill Plain terms a ‘saving strategy’, an attempt at ‘reassembling the self [and society] in the wake of its threatened annihilation’.<sup>62</sup>

Homi Bhabha identifies gathering – the act of ‘gathering the past in a ritual of revival’ or ‘gathering the present’ – as an important sign of the migrant experience.<sup>63</sup> Roberts’s impulse towards collecting and assemblage in ‘An Introduction to Village Dialect’ can thus be seen as an attempt to imbue a sense of shape and meaning to the experience of displacement through bringing disparate fragments together, without trying to make them one. Moreover, like the eighteenth-century antiquarians before her, she uses her assemblage of fragments to move away from the strictures of historical narrative, to evoke what Susan Manning terms ‘the thickness, the texture of the past’, rather than its meaning.<sup>64</sup> For instance, a passage on animal symbolism in Welsh folklore takes the material facticity of the pig as its central idea, yet jumps between a myriad disparate anecdotes: the reverence for the fox by the Cambro-British Saints even when they carried off the body of a young pig (110),

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<sup>61</sup> David Mellor, p. 34.

<sup>62</sup> Plain, ‘Women Writers and the War’, pp. 173-4.

<sup>63</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, ‘DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation’, in *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 291-321 (p. 291).

<sup>64</sup> Susan Manning, ‘Antiquarianism, balladry, and the rehabilitation of romance’, in *The Cambridge History of English Romantic Literature*, ed. by James Chandler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 45-70 (p. 50). In its marked concern with material culture, Romantic antiquarianism can be regarded as an important precursor to the archaeological and ethnographic impulses that, as many critics have noticed, permeate Roberts’s work.

the founding of monasteries on sites where a pig was found (111), the invocation of a pig as a symbol of the ‘Christian peoples of Wales’ in a stanza attributed to Myrddin (111).<sup>65</sup>

Like Woolf, Roberts was dissatisfied with conventional historical narrative, all too aware of the ‘living complexity’ of culture, left aside in the name of national unity and narrative progression – hence her critique of the ‘tragic deformity’ (107) perpetrated by traditional British literary histories at the opening of her article. In ‘An Introduction to Village Dialect’ she emulates the ‘partially recuperated [...] assemblages’ of the antiquarian in order to access what Susan Manning calls an ‘unsyntaxed past’: breaking free from the fixed ‘grammar’ of Welsh history, she imbues her collection of fragments with the power to stimulate new ways of imagining the nation.<sup>66</sup>

### **Medieval manuscript culture: transit and translation**

Roberts’s ‘An Introduction to Village Dialect’ seeks, in the words of Katie Trumpener, to ‘[counter] the physical destruction of a national sense of place by the literary recovery of a national sense of history’.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, she presents the medieval manuscript as the privileged vehicle for this recovery, asserting that ‘because of the tragic deformity’ imposed by the neglect of Welsh culture, ‘I am compelled to raise certain manuscripts out of the dust; and I will examine these in as clear and sound a manner as possible’ (106).<sup>68</sup> For Roberts, the rescuing of ‘buried’ documents is both an act of magic – raising a body of culture from the dead – and science, requiring the detached, observational precision of the botanist or ethnographer.

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<sup>65</sup> Merlin.

<sup>66</sup> Manning, p. 50.

<sup>67</sup> Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: the Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 44.

<sup>68</sup> The reconstruction of the literary past out of its material remains is here figured as an act of reanimation or simulation: Susan Manning notes that in the Romantic period, antiquarian activities were sometimes associated with the re-animation of dead body-parts, an idea that later fed into Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (p. 51).

She placed great value on gaining first-hand experience of historical manuscripts, sometimes travelling large distances in order to do so. In a letter to Robert Graves, she recounts a difficult encounter with curator Idris Bell at the British Museum when she tried to access some of the ‘early books of 1606’, asserting that ‘I understand your fury at the barrier all those people of authority put up. They refuse to help, & are even reticent in allowing you to see the original documents’.<sup>69</sup> Implicit to this statement is a critique of systems of power preventing ordinary people from gaining access to their cultural heritage, hiding these deposits away instead behind an ‘iron cage’.<sup>70</sup> Influenced, perhaps, by her friend Ernest Rhys, whose Everyman editions did much to bring canonical literary texts to a wide readership for the first time, Roberts saw the study of ‘original documents’ as part of the collective reclamation of national culture vaunted by Woolf in her essay ‘The Leaning Tower’. Just as Woolf urged that ‘we are going to need to preserve and create writing, collectively’,<sup>71</sup> so Roberts suggested to Graves that ‘the authentic documents should be photographed & printed off, & be made available to every person interested in studying them’.<sup>72</sup>

A central portion of ‘An Introduction to Village Dialect’ is dedicated to tracing what Roberts called ‘interesting examples of Welsh dialogue and custom’ (112) in a diverse range of medieval literary texts, from *The Lives of the Cambro-British Saints* (published 1853) to Wace’s *Roman de Brut* (c. 1155) and other works connected to the Arthurian ‘Matter of Britain’ cycle. Dwelling on the texts’ transmission history, Roberts constantly returns the focus of the reader to the physical manuscripts from which they are derived. In so doing, she calls attention to the dynamic processes of translation and adaptation that defined manuscript culture in premodern Britain:

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<sup>69</sup> Roberts, ‘Letter to Robert Graves’, 7th May 1944, in *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, ed. by Patrick McGuinness, p. 176.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Woolf, ‘The Leaning Tower’, p. 181.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

Layamon, a priest who lived and wrote on the Severn bank and Welsh borders, who adapted the surrounding Welsh folklore into his 'Brut' which at its source, as was Wace's before him, was derived from a Cymric MS, found in Breton by Walter Mape (a native of the Welsh Marches), and put into the Cymric tongue by him. (108)

In a manner reminiscent of Woolf's 'Anon', Roberts depicts a time prior to the printing press when the literary text and its material form were one and the same, and texts were therefore subject to change each time they were copied. Emphasising what Paul Zumthor terms '*la mobilité essentielle du texte médiévale*' (the essential mobility of the medieval text), she presents the medieval manuscript as a material object travelling in time – a vehicle for a literary tradition that moves restlessly (literally, and literarily) over the border between different times, languages and locations.<sup>73</sup> Projecting once again a profusion of authors and different points of origin, Roberts indicates that conception of the nation as a 'mythic totality' projected, to some extent, by the 'Matter of Britain' cycle – is unsettled (or in Bhabha's words, 'crossed'), by the circular, 'supplementary' movement of writing.<sup>74</sup>

Roberts identifies a medieval Anglophone Welsh tradition with a liminal topography somewhere *between* England and Wales. For instance, she emphasizes that Layamon was 'a priest who lived and wrote on the Severn bank and Welsh borders' (108), and she speculates that the line 'From comely Conway unto Clyde' found in the medieval Chester *Play of the Shepherds* encompasses a region extending from Conway in North Wales to the line of the river Dee (113). In fact, her literary history reflects Bhabha's contention that borders and edges do not simply mark the limits of a culture, but are in fact the places in which the meanings of that culture are generated:

It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experience of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Paul Zumthor, *Essai de poétique médiévale* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), p. 71.

<sup>74</sup> Bhabha, 'DissemiNation', p. 305.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, *The Location of Culture*, p. 2.

Shining a spotlight into the dusty corners of medieval literary culture, Roberts suggests that literary tradition is produced by a ceaseless movement over the border and back again, through a constant process of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation.<sup>76</sup>

### **Orality and folk culture: the absent-present voice from the periphery**

The second part of 'An Introduction to Village Dialect' is dedicated, as is Woolf's 'Anon', to exploring the oral folk culture attached to the idea of a vernacular 'mother tongue'. Under the influence of Welsh scholars such as Sir John Rhys, the study of folklore became instrumental in attempts to define a coherent Welsh past during the nineteenth century, and was often made to serve the investigation of the origins and development of the Welsh language.<sup>77</sup>

Focusing on texts such as Chaucer's 'Ballade of Bon Conseil', Gerald of Wales's *Itinerary through Wales*, and the Wakefield *Second Shepherd's Play*, Roberts attempts to demonstrate the importance of an oral tradition that, centred around Wales, fed into, and nourished the English literary canon. Susan Manning observes that in the antiquarian tradition, oral culture came to be associated with geographical and cultural marginality, presented as a window into a world that was perennially on the brink of disintegration at the hands of modern print culture.<sup>78</sup> Rescued, yet also 'mutilated' by the world of print, oral culture was seen to represent the 'absent-present voice from the periphery'.<sup>79</sup> The ghostly echoes of a Welsh folk culture summoned by 'An Introduction to Village Dialect' point to what Woolf termed the 'lives of the obscure' – those marginalized, ordinary voices that have left no textual trace, but that constantly erupt (and interrupt) Roberts's narrative in order to break up the broad

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<sup>76</sup> These terms were developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), and used in their *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980). See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. by Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 2009), and *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. by Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 1987).

<sup>77</sup> Wood, p. 94.

<sup>78</sup> Manning, p. 60. Manning notes that during the Romantic period, '[t]opographically, the oral was construed as marginal, located at the periphery; epistemologically, it occupied an equivocal area of contingency and transience; jurisprudentially, its immaterial nature protected it from the reach of law.'

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

patterns of British national memory, offering a kind of counterpoint to the mainstream music of colonial history.

Drawing, perhaps, on the link between premodern folk culture and women's creativity advanced by scholars such as E.K. Chambers, 'An Introduction to Village Dialect' persistently identifies oral culture with women's voices; Milton's Eve, Roberts suggests, 'is given a voice which runs parallel with the rondel' (122), and many of her examples of everyday speech in Wales are identified with female inhabitants of Llanybri, or cultural forms associated with women, such as the letter. Indeed, her juxtaposition of oral and literary voices has the effect of placing the voices of working Welsh women on a level of parity with male architects of English literary tradition. Discussing George Puttenham's use of language in his *Arte of English Poesie* (1589) she comments that 'there have been times, when a peasant, sometimes illiterate, has attempted to express herself directly out of the Cymric tongue, and the attempt has left me as delighted and vague as Puttenham' (118), quoting from the speech of her elderly neighbor, Amelia Phillips, by way of illustration: 'She is not very well, the broccoli I mean (118).' Significantly, Woolf celebrated both the Elizabethans and working women for the elasticity and freshness of their language; in an introduction to Margaret Llywelyn Davies's *Life As We Have Known It* (1931), an anthology of working women's writing, she observes that their speech has a vital 'quality that Shakespeare would have enjoyed'.<sup>80</sup> This mysterious 'quality' is derived from what Woolf saw as working women's lingering connection – by dint of their lack of literacy – to an older, oral tradition that is simultaneously conservative, preserving the past, and linguistically innovative. Thus, in the same introduction, Woolf exclaims,

How many words must lurk in those women's vocabularies that have faded from ours!  
[...] What images and saws and proverbial sayings must still be current with them that

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<sup>80</sup> Woolf, 'Introduction' to *Life as We Have Known It*, ed. by Margaret Llewellyn Davies, (London: Hogarth, 1931), p. xxvii.

have never reached the surface of print, and very likely they still keep the power which we have lost of making new ones.<sup>81</sup>

For Roberts as for Woolf, the speech of rural working-class women is both rich and strange: closely connected to the material and organic world (as suggested, perhaps, by the surreally personified broccoli), it offers nonetheless a kind of ‘unbounded’ language, whose words and meanings are not fixed in dictionaries, but can be moulded anew in response to different circumstances.

Both Woolf and Roberts present premodern oral culture as elusive, perceivable only in snatches and glimpses. Tracing the popular origins of the carol form, Roberts cites a passage in Gerald of Wales’s *Gemma Ecclesiastica* which describes how

When a priest was so haunted by a refrain that he heard all night long, ‘that in the morning at the Mass instead of Dominus vobiscum he said “Swete lemman thin are...” “Sweet heart, take pity”’ [sic]. (119)<sup>82</sup>

Here, oral culture is kept at a distance, perceivable only from the mediated position of a priest’s window, or ‘aslant’, from the perspective of Gerald of Wales. Indeed, the scene reflects the ‘slanted’ view of medieval culture projected by Woolf in her essay ‘Reading’ – a perspective that Woolf presents as simultaneously constrictive and imaginatively liberating.<sup>83</sup>

Roberts’s vision of Welsh culture is underpinned by motifs of haunting, revenance, return: her text is haunted by the refrains of the ballads, just as they run through the mind of the unnamed priest in Gerald’s description; the ballad ‘Clerk Sanders’ is ‘often printed with

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p.xxvii.

<sup>82</sup> Interestingly, the same passage from Gerald of Wales, taken from W.P. Ker’s essay ‘On the Danish Ballads’ (1908), is included in G.K Chambers and F. Sidgwick’s *Early English Lyrics*, Woolf’s source for ‘Anon’. Chambers also cites Gerald via Ker and, given the notable commonalities in Chambers’s and Roberts’s representations of the development of the rondel and carol forms, there is a possibility that she may have read the text, though she never quotes from Chambers’s ‘Some Aspects of Medieval Lyric’ or any of the anthologized texts directly.

<sup>83</sup> For Woolf, similarly, the oral culture of ‘Anon’ can only be ‘peered’ at aslant, through a ‘half shut eye’ (‘Reading’, p.13). ‘Slant’, or ‘Skaz’ is identified by Mikhail Bakhtin as ‘the word with a sidewise glance’, associated with a verbal masquerade that involves one voice putting on the style of another. See K. Shanthichitra, ‘Telling it with a Slant: Narrative Style of Anita Nair’, *Indian Journal of Applied Research*, 3.9, 298- 299 (p. 298).



‘Sweet William’s ghost’ (116); ‘[I]etters from Carmarthen’ that she has received ‘often returned for me the period of the Elizabethans’ (118). Her inclusion of the passage from Gerald of Wales serves to suggest how the language, rhythm, and voices of others penetrate our subjectivity to speak through us, unconsciously. Like Woolf, she presents national tradition as a form of dispossession, viewing it as something that takes possession of the subject through the senses and though their acquisition of language yet, like sound, remains resistant to being contained or ‘owned’.<sup>84</sup> This perception is influenced, perhaps, by her own sense of exteriority to the locations of Welsh culture: in a diary entry, she recounts her desire to attend a service in Llanybri’s medieval chapel, yet, prevented from attending by an ‘inability to sing in Welsh or understand the language’, like Gerald’s priest she ‘had to be content with listening to the hymns and voices vibrating through the air between the Chapel door and the kitchen door which I had left open’ (*D*, 23).

Connecting the carol back to the ‘the circular dance of the Welsh’, Roberts cites another description from Gerald of Wales, this time from his *Itinerarium Cambriae* (1188; *The Journey through Wales*):

You may see men or girls, now in the church, now in the churchyard, now in the dance, which is led round the churchyard with a song, on a sudden falling on the ground as in a trance, then jumping up in a frenzy, and representing with their hands and feet, whatever work they have unlawfully done on feast days...mitigating their labour, by the usual rude song’ (120).

Gerald of Wales’s portrayal of the rural dance is redolent of Woolf’s Anon, the popular, transgressive artist who ‘was to be found acting the Mass in the church; but, as he acted more and more his own art, [...] left the church, and staged his pageant in the churchyard’(A,

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<sup>84</sup> In ‘The Leaning Tower’, Woolf argues that middle-class male writers ‘are aristocrats; the unconscious inheritors of a great tradition’ (p. 170). She articulates a hope that [t]he next generation of writers might inherit a shared ‘unconsciousness which is necessary if writers are to get beneath the surface’ to create great works (p. 178).

383).<sup>85</sup> Drawing on the same anthropological discourses that influenced Woolf, Roberts identifies Wales as the site of an elusive, communal tradition, rooted in the rhythms of labour. Her preoccupation with circularity and the circular dance pertains to an interest – even more acute than that of Woolf – in what Jane Marcus terms ‘the chorus’ of working people of all classes, ‘once the serious “song” of drama’: viewed in the context of Woolf and Harrison’s writing, it speaks of an attempt to show how individual perspectives on Welsh history, such as Gerald of Wales’s, are encased in the experience of a more heterogeneous collective, the ‘body of the people’.<sup>86</sup>

Roberts’s interest in rhythm and the vitalistic ‘vibrations’ of history is a central thread running throughout her text. Towards the end of her discussion, she reveals the controlling intention behind her essay:

Now I have arrived at the essence of all languages of the soil, and by which phrases are governed, rhythm: and though unconscious to the speaker at the time, there is invariably a set pattern, to which accented words are added to balance a phrase. (119)

Here, Roberts takes a transnational view, emphasising the dissemination and diffusion of the popular refrains of Welsh folk ballads over a wide space.<sup>87</sup> Yet though she draws myriad connections between folk culture in England, Brittany, Iceland, Italy, and Hungary, she always circles back to Wales as a *rhythmic* point of origin. Take, for example, her commentary on the English ‘Ballad of the Three Ravens’:

Of the origin of the refrain, which extended all over Britain and is even found south in William Cornishe’s poems (‘Dyry, comne dawn, dyry dyry come dawn’ (I quote from memory), the source is traced to Wales. (116)

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<sup>85</sup> Woolf’s source text for her discussion of medieval lyrics, E.K. Chambers’s ‘Some Aspects of Mediæval Lyric’, cites the same passage from Gerald of Wales. Chambers notes that ‘[f]rom the blossoming time of the *chanson populaire* and the *chanson courtois* no English secular lyric is preserved to us, although Giraldus Cambrensis affords testimony in an amusing story to its existence’ (p. 273).

<sup>86</sup> Marcus, *Languages of Patriarchy*, p. 37.

The rhythms of medieval Welsh culture offers Roberts a sense of recurrence and perpetuity, suggesting – as does the pageant in Woolf’s *Between the Acts* – a literary tradition that is still in process: observing how the ‘persistence with which these tunes haunt and remain in the mind’ makes them resemble ‘pagan chants’, she suggests that ‘neither the dance nor song can be said to have an ending’ (121). Moreover, she presents rhythm as an important bearer of memory, observing ‘how a story could be remembered by a peasant – simply by the stress of a repeated phrase, or one word accented and repeated in a pattern’ (122). Thus, in Roberts’s fragmentary historical purview, ‘it is the pattern and rhythm which holds the story together and prevents it from getting lost’ (122). The rhythms of oral Welsh folksong come to embody a sense of continuity in duration, described by Jane Harrison as ‘that life which is one, indivisible, and yet ceaselessly changing’.<sup>88</sup>

### **Dialogism, carnival and counterculture**

As I have already shown, Roberts’s literary history speaks in tongues. The interplay of voices conjured by ‘An Introduction to Village Dialect’ invokes a dialogic conception of history, projecting the past in terms of what Mikhail Bakhtin calls a ‘diversity of social speech types’<sup>89</sup> that ‘struggle and evolve in an environment of social heteroglossia’.<sup>90</sup> This becomes particularly evident in Roberts’s examination of the Wakefield’s *Second Shepherd’s Play* (c. 1500):<sup>91</sup>

Again, the mock of the pipes: ‘Who is that pipes so poor?’ is a reminder of the Bard Glyn Cothi’s ironical satire when the bagpipes were introduced at an early Eisteddfod. And the sly reversal of Taffy was a Welshman, when Mak is represented as the sheep-stealer and is tossed in canvas by the three shepherds. The Play, written as far as I can judge, for I have not seen the original spelling, in middle English with a dig at the Southern dialect of Wessex. (114)

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<sup>88</sup> Duration, Bergson explains in his *Creative Evolution*, ‘is the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances’. Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. by Arthur Mitchell (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983), p. 4.

<sup>89</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, pp. 262-63.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 291.

<sup>91</sup> Roberts’s discussion of medieval theatre in this text is possibly derived from her reading of ‘*Everyman*’ *With Other Interludes, Including Eight Miracle Plays* ed. by Ernest Rhys (London: J.M. Dent, 1909).

If Roberts seeks to prove Welsh influence in the Play, she stops short of claiming it for a straightforwardly Welsh tradition. Instead, she is more interested in demonstrating the linguistic diversity that informs the use of humour in the text, citing several examples of dramatic dialogue in which the southern English dialect is mocked, twisted, and imitated by the Northern Mak and the shepherds. Bakhtin notes that while poetry has traditionally served the role of ensuring the ‘centralization of the verbal-ideological world’, an attention to medieval folk culture shows that ‘on the lower levels, on the stages of local fairs and at buffoon spectacles, the heteroglossia of the clown sounded forth, ridiculing all “languages and dialects”’.<sup>92</sup> It is this lower substratum of Welsh and English culture that Roberts seeks to tap in ‘An Introduction to Village Dialect’. Celebrating and reconstructing a ‘canivalesque’ folk culture of ‘streetsongs, folksayings, anecdotes’, she presents a world in which, in the words of Bakhtin, ‘there was no language-centre at all, where there was to be found a lively play with the “languages” of poets, scholars, monks, knights and others, where all languages were masks and where no language could claim to be an authentic, incontestable fate’.<sup>93</sup> In this way, she harnesses the dialogism of medieval folk culture as a mode of resistance to the colonial enforcement of linguistic hierarchy and homogeneity for the purposes of power. Through her depiction of medieval Welsh oral culture, she collapses the binary division between linguistic ‘centre’ and marginal ‘variant’, emphasizing instead the decentralized, ‘centrifugal forces in the life of language’.<sup>94</sup>

To a certain extent, ‘An Introduction to Village Dialect’ announces, and even actively invites, a breakdown in historical narrative. Indeed, Roberts’s cacophony of different voices sometimes seems on the brink of descending into madness or non-sense. Bhabha identifies a

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<sup>92</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 273.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

certain kind of non-sense with the colonial encounter; signalling a ‘colonial otherness that speaks in riddles, obliterating names and proper places’, it speaks not only of anxiety regarding the loss of meaning in the translation between different levels of culture and reality, but also of ‘an uncertain colonial silence that mocks the social performance of language with its non-sense, that baffles the communicable verities of culture with [its] refusal to translate’.<sup>95</sup> In this way, Roberts’s echo-chamber of voices, like the mocking laughter of Bakhtin’s medieval carnival, calls attention to the interpretive limits of all culture and language, unsettling the fixed categories of identity and reality imposed by the ideology of empire.

However, the text’s resistance to unified narrative also testifies to its articulation of the Kristevan semiotic. As I have shown in relation to Woolf’s work, Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic linguistic theory identifies the semiotic ‘disposition’ of language with the primary drives that orient the baby toward its mother. Evoking a ‘pre-sentence-making disposition to rhythm, intonation, nonsense’, the semiotic interrupts and disrupts the symbolic order, ‘mak[ing] nonsense abound within sense’, and creating laughter.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, as I have shown in relation to Woolf’s writing, the semiotic chora carries potential for a ‘revolution in poetic language’.<sup>97</sup> Returning the pre-linguistic, instinctive, undertow of the national ‘text’ through her attention to medieval oral culture, Roberts breaks up a national narrative of division and isolation in order to effect a liberating extension and expansion of national space.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, pp. 123-124.

<sup>96</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 150; Kristeva, *About Chinese Women* (New York and London: Marion Boyars, 1977), p. 30.

<sup>97</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 119, p. 104.

<sup>98</sup> Bakhtin’s ideas of language exerted a significant influence of Kristeva’s theorisation of the semiotic: both speakers foreground the importance of the speaking subject, and, as Toril Moi observes, Bakhtin’s concepts of ‘dialogism’ and ‘carnivalism’ can be seen to inform the ‘textual play’ and subversive creativity that Kristeva identifies with the semiotic disposition. Toril Moi, ‘Introduction’ to ‘Word, Dialogue and Novel’ in *The Kristeva Reader*, p. 34.

### ***Gods with Stainless Ears and the ‘thingness’ of language*<sup>99</sup>**

As I have indicated in my introduction to this chapter, Roberts’s writing hinges on a tension between an idea of language as an authentic, living entity, and language as artifice and performance. This conflict is recurrently staged in Roberts’s long poem, *Gods with Stainless Ears*. While the text repeatedly engages the speaking voice and the idioms of local dialect, its language is also markedly excessive, built up, eclectic, hyperbolic, demonstrating, in John Wilkinson’s words, Roberts’s ‘hyper-responsiveness to the languages that impinged on her’ in the present moment.<sup>100</sup> In drawing upon the embodied rhythms of oral culture explored in ‘An Introduction to Village Dialect’ she attempts to unleash a revolutionary, ‘liberated language’ capable of bringing about new social and historical relations.

In his essay ‘Discourse in the Novel’, written in 1934-5 but not published until 1973, Mikhail Bakhtin asserts that language, particularly spoken language, represents

The co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past: between differing epochs of the past, between difference socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendency, circles and so forth, all given a bodily form.<sup>101</sup>

Roberts is similarly attuned to the historical layering of spoken language in *Gods with Stainless Ears*. She presents herself as a kind of word archeologist, rescuing old and usual words, reveling in their different historical meanings, building up layer upon layer of language like a collage. In Part I, ‘soldiers squat and cark/ Shell and peel pods and spuds’ (ll. 93-4). The verb ‘cark’, as Nigel Wheale points out, is ‘one of the poet’s useful revivals’.<sup>102</sup> In its original fourteenth-century usage, it means ‘to labour anxiously’ or ‘to be full of anxious thought’, thereby evoking a sense of the interpenetration of physical and mental activity. A similarly stratified use of language can be seen in Part I, when the the landscape

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<sup>99</sup> The term is Jerome McGann’s; see *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 76.

<sup>100</sup> Wilkinson, p. 193.

<sup>101</sup> Bakhtin, ‘The Dialogic Imagination’, in *Discourse in the Novel*, p. 291

<sup>102</sup> Wheale, ‘Legend and Form in the 1940s’, p. 11.

surrounding Cwmcelyn is described as ‘Elucidating shapes flecked with woolglints/And small affiliated tares’. The ‘tares’ denote a cultivated vetch (a kind of crop), or, in earlier usage, harmful weeds growing in cornfields. Yet one of its obsolete meanings, dated to Chaucer’s time, is given in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as ‘a very small particle; a whit, a jot, an atom’.<sup>103</sup> The idea of the tare as a ‘very small particle’ is picked up again in the explanation Roberts provides for ‘woolglints’ in her notes to the poem:

I had the image of iridescent bits of dust which float about in the sunbeams like pieces of flock. As the estuary is covered with sheep, and the atmosphere I wanted to create, a supernatural one, I felt that there was bound to be some density – a stifling quality in the air. I therefore imagined these woolglints, which were bound to float about from the backs of the sheep, and the minute weeds – almost-green invisible cells – hovering over the quagmires (71).

This combination of the material solidity of the sheep, and the effervescence of the ‘iridescent bits of dust’ is typical of Roberts’s treatment of language in *Gods with Stainless Ears*. Influenced by new developments in physics, such as wave-particle theory, both of these images provoke a reflection upon the meaning and ‘density’ of matter, presenting Welsh culture as simultaneously solid and immaterial, effervescent.

There is a palpable ‘thingness’ to Roberts’s language throughout *Gods with Stainless Ears*. For instance, she frequently uses concrete nouns as verbs, as in the lines ‘Trees crisp with Maeterlinck blue, screen/Submarine suns’ (I, ll. 51-2), and ‘Men slave, spit and spade’ (I, l. 78). Her imagery also has a definitively tangible quality: the ‘angel secretaries’ in the futurist dystopia imagined at the end of the poem utter ‘speech blue behind aniline minds’ (V, l. 100); the word ‘aniline’ (a play, perhaps, on ‘anodyne’) denotes a ‘colourless, oily, aromatic, volatile liquid’ used as a base for dye, obtained originally by distilling indigo. Tony Conran notes that the language of *Gods with Stainless Ears* ‘has a curiously rootless quality, even when the meaning is clear – almost as if English were being used by a foreigner with a

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<sup>103</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary* < <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/197819?rskey=VOF0iX&result=1#eid> > [accessed 30 September 2015].

very large vocabulary learnt entirely from dictionaries'.<sup>104</sup> Accordingly, throughout the poem, Roberts harnesses her position as a linguistic outsider in order to call attention to the sensual materiality of language – to its texture, colour, and sound, as well as its sense. Like Gertrude Stein and Mina Loy, she encourages her readers to step outside language in order to take a closer look at its 'literal surfaces and immediate moments', so as to facilitate new kinds of meaning-making.<sup>105</sup> In their communication over the poem, Robert Graves articulated reservations about Roberts's 'supercharging' of her lines, wondering 'how much interrelation of dissociated ideas is possible in a single line without bursting the sense'.<sup>106</sup> Roberts's defence of this strategy reveals her desire to use words not only for their sense, but also for their *feel*, to deploy words in new ways in order to make them expressive of 'today':

I cannot change it; but I believe a stricter technique would have reduced the poem and clarified what I wanted to say. On the other hand it would have been less pliable & adventurous & may have constrained that which I purposely set out to do: which was to use words in relation to today – both with regard to sound (i.e.: discords & ugly grating words) & meaning.<sup>107</sup>

Writing in 1924, Mina Loy connected the self-reflexive play with language in Gertrude Stein's writing to a democratic impulse within modernism. Arguing that 'Modernism has democratized the subject matter and *la belle matière of art*', she notes that

through cubism the newspaper has assumed an aesthetic quality, through Cézanne a plate has become more than something to put an apple upon, Brancusi has given an evangelistic import to eggs, and Gertrude Stein has given us the Word, in and for itself.<sup>108</sup>

Thus, while the disrupted syntax and linguistic pyrotechnics of this poem might be seen to render the text arcane or elitist, they are in fact symptomatic of Roberts's broadly democratic

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<sup>104</sup> Conran, *The Cost of Strangeness*, p. 190. Nigel Wheale similarly contends that Roberts's use of rare words encourages readers to 'make extensive use of the OED to reconstruct their meanings' ('Legend and Form in the 1940s', p. 10).

<sup>105</sup> Drew Milne, 'Modernist Poetry in the British Isles', in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Poetry*, ed. by Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 147-162 (p. 147); McGann, *Black Riders*, p. 22.

<sup>106</sup> Quoted in Wheale, 'Legend and Form in the 1940s', p. 14.

<sup>107</sup> Lynette Roberts, 'Letter to Robert Graves', December 18 1944, in *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, p. 181.

<sup>108</sup> Mina Loy, 'Gertrude Stein' (1924), quoted in Milne, 'Modernist Poetry in the British Isles', p. 148.



aspirations for poetry, her desire to by-pass the need for comprehension and to invite her readers to participate in a ‘sensuous awareness of the linguistic experience itself’.<sup>109</sup>

### **William Morris: the material text as craft and embodiment**

While, as I have discussed in Chapter 2, the landscape of *Gods with Stainless Ears* can be seen to take on a palimpsestic quality, this effect also extends to the poem’s use of visual form. Roberts can be seen to imitate the appearance of the medieval manuscript in order to lend her text what Drew Milne terms a ‘sculptural and musical palpability’.<sup>110</sup> This technique is exemplified in the passage from Part I depicting the arrival of soldiers to the bay of Cwmcelyn:

DISSILIMAR. DISSUNDERED. CRANCH-CRAKE CRANCH-CRAKE.  
ASHIVER. ANHUNGERED ANHELATION.  
CERAUNTIC CLOUDS CRACK IN THEIR BRAIN.  
Who was to be ring carrier for Jerrymandering  
Gerontocracy. The ring officer with argyria?

Soldiers seldom suffered from this; for silver  
Scarcely smoothed their palm. CONGRIEVED. CONSTRAINED.  
CONDEMNED. *Subversive* (?) for humanity blast this  
And much else besides. Hell would chill a chitter  
Chatter at their conflowing misery (ll. 56-65).

Tony Conran contends that Roberts ‘[throws] her language at you like bombardment’<sup>111</sup>, and here, her irregular use of capitalization and punctuation and assertive invective would seem to evoke the invective of the Futurist manifesto, which typically drew on the techniques of advertising in order to ‘bombard’ the reader with its message.<sup>112</sup> Yet the layout and expressive typography of her poem – its capitalised part headers, sectional capitalization, and sporadic italicisation – also gesture obliquely to the large initial lettering, incipits, and rubrics

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<sup>109</sup> Paul Peppis, ‘Schools, Movements, Manifestoes’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, ed. by Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 28-50 (p. 38).

<sup>110</sup> Milne, p. 147

<sup>111</sup> Conran, *The Cost of Strangeness*, p. 191.

<sup>112</sup> Peppis, pp. 30-33. Futurism borrowed the new typographical techniques associated with advertising in order to grab the reader’s attention and appeal to a mass audience; Roberts’s expressive typography re-appropriates this populist strategy for her own, democratic ends.

used by medieval scribes, while the even lines and tightly-wrought stanzas echo the narrow columns used in some medieval books.<sup>113</sup>

In particular, the visual form of Roberts's text gestures to the printed books produced by William Morris's Kelmscott Press and other private ventures during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which were often designed to imitate the decorative 'hand-made' quality of the medieval codex. Critics such as D.F. McKenzie and Jerome McGann have identified a largely underacknowledged British literary tradition extending from William Blake's illuminated manuscripts through the work of the pre-Raphaelites to W.B. Yeats and Ezra Pound.<sup>114</sup> Moreover, in Wales, a reinvigorated tradition of 'Celtic' book design was sustained during the earlier twentieth century by the activities of the Gregynog Press, as I have indicated in Chapter 4. Roberts draws on the medievalist aesthetics of the Victorian private printing press in order to conjure what McGann terms a 'language visible', directing attention towards the text's decorative surfaces.<sup>115</sup> By means of her expressive, medievalist typography, she posits her text as a self-consciously crafted artifact that speaks of its own fabrication.<sup>116</sup>

In his essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936), Walter Benjamin notes that prior to widespread mass production, the work of art, like the literary

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<sup>113</sup> The *Red Book of Hergest*, one of the most important medieval Welsh codices and container of the narratives of the Mabinogi, includes texts written in twin columns in this way.

<sup>114</sup> McGann, *Black Riders*, D.F. McKenzie, *Making Meaning: 'Printers of the Mind' and Other Essays*, ed. by Peter D. MacDonald and Michael F. Suarez, S.J. (Amherst, Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), and Nina Enemark, 'Poetry as Preservation Ritual: Jane Harrison, Antiquarianism, and Hope Mirreles's *Paris*', available online. [https://www.academia.edu/6564288/Poetry\\_as\\_Preservation\\_Ritual\\_Jane\\_Harrison\\_Antiquarianism\\_and\\_Hope\\_Mirreles\\_s\\_Paris?auto=download](https://www.academia.edu/6564288/Poetry_as_Preservation_Ritual_Jane_Harrison_Antiquarianism_and_Hope_Mirreles_s_Paris?auto=download) [accessed 5 October 2015].

Observing that 'Pound's work has a substantial *thingness* to it, a kind of hard objective presence', McGann suggests of *Cantos* I-XXX that 'Their significance is completely involved with the late nineteenth-century's Renaissance of Printing' spearheaded by the Pre-Raphaelite movement and the efforts of William Morris (p. 76). Pound's *Cantos* can be seen to exert an influence on Roberts's *Gods with Stainless Ears*: Charles Mundy has suggested a parallel between the two poems. See Mundy, 'Outside the Imaginary Museum', p. 26.

<sup>115</sup> McGann, p. 23.

<sup>116</sup> McGann, p. 21.



The use of clipped, staccato phrases in these stanzas are evocative of the broken impressions of the villagers as they strive to make sense of the suddenness of the event, as well as the physical disintegration of the plane in the waves. Her irregular spacing and capitalisation conjure the sound of the crash – the tense anticipation, and the silence afterwards. Furthermore, the metaphor of '[f]aces forged into icing bags' succinctly conveys the villagers' cold skin and forced emotional containment as they rush outside to witness the scene. If Roberts's disrupted syntax tends to imbue inanimate things with agency (in this case, the smoke fumes, which appear to 'raise' a 'hearse'), then what Anthony Domestico calls her 'words in action' are also imbued with the capability of effecting positive action in the world, defying the sense of powerlessness and enforced passivity that Roberts saw as a pervasive feature of both soldier and civilian experience in war.<sup>122</sup>

If, as I have suggested, Roberts's text strives to 'put on' the form of the medieval manuscript, then this 'frame' imbues the historical content of her text with a 'quoted' or 'secondary status', emphasising its status as an elaborate *imitation* of Welsh history and culture.<sup>123</sup> In Part I of *Gods with Stainless Ears*, 'Prophets warm in the shade sign black signatures/In the Red Book of Hergest and cross their toes/To confuse the Principality' (ll. 150-153), the crossing of the letters (and toes) representing a kind of evasive 'double-crossing' at the heart of Wales's national identity. Roberts's notes to the line read as follows:

Red Book of Hergest: one of 'The Four Ancient Books of Wales' in the library of Jesus College, Oxford, MSS of Ancient Welsh prose and poetry. Many of the authors still remain unknown. The 'play' here, is on the scribes who have tampered with the MSS in the thirteenth century, and the poet Iolo Morganwg in particular, who forged numerous parchment poems (72).

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<sup>122</sup> Anthony Domestico, 'Words in Action: The Sacramental Poetry of David Jones', *Commonweal*, 140.1 (2013), 12-16 (p. 16). Domestico takes the phrase from Maurice de la Taille, David Jones's favourite theologian.

<sup>123</sup> McGann, p. 46. Roberts makes pointed references to major medieval Welsh codices (the Red Book of Hergest, the Black Book of Carmarthen) in her notes to the poem. Woolf, as we have seen, carried out a similarly postmodern technique in her use of Chaucerian framing devices in 'The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn', 'The Pastons and Chaucer' and *Between the Acts*.

Poet-antiquarian Iolo Morganwg (1747-1826), occupies a position of importance in Roberts's conception of culture and tradition. Described by one scholar as 'the greatest of the Welsh romantic dreamers', Morganwg's scholarship on the history and literature of medieval Wales contributed significantly to nineteenth-century conceptions of Welsh national culture.<sup>124</sup> Yet crucially, Morganwg was a divided figure, for he was also a forger, who created a substantial body of 'medieval' texts in order to provide evidence for the utopian cultural past that he perceived in his imagination.<sup>125</sup> Ceri Lewis observes that the extent of these forgeries came to light only in the early twentieth century, with the result that Morganwg's fabrications still influence conceptions of Welsh tradition today.<sup>126</sup> As Jean Baudrillard asserts, '[c]ounterfeit and reproduction imply always an anguish, a disquieting foreignness', and Morganwg can thus be seen as an unsettling figure who recalls the 'foreignness' at the heart of Welshness.<sup>127</sup> Yet his 'forgeries' also indicate the revolutionary potential opened up by this loss: poised 'somewhere between translation, re-creation and fabrication', they indicate that tradition is something to be fabricated out of fragmentary remains, something to be brought forth in the 'now' of the poem 'for use in our time'.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Ceri Lewis, 'Iolo Morganwg', in *A Guide to Welsh Literature, c.1700-1800*, ed. by Branwen Jarvis (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), pp. 126-186 (p. 153).

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155. Influenced by Blake and Wordsworth and keenly aware of the intellectual developments underpinning radical sociopolitical change in France, Morganwg idealized the early medieval social group he defined as druids as pacifists supporting liberty, equality, fraternity, justice and benevolence, using the past as a vehicle for an utopian social vision in much the same way as Jane Harrison or William Morris. See Ceri Lewis, p. 159.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>127</sup> Baudrillard, p. 376.

<sup>128</sup> Manning, p. 58. Like James Macpherson, the 'translator' of the *Poems of Ossian*, Roberts's 'appropriation of 'the paradoxical space of antiquarianism' can be seen as 'revolutionary', since 'it conjur[es] new expressive possibilities for both poetry and prose' (Manning, p. 59).

## ‘Secondary orality’ and the rhythms of place

Staging a lively contest between eye and ear, literacy and orality, Roberts’s text invokes a modern world in which the visual image and the written word were battling with the radio for the audience’s (and reader’s) attention. The keen attention to different sounds demonstrated by *Gods with Stainless Ears* was propelled in part by the advent of new sound technology, but can also be viewed within the context of Roberts’s desire to re-integrate the medieval oral culture of rhythm and song explored in ‘An Introduction Village Dialect’ into her poetry. In fact, emulating the avant-garde use of sound propounded by F.T. Marinetti in his 1933 Manifesto ‘La Radia’, Roberts’s poem conjures what Marinetti called ‘[c]onflicts between different noises and distances which is to say spatial drama added on to temporal drama’.<sup>129</sup> Part II of *Gods with Stainless Ears* conjures a distinctly aural environment, reverberating with musical instruments and birdsong:

In zibeline stripes strike out the pilotless  
Age: from saxophone towns brass out the dead:  
Disinter futility that we entombing men  
Might curn our runaway hearts. –  
On tamarisk; on seafield pools shivering

With water-cats, ring out the square slate notes  
Shape the birdbox trees with neumes, wind sound  
Singular into cool and simple corners  
Round bale bittern grass and all unseen  
Unknown places of sheltered rubble

Where whimbrels, redshanks, sandpipers ripple  
For the wing of living (ll. 11-22)

Roberts’s pastoral soundscape is inclusive, incorporating the different ‘noises’ of modernity: a gramophone standing on the sand; a brass band; birdsong emanating from the ‘sheltered rubble’ of the bombsite. Roberts often identifies sound with a sense of psychic integrity in her writing, and here, listening offers a means of ‘locating’ the self within the wider cultural

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<sup>129</sup> Marinetti and Nasnata, ‘La Radia’, in *Futurism: an Anthology*, ed. by Lawrence Rainey et al, p. 294.

environments, anticipating Walter Ong's assertion that '[w]hen I hear [...] I gather sound simultaneously from every direction at once: I am at the centre of my auditory world, which envelopes me, establishing me at a kind of core of sensation and existence.'<sup>130</sup> Nigel Wheale suggests that '[a] version of musicality is privileged over sense' in *Gods with Stainless Ears*, and fittingly, the landscape of Part II appears as a giant instrument, with the speaker's invocation to 'distil our notes into febrile reeds/Crisply starched at the water-rail of tides' aligning the Welsh landscape with the pan pipes of Arcadia.<sup>131</sup>

The 'neumes' referred to in this passage refer to signs used in medieval musical notation to represent 'certain melodic patterns, often indicating a single syllable sung to a cluster of notes'.<sup>132</sup> Because the notes on the stave were sometimes recorded in quadrilateral shapes, they are conflated by Roberts with slate roofs and birdboxes. In 1940, Roberts published an article on fourteenth-century Florentine artist Lorenzo da Monaco in *Life and Letters To-day*, in which she relates how she consulted the Camaldolese Gradual, an ornate twelfth-century choir book then held at the Kensington Museum, every day for four months to detect signs of Lorenzo's hand. The reference to medieval musical notation may draw on Roberts's study of the Camaldolese Gradual, for the ornate, colourfully illuminated choirbook depicts neumes in their geometrical form. In this way, Roberts presents her poem, not only as a modern version of the medieval book, but more precisely as a modern version of the medieval musical score. Literally embodying the 'melodic patterns' and rhythmic chants of medieval ecclesiastical music, *Gods with Stainless Ears* presents itself as a kind of ritual mnemonic, embodying and re-calling a collective past.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Ong, p. 71. In oral cultures, as Ong notes, the cosmos is an ongoing event with man at its core.

<sup>131</sup> Wheale, 'Legend and Form in the 1940s', p. 9.

<sup>132</sup> McGuinness, *Collected Poems*, p. 144.

<sup>133</sup> Ong notes that ritual, in the form of chants, serves the role of oral memorialisation (p. 64).

Like Woolf, Roberts was aware of the ‘potentially democratising force of the new availability of music’,<sup>134</sup> and her attempt to re-introduce a concrete sense of musicality and rhythm into her text follows the precedent set by Symbolist poets such as Verlaine, who posited a rejection of ‘official’ literature in favour of musicality as an ‘anti-bourgeois gesture’.<sup>135</sup> T.S. Eliot questioned Roberts’s use of obscure diction in Part II, claiming that it was a mistake to put the words ‘plimsole, cuprite, zebeline [sic] and neumes’ in one poem. Yet Roberts’s ‘plimsole plover’ – a black-and-white marked shorebird – and ‘zibeline’ – the name of a perfume made by the ‘Perfume Veil de Paris’ brand, advertised with the image of a bottle against black and white stripes<sup>136</sup> – evoke the visual appearance of piano keys, as well as the play of black print and white spacing on the text itself. Through her unusual typography, Roberts thus calls attention to the print itself as a kind of rhythm, the spaces between the black figures creating their own form of textual music.

### **Revolution and renewal: restoring the semiotic**

Julia Kristeva cites music as one of the ‘non-verbal signifying systems constructed exclusively in the basis of the semiotic’, observing that ‘with a material support such as the voice, [the] semiotic network gives “music” to literature’. Roberts’s channelling of the semiotic is symptomatic both of her longing for continuity, and her desire to ‘make it new’. As I have shown in relation to Woolf’s work in Chapter 5, although the semiotic chora expresses a continuum (relations between body parts, family members), it also has to do with rupture, manifesting itself in the form of ‘discontinuities in the elements susceptible to

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<sup>134</sup> Cuddy-Keane, ‘Virginia Woolf, Sound Technologies and the New Auralty’, p. 75. In a diary entry of May 7<sup>th</sup> 1942, Roberts records having attended a lecture by Dr. Mansel Thomas on ‘The Future of Welsh Music’. Decrying ‘the present barrier which is set up to protect and prolong the traditional music of yesterday’ in Wales, she argues that we should ‘overthrow all authority, no matter how high or where they stand, who in any way oppose the young creative musicians’ own creative individuality’ (D, 49).

<sup>135</sup> Peter Childs, *Modernisms: a Literary Guide* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), p. 144.

<sup>136</sup> Mundy, ‘Outside the Imaginary Museum’, p. 26.



semiotization': voice, gesture, colours'.<sup>137</sup> Rhythm, then, is shown to be the bearer of a tradition that is always ending, and beginning again; like the repeated refrain of the anonymous chorus in Woolf's *Between the Acts*, the 'unstable collocations of meaning/music' detected by Nigel Wheale in *Gods with Stainless Ears* conjure a seam of shared memory and living continuity that persists through, or within, the violent disruption and discontinuity experienced by modern Wales.<sup>138</sup>

Roberts's interest in 'delv[ing] back to the foundations of language and the social' to rediscover its rhythmic 'semiotic' undertones can be connected to the experience of physical pain in war.<sup>139</sup> Elaine Scarry has argued that pain does not simply resist, but affects a 'shattering' of language, 'bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned.'<sup>140</sup> In her essay 'On Being Ill', Woolf associates the new perspective on language opened up by the experience of toothache with creativity, suggesting that when unwell, the subject is able to look beyond meaning to perceive the sensory, visual, and aural dimensions of language more acutely:

[...] 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 distil their flavour, and then, if at last we grasp their meaning, it is all the richer for having come to us sensually first, by way of the palate or the nostrils, like some queer odour (108).

Offering a new perspective on language, pain compels the sufferer to craft new forms out of the elemental components of language. The subject in pain, for Woolf,

is forced to coin new words himself, and, taking his pain in the one hand, and a lump of pure sound in the other (as perhaps the people of Babel did at the beginning), so to crush them together that a brand new word in the end drops out (102).

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<sup>137</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 96.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid, p. 94. The semiotic chora 'effects discontinuities by temporarily articulating them and then starting over, again and again'.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., p. 117.

<sup>140</sup> Scarry, p. 5, p. 4.

This linguistic inventiveness is everywhere conveyed in *Gods with Stainless Ears*: in the onomatopoeic ‘tintinabulation/ of voice and feather’ (ll. 44-5) filling the landscape of part I, to the verb ‘Cantation’ (I, l.68) used in the poem’s address to the ‘Mother Mild of Pembroke Streams’, seemingly an admixture of the Welsh *canu* and the English ‘incantation’. Scarry argues that ‘the act of verbally expressing pain’ is not only an aesthetically creative one: it ‘is a necessary prelude to the collective task of diminishing pain’.<sup>141</sup> It also has political implications, for ‘the relative ease or difficulty with which any given phenomenon can be verbally represented also influences the ease or difficulty with which that phenomenon comes to be politically represented’.<sup>142</sup> Thus, in refocusing attention on the material qualities of language – its aural, phonic and visual dimensions – Roberts seeks to lend political visibility both to experiences of the female body, and to the Welsh ‘body politic’.

Surface, then, becomes substance in Roberts’s poem. While the Western philosophical tradition held that writing concealed, or operated as the exterior container of, a deeper truth, a more authentic meaning, in Roberts, this ‘manifest surface’ *is* the meaning.<sup>143</sup> Roberts’s poetry can in this way be seen to place itself within a ‘Celtic’ tradition of design, craft and artifice that gained increasing visibility during the 1940s.<sup>144</sup> As David Mellor suggests, Neo Romantic artists such as John Piper ‘placed the apogee of British art during a period of ‘Celtic’ supremacy, linear and rhythmical, from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, before the Fall into “Humanisation and the age of sentiment”’.<sup>145</sup> David Jones’s visual art took up this tradition, picturing, in Mellor’s words, ‘a divine order of lines of influence from the

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid, p. 9.

<sup>142</sup> Scarry, p. 12.

<sup>143</sup> Similarly, McGann contends that Stein’s texts ‘prevent (spatial) distinctions between (manifest) surface and (concealed) significance, or (temporal) distinctions between past and present’ (p. 22), a reading that accords with my account of Roberts’s historical approaches. In Roberts’s writing, the blurring of bounds between past and present is often connected to the troubling of distinctions between manifest surfaces and concealed significance.

<sup>144</sup> Scottish artist Michael Ayrton spoke of his compatriot Robert Colquhoun’s ‘roots in that Celtic gift of design’ at this time (David Mellor, p. 54).

<sup>145</sup> David Mellor, p. 38.

heavens to the profane, bless and beautify the carnal order'<sup>146</sup> Drawing on the intricate pattern-making of Celtic design, *Gods with Stainless Ears* anticipates Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's 'rhizomatic' conception of a literary tradition articulated, not through linear genealogy, but through what they call 'lines of articulation' (strata and territories) and 'lines of flight' (deterritorialisation), connecting disparate peoples, places, and times.<sup>147</sup> These lines imply the *undoing* of all fixities and hierarchies, positing a tradition that is always moving beyond its own borders.<sup>148</sup> As Deleuze and Guattari write, writers who resist the compulsion to impose unity on a text 'are indeed angel makers, *doctores angeli*, because they affirm a properly angelic and superior unity': Roberts's words, which, like James Joyce's, have 'multiple roots', 'shatter the linear unity of knowledge, only to invoke the cyclic unity of the eternal return'.<sup>149</sup>

For Roberts, the Welsh nation is constructed through a series of dynamic linguistic performances – be that the written word, or the spoken 'utterance'. *Gods with Stainless Ears*, as I have shown, is one such dynamic linguistic performance. Through her expressive typography and insistence on the sound, texture, and colour of her language, Roberts calls attention to the physicality of the written word, presenting her text as a dramatic, performative space that not only reflects, but, like the medieval manuscript, actually embodies history and the historical moment in which it was made.

Although for Romantic poets such as Wordsworth the 'simple voices of living' were seen as an arbiter of meaning and self-presence, in Roberts's work, as in Woolf's, voices are often disjoined from the body – an effect that mirrors the ghostly sounds of the radio – thereby calling into question the idea of an originary and unified self-identity. Invention and

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>147</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, in *Literary Theory: an Anthology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, ed. by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, pp. 378-386 (p. 378).

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., p. 380.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

fabrication, as I have shown, are important to Roberts's poetic vision. Refusing to simplify the messiness of Welsh culture and its history, she shows how it is created through a process of constant fabrication and 'supplementation' in the present. While her work would seem to stage a conflict between the artificiality of modern print culture and the authenticity of the 'earth rhythms' associated with the medieval vernacular, it ultimately dissolves the division between the two. Through her inventive use of language and expressive typography in *Gods with Stainless Ears*, Roberts shows a faith in the power of writing to remake the old oral community on different, modern terms. Revelling in the idea that medieval origins can be invented anew through the *techne* of language, she crafts her text so that her writing itself appears as rhythm and as communal performance. Drawing on the idea of the (Welsh) vernacular, she uses this in order to mould her language into new shapes, so as to make it 'bear the burden' of a silenced past, and syllable new words through which to express an emergent postcolonial identity for the future.

## Conclusion

Written in 1942, Roberts's poem 'Crossed and Uncrossed', with its 'concentration' of time, image, and meaning, encapsulates many of the ideas that I have explored in my thesis:

Heard the steam rising from the chill blue bricks  
Heard the books sob and the buildings huge groan  
As the hard crackle of flames leapt on firemen  
and paled the red walls.

Bled their hands in anguish to check the fury  
Knowing fire had raged for week and a day:  
Clung to buildings like swallows flat and exhausted  
under the storm.

Fled the sky: fragments of the Law, kettles and glass:  
Lamb's ghost screamed: Pegasus melted and fell  
Meteor of shining light on to a stone court  
And only wing grave

Round Church built in a Round Age, cold with grief,  
Coloured Saints of glass lie buried at your feet:  
Crusaders uncross limbs by the green light of flares,  
burn into Tang shapes (ll. 1-16).

The poem draws on Roberts's direct experience of bombing during a series of visits to London and the East Coast to see Keidrych, where he was stationed at Yarmouth.<sup>1</sup>

Specifically, it transforms a memory of her stay with her friend Celia Buckmaster at King's Bench Walk, near the Inner Temple, during the aftermath of a bombing raid. As she records in her diary,

[...] when I turned up while the library buildings were still smouldering and continued to burn for another five days. The Round Church empty and wet like a grotesque sea shell. Out of this experience I wrote my poem 'Crossed and Uncrossed' (*D*, 46).

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<sup>1</sup> Roberts, 'Notes for an Autobiography', p. 219.

The speaker sets herself up as a direct witness to this disastrous event, as suggested by the emphasis upon ‘Heard’ in the first two lines; placing herself in a public role, she strives to record, and give sense to, a moment of unprecedented destruction and ordinary heroism.

According to Leo Mellor, Roberts can be seen to understand bombed-out spaces ‘through various modes of bodily or organic sensations that themselves become part of the works’, and in this poem, she refracts the scene through a succession of bodily sensations, conveyed in the words ‘sob’, ‘groan’, ‘Bled’, ‘exhausted’.<sup>2</sup> Forgoing the first person pronoun in the first two lines, the sensations of the speaker become one with those of her surroundings; speaker, books, firemen, all share in the same, collective anguish. Because the ‘Round Church’ was made by human hands, and housed human thoughts, its destruction is a viscerally human one, emphasising the destruction of social life wrought by the ruination of its material artefacts.

In spite of the urgency and contemporaneity of the poem, it is strangely and historically layered, reflecting the fact that bombsites revealed ‘a great swathe of linear time previously hidden or buried, offering history exposed to the air’.<sup>3</sup> The ‘Round Church built in a Round Age’ conjures an imaginary, medieval age of belief, holism, community (conveyed throughout Roberts’s work in the image of the hoop, the ‘circle of C’, the circular dance), all of which have been shattered by the force of the blast. Similarly, the ‘Coloured Saints of glass’ – shards of the stained-glass that, beloved by Pre-Raphaelite artists, was identified with an imaginary medieval culture of ‘faith, stability, [...] creativity’, and joy – lie ground into the dust under foot, a flagrant indicator of the fragility of the cultural past.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Leo Mellor, p. 109.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Harris, p. 2.

For both Roberts and Woolf, medieval tradition – English *and* Welsh – was associated with a language of colour, and both writers celebrated, and at times attempted to emulate, a way of seeing that remained, in Idris Bell’s assessment, ‘crisp, brightly lit, crystal-clear, objective’.<sup>5</sup> Yet in Roberts’s poem, this vision is broken and distorted; all that remains is mess. Her ‘disjointed images’ and ‘violent juxtapositions’ – the cool, ‘chill blue bricks’ against the ‘hard crackle of flames’, the fragments of the ‘Law’ (an allusion to the law buildings at the Inner Temple) jumbled up with pieces of everyday objects, such as ‘kettles and glass’ – make use of the strategies of surrealism in order to register a sort of ‘aesthetic wonder and intrigue at devastation’.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, though the poem is set in London, its generalised meditation upon the destruction of an ancient culture extends to that of Wales; the collocation of ‘blue’ in the first line and ‘books’ in the second stanza point to a history of the violent suppression of the Welsh language and its culture, suggesting a parallel between bombing and less tangible acts of linguistic and colonial violence.

Contrasting the beauty of medieval art with the violence of modern-day destruction, ‘Crossed and Uncrossed’ would seem to announce the impossibility of meaningful creation under the brutalised conditions of modernity – the impossibility, perhaps, of meaning itself in the face of such experience. The poem ends with a series of cryptic images that allude to the same ‘emptiness about the heart of life’ (p.26) that Woolf considers in *Mrs Dalloway*:

Still water silences death: fills night with curious light,  
Brings green peace and birds to a top of Plane Tree  
Fills Magnolia with grail thoughts (ll. 37-40)

Yet the white flower, filled with ‘Grail thoughts’, is also a hopeful image, pointing to something beautiful that remains to be found among the ruins. Indeed, catastrophic

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<sup>5</sup> H. Idris Bell, ‘The Welsh Poetic Tradition’, *Wales*, 3.1 (1943), 38-44 (p. 39). In her essay ‘The Pastons and Chaucer’, Woolf similarly identifies Chaucer’s vision of the Middle Ages with the ‘gay and definite’ (p. 9). Her depiction of Chaucer as ‘unabashed and unafraid. He will always get close up to his object’ (p. 12) resonates with Bell’s assertion that the medieval Welsh poet was ‘writing always with his eye on the object’ (p. 39).

<sup>6</sup> Leo Mellor, p. 85-86.

destruction opens out onto new creation throughout this poem. Exposed to the fire, the medieval ‘crusaders’ – figures tied to the patriarchal ‘Law’ of Church and State – are melted down and set free: ‘uncross[ing] limbs’, they take on new, fluid forms, redolent of modernist abstraction. These strange ‘Tang’ shapes signal the liberation of tradition from the old discourses of heroism and sacrifice, ‘King and Country’, that the knights once stood for; the ‘green light of flares’ that illuminates them may be eerie, but it also evokes a tacit sense of growth and forward movement. In fact, ‘Crossed and Uncrossed’ exemplifies Roberts’s intuition – evident throughout her work – that ‘structures incomplete, broken, smashed or decayed could tell far more than they ever could whole whole’.<sup>7</sup> The ruined building, opened up to the sky, asks the reader to look at the medieval past, and at culture itself, in radically new ways.

Importantly, moreover, the poem shows how the human drive to destroy – rendered in meteorological terms, as a ‘storm’ (l. 35) – engenders another, perhaps more powerful desire: the desire to save, to create, to continue. As Tony Conran suggests, ‘Crossed and Uncrossed’ is also a praise-poem, in the Horatian or Bardic style, dedicated to the mother of Celia Buckmaster.<sup>8</sup> In her autobiographical notes, Roberts recalls that it was ‘Celia’s mother who executed such bravery’ when all ‘[t]he gentlemen assigned to be there had missed duty’:<sup>9</sup>

Treasure was saved. Your loyalty broke all sight,  
 Revived the creed of the Templars of old;  
 Long lost. Other of the Inn escaped duty  
 In black hats.

Furniture out, slates ripped off, yet persistently  
 Hoovering the remaining carpet, living as we all do  
 Blanketed each night, with torch, keys, emergency basket  
 Close by your side (ll. 21-28).

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<sup>7</sup> Leo Mellor, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Conran, *Frontiers*, p.169. Celia Buckmaster (1914-2003) was a novelist and painter. She worked with Roberts on her flower-selling business, Bruska, in the 1930s, and travelled with her to the Scilly Isles and Madeira. See ‘Notes for an Autobiography’, p. 205.

<sup>9</sup> Roberts, ‘Notes for an Autobiography’, p. 218.



Here, Roberts succeeds in manipulating medieval tradition so as to render her text simultaneously ‘a public praise-poem and an expression of intimacy’.<sup>10</sup> The poem addresses a particular woman in a particular situation, yet it also encompasses all those women just ‘getting on with their housework in the intervals between air-raids’, imbuing their ordinary acts with extraordinary significance.<sup>11</sup> Woolf, too, was taken by the role of ordinary women in maintaining some semblance of order among the chaos during the wartime bombing raids. In a letter to Ethyl Smythe on 25 September 1940, she wrote:

London looked merry and hopeful, wearing her wounds like stars; why do I dramatise London perpetually? When I see a great smash like a crushed match box where a house once stood I wave my hand to London. What I’m finding odd and agreeable and unwonted is the admiration this war creates – for every sort of person: chars, shopkeepers, even more remarkably, for politicians - Winston at least, and the tweed wearing sterling dull women here, with their grim good sense [...] We burnt an incendiary bomb up on the down last night. It was a lovely tender autumn evening, and the white sputter of the bomb was to me, who never listened to the instructions, rather lovely.<sup>12</sup>

Like Roberts, Woolf reads the bombing for its aesthetic potential, almost in spite of herself, with the ‘lovely’ sputter of her incendiary bomb finding reflection in Roberts’s ‘Meteor of shining light on to a stone court’. Furthermore, she expresses a similar sense of ‘shared experience’ with disparate bands of people, precipitated by the war, echoing Roberts’s appeal to women living ‘like we all do’ in ‘Crossed and Uncrossed’.<sup>13</sup>

‘Crossed and Uncrossed’ brings together some of the central impulses behind Woolf’s and Roberts’s medievalisms: the search for a new, collective voice; the bridging of the divide between private and the public; the positioning of the body at the heart of history and experience – or, as Woolf’s fictional medieval scholar Rosamund Merridew puts it, ‘at the centre of all ages: beginning middle or end’ (*JM*, 34). As I have shown in this thesis, both

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<sup>10</sup> Conran, *Frontiers*, p. 170.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171.

<sup>12</sup> Virginia Woolf, ‘Letter to Ethyl Smythe’, 25 September 1940, in *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, VI, 434-5.

<sup>13</sup> Conran, *Frontiers in Anglo-Welsh Poetry*, p. 171.

Woolf and Roberts looked to the medieval vernacular in order to explore the idea that the origins of culture and language reside in bodily rhythms, connected to domestic labour. Furthermore, it is to these origins they return in order to 'begin again'. Just as, in Jane Marcus's view, Woolf develops a 'metaphor of the artist as charwoman to the world',<sup>14</sup> so Roberts can be seen to find a model for the artist in Celia Buckmaster's mother: saving fragments of tradition from oblivion, cleaning up the 'mess' left by a war-obsessed national culture and turning it into something beautiful again, her actions enact in physical form what Roberts's poems attempt on the page. Celia's mother's ordinary heroism can be understood as a paean to an art that, rooted in the everyday realms of women's experience, is dedicated to collective survival and continuation, one that, in David Jones's words, 'has no end save the perfecting of a process'.<sup>15</sup> While the shelling of the medieval church, like the wobbling of the 'leaning tower' of male privilege in Woolf's eponymous essay, might cause a crisis in social meaning, it is also shown to leave a space for different forms of culture, alternative narratives of creation and endurance, to emerge out of the ruins.

Roberts's juxtaposition of medieval 'crusaders' with the surreal, twisted forms of the bombsite recalls an earlier composition by Neo Romantic artist John Piper. Alexandra Harris describes how the response of John Piper and Myfanwy Evans to modern art

was coloured by the brilliant hues of medieval stained-glass windows and the bold lines of early carvings. For a 1936 photograph Piper did some explicit bringing together. In a corner of his studio he arranged abstract canvases in among his water colours of medieval glass, testing their companionship across seven centuries.<sup>16</sup>

This thesis has aimed to emulate Piper's practice of bringing different ideas into unexpected juxtaposition, so as to discover new relations between them. I have suggested that Woolf and Roberts do not use the medieval to escape a troubled present; instead, like Piper, they use the

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<sup>14</sup> Marcus, *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy*, p. 56.

<sup>15</sup> Jones, 'Art and Sacrament', p. 151.

<sup>16</sup> Harris, pp. 29-30.

present in order to ‘read’ the medieval past differently, re-appropriating the medieval as something contemporary and even avant-garde. Conversely, Woolf and Roberts utilise the medieval past as a way of ‘reading’ modernity in another way, so as to attain new perspectives on entrenched ideas surrounding war, gender, and national identity. In different ways, both writers challenge the German Romantic account of a nation as ‘a holistic people with a common language, history, culture, and race’.<sup>17</sup> Rather than celebrating the unity and stability of the Welsh or English Middle Ages, they insist upon its complexity, its social stratification, its multilingualism, thereby discovering in the ancient past a model for appreciating the complexity of the modern nation. While drawn to the notion of an organic community, they ultimately prefer to think about the nation in terms of fragments, ‘those parts and those peoples who do not easily belong to it, who exist at the margins and peripheries of society’, as a basis for defining a more inclusive national culture.<sup>18</sup> Fittingly, their vision of the medieval past is highly fragmentary, too, hinging upon what Leo Mellor terms ‘[b]odily sensations and illuminated fragments’. In their hands, the ‘orts, scraps, and fragments’ of the medieval past become ‘productive sacraments of creative ingenuity’ that, rather than appearing as a sign of civilisation’s end-point, serve instead as a starting point for thought and for new meaning-making.<sup>19</sup>

In his *The Politics of Modernism*, Raymond Williams emphasised the plurality and diversity of the twentieth-century cultural formation now recognised as ‘modernisms’:

[W]hat we have really to investigate is not some single position of language in the avant-garde or language in Modernism. On the contrary, we need to identify a range of distinct and in many cases actually opposed formations, as these have appeared in language.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 62. As Young suggests, this idea was pushed to its extreme by Nazi Germany.

<sup>18</sup> Young, p. 63.

<sup>19</sup> Holsinger, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism*, p. 79.

Building on the contribution offered by studies such as Daniel Williams's *Black Skin, Blue Books* (2012), or Chris Wigginton's *Modernism from the Margins: the 1930s Poetry of Louis MacNeice and Dylan Thomas* (2007), my thesis offers a response to Raymond Williams's appeal for an account of British modernism that 'addresses internal differences'.<sup>21</sup> These 'internal differences' have to do with the Welsh experience of medieval tradition and nationhood, as conveyed in Roberts's work, yet they are also conditioned by gender.

Bringing Woolf and Roberts together for the first time, I have shown that they share a conviction of the importance of national tradition – access to a shared culture and a shared past – to women writers, and that, in spite of their differences, they engage with medieval tradition in order to carve out a 'place' for the woman writer within national culture. Furthermore, they both recognise that the attempt to negotiate a position for women in the nation is dependent upon, and tied to, gaining recognition for other forms of difference within the life of the nation, and that this project involves the radical transformation of national culture. Thus, while Roberts seeks to assert a postcolonial consciousness for Wales, Woolf strives to 'decolonise' the cultural map of England, through reference to the 'adversary, anterior' tradition of 'Anon'.<sup>22</sup> Both writers look to the Middle Ages in order to define an alternative set of national origins, connected to the feminine, the local and particular, rather than the masculine, universal and imperial, as the basis for national renewal. Through their imaginative reinvention of the medieval past, they seek to recuperate the 'petits récits' of women and/or minority cultures, hidden away 'between the acts' of imperial history. Furthermore, because the Middle Ages can be identified with localised forms of culture,

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<sup>21</sup> Daniel Williams, p. 87.

limited in large part to the Manor or the *cantref*, medieval history affords both writers an avenue through which to envision a more localised, decentred conception of national space.<sup>23</sup>

Drawing on the influence of visual artists such as Vanessa Bell or Neo-Romantics such as John Piper and Graham Sutherland, both Woolf and Roberts position themselves within national culture through the gaze upon the landscape.<sup>24</sup> They present this landscape, not as a Romantic, feminised ideal, separated off from culture, but as a cultural text in its own right, inscribed by both men and women, past and present. In this way, they approach what Woolf called the book 'laid upon the landscape' in order to access more communal, collective forms of national culture.<sup>25</sup> As in 'Crossed and Uncrossed', medieval history is persistently imagined in spatial forms in their work. Thus, rather than existing as two separate points in a linear chronology, medieval past and modern present are shown to lie side by side at the same time and in the same spot, like different sections in a cubist painting. In this way, they dismantle perceived hierarchies between past and present, and show how the one is necessarily implicated in the other. Insisting on history as 'a thing lived, experienced', they follow William Morris, 'making the past present' in tangible, material forms, so as to experience and thus, reclaim it as a woman.<sup>26</sup>

While cultural nationalists such as Saunders Lewis or G.K. Chesterton sought to return to the 'origins' of national culture in a more organic, coherent, and orderly medieval past, Woolf and Roberts both recognise that origins are elusive, and are essentially a construction of the present. Thus, in their approach to the medieval past, they are far more

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<sup>23</sup> See Turner and Turner, p. 4: 'In European societies with a rurally based economy and feudal social structures, life for the masses tended to be intimately localised.'

<sup>24</sup> Garrity, *Step-daughters of England*, p. 27.

<sup>25</sup> Woolf, 'Reading', p. 13.

<sup>26</sup> Jane Harrison, *Alpha and Omega*, p. 205, William Morris, 'Address at the Twelfth Annual Meeting of the SPAB' (1889), in *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, ed. by May Morris, 2 vols, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1936), I, 146-147. Morris's definition of romance in this speech provides the keynote (and title) for my study: 'As for romance, what does romance mean? I have heard people miscalled for being romantic, but what romance means is the capacity for a true conception of history, a power of making the past part of the present.'

interested in recurrence and continuity than origins and ends. Their unorthodox, often anachronistic portrayal of the Middle Ages can be attributed to the idea that tradition, for women is never 'ready made', which means that they are free to craft it anew, via the imagination, in order to suit the needs of the present. As I have shown, their writings testify to an optimistic belief in the transformative power of art and of language, its capacity to construct new forms of tradition and culture, 'for practical use in our time' (*D*, 17).

I have shown that Woolf and Roberts perceive the nation as an imagined entity, constructed in and through language itself. In their exploration of the medieval past, they attempt to return to the 'organic' beginnings of language, connected to the childhood relationship with the maternal body. Fundamental to the argument of this thesis is the suggestion that both Woolf and Roberts identify the Middle Ages with what they construe as the maternal, 'semiotic' undertow to the national text. This 'maternal' unconscious is glimpsed in music, in scattered sights and sounds, 'the cawing of rooks in an elm tree',<sup>27</sup> and the 'gestural and vocal play' of texts such as *Gods with Stainless Ears* and 'An Introduction to Village Dialect'.<sup>28</sup> Articulating a sense of emotional continuum between different people and between people and their environment, it provides a way of recasting traditional, paternalistic narratives of national identity. Both writers use their medieval 'subtext' in order to substitute allegiance to a single ideology for a sensuous relation to place, to exchange national *unity* for *community*. As Toril Moi writes, the semiotic introduces 'negativity, difference, disruption' into the text, and is characteristic of the 'mobile, unfixed, subversive writing subject'. Identifying the nation with what Woolf calls the 'lady [...] gone a-roving',<sup>29</sup> the woman writer as 'mobile, unfixed, subversive wandering subject',<sup>30</sup> Roberts and Woolf introduce 'difference [and] disruption' into the national 'text', so as to break it up and make it

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<sup>27</sup> Woolf, *Three Guineas*, p. 313.

<sup>28</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 94.

<sup>29</sup> Woolf, 'Craftsmanship', p. 90.

<sup>30</sup> Moi, 'Introduction' to *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 89.

new again.<sup>31</sup> In Julia Kristeva's view, the idea of the semiotic 'rehabilitates the notion of the fragmented body – pre-Oedipal but always already invested with semiosis': in other words, it shows how fragmentation can be meaningful, though this 'meaning' might be somewhat different from the binary logic of 'symbolic' language.<sup>32</sup> I have shown that, in their attention to medieval oral culture, both Woolf and Roberts discover a maternal literary tradition articulated in and through discontinuity and fragmentation, a tradition in which the gaps and silences say as much as the words.<sup>33</sup> It is fitting, perhaps, that Roberts's 'Crossed and Uncrossed' consciously emulates the form of the Sapphic stanza, gesturing to the beginnings of women's poetry in the beautiful 'remains' of Sappho's work.<sup>34</sup>

By juxtaposing Woolf with Roberts, I have sought to indicate that Welsh-identified writers were drivers in the 'anthropological turn' described by Jed Esty – the widespread attempt on the part of modernists to reconceive 'British hegemony' in terms of a 'recovered cultural particularity' that took place during the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, I have shown how a particular vein of Bloomsbury, linked to Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell, and defined by an appreciation of nature, a 'naïve' tradition of domestic craft associated with the Omega Workshops, and avant-garde experiments with form, found its way into the Welsh modernism that flourished around this time.<sup>36</sup> Through my excavation of the medieval undercurrents in their work, I have also aimed to provide a model and a framework for understanding women's multi-perspectival approaches to national tradition and the medieval past during the modernist period, an area of enquiry that has hitherto been subsumed into masculinist models. This will provide a platform for any further enquiries into the extensive, yet hitherto

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<sup>32</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 91.

<sup>33</sup> Tony Conran observes that in 'Crossed and Uncrossed', 'the lacunae are almost part of the texture'. *Frontiers in Anglo-Welsh Poetry*, p. 170.

<sup>34</sup> See Roberts's note to the poem, in *Collected Poems*, p. 38.

<sup>35</sup> Esty, p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> Rosner notes that Woolf's reimagining of design – and thus family and social institutions – was influenced by the Omega Workshops (*Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life*, p. 16).

neglected field of women's medieval re-writings of the twentieth century, not least Roberts's medievalist novel, *Nesta*. Written by Roberts over 1941-44, *Nesta*, as I indicated in the introduction to this thesis, is an imaginative re-writing of the life of Welsh princess *Nest* (c.1085-1136), the grandmother of Gerald of Wales. The text was thought lost when I undertook my thesis in 2010, but the manuscript has very recently been discovered by a graduate student, Daniel Hughes, at the Harry Ransom Centre at the University of Texas at Austin where Roberts's collections are held. *Nesta* lies beyond the scope of my thesis, which, as I have stated in my introduction, addresses the use of medieval culture as a model and metaphor for poetic language – hence my decision to focus chiefly on Roberts's poetry. However, the strategies adopted by Roberts in this novel corroborate many of the arguments I have advanced in relation to Woolf's and Roberts's medievalisms. In her introduction to the novel, Roberts announces that '[t]his book is to be read as it was written, as an imaginative piece of work recollected around the hearth.'<sup>37</sup> In this way, she explicitly positions it within the vernacular, 'domestic', female-oriented storytelling tradition that Woolf vaunts as the domain of 'Anon'. The array of sources that Roberts cites for her novel – 'Mediaeval Manuscripts, Literature of the Period, Lives of the Cambro-British Saints, Mythology, Laws, Pipe Rolls, Cartography, with added concentration on the "Itinerary through Wales"' – confirm the spatial, geographical components of her medieval imagination, as well as its concern with ordinariness: her scholarly interest in 'Pipe Rolls' – one of the major sources of information for medieval social history – is shared by Woolf's medieval historian, Rosamund Merridew, who has written a book on 'The Manor Rolls' (JM, p. 34).<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, like Merridew (and indeed, like Woolf), Roberts rejects a slavish dedication to facticity in favour of the imagination, noting,

When truth in history is penetrated we too often find that it does not exist. Facts are

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<sup>37</sup> Lynette Roberts, 'Book of Nesta', Harry Ransom Center, Lynette Roberts Collection MS-3561, fol. 2.

<sup>38</sup> Roberts, 'Book of Nesta', fol. 2.



insufficient. Think of the record that our enemy will interpret of Dunkirk, and our conception of it...of any event which may have been experienced of this recurring war.<sup>39</sup>

In their approach to the medieval past, both Woolf and Roberts insist upon the idea, proposed by the character Antoinette in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, that 'there is always the other side, always'.<sup>40</sup> They mobilise their imagination in order to discover the 'other side' of a national text defined by war, colonialism, and the adventures of 'great men', located in 'the details of life and the pulsings of affect'.<sup>41</sup> This alternative history is conveyed in *Nesta* by the smells of the herbarium at St Davids, the 'quick rhythm' of the Welsh craftsmen in the 'turn of their work', or the 'mattress [...] filled up with sweet yellow straw and head pillows from the pluckings of geese' made by Rhys ap Tewdur for his wife.<sup>42</sup> In her preface, Roberts insists that 'what can be suggested, and this is what I have tried to do, is to use the imagination, and bring all those facts to life'. Reanimating the wandering, 'maternal' body of Nest ferch Rhys, she uses her story, not only to express a sense of Welsh difference, but also, to suggest a different way of imagining national belonging.<sup>43</sup>

History, as Woolf and Roberts recognised, is so often the battleground for deciding who should be 'inside', and who should be 'outside' the life of the nation; as a cultural discourse, it participates in the fixing of borders, real and imaginary. Significantly, Woolf's and Roberts's contemporary context was not unlike our own: it, too, was marked by the mass movement of people across continents unsettled by war and poverty, and witnessed an emotive, reactionary preoccupation with Britain's borders. Their vision for a national culture that can admit and celebrate 'outsiders like ourselves', a national culture that lays stress on

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, ed. by Judith Raiskin (New York: Norton, 1999), p. 77.

<sup>41</sup> Highmore, *Ordinary Lives*, p. xii.

<sup>42</sup> Roberts, 'Book of Nesta', fol. 10, fol. 12, fol. 16.

<sup>43</sup> Roberts, 'Book of Nesta', fol. 2.

interdependence and interconnection, rather than isolation and separation, offer suggestive avenues for approaching some of the political challenges faced by Wales and Europe today.

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