

Aesthetics of Being:

The Unfinished Memoirs of Virginia Woolf and Jean Rhys

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This essay reads Woolf's unfinished memoir "A Sketch of the Past" and Rhys' memoir *Smile Please* through the lens of relational psychoanalytic theories that focus on how the mother's handling of the infant provides a primary experience of patterning and order that constitutes a foundation for what Christopher Bollas calls 'the first human aesthetic'¹. Woolf's and Rhys' memoirs, written at the very ends of their lives, provide a particularly compelling case for an 'aesthetics of being', as both writers return in imagination to the mother-daughter matrix in order to explore the genesis of the creative impulse. Yet despite this commonality, these memoirs make distinctly different cases for how 'the first human aesthetic' impacts each writer's conception of her creativity; whereas Woolf's early childhood memories incorporate the maternal aesthetic as a positive constituent of her sense of writing, Rhys' memories, by contrast, highlight the mother's role in the formation of an aesthetic based on disharmony, alienation and estrangement. Taken together, then, these memoirs demonstrate how the 'first human aesthetic' continues to 'speak through' the creative writer's imagination and understanding of the role of her craft in her life.

Relational psychoanalysis has always stressed the relationship between infantile experiences of the mother's care and the infant's emergent sense of self. As Hans Loewald writes:

[T]he manner in which a child is fed, touched, cleaned, looked at, talked to, called by name, recognized and re-recognized... communicate[s] to him his identity, sameness, unity, and individuality, shape[s] and mold[s] him so that he can begin to identify himself, to feel and recognize himself as one and as separate from others yet with others. The child begins to experience himself as a centered unity by being centered upon².

Winnicott similarly describes the process by which an infant goes from an 'unintegrated state' to a structured integration through the mother's creation of a 'facilitating environment'³; building upon this concept, Bollas argues that the mother's mode of handling the child is an 'idiom' or 'logic' of care:

The baby takes in not only the contents of the mother's communications but the form of her utterances, and since in the beginning of life handling of the infant is the primary mode of communicating, I maintain that the internalization of the mother's form (her aesthetic) is prior to the internalization of her verbal messages (p. 42).

Thus ‘we learn the grammar of our being before we grasp the rules of our language’ (p. 44). For Bollas, then, the aesthetic experience incorporates the mother’s idiom or form of caring for the infant; throughout our lives, he maintains, we will continue to seek out those experiences that will tap into and activate these latent aspects of ourselves that otherwise lie dormant in the unconscious. By extension, the *creation* of artistic form – particularly when that form contains and ‘manages’ the primal infantile anxiety situation of abandonment and loneliness – can itself function as an expression of the mother’s ‘idiom of care.’

While Bollas posits that ‘the grammar of our being’ develops prior to verbalisation, that grammar plays an important role in the child’s *experience* of language, according to Loewald. In contrast to relational theorists such as Daniel Stern and Harry Stack Sullivan, and other psychoanalytic theorists such as Freud and Lacan, Loewald usefully challenges the conventional separation drawn between preverbal and verbal stages of development. For Loewald, the infant experiences language as an element of an originary ‘primordial density’; the infant is ‘immersed, embedded in a flow of speech that is part and parcel of a global experience within the mother-child field’ and ‘bathed in sound, rhythm, etc., as accentuating ingredients of a uniform experience’⁴. This density persists, for secondary-process experience exists alongside what Stephen A. Mitchell terms ‘an earlier primordial organization of dedifferentiation, affective density, and fusion’⁵. Indeed, rather than viewing language as a medium of separation that drives a wedge between perceptual or affective experience and how it is verbally represented (Stern’s position), Loewald argues that language:

‘in its most genuine and adaptive function is a binding power. It ties together human beings and self and object world, and it binds abstract thought with the bodily concreteness and power of life. In the word primary and secondary process are reconciled’ (p. 204).

In fact, both Woolf and Rhys discuss words and writing in ways that resonate with Bollas’ and Loewald’s formulations; both open their memoirs with incidents in early childhood that foreground how interaction with their mothers shaped their sense of self or ‘grammar of being’: these self-identified ‘first memories’ then constitute an important role in the writers’ later descriptions of the function of language⁶. Woolf in fact offers *two* memories, nonchalantly noting the contradiction that both seem to function as ‘first’ memories: the first memory narrated is of ‘red and purple flowers on a black ground – my mother’s dress [...] I was on her lap’ (SOTP p. 64); the second memory extends the first,

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for Woolf imagines for ‘artistic convenience’ that this memory of sitting on her mother’s lap takes place on a journey to St. Ives, the summer home that remained an important touchstone throughout Woolf’s life. Lying half-asleep, half-awake in the nursery, Woolf remembers hearing the waves breaking on the beach in a soothing one-two rhythm echoed in the blind pull drawing across the floor (SOTP p. 64-65). Woolf goes on to describe this memory as the ‘feeling... of lying in a grape and seeing through a film of semi-transparent yellow’, and her description of painting the memory similarly features a womb-like uterine envelope: her picture would be ‘globular, semi-transparent,’ featuring ‘curved petals,’ shells, and other semi-transparent curved shapes, ‘showing the light through but not giving a clear outline.’ ‘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 [...] The sound seems to fall through an elastic, gummy air’ (SOTP p. 66). Woolf’s first memories depict a sensual, oceanic and embryonic peace, one that prominently centres upon the mother’s lap and that draws attention to the relation between child and mother in the image of the red and purple flowers splashed across the black background. Recalling the Tagore quotation that opens Winnicott’s well-known essay ‘The Location of Cultural Experience’ – ‘On the seashore of endless worlds, children play’ – Woolf’s opening memory could serve as a paradigmatic illustration of Winnicott’s sense of the symbol as the union of mother and baby ‘at the point in time and space of the initiation of their state of separateness’⁷. Not only does this sensual evocation of the waves breaking on the beach resound throughout Woolf’s writing, bearing witness to this memory’s persistence as constitutive of her ‘grammar of being’, so, too, does Woolf’s writing infuse secondary-process experience with Loewald’s ‘primordial density’.

Rhys’ first memory is decidedly less harmonious:

“Smile Please,” the man said. “Not quite so serious.”

....

“Now,” the man said.

“Keep still,” my mother said.

I tried but my arm shot up of its own accord.

“Oh what a pity, she moved.”

“You must keep still,” my mother said, frowning⁸.

Rhys goes on to record how this picture, taken when she was six, became the source of a lifelong self-estrangement:

The eyes were a stranger’s eyes. The forefinger of her right hand was raised as if in warning. She had moved after all. Why I didn’t know; she wasn’t me any longer. It was the first time I was aware of time, change, and the longing for the past. I was nine (SP p. 13-14).

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This passage, which opens the memoir Rhys named in reference to this memory, was cut from the ending of Rhys' early novel *Voyage in the Dark*, where it formed part of Anna Morgan's delirium, as she lies bleeding to death from a botched abortion. Here Rhys highlights the mother's insistence on the daughter's obedience and quiescence, while for Rhys – disobedient from some inner and unnamed compulsion – the passage draws attention to an inner turmoil at odds with the surface image: *the photograph functions as a static facade that conceals mother-daughter disconnect*. This anecdote encapsulates the way in which the mother not only fails to mirror the daughter in the Winnicottian sense, but she also insists on a conformity that entails the daughter's compliance to what Winnicott terms a 'false self'; he calls this type of external coercion 'impingement'⁹. Winnicott argues that, in this type of interaction, the infant must react to impingement, and only emotional withdrawal permits an individual existence:

There is not even a resting place for individual experience, and the result is a failure in the primary narcissistic state to evolve an individual. The 'individual' then develops as an extension of the shell rather than of the core, and as an extension of the impinging environment [...] The individual then *exists by not being found*' (211; italics in the original).

Tellingly, Rhys' passages on female subjectivity frequently feature passages in which her protagonists turn to mirrors to confirm their sense of self, yet the image that is returned to them typically registers a profound sense of disconnect, for the image in the mirror repudiates rather than confirms existence. Frequently, her protagonists endorse the creation of a static and artificial surface that deflects the hostility they detect in other people, especially other women.

If we move to Woolf's and Rhys' descriptions of why they write, what becomes evident is that each writer's description of her craft builds upon and extends these 'first memories'. Woolf's first memories, as we have seen, foreground both the maternal environment and the sense of the child enclosed in a uterine medium. Woolf will later describe her childhood world as a maternal globe orbiting the mother's gravitational pull:

What a jumble of things I can remember... about my mother... of her surrounded; of her generalised; dispersed, omnipresent, of her as the creator of the crowded merry world which spun so gaily in the centre of my childhood [...] there it always was, the common life of the family, very merry, very stirring, crowded with people; and she was the centre; it was herself. This was proved on May 5th 1895. For after that day there was nothing left of it... everything had come to an end (SOTP p. 84).

The shattering of the maternal, global environment becomes the hallmark of Woolf's conceptualisation of her own aesthetic impulses. Describing the genesis of her creativity as the 'shock-receiving capacity' Woolf remarks that:

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[...] a shock is at once in my case followed by the desire to explain it... I make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together. Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me. It is the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what; making a scene come right; making a character come together (SOTP p. 72).

At one level, Woolf's description evokes Melanie Klein's conceptualisation of artistry as a reparative gesture to the mother damaged in infantile phantasy.¹⁰ Writing also serves as what Bollas would term the transformational object; Bollas writes that the subject seeks the transformational object because s/he 'aspires to be matched in symbiotic harmony within an aesthetic frame that promises to metamorphose the self' (p. 46). Woolf's own description is strikingly similar to Bollas'. Woolf observes that:

[...] one is living all the time in relation to certain background rods or conceptions. Mine is that there is a pattern hid behind the cotton wool. And this conception affects me every day. I prove this, now, by spending the morning writing... I feel that by writing I am doing what is far more necessary than anything else' (SOTP p. 153).

Woolf's fiction, then, foregrounds 'moments of being', temporal moments created through the rituals of art whereby the artist holds at bay the shattering and fracturing chaos of death, change, mortality.

Like Woolf, Rhys' descriptions of her artistry reflect and expand upon the memory of herself and her mother. Here, however, disharmony and rejection reign. Trying to recall if they had ever been in harmony, Rhys again turns to a photograph, this time of her mother, only to record again her sense of estrangement:

I don't know whether I was jealous or whether I resented knowing that she had once been very different from the plump, dark, and only sometimes comfortable woman I knew [...]. Even after the new baby was born there must have been an interval before she seemed to find me a nuisance and I grew to dread her. Another interval and she was middle-aged and plump and uninterested in me. Yes, she drifted away from me and when I tried to interest her, she was indifferent (SP p. 33).

Tellingly, Rhys extends this indifference to the beautiful and now long-lost childhood world of Dominica:

It's strange growing up in a very beautiful place and seeing that it is beautiful. It was alive, I was sure of it. Behind the bright colours the softness, the hills like clouds and the clouds like fantastic hills. There was something austere, sad, lost, all these things. I wanted to identify myself with it, to lose myself in it. (But it turned its head away, indifferent, and that broke my heart' (SP p. 66).

Writing becomes a way to assuage the pain of rejection; indeed, Rhys records in the unpublished *Black Exercise Book* that writing poems provided a release for emotional pain; these poems repeatedly used words such as pain, shame, sleep, sea and silence. At the same time, surface form – the photograph, the mirror, the beautiful landscape – repels

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– or, in Winnicottian terms, impinges upon – the nascent writer, forcing her to withdraw to an internal private world of painful self-seclusion.

Rhys typically attributed her birth as a creative writer to the failed love affair of her early youth, a love affair that recapitulates the earlier, primal rejection of the daughter by the mother. Abandoned by her older, richer lover and plunged into despair, Rhys purchases a set of black exercise books and pens in primary colours that become a site of compulsive working out:

It was after supper... that it happened. My fingers tingled, and the palms of my hands. I pulled a chair up to the table, opened an exercise book, and wrote... I remembered everything that had happened to me in the last year and a half. I remembered what he'd said, what I felt (SP p. 104).

This combination of black notebooks and bright primary-coloured pens becomes a motif of self-recognition, both here and in *Good Morning, Midnight*; in a startling reversal of Woolf's memory of her mother's lap, Rhys' woman writer longs for a black dress with 'wide sleeves embroidered in vivid colours – red, green, blue, purple' because she had seen herself in it¹¹; she imagines herself as 'the dark background to show up the bright colours' (GMM p. 29). Form in turn becomes what Rhys terms an 'anodyne,' a mechanism for the control and management of emotional pain. As Rhys explains, 'I've never gotten over my longing for clarity, and a smooth firm foundation underneath the sound and fury'¹². Rhys here reverses her more typical configuration, whereby the 'sound and fury' undergird the smooth, hard surface (as in the title of her best-known novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, where the surface conceals the detritus caught beneath). The well-wrought story bears witness to the *absence* of the truth; as Sasha, Rhys' sole fictional portrait of a woman writer, explains, 'You imagine the carefully-pruned, shaped thing that is presented to you is truth. That's just what it isn't. The truth is improbable; the truth is fantastic; it's in what you think is a distorting mirror that you see the truth' (GMM p. 74). The mirror, by contrast, covers over and points up the fractures in self-construction; Sasha imagines the mirror speaking to her, telling her that it retains every image of her it has ever seen: 'Would you believe that, of all the faces I see, I remember each one, that I keep a ghost to throw back at each one, lightly, like an echo – when it looks into me again?' (GMM p. 170).

"A Sketch of the Past" and *Smile Please* both illustrate the way in which writing can function as a transformational object that memorialises the daughter's experience of the mother's care and presence. As Bollas explains:

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The mother's idiom of care and the infant's experience of this handling is the first human aesthetic. It is the most profound occasion where the content of the self is formed and transformed by the environment [...] This first human aesthetic informs the development of personal character [...] The transformational object promises to the beseeching self an experience where the unintegrations of self find integration through the form provided by the transformational object [...] the mother is the first transformational object and her style of mothering the paradigm of transformation for her child (p. 40).

In keeping with Loewald's contention that language is the bridge between primary and secondary process experiences, a bridge that enables language to retain its affective connection to the experiences he calls 'primal density', Rhys and Woolf write the mother's 'idiom of care' into the scene of writing. For Woolf, the scene of writing immerses her in an imaginative world of reconstruction and reverie that gives her 'the strongest pleasure known to me' (SOTP p. 72). Rhys, too, writes the mother's 'idiom of care' into the scene of writing, but that scene is one of responding to an impinging environment in order to 'earn death'. *Smile Please* includes portions of a diary in which Rhys puts herself on trial, explaining to the prosecutor that she 'must' write because '[i]f I stop writing my life will have been an abject failure [...] I will not have earned death' (SP p. 133). This scene resonates with another in the memoir, in which Rhys recalls a little girl who could not answer the Catechism question "'Who made you?'" correctly: 'my chief memory was a little girl who persisted obstinately in saying "My mother!"... At last the nun, exasperated, banished her from the class' (SP p. 64). Rhys' writing foregrounds the 'beseeching self' that longs for the form that promises integration of the 'unintegrations of self'; tellingly, her aesthetic documents the *failure* of that process, whereby the beseeching self wanders alone and forever unintegrated in a universe of rejection and exile. Aesthetic moments, Bollas reminds us, need not be pleasant to be effective: 'aesthetic moments are not always beautiful or wonderful occasions – many are ugly and terrifying but nonetheless profoundly moving because of the existential memory tapped'¹³. Rhys' aesthetic hence functions as an example of the ways in which form controls and makes manageable – even pleasurable – the primal infantile anxiety situation of abandonment and loneliness that constitutes her 'grammar of being.'

This essay's title – the aesthetics of being – plays upon Woolf's description of 'moments of being' in her memoir, vivid perceptual or affective memories that stand apart from the 'cotton wool of daily life' (SOTP p. 72). Woolf describes these moments as shocks, and observes that the 'shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer'. She believes that a shock speaks to something real behind appearances, that *she makes it real*

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by putting it into words. As in Rhys' sense of the interplay between controlled surface and roiling undercurrents, Woolf's 'moments of being' gesture toward the need to verbalise the wordless potential of what Bollas calls the 'unsought known': writing for both women actualises and elaborates the potentialities that lie dormant in childhood memories. In that actualisation and elaboration they create in these memoirs an 'aesthetics of being' in Bollas' use of the term, 'an irreducible intelligence in human form... unfolding into a person's character through its interaction with the environment'¹⁴. That environment for both remains the maternal environment, while language for both retains the 'primordial density' of that environment – for better or worse.

¹Christopher Bollas, 'The Aesthetic Moment and the Search for Transformation', in *Transitional Objects and Potential Spaces: Literary Uses of D. W. Winnicott*, ed. by Peter L. Rudnytsky (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 43. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

²H. W. Loewald, 'On the Therapeutic Action of Psycho-analysis', *International Journal of Psycho-analysis* 41 (1960), 16-33. Rpt. in *Essential Papers on Object Relations*, ed. By Peter Buckley (New York and London: New York University Press), pp. 393. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

³ Donald W Winnicott, *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development* (New York: International Universities Press, 1965), p. 223.

⁴ H W Loewald, 'Primary process, secondary process, and language', in *Papers on Psychoanalysis* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1980), pp. 185-187. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

⁵ Stephen A Mitchell, *Relationality: From Attachment to Intersubjectivity*. (Hillsdale, New Jersey and London: The Analytic Press, 2000), pp. 11.

⁶ Virginia Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past.' In *Moments of Being*, second edition, ed. By Jeanne Schulkind. (New York: Harcourt, 1985), pp. 64. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

⁷ Donald W Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*. (London: Tavistock Publications, 1971), pp. 95-97.

⁸ Jean Rhys, *Smile Please: An Unfinished Autobiography*. (Berkeley, California: Creative Arts Book Company, 1983), pp. 13. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

⁹ Donald W Winnicott, *From Paediatrics to Psycho-analysis*. (New York: Basic Books, 1975), pp. 211. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

¹⁰ Melanie Klein, 'Infantile Anxiety Situations Reflected in a Work of Art and in the Creative Impulse,' in *The Selected Melanie Klein*, ed. by Juliet Mitchell. (New York: The Free Press, 1987), pp. 84-94.

¹¹ Jean Rhys, *Good Morning, Midnight*. (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1939/1986), pp. 28. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

¹² *The Letters of Jean Rhys, 1931-66*. Ed. Francis Wyndham and Diana Melly. New York: Viking, 1984. Page 71.

¹³ Christopher Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), pp. 29.

¹⁴ Joseph Scalia, 'Introduction,' *The Vitality of Objects: Exploring the Work of Christopher Bollas*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2002. p. 4.