

IRA NADEL

*Oriental Woolf*

“What is more European, after all, than to be corrupted by the Orient?”

—Richard Howard

What are the origins of the Oriental discourse of the Bloomsbury Group and, more specifically, Virginia Woolf? How did the colonial dialogue of the time affect her representation of the Orient? How did her successful re-reading of the Orient alter her writing, even if her characters seem unaware of the political, economic, or linguistic burden of imperialism?

Woolf initially accepted the received ideas of the Orient as seen in her “Ode Written Partly in Prose.” There, she characterizes the East, and specifically China, as a world where “mandarins go, mute, cruel; delicate; / past the gold pagodas; [...] and the people smile wise inscrutable smiles.”<sup>1</sup> But another, later reaction is that of the traffic policeman Budge in *Between the Acts*, who satirically expresses the devolution of the Empire. Directing traffic at Hyde Park, Budge dissolves the Empire into a mass of automobiles where distinctions disappear: “*The Shah of Persia; Sultan of Morocco; or it may be 'Er Majesty in person; or Cook's tourists; black men; white men; sailors, soldiers.*”<sup>2</sup> “Nobody seems to know one car from another,” Miss La Trobe observes at the close of the novel.<sup>3</sup>

By the end of Woolf’s writing life, the Empire has become the arena of a traffic policeman who insists that “*they obey the laws of God and Men*” and, parodying Kipling, declares: “*Let 'em sweat at the mines; cough at the looms; rightly endure their lot. That's the price of Empire; that's the white man's burden.*”<sup>4</sup> But

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<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Ode Written Partly in Prose,” in *Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Susan Dick (London: Hogarth, 1985), 232.

<sup>2</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (London: Hogarth, 1947), 189.

<sup>3</sup> Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 234.

<sup>4</sup> Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 191.

Woolf did not begin with this view. Her early vision of the Orient was romantic and exotic, emphasized in the playful caricature of the East represented by the Dreadnought Hoax of 1910, which duped the British Navy into allowing a group imitating a foreign government onto one of their most important warships.

Woolf's 1907 review of *Call of the East* by Charlotte Lorrimer suggests her initial view of the romantic East. Somewhat ambivalent toward Lorrimer's attitude, Woolf praises her descriptions of Chinese and Japanese landscapes but senses their unreality. Yet the idea of the inscrutable East seduces Woolf, plus the Orient's ability to "enjoy simple things—the shadows of the trees at noon."<sup>5</sup> But she is also sceptical, especially of Lorrimer's attempt to empathize with her subjects, admitting that all an observer can do is record the actions of the drama and believe that "beneath the decorous surface there is the 'deep underlying poetry' of Oriental faith." The statement displays Woolf's embedded romanticism and a rhetoric favouring the alien and the exotic inherited from late nineteenth-century Orientalist conventions.<sup>6</sup>

"Chinese Stories," a review of 1913, suggests a modest shift. Woolf corrects the image of the "ordinary Chinamen" devoted to reading his classics, to a figure who enjoys popular writing, preferring ghost stories or the popular *History of the Three Kingdoms*. The influence of "light literature," nearer "to the life they know than the old and famous books," alters her previously idealized view.<sup>7</sup> But she persists in distinguishing an "other," marked by a lack of realism in that other's tales, which are more like dreams. They are memorable but, like children's stories, lack a point. Yet their spirituality and fantasy possess a "real beauty" enhanced by their "unfamiliar surroundings and exquisite dress."<sup>8</sup> She ends with a remarkable Oriental image of her own: "So queer and topsy-turvy is the atmosphere of these little stories that one feels [...] much as if one had been trying to walk over a bridge in a willow pattern plate."

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<sup>5</sup> Virginia Woolf, "Call of the East," *Times Literary Supplement*, 26 April 1907, 131.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 40-44, 95-8.

<sup>7</sup> Virginia Woolf, "Chinese Stories," in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 2, 1912-1918, ed. Andrew McNeillie (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1987), 7.

<sup>8</sup> Woolf, "Chinese Stories," 8.

Woolf's evolving understanding of the Orient revises an inherited colonial view as she becomes more absorbed with aesthetics and less absorbed with (and less accepting of) representations of power. This occurs specifically through her encounters with the visual arts, learning to see in an Oriental manner. Woolf's sister Vanessa expressed the challenge when she wrote to her son Julian, then teaching at Wuhan University, in December 1935. Noting a rumour that there may be an elderly painter in Peking (Beijing) who paints like Matisse, she asks if Julian might be able to see him. She then adds that such art seems to her

like music using another scale—we're not used to the harmonies and relationships they use (one has to get into their world which seems oddly faint and remote in some way). Perhaps, in its own scale, so to speak, it has as much to do with actual appearances as European art.<sup>9</sup>

Music in "another scale" is an apt summary of what the Orient, in its non-politicized form, will mean to both Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf.

Through her work, Woolf will outgrow the misreadings of the Orient by her tourists and colonists, such as Rachel Vinrace in *The Voyage Out* or Mrs Dalloway in her response to Peter Walsh, who has just returned from India. Woolf will learn instead to re-interpret the signs of Empire. *Three Guineas* is a step in that direction which *Between the Acts*, through its satire of Empire, confirms.

Roland Barthes may help. His 1982 work *Empire of Signs* emphasizes a fictive Orient, reading its forms and objects as signs. This is particularly clear when he writes about packages, importantly observing that the supposedly diminutive aspect of Japanese objects is not a matter of their actual size or dimensions but of a "kind of precision which the thing observes in delimiting itself, stopping, finishing."<sup>10</sup> Every object, every gesture "seems framed." Woolf understood this. She follows a similar aesthetic in her writing where the moment, action, or gesture is not outlined as much as illuminated.

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Patricia Laurence, *Lily Briscoe's Chinese Eyes, Bloomsbury, Modernism and China* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 350.

<sup>10</sup> Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 43.

Barthes's description of a Japanese package has connections with Woolf's Oriental method. The package is always

Geometric, rigorously drawn, and yet always signed somewhere with an asymmetrical fold or knot, by the care, the very technique of its making, [...] it is no longer the temporary accessory of the object to be transported, but itself becomes an object.<sup>11</sup>

This could be a comment on Woolf's own style and a manner of expression that is itself poised, framed, at times "invisible,"<sup>12</sup> transforming itself into the thing itself—exactly what Beckett said of Joyce's style regarding *Finnegans Wake*. Joyce's work is not about anything directly but becomes, through its language, the very thing itself.

Such packaging, Barthes continues, "postpones the discovery of the object it contains."<sup>13</sup> The "luxury of the envelope" is the critical element, not so much the item inside: "the box [is] the object of the gift, not what it contains."<sup>14</sup> The box, or in the case of Woolf her style, "acts the sign: as envelope, screen, mask, it is *worth* what it conceals." The function of the package is not to protect in space but "to postpone [meaning] in time." The discharge of the richness of a thing or its meaning occurs only when the object is "precise, mobile and empty"—not devoid of meaning but re-locating meaning in the packaging or the process of unwrapping it.<sup>15</sup> This is not to discount the content of Woolf's writing, but to show its undercurrent of an Oriental sensibility where process (packaging) is equal to, or even greater than, the product (meaning).

This emphasis on signs shapes Woolf's Orientalism, although she began with the use and awareness of romantic images: Chinese pagodas, blue china plates, lanterns or cranes among wildflowers. Superseding it was an undercurrent of exotic peril, possibly possessing disease and danger and even damaged women.

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<sup>11</sup> Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, 45.

<sup>12</sup> Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, 43.

<sup>13</sup> Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, 45.

<sup>14</sup> Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, 46.

<sup>15</sup> Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, 47.

Another stage marking her shifting awareness was the curious emergence of semi-racist language to describe the behaviour of white women, as with Lily Briscoe's "Chinese eyes, aslant."<sup>16</sup>

Stylizing Woolf's initial view of the Orient is a moment in the short story "Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street" when Mrs Dalloway observes a woman waiting in a Bond Street glove shop she has just entered. The other woman sits "sideways at the counter, her elbow poised" but looking "vacant; like a figure on a Japanese fan [...] too vacant perhaps, yet some men would adore her."<sup>17</sup> The eroticized Orient finds expression in the idealized but emotionless figure. The narrator in *Mrs Dalloway* similarly emphasizes Elizabeth Dalloway's passivity: "an expression she needed, but her eyes were fine, Chinese, oriental," looking in the evening "very stately, very serene."<sup>18</sup> Lily Briscoe, of course, possesses "little Chinese eyes," suggesting an Orient possessing allure, mystery, and the exotic.<sup>19</sup>

But there is also, for Woolf, a sense of Oriental cruelty. The wealthy collector in "The Lady in the Looking Glass" acquired her treasures at "at great risk from poisonous stings and Oriental diseases."<sup>20</sup> There is similarly a hidden danger in the telegraph wire in the passage cited from "Ode Written Partly in Prose" where "the houses have paper walls; / and the people smile wise inscrutable smiles."<sup>21</sup> The imagery mixes stereotypes about the inscrutable East with worry and concern.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps Woolf's cruellest image of the Orient is in "The Mark on the Wall." Imagining the interests of a retired Colonel with an amateur interest in English archaeology, the narrator postulates that as he lies dying from a stroke, he thinks not of his family but of the items in a local museum: an ancient arrowhead

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<sup>16</sup> Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1955), 42.

<sup>17</sup> Virginia Woolf, "Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street," in *The Complete Shorter Fiction*, 150.

<sup>18</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 204.

<sup>19</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 29.

<sup>20</sup> Virginia Woolf, "The Lady in the Looking Glass", in *The Complete Shorter Fiction*, 216.

<sup>21</sup> Woolf, "Ode Written Partly in Prose," 232.

<sup>22</sup> See, also, Woolf, *The Complete Shorter Fiction*, 300.

together in a case with “the foot of a Chinese murderess, a handful of Elizabethan nails, [...] and the wine-glass that Nelson drank out of.”<sup>23</sup> This disturbing colonial image contrasts violence in the Orient with orderliness in Britain. The arrowhead and the foot distinguish between two conflicting cultures, one dominant, the other subservient.

Ironically, the murderess is the only actual Asian woman to appear in Woolf’s fiction, yet there is no speculation about the implications of the woman, or portion of the woman, on display. Feet were a symbol of freedom in the East, a method of escape but clearly controlled by the British.<sup>24</sup> Her 1917 story appeared with Leonard Woolf’s “Three Jews” in the first publication of the Hogarth Press, *Two Stories*, and displays the inherited sense of imperial authority and the image of the Asian woman as silent, passive, and victimized. The murderess is nameless and without physical description, yet her identity as a murderess violates the received image of the Chinese female as passive, beautiful, and silent.

Edward Said in *Orientalism* argues that the Orient is “a mode of discourse” with imagery, doctrines, and disciplines.<sup>25</sup> It is also “a style of thought” which Woolf, in this early work, adopts. The relationship between the West and the East is one of power, domination, and hegemony, which Woolf here does not question.<sup>26</sup> The superiority, morally and legally, of the West is evident. The death of the murderess implies that English law and order is not to be questioned. Stereotypes of Asian woman also dominate the images presented by Mrs Ramsay and Mrs Dalloway, who notices the vacant eyes of the woman in the glove shop, empty but beautiful.

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<sup>23</sup> Virginia Woolf, “The Mark on the Wall,” in *The Mark on the Wall and Other Short Fiction*, ed. David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 2008), 7-8.

<sup>24</sup> Heather Levy, “‘The Cruel Yet Delicate Foot of a Chinese Murderess’: The Impact of Woolf’s Images of Asia in the Postcolonial Korean Classroom,” *Virginia Woolf and Her Influences: Selected Papers from the Seventh Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf*, ed. Laura Davis and Jeanette McVicker (New York: Pace University Press, 1998), 148.

<sup>25</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 2.

<sup>26</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 5.

The Orient for Woolf became increasingly complex, evolving from a 1906 visit to Constantinople to an engagement with Oriental art in England and then to a vicarious sense of the East through the travels of Vita Sackville-West and the experiences of her nephew Julian Bell in China.

Woolf was twenty-four when she travelled to Constantinople and Greece, accompanied by her sister Vanessa, her brother Adrian, and their friend Violet Dickinson. In her journal, she remarks that “Constantinople is a place of live nerves, & taut muscles.”<sup>27</sup> At this early stage, her vision was appropriately romantic. One morning, she writes,

a mist lies like a veil that muffles treasures across all the houses & all the mosques; then, as the sun rises, you catch hints of heaped mass within; then a pinnacle of gold pierces the soft mesh, & you see shapes of precious stuff lumped together. And slowly the mist withdraws, & all the wealth of gleaming houses & rounded mosques lies clear on the solid earth.<sup>28</sup>

Constantinople is the single Oriental metropolis of greatest significance for Woolf, reinforced by her visit there, echoed by Leonard’s 1917 publication *The Future of Constantinople*, and sustained by the adventures of Vita Sackville-West, whose husband Harold Nicolson was Secretary in the British Embassy in Constantinople from 1911 to 1914. *Orlando* contains more than ten references to the city.

The Orient for the young Woolf is overwhelming: “When we come to consider the question of the West & East,” she concludes, “then indeed—we lay down the pen, & write no more.”<sup>29</sup> From such an engagement, it is not surprising that

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<sup>27</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Turkey 1906,” in *A Passionate Apprentice: The Early Journals, 1897-1909*, ed. Mitchell A. Leaska (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1990), 357.

<sup>28</sup> Woolf, “Turkey 1906,” 351. Constantinople will also appear in *To the Lighthouse*, in which Nancy refuses to praise Minta’s engagement “as if it were Constantinople seen through a mist, [so that], however heavy-eyed one might be, one must needs ask ‘Is that Santa Sofia?’ ‘Is that the Golden Horn?’” (61).

<sup>29</sup> Woolf, “Turkey 1906,” 352.

critics such as Patricia Laurence have argued that Woolf's modernism is unthinkable without the Orient.<sup>30</sup>

Bloomsbury was a further source of Woolf's Oriental education, numerous members of the circle and their friends visiting, teaching, and writing about an important concept and part of the world. However, Woolf began to reject the inherited colonial view of the Orient which, as Said observes, meant a discourse of European domination over the East.<sup>31</sup> She found, instead, a place of exploration, study, and intense expression. She does not deny the imperial abuse of the East, but rather celebrates its culture, specifically its art.

Woolf's aesthetic response should not be a surprise. Lytton Strachey's October 1908 review of H. A. Giles's anthology *Chinese Poetry in English Verse* in the *New Quarterly* anticipated much of the appreciation of Chinese writing soon to follow. In his essay, Strachey suggests that the work of Li Po reminds him of Verlaine and that the Chinese verses translated by Giles are "faultless" and "compact of art," reminding one of "Greek statues." "The spirit is the classical spirit" but different from that of the West, which aims at a finality of beauty.<sup>32</sup> For the Chinese, the effect is of a prelude "to a long series of visions and of feelings. It hints at wonders."<sup>33</sup>

Anticipating what Woolf will develop, Strachey writes that the poems are not "records of isolated facts" but "pastel drawings of some intimately seized experience." Incident is charged "with beautiful suggestions," a kind of "ulterior significance" marked by the realization of "the curious intimacy" of the present.<sup>34</sup> The playful Strachey, taken with China, also published a Chinese epithet under the pseudonym Se Lig, his inverted initials, in the *Cambridge Review*.

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<sup>30</sup> Laurence, *Lily Briscoe's Chinese Eyes*, 327-78.

<sup>31</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 1-28.

<sup>32</sup> Lytton Strachey, "An Anthology," in *Characters and Commentaries* (Westport: Greenwood, 1979), 143, 139.

<sup>33</sup> Strachey, "An Anthology," 139-40.

<sup>34</sup> Strachey, "An Anthology," 140, 143.

Orientalism for Said is not “a mere political subject” but a “*distribution* of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical and philological texts.”<sup>35</sup> The order here is important because it privileges the aesthetic, as did Woolf. But Orientalism is also a discourse produced by various kinds of uneven exchanges of power. This is something Leonard Woolf understood as he reflected on his time in Ceylon in a series of texts. Indeed, he was more attuned to the political challenges of Orientalism than his wife. After his return to London in 1911, he offered critiques of imperialism and subjugation partly through his novel *The Village in the Jungle* of 1913, published the year after he married Woolf, and partly through his *Stories of the East*, published by the Hogarth Press in 1921.

Virginia Woolf only casually and incidentally cites imperial exploitation, beginning with her critique of British patriarchal colonialism in South America, which she suggests is indirectly responsible for the death of Rachel Vinrace in *The Voyage Out*. There is also the harm done to Peter Walsh evident on his return from India, and what has killed, even accidentally, Percival in *The Waves*. But Woolf could also treat the weaknesses of Empire satirically, as she did in her play *Freshwater* when the painter Frederick Watts sends Ellen Terry off to Bloomsbury with the command, “in that polluted atmosphere spread your doctrines, propagate your race, wear trousers.”<sup>36</sup> A day will come, he exhorts, when “the voice of purity, of conscience, of high mindedness of nobility and truth will again be heard in the land.”

But the Orient still held its allure for Woolf, initially encountered not through politics but art. Responding to the visual arts and to literature, Woolf focused on pictorial assembly and visual abstraction, rather than imperial manifestations of power, absorbing elements of Oriental aesthetics that confirm not only her consciousness of the Orient but also her artistic practice. The imagined Orient becomes real for Woolf through her well-known concentration on graphic expressiveness, replacing literal description. This is an Oriental act contributing to what I shall term her “Oriental style.”

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<sup>35</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 12.

<sup>36</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Freshwater*, ed. Lucio P. Ruotolo (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1976), 72.

## I

A literary discussion of “Oriental Woolf” might begin with the well-known simile in “Kew Gardens” (1919) for the city of London as “a vast nest of Chinese boxes all of wrought steel turning ceaselessly one within another.”<sup>37</sup> Or with the “pearl pagodas” worn as earrings, or the China Sea or the China question, all noted in *The Waves*. Throughout her work, the Orient flourishes, although transformed from an almost unconscious inheritance of imperialist views to a more problematized culture, the difference between the romanticized vision of *Orlando* and the recognition of an “Oriental problem” introduced in *The Waves*<sup>38</sup> and critiqued in *Between the Acts*.

Woolf’s knowledge of the Orient moved from a romanticized sense of the exotic to a more sophisticated understanding through art with the assistance of Roger Fry, Laurence Binyon, Arthur Waley, and others. A series of exchanges and contacts between Bloomsbury figures and Chinese intellectuals also furthered her Oriental knowledge: E. M. Forster with Xiao Qian, Fry and Lowes Dickinson with Xu Zhimo are but two examples. Others, of course, were also discovering the Orient at this time, notably Pound, who followed his *Cathay* (1915) with *Noh or Accomplishment* (1916), his rendering of Fenollosa’s study of Japanese Drama, and with *Certain Noble Plays of Japan* (1916), a collection of four Nōh plays with an introduction by W. B. Yeats. Pound’s “translation” of Fenollosa’s *Chinese Written Character* appeared in the *Little Review* in 1919.

Supplementing this awareness was easy access to actual Oriental objects, starting with a 1910 show of Chinese and Japanese painting organized by Binyon at the British Museum.<sup>39</sup> Binyon was curator of Chinese Prints and Drawings, a close

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<sup>37</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Kew Gardens,” in *The Mark on the Wall*, 17.

<sup>38</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, ed. Gillian Beer (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 2008), 111.

<sup>39</sup> Proust may have been another, early source for Woolf’s idealized view of the Orient. French Orientalism, which permeates Proust’s work from Odette’s “odd little house full of Chinese Things” to Turkish beads, Oriental draperies, and palms in Chinese porcelain pots, was unavoidable. The very moment of the madeleine rises from “a japoniste cup of tea,” the narrator likening his epiphany to the unfolding of Japanese origami papers dropped into a porcelain bowl of water. See Christine Froula, “Proust’s China,” in *Modernism and the Orient*, ed. Zhaoming Qian (New Orleans: University of New Orleans

friend of Ezra Pound's, and instrumental in instructing, even informally, Woolf on the Orient; Woolf would thank Binyon in the "Preface" to *Orlando*. After the collapse of the Qing Empire in 1911, a good deal of looted Chinese art surfaced in European museums, appearing in London at the very time of post-impressionism. Binyon's museum show ran from 1910 to 1912, coinciding with Fry's "Manet and the Post-Impressionists" in 1910 and with Fry's second post-Impressionist show in 1912. Intense newspaper coverage emphasized the vogue for Chinese and avant-garde art as parallel phenomena.<sup>40</sup>

Binyon worked to introduce new concepts of Eastern art to the West, publishing *Painting in the Far East* in 1908 and then his study of oriental aesthetics, *Flight of the Dragon*, in 1911. Pound, who in 1918 would publish two essays entitled "Chinese Poetry," read Binyon's work in detail. It not only influenced his ideas about Imagism but shaped his own poetics. Binyon established six canons of Chinese painting, the first three of which are distinctly related to Woolf:

1. Rhythmic vitality or Spiritual Rhythm expressed in the movement of life.
2. The art of rendering [...] anatomical structure by means of the brush.
3. The drawing of forms which answer to natural forms.<sup>41</sup>

Supplementing this a few years later would be Arthur Waley's *An Introduction to the Study of Chinese Paintings* (1923). Waley's translation of *The Tale of Genji* (ca. 1925) also made an impact, with Woolf reviewing it in 1925.<sup>42</sup> One

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Press, 2012), 74. In 1911, the year Binyon published his study of Oriental art, *The Flight of the Dragon*, Proust went looking for China at an exhibition of Chinese paintings at the Durand-Ruel Gallery in Paris. In 1919, Woolf asked Roger Fry, an early Proust enthusiast, to bring back the first two volumes of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, although she didn't read Proust carefully until 1922. In May that year she told Fry that "Proust so titillates my own desire for expression that I can hardly set out the sentence. Oh, if I could write like that! I cry." See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 2, 1912-1922, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 525. In 1928, the Hogarth Press published Clive Bell's short work, *Proust*.

<sup>40</sup> On this topic see Rupert Richard Arrowsmith's well-informed *Modernism and the Museum* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Alec Marsh, *Ezra Pound* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011), 51.

<sup>42</sup> Virginia Woolf, "The Tale of Genji: The First Volume of Mr Arthur Waley's Translation of a Great Japanese Novel by the Lady Murasaki," *Vogue* 66.2 (July 1925): 53, 80.

critic actually suggests that Woolf might have influenced Waley.<sup>43</sup> Her style, in fact, may have shaped Waley's translation of the second volume of *The Tale of Genji*, "The Sacred Tree," a feature also noted by a reviewer in the *Times*.

Vita Sackville-West and her Oriental journeys of 1926-27 with her husband Harold Nicolson initiated another phase of Woolf's Oriental encounter, marked especially by travel accounts of the East. In this stage, the Hogarth Press played a vital role, not only publishing Sackville-West's *Passenger to Teheran* (1926) and *Twelve Days* (1927), but also, as an extension of these Oriental interests, Stephen King-Hale's *The China of To-Day* (1927). Sackville-West's travels and her particular love of gypsies, which she shared with Woolf and which later appeared in *Orlando*, solidified a connection with the East.

Extending this phase of Woolf's Oriental "education" were the experiences of her nephew Julian Bell, who in 1935 taught at Wuhan University, located 690 kilometres east of Shanghai. There he had a love affair with the modernist Chinese writer and painter Lin Shuhua, and wrote frequent letters home about his university and Chinese experiences. A sixteen-month correspondence between Woolf and Lin Shuhua would follow after Julian's death in 1937.<sup>44</sup> Woolf would actually advise Lin Shuhua on drafts of her autobiography, written in English and published by the Hogarth Press in 1953. In the same period, I. A. Richards, William Empson, and Harold Acton were also establishing a presence in China through visits and teaching. Acton, for example, taught and studied in China from 1932 until 1939.

Supplanting the intellectual appreciation of Chinese art and letters at this time was the prevalence of, first, Chinese kitsch, available at Liberty's department store (and other locations) and then Chinese *objets d'art*. These took the form of Chinese silks, scrolls, fans, furniture, Buddha sculptures, Cantonese gongs, or

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<sup>43</sup> John De Gruchey, *Orientalizing Arthur Waley* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003), 136-7.

<sup>44</sup> Their love affair would become the subject of a controversial novel, *K: The Art of Love* (2002) by Hong Ying. In the preface, the author, having visited Charleston, Vanessa Bell's home, notes a number of Chinese art works, likely presents from Julian to his mother. The historical novel attempts to blend the world of Bloomsbury, the world of Wuhan, and the erotic life of Lin Shuhua.

supposed translations of Chinese poetry. China was also in the news: journalistic coverage of the Boxer Rebellion (1895-1900) and the fall of the Qing dynasty (1911) made headlines.<sup>45</sup> The *objets d'art* ranged from furniture to silks, from elegant shawls to porcelain.

China was also beginning to appear almost regularly in the fiction of the period, paralleling interest in its art. Edward Dowell in Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* (1915), for example, remembers his wife Florence's dress "of blue figured silk—a Chinese pattern—very full in the skirts and broadening out over the shoulders."<sup>46</sup> With that dress, he adds, she wore "an immensely broad Leghorn hat—like the Chapeau de Paille of Rubens, only very white [...] and her complexion had a perfect clearness, a perfect smoothness." This is a stylized, Orientalized image, repeated in the black screen around the door in the Excelsior Hotel dining room where Dowell notices "three golden cranes flying upward on each panel."<sup>47</sup> Later, reinforcing the china theme, Dowell comments on the pink of Ashburnham's complexion and eyelids, which "gave them a curious, sinister expression—like a mosaic of blue porcelain set in pink china," while Leonora, herself, has "china-blue orbs."<sup>48</sup>

A generation later, in 1934, Beatrice Webb encouraged Forster to write a "Passage to China," following his success with *A Passage to India*. A Chinese journalist and writer Xiao Qian, who had studied at Kings College, Cambridge and knew Forster, also urged the novelist to take up China. But in a Borgesian letter of reply, Forster told Qian, who had published *China but Not Cathay* in 1942, that he must imagine that he had written a novel about China "but that unfortunately its pages have got stuck together during printing, so that it cannot be read."<sup>49</sup>

Collectively, these events contribute to what I am calling Woolf's "Oriental style," an expression and attitude incorporating an Oriental perspective and even

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<sup>45</sup> Laurence, *Lily Briscoe's Chinese Eyes*, 327-8.

<sup>46</sup> Ford Madox Ford, *The Good Soldier* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 25.

<sup>47</sup> Ford, *The Good Soldier*, 26.

<sup>48</sup> Ford, *The Good Soldier*, 31, 36; see, also, 277.

<sup>49</sup> Laurence, *Lily Briscoe's Chinese Eyes*, 177-8.

pose, marked in photographs of Woolf by a poised, erect, glacial, and often impersonal posture. Her treatment of time, expression and character also embody an “Oriental style,” summarized, perhaps, in Bernard’s image of the “China parrot” (likely blue) noted in *The Waves*.<sup>50</sup> This object, analogous to Yeats’s golden bird, observes and witnesses life passing by, but with intense attention to detail, colour, and form.

China means many things to Woolf, not the least as a symbol of aesthetic contemplation, self-containment, and mystery. In *The Waves*, Louis notes a man who lives “surrounded by china pots. Break one and you shatter a thousand pounds.”<sup>51</sup> The man collects them as a substitute for a broken love, but “since beauty must be broken daily to remain beautiful, and he is static, his life stagnates in a china sea.” Here, Woolf hints at the problematics of the Orient, the conflict between beauty and destruction, a destruction related to, and prevented by, economics. Chinese pots, in fact, both haunt and comfort Woolf. Her essay “Street Haunting” opens with a reminiscence of a “blue and white china bowl” thrust into her hands in Mantua by an old woman “as if she never wanted to be reminded of her quixotic generosity.”<sup>52</sup> But the bowl enacts a mysterious power, ironically evoking not China but memories of Italy: a “windy morning, [with] vines laced about the pillars” which “rise up in a cloud from the china bowl on the mantelpiece.”<sup>53</sup> It becomes a crucible of the past to greet her after her voyage out into the wintry street of London to buy a lead pencil.

## II

Conceptually, the uniqueness and appeal of China, as presented by the comparatist Eric Hayot, is that eighteenth-century Europe encountered China as the first “contemporaneous *civilizational* other.”<sup>54</sup> It was not a tribe or nation which lacked a culture, technology, or economy. It actively competed with

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<sup>50</sup> Woolf, *The Waves*, 156.

<sup>51</sup> Woolf, *The Waves*, 144.

<sup>52</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Street Haunting: A London Adventure,” in *Selected Essays*, ed. David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 2009), 177.

<sup>53</sup> Woolf, “Street Haunting,” 178.

<sup>54</sup> Eric Hayot, *The Hypothetical Mandarin: Sympathy, Modernity, and Chinese Pain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 9.

Europe as a model of civilization. A second distinction is that for much of Europe's awareness of China, it had "significant economic and technological advantages over Europe," notably in the manufacture of tea, silk, and porcelain, whose exchange dominated maritime economies. Until the mid-nineteenth century, China had a massive impact on the European economy and imagination, Hayot argues, challenging Europe culturally, economically, and technologically.<sup>55</sup> No less than T. E. Lawrence sensed this when he wrote in 1920 that "the East is to-day the place of change—of changes so great and swift that in comparison with it our Europe is standing still."<sup>56</sup>

The cross representation of gender in Oriental imagery (developed of course in *Orlando*) is one sign of that change, and at the same time it raises questions to do with the visual presentation of the body. In Chinese painting the body is almost always invisible: dress, robes, clothing, and even objects prevent us from seeing the body, contradicting the western tradition of the nude. For Chinese artists, the physical components of the body are secondary to the soul. Importantly, "the rhythmical Chinese brush line, not the solid volumes and textured surfaces of Western painting [...] best represents the existence and energy of those seemingly 'bodiless' Chinese figures."<sup>57</sup> Additionally, the European practice of a portrait isolating the body or person in empty space was alien to the Oriental practice, which repeatedly represented context through such established topoi as gardens, palaces, trees, rocks, rivers, and robes. Objects surrounding the figure, as well as dress, suggest an inner life.<sup>58</sup> The difference in portraiture would resonate with Woolf, for her representation of character is never without context. Objects define Mrs Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*, for example, and not only the

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<sup>55</sup> Hayot, *The Hypothetical Mandarin*, 10.

<sup>56</sup> T. E. Lawrence, "The Changing East," in *The Lure of the East: British Orientalist Painting*, ed. Nicholas Tromans (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 58.

<sup>57</sup> Wu Hung and Katherine R. Tsiang, "Introduction," in *Body and Face in Chinese Visual Culture*, ed. Wu Hung and Katherine R. Tsiang (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005), 2. Also helpful are John Hay, "The Body Invisible in Chinese Art?," in *Body, Subject and Power in China*, ed. Angela Zito and Tani E. Barlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 42-77; and Richard E. Vinograd, *Boundaries of the Self: Chinese Portraits, 1600-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>58</sup> Angela Zito, "Silk and Skin: Significant Boundaries," in *Body, Subject and Power in China*, 109.

seaside vacation house in the Hebrides but also individual things such as the bowl of fruit in the dinner scene.

Illustrating but complicating the synergy between the Orient and Woolf is an eighteenth-century double portrait, entitled “Is it One or Two?”, of the powerful and autocratic Chinese ruler known as the Qianlong emperor, who reigned from 1736 to 1796. The fourth emperor in line of descent after Manchu warriors came into Beijing from the north in 1644 and destroyed the Ming dynasty, he assumed the generic name and identity of Qianlong emperor. Dressed like a traditional Chinese gentleman in the portrait, the Manchu ruler sits next to a painted portrait of himself in the same attire surrounded by his favourite paintings, books, and other objects.<sup>59</sup> As in the style of earlier portraits of Chinese scholars, such objects visualize inner traits. Importantly, the emperor on the divan and the emperor in the hanging portrait turn toward each other. The living emperor faces a painting of himself; in turn, the painted emperor is effectively posed before his own portrait, and is encompassed by an inscription by Qianlong on the upper right, the first line of which is translated as “Is it One or Two?” Here, the emperor’s writing self faces his painterly self, which in turn faces his actual self. (There are, one might argue, three portraits or presences at work: scriptural, figurative, and actual.) The entire work is a tension-filled site of signification.<sup>60</sup> The work represents a three-level grammar of representation.

“Is it One or Two?” anticipates the multiple-self theory Woolf will develop, not only in *Orlando* but also in her statements about and efforts at biography. Both the unknown Chinese artist and Woolf acknowledge that we possess a multiplicity of “bodies.” But Chinese art repeatedly avoids particulars for particulars’ sake, creating art less concerned with vivifying details than with general meaning, an art more of concept than precept.<sup>61</sup>

Furthering the complex roots of Woolf’s engagement with the Orient were new translations of Chinese literature and history by, in particular, Giles and

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<sup>59</sup> Zito, “Silk and Skin,” 103-6. There are four extant versions of the painting, although the artist is unknown. The most recent and extended analysis of the work is Kristina Kleutghen, “One or Two, Repictured,” *Archives of Asian Art* 62:1 (January 2012): 25-46.

<sup>60</sup> Zito, “Silk and Skin,” 103.

<sup>61</sup> Wu and Tsiang, eds, *Body and Face in Chinese Visual Culture*, 363, note 3.

Fenollosa, and exhibitions at the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum focusing on the visual culture of Japan and China highlighting an intriguing if mystifying cultural “other.” What especially appealed was the unity of character and image in Chinese art. The practice of Woolf and that of Chinese writer and artists was similar: both pictured what they saw.

Roger Fry is the key. His painting “Still Life with T’ang Horse” (1919-1921) records the personal attachment to China expressed earlier in his articles of 1909-1910. The painting illustrates Chinese objects and sculptures which Fry owned. Throughout his writing, Fry acknowledged the clarity and precision of Chinese visual representation, celebrating its colour harmonies and patterns, and this enthusiasm may have derived from his early sense of Japanese art in Matisse. He quickly understood that design in Oriental art did not mean “mere agreeableness of pattern” but the play of form as expressive of moods and images, responding “to the feelings and the intelligence” coupled with a unique “angle of vision,” just as in Whistler.<sup>62</sup>

“Essay in Aesthetics,” Fry’s 1909 essay reprinted in *Vision and Design*, anticipated these views when he emphasized the “rhythm of the line,” the line a “record of a gesture.”<sup>63</sup> He clearly grasped the quality of expression in the pure line echoed by Woolf at the end of *To the Lighthouse*.<sup>64</sup> There, Lily Briscoe completes her painting by drawing a single line in the centre thinking, as she lays down her brush, “I have had my vision.”<sup>65</sup> Woolf here employs the vocabulary of Oriental art partly borrowed from Fry: rhythm, line, stroke, and pause are linked to a calligraphy that establishes a continuum from word to image. The end of the novel is an Oriental, calligraphic moment. The year before *To the*

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<sup>62</sup> Roger Fry, “Watts & Whistler,” in *A Roger Fry Reader*, ed. Christopher Reed (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 29.

<sup>63</sup> Roger Fry, “An Essay in Aesthetics,” in *Vision and Design* (New York: Peter Smith, 1947), 22.

<sup>64</sup> Roger Fry, “Line as a Means of Expression in Modern Art,” in *A Roger Fry Reader*, 330.

<sup>65</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 170.

*Lighthouse* appeared, Fry published an essay, emphasising the line, entitled “On Calligraphy.”<sup>66</sup>

Woolf and the Bloomsbury group remained alternately curious and envious of China. “Do you make friends with the [Chinese]—the students?” she asked her nephew in a letter. “It all seems like a seraphic scene on a blue china plate to me. Here we never stop facing facts,” she added. In a later letter, she suggested that China will form a strong background for Julian against the excitement of British reality, admitting that “you are much to be envied. I wish I had spent three years in China at your age.”<sup>67</sup> China was inescapably on Bloomsbury’s radar.<sup>68</sup>

### III

China may have been a site of resistance in the cultural mind of Europeans, misperceiving it as an outmoded economy and country of rigid rule (in contrast to European democracy) but its exoticism and mystique remained. Roger Fry understood its importance as early as 1910 when he wrote in “Oriental Art” that “we can no longer hide behind the Elgin marbles and refuse to look” at Chinese and Japanese painting, at Persian pottery and Indian sculpture.<sup>69</sup>

The cross-fertilization of East and West, partly initiated through Leonard Woolf and the Bloomsbury artists, expanded by Vita Sackville-West, and confirmed by numerous Oriental exhibitions, stimulated Woolf in a variety of ways. So, too, did Lady Ottoline Morrell. At her salons, where guests regularly wore East Asian outfits, Woolf encountered London’s Oriental fashion craze. She recounts one of these evenings in *Moments of Being*, with “the Persian rugs, the embroideries, the tassels, the scents.”<sup>70</sup> She herself once appeared at a fancy

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<sup>66</sup> Laurence, *Lily Briscoe’s Chinese Eyes*, 380.

<sup>67</sup> Sasha Su-Ling Welland. *A Thousand Miles of Dreams: The Journeys of Two Chinese Sisters* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 255-6.

<sup>68</sup> Not everyone who visited was positive. Bertrand Russell wrote that his impression of China is “what Europe would have become if the eighteenth century had gone on till now without industrialism or the French Revolution.” See Bertrand Russell, *Autobiography*, vol. 2, 1914-1944 (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968): 138.

<sup>69</sup> Roger Fry, “Oriental Art,” *Living Age* (26 March 1910): 794.

<sup>70</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind, 2nd edn (San Diego: Harcourt, 1985), 200.

costume party at the Botanical Gardens dressed as Cleopatra, anticipating, perhaps, Miss La Trobe in *Between the Acts*, who at one point says, “I might have been—Cleopatra [...] You’ve stirred in me my unacted part.”<sup>71</sup> In his diary of 1909, Adrian Stephen writes that at the dress ball his sister looked “very fine in long flowing robes with her hair down, though more like Isolde than Cleopatra.”<sup>72</sup>

Lily Briscoe’s Chinese eyes (more of an insult than a compliment and mentioned five times in the novel) is only one manifestation of what in *The Waves* Woolf would gradually come to understand as “the Oriental problem,” a problem addressed by Percival’s ironic demonstration of imperial power. Here, the Orient is under British control, displayed in a high-handed manner over a minor incident. The commanding Percival—in “sun helmet” but on a “flea-bitten mare”—orders a group of bewildered Indians into action to right a fallen cart. Before his orders, they stood about “chattering excitedly” in a world of “ramshackle pagodas” and “crenellated buildings which have an air of fragility and decay as if they were [...] in some Oriental exhibition.”<sup>73</sup> The tone of the scene emphasizes the irony of the imperial expropriation of the Orient, Woolf now problematizing the perception of the East and its political meaning, although Percival’s orders bring results.

*To the Lighthouse*, another of Woolf’s key Oriental texts, anticipates this shift, beginning with Mr Carmichael, who has been to India, basking in the sun “with

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<sup>71</sup> Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 137.

<sup>72</sup> Quoted in Vanessa Curtis, *Virginia Woolf’s Women* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 197. A particular Oriental feature that Woolf incorporated in her self-image was the cashmere or silk shawl. This accessory sublimated Eastern style to European dress while expressing luxury. Unlike silk, which came from worms, cashmere came from alpine goats, harder to cultivate in Europe, hence its rarity and greater value. Mrs Ramsay wears a shawl in *To the Lighthouse*, which she removes to cover the boar’s skull above Cam’s bed. Earlier, in chapter 12, there is a reference to her green shawl. Furthermore, in a memoir of Woolf’s visit to Girton College, Cambridge to deliver her paper “A Room of One’s Own” in October 1928, Kathleen Raine notes the oriental embroidery covering the grand piano, while the audience was draped in “Chinese shawls spread like the plumage of butterflies.” See Kathleen Raine, *Autobiographies* (London: Skoob Books, 1991), 125.

<sup>73</sup> Woolf, *The Waves*, 111.

his yellow cat's eyes ajar."<sup>74</sup> The vision of Empire is becoming blurred, with Woolf's emphasis on eyes duplicating the most prominent feature of Chinese portrait painting. With unusual insistence, Chinese portraiture concentrates on the eyes and their arresting expressions.<sup>75</sup> Woolf herself seems to have sensed this. Her early short story "An Unwritten Novel" (1920) opens with comments on the eyes, the second sentence reading "Life's what you see in people's eyes."<sup>76</sup> "The eyes of others our prisons; their thoughts our cages" she later writes.<sup>77</sup> In "Street Haunting" she relies on eyes as a metaphor of searching below the surface: "we are in danger of digging deeper than the eye approves [...] let us dally a little longer, be content still with surfaces only" because "the eye has this strange property: it rests only on beauty; like a butterfly it seeks out colour and basks in warmth."<sup>78</sup> The vision is Oriental.

In *Mrs Dalloway*, Septimus Smith's hazel eyes reveal his state of mind: his eyes "had that look of apprehension in them which makes complete strangers apprehensive too. The world has raised its whip; where will it descend?"<sup>79</sup> Interestingly, in her diary for November 1928, Woolf characterized *The Waves* as "an abstract mystical eyeless book."<sup>80</sup> Woolf herself did not like being looked at, and in many of her portraits, especially by her sister, her eyes are absent.

An additional China reference in *To the Lighthouse* is Mrs Ramsay's recollection of verses from Charles Elton's poem "Lauriana Laurilee": "the China rose is all abloom and buzzing with the honey bee."<sup>81</sup> (It is a "yellow bee" in the original, but honey is what Mrs Ramsay remembers.) Repeated at dinner, these words

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<sup>74</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 12.

<sup>75</sup> Richard Shone, "The Artists of Bloomsbury: Roger Fry, Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant," in *The Art of Bloomsbury*, ed. Richard Shone (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 29.

<sup>76</sup> Virginia Woolf, "An Unwritten Novel," in *The Mark on the Wall*, 19.

<sup>77</sup> Woolf, "An Unwritten Novel," 23-4.

<sup>78</sup> Woolf, "Street Haunting," 179.

<sup>79</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, ed. David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2000), 12.

<sup>80</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 3, 1925-1930, ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 203.

<sup>81</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 96.

“wash” from side to side in Mrs Ramsay’s mind “like little shaded lights, one red, one blue, one yellow.” The China rose, also called the Bengal rose (note the overlap of China with India), is the *Rosa chinensis*, of China, having slightly fragrant crimson, pink, or white flowers. China roses, based on *Rosa chinensis*, were cultivated in East Asia for centuries and grown in Western Europe since the late eighteenth century, finding their way to the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew. According to contemporary botanists, the China rose is the class upon which the modern rose is built.

The Chinese garden was another expression and expropriation of Chinese culture and art at this time. The ten-tiered pagoda in Kew Gardens introduced by Sir William Chambers in the eighteenth century symbolized the uniqueness yet quiet beauty of Chinese form, soon imitated throughout Europe; it also marked the annexation of Chinese arts and gardening.<sup>82</sup> Chambers also introduced a pavilion at Kew decorated with panels depicting the life of Confucius.<sup>83</sup> Woolf noted these features in “Kew Gardens,” and returned to them in *A Room of One’s Own* when she outlined the structure of a novel “built now in squares, now pagoda shaped, now throwing out wings and arcades, now solidly compact and domed like the Cathedral of Saint Sofia at Constantinople.”<sup>84</sup> Two essential sites of the Orient unite.

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<sup>82</sup> On the history of the pagoda and its importance, see C. A. S. Williams, *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism and Art Motives, an Alphabetical compendium of antique legends and beliefs as reflected in the manners and customs of the Chinese*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn, introduced by Terence Barrow (1941; Rutland: Tuttle, 1978), 305-6. For a new collection addressing the cultural intersection of modern Britain and China, see *British Modernism and Chinoiserie*, ed. Anne Witchard (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

<sup>83</sup> D. E. Mungello, *The Great Encounter of China and the West, 1500-1800*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 103.

<sup>84</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, in *A Room of One’s Own and Three Guineas*, ed. Morag Shiach (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 1998), 92. Another, less noticed Oriental feature at Kew Gardens, built for the Japan-British Exhibition of 1910 and moved to Kew in 1911, is the Chokushi-Mon, or “imperial Envoy’s Gateway”. This is a four-fifths-scale replica of the karamon (gateway) of the Nishi Hongan-ji temple in Kyoto. It lies about 140 metres west of the Pagoda at Kew and is surrounded by a reconstruction of a traditional Japanese garden.

Woolf's "Kew Gardens" incorporates an Oriental garden style. Her close-up of nature, emphasizing an intensity of experience, begins with colour and detail before registering imagistic fragments:

From the oval-shaped flower-bed there rose perhaps a hundred stalks spreading into heart-shaped or tongue-shaped leaves half way up and unfurling at the tip red or blue or yellow petals marked with spots of colour raised upon the surface; and from the red, blue or yellow gloom of the throat emerged a straight bar, rough with gold dust and slightly clubbed at the end.<sup>85</sup>

Intensity and distance, colour and detail; a heightened perception and sensitivity to colour and light—Woolf is presenting an Oriental picture with qualities borrowed from Chinese painting and visual imagery.

Such a style might be called "ornamental," an adjective sometimes used to diminish the Oriental as merely decorative. This is not only writing with a supposed rhetorical flourish to convey elegance, complexity, or beauty, but a quality physically represented in Bloomsbury rooms.<sup>86</sup> Roger Fry's decorated bed for Lalla Vandervelde, or Vanessa Bell's and Duncan Grant's painted mantel and wall paper in the drawing room of River House, illustrate this.<sup>87</sup> When Maynard Keynes and two of his Cambridge friends, John Sheppard and Harry Norton, took over 46 Gordon Square in 1916, they redecorated the

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<sup>85</sup> Woolf, "Kew Gardens," 11.

<sup>86</sup> For an expansion of the term and counterview to Said, see David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). Unlike Said and his idea of the "other," Cannadine argues that if there was a unified British imperial enterprise, it was "the effort to fashion and to tie together the empire abroad in the vernacular image of the domestic, ranked social hierarchy" as it existed at home. The British Empire was more about replication of "sameness and similarities originating from home" than an "insistence on differences and dissimilarities originating from overseas." The British Empire was not concerned "with the creation of 'otherness'" but of affinities. The belief, he argues, was that society on the periphery was the same as the metropolis. If anything, the Empire was about "the domestication of the exotic," not the promotion of differences (Cannadine, *Ornamentalism*, xix).

<sup>87</sup> Christopher Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms: Modernism, Subculture and Domesticity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 202-3.

“monument” to Bloomsbury by painting a cupboard door with a scene from Istanbul with St Sophia in the background.<sup>88</sup> Charleston House in Sussex, the country home of Vanessa and Clive Bell, contained similar decorative motifs with overemphasized Oriental features.

The homes of Woolf were not immune from uniting the Oriental and the decorative. Monk’s House, Virginia’s and Leonard’s residence in the Sussex village of Rodmell, and 52 Tavistock Square, their London headquarters, exhibited such blending: the overmantle at Tavistock Square, for example, displayed a large Oriental fan.<sup>89</sup> The book covers of the Hogarth Press, often a collaboration between Woolf and her sister Vanessa, also reflected an ornamental aesthetic repeated in Roger Fry’s Omega Workshop’s room for the “Ideal Home” exhibition sponsored by the *Daily Mail* in 1913. There were also Oriental Omega fans and boxes attributed to Grant on display.<sup>90</sup> As early as 1863, the decorated Oriental Courts (Chinese, Japanese, and Indian) at the South Kensington Museum, later the Victoria and Albert, introduced the public to Oriental décor.<sup>91</sup>

In *To the Lighthouse*, the ornamental is seen in Mr Ramsay, acting in an inscrutable, quasi-oriental manner when he decides *not* to see the children play cricket: he stops but “he did not speak; he looked; he nodded, he approved; he went on.”<sup>92</sup> Woolf then blends the decorative with his speculative nature:

seeing again the urns with the trailing red geraniums which had so often decorated processes of thought, and bore, written up among their leaves, as if they were scraps of paper on which one scribbles notes in the rush of reading—he slipped, seeing all this, smoothly into speculation suggested by an article in *The Times* about the number of Americans who visit

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<sup>88</sup> Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms*, 204, 209.

<sup>89</sup> Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms*, 228.

<sup>90</sup> Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms*, 117-18.

<sup>91</sup> For an account of the Oriental Courts, see Owen Jones, *Grammar of Ornament* (London: B. Quaritch, 1910).

<sup>92</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 37.

Shakespeare's house every year. If Shakespeare had never existed, he asked, would the world have differed much from what it is today?

Later in the novel, when Minta loses her grandmother's brooch, the decorative again emerges.<sup>93</sup> Repetition and detail, the weaving and re-weaving of image in these and other passages create an ornamental style that also suggests Woolf's Oriental manner.

This is especially evident in *The Waves*, a work with a similar concentration on colour, notably blue, red, and yellow. Importantly, this is a novel where "things are said as if they were written," stylized and poised.<sup>94</sup> Rhoda, for example, trying to forget Oxford Street and London, sees the city again in a painterly, Oriental manner, although without the colour: "my mind is printed with brown-paper parcels and your faces. I have been stained by you and corrupted [...] all were dressed in indeterminate shades of grey and brown, never even a blue feather pinned to a hat."<sup>95</sup> Even references to Byron throughout the novel evoke the Orient, recalling how he frequently dressed his poetic dramas such as *Don Juan* in oriental costumes.<sup>96</sup>

The interim passages in *The Waves* dealing with the arc of the sun seem themselves to step out of a Chinese painting:

*Now there was only the liquid shadow of the cloud, the buffeting of the rain, a single darting spear of sunshine, or the sudden bruise of the rainstorm. Solitary trees marked distant hills like obelisks [...] rimmed in a gold circle the looking-glass held the scene immobile as if everlasting in its eye [...] The foam had turned livid and left here and there a white gleam of pearl on the misty sand.*<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 63.

<sup>94</sup> Woolf, *The Waves*, 165.

<sup>95</sup> Woolf, *The Waves*, 169.

<sup>96</sup> Woolf, *The Waves*, 70-2 contain the principal references to Byron and *Don Juan*, although an allusion to Byron's "Darkness" appears on 198.

<sup>97</sup> Woolf, *The Waves*, 174.

The immobility, imagery, and colour become the singular way Woolf is able “to keep coherency” for her characters and perhaps herself in the work, writing at one moment that “the earth absorbs colour like a sponge slowly drinking water.”<sup>98</sup> The symbolism of such painting is quintessentially Oriental.

#### IV

The key idea relating to Woolf and the Orient is that the formal development of Woolf’s prose from *The Voyage Out* through *The Waves* echoes that quality of Chinese painting which focuses on the simplicity but directness of the line, or in her case, the statement. Stylistically, the Orient helped to define, if not refine, Woolf’s own writing, but politically, she began to recoil from late imperial Britain’s appropriation of the East.

A particular work by Vanessa Bell summarizes the Oriental style in visual terms: “The Conversation” (1913-1916), with its seeming absence of depth and domination of the canvas by two foregrounded figures. These figures are seen in profile, the one on the right voluminously dressed and impassive, the other on the left gesturing with her mouth while her posture is stylized and fixed in a suggestive Oriental pose. In the background, a partially seen figure emerges. Bell’s work expresses, in the words of a recent observer, “perfect simplicity both in what is expressed and the means of expression.”<sup>99</sup> It possesses “a grand, natural distinction” also seen in Oriental art. Richard Shone describes Bell’s “tough simplicity,” referring to her tendency to cube her shapes, drawing them with an overall geometric conception.<sup>100</sup>

Bell’s preference for formal simplification, an Oriental habit, is also seen in her “Byzantine Lady” (1912), echoed by Grant in “The Queen of Sheba” (1912) with its foreshortened perspective and formalized posture, especially of the hands, the static gesture of Solomon contrasting with the animated but poised hand of the Queen. Images of the exotic East inform the entire painting. Persian,

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<sup>98</sup> Woolf, *The Waves*, 236, 239.

<sup>99</sup> André Dunoyer De Segonzac in Richard Morphet, “Image and Theme in Bloomsbury Art,” in *The Art of Bloomsbury*, ed. Richard Shone (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 36.

<sup>100</sup> Richard Shone, *Bloomsbury Portraits* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1976) 79.

Byzantine, and Oriental influences clearly appear throughout the paintings of early Bloomsbury.

Chinese painting exhibited an economy of line and a precision that suggested complexity. Like Woolf, it is allusive and suggestive. According to an early and comprehensive study of Chinese symbolism and art, originally published in Beijing in 1931 by C. A. S. Williams, acting Commissioner in charge of maritime customs and an English resident of China, a Chinese picture is a “voiceless” poem.<sup>101</sup> Owing to its perspective, it should be placed “on the floor, leaning against the wall [or] viewed from above.” Williams emphasizes that the difference between Eastern and Western painting is that the former is subjective, the latter objective. Most importantly, “drawing is taught in China by the same methods as writing.” This in turn reflects the influence of art on Woolf’s writing, especially through the painting of her sister Vanessa and of Grant, as well as the critical work of Fry and of Clive Bell. And in a comment by Williams on Chinese drawing, one senses its applicability to Woolf and her style: “wonderful effects are often created with only a few strokes of the brush.”<sup>102</sup>

Woolf’s most Oriental work is *Orlando*, a text both set in, and expressive of, the Orient. It transforms desire into form, while fashioning an informal critique of western authority over the Orient, overshadowed by her embellishment of Oriental settings and dress. It manifests Woolf’s Oriental style, oblique, alluring, refined, and exact, something she sensed in 1906 when she first viewed St Sophia:

At six [a.m.] I was on deck & suddenly we found ourselves confronted with the whole of Constantinople; there was St. Sophia, like a treble globe of bubbles frozen solid, floating out to meet us. [... Here] you realised that life was not lived after the European pattern, that it was not even a debased copy of Paris or Berlin or London [...] you knew yourself to be the spectator of a vigorous drama. [...] Up in the air, & deep down in the earth the lamps burnt; & then the moon, a crescent, swung slowly

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<sup>101</sup> Williams, *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism*, 307.

<sup>102</sup> Williams, *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism*, 308.

up the sky, & a pure drop of light, the evening star, turned the innumerable lamps to gold.<sup>103</sup>

Physically and stylistically, we have arrived at Virginia Woolf's Orient, although it would take some twenty-five years for her to adjust her vision.

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<sup>103</sup> Woolf, "Turkey 1906," 347-8.