"Recording the Atoms": Virginia Woolf, Lily Briscoe, and Écriture Feminine

It would seem...an indisputable fact that 'we'—meaning by 'we' a whole made up of body, brain and spirit, influenced by memory and tradition—must still differ in some essential respects from 'you', whose body, brain and spirit have been so differently trained and are so differently influenced by memory and tradition. Though we see the same world, we see it through different eyes.

— Woolf, Three Guineas (175)

Virginia Woolf's manifesto “Modern Fiction” praises the emerging aesthetic of the modernist movement of the early twentieth century as better suited for the depiction of life in a world undergoing a rapid and paradigmatic shift. As the preceding literary traditions of the nineteenth century do not allow for the honest portrayal of life as a "luminous halo" composed of "innumerable atoms" (Woolf, "MF" 150), or facilitate the expression of life from the vantage point of life itself (146), they are no longer applicable to the turmoil of the new, modernist era. When examined in conjunction with Woolf's other works, as well as later works of poststructuralist feminist theory on écriture feminine, this aesthetic takes on another dimension, and evolves into a means of conveying a feminist viewpoint, as well as a modernist one. By aiding in the subversion of the "scientific realism" common to symbolic patriarchal order—of which constraining literary traditions are a part—, such an aesthetic offers the freedom to express the imaginative reality of "what one sees" as opposed to simply producing a realistic facsimile of the tangible world. This imaginative reality is gained through semiotic impressions from the senses and the body, and is therefore indicative of écriture feminine as defined by Cixous and
Kristeva. At this time a similar aesthetic coup was occurring concurrently in the world of art with the advent of post-impressionism and Roger Fry's 1910 London exhibition (Roe, "Impact" 168). Conjunctively, these shifts in expression had a profound effect upon Woolf's work. Their cooperative influence on her fiction can best be seen in the artistic process of To the Lighthouse's Lily Briscoe. Lily, like Woolf, experiments within her medium in order to more accurately portray life as she experiences it, and to subvert the patriarchal structures of convention that seek to keep her from such a goal. Therefore, just as Woolf in A Room of One's Own finds the male sentence "unsuited for a woman's use" (AROO 100), Lily Briscoe finds the "fashionable, ... pale" (TL 19) style of painting adhered to by her male counterparts to be unsuited for the portrayal of her artistic vision; in response to this, Lily develops her own artistic "écriture feminine" over the course of the novel, building a visual aesthetic which better facilitates the expression of her own motives and viewpoint. In “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Cixous states that “Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement” (875). Virginia Woolf achieves this goal by the movement of her pen, and, in To the Lighthouse, Lily Briscoe by the movement of her brush. The pair thus stands inextricably linked, staring defiantly back at the patriarchal symbolic, with its mocking jeers of "women can't paint, women can't write" (Woolf, TL 42).

As demonstrated by the epigraph above, Virginia Woolf's own convictions surrounding female expression and female voice were strong, and long before Woolf depicted "Lily Briscoe seek[ing] autonomy through her artistic process," (Moriconi 17), she was seeking her own independence, and encouraging others to do the same through works such as Professions for Women and A Room of One's Own. In the latter, Woolf argues that the traditional sentence is "a man's sentence,... unsuited for a woman's use" (Woolf, AROO 99-100), and that this "scarcity
and inadequacy of tools [of expression]" (100) is an imposing obstacle for nineteenth-century female writers. Jane Austen and Emily Brontë alone are singled out by Woolf as having accomplished that to which all women writers must aspire for "[t]hey wrote as women write" (Woolf, AROO 97), and remained "deaf" (97) to patriarchal conventions and criticism. To do so meant to defy the symbolic order of their time, and carve out a new style of writing better suited for their needs. Though Austen and the middle Brontë sister cleared a small patch of ground from which to begin, Woolf contends that in order for a women's tradition of writing to be established in the twentieth century, more women must take up the pen (Woolf AROO 148-149), and further experimental styles must be explored. Woolf herself carries out such literary exploration over the course of her novels, experimenting heavily with the ways in which "aesthetics, voice, style and the body come together to determine the different forms which a woman's writing [might] take" (Raitt 30). This decades-long experimentation with feminine aesthetics is depicted in a more concentrated form in the artistic growth of Lily Briscoe, who struggles to throw off the conventions and limitations of patriarchal Victorian society in order to paint "what she sees" (Woolf, TL 19).

Also in A Room of One's Own, Woolf states that "the nerves that feed the brain would seem to differ in men and women" (101). The ways in which these "nerves" work in a woman's brain are described in Helen Cixous' Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing. The excerpt titled "Third dream-Hand painting or 'a woman's writing'" (Cixous, Three Steps 76-70) offers a conceptual bridge with which to span the gap between Woolf and her character’s artistic exploration with pen and paint respectively, and clarifies the workings of écriture feminine evident within their creative processes. In "Third dream," Cixous details a dream sequence in which she is called away from domestic tasks by an irrepressible urge to paint. Much like Woolf
writing "recklessly, rapidly, [and] brilliantly" (Roe, Preface xiii) or Lily Briscoe painting "desperately, pitching herself against her easel" (Woolf, TL158), trying "to get ahold of that very jar on the nerves" (158), Cixous finds herself possessed by a rush of creativity in the dream, and begins painting "very fast,... with all [her] strength... racing with the unknown force that was painting, passing through [her] palms... from the furthest depths" (Three Steps 77) in an attempt to "record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall" (Woolf, "MF" 150). In this sequence, Cixous states that "the [woman's] unconscious tells a tale of the supernatural possibility... of bringing a child to light" (Three Steps 77-78), thereby drawing the connection between this feverish burst of expression and the creation of life. This maternity is a pivotal part of the feminine creative process, and figures strongly within Lily Briscoe's artistic sentiment, as she protectively "clutches...[the] miserable remnant of her vision to her breast" (Woolf, TL 19) to prevent its destruction by the doubts and pressures which threaten her endeavour.

According to Kristeva's discussion of écriture feminine, the connection between maternity and feminine expression is centered within the Chora. As Kristeva notes, the Chora "is [a] nourishing and maternal" (36) interiority, "formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated" (35). Concerned with the “Pre-Oedipal,” “pre-linguistic” and semiotic rhythms of the body (Kristeva 37), the Chora is the maternal substrate which connects the body to the mother. It is also the site of connection with the Other, as Cixous points out in “The Laugh of the Medusa,” for "there is hidden and always ready in women the source; the locus for the other" (881). It is this locus, the maternal Chora, that must be accessed in order to produce an écriture feminine through openness to the other. After the Chora, the symbolic is the second of the two modalities inherent within “the signifying process
that constitutes language” (Kristeva 34). It is concerned with the structures of language and the order of patriarchal society. "Marking the threshold" (Kristeva 43) between these two realms is the Thetic phase. The Chora, or semiotic, is the precondition for the Thetic, which is "the threshold of language" (Kristeva 41). Originating "in the 'mirror stage' and completed, through the phallic stage, by the reactivation of the Oedipus complex in puberty" (49), the Thetic is of utmost importance to écriture feminine, as during and after the Thetic, the semiotic is submerged, made abject, and the symbolic reigns. After this happens, the "myriad impressions" (Woolf, "MF" 150) the mind receives, whether they be "trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel" (150) are no longer easily discernible individually, and are instead buried within the "shape... [of a] Monday or Tuesday" (150). Therefore, the Thetic stage forms a barrier which protects the symbolic, with its patriarchal language, from the semiotic realm of the body. This blocking of the semiotic is problematic, for "the particularities of the feminine world—a world different from that of man—with respect to language, with respect to the body, with respect to work, with respect to nature, and the world of culture" (Irigaray and Speidel 13) are not represented within the symbolic realm of patriarchy. As the "threshold" between one realm and the other, the subversion of the Thetic is the key to connection with the Other, situated in the semiotic, and is therefore crucial to the portrayal of a feminine voice.

Kristeva's work on écriture feminine suggests that the symbolic—with all the injustices and constraints its patriarchal structure holds for women, including, as Woolf points out, the tyranny of the male sentence—must be undermined or overthrown, allowing for the coloring of perception and expression not only by the structures of language and society, but also by one's sensory impressions and pre-linguistic modes of experiencing (44). In this way, one's perceptions are attuned to both the symbolic and the semiotic, and therefore to difference and to
the Other; it is this openness to the Other which is the essential component of écriture feminine (Cixous, "Laugh" 875). In the section of To the Lighthouse titled "The Window," the connection Lily feels with Mrs. Ramsay as she is painting the mother and her son is preserved through the subversion of the Thetic. By working in a liminal space in which both the symbolic and the semiotic are present, Lily allows "silent impressions" (Moriconi 74) to remain alongside symbolic observation; and therefore is able to maintain the unspoken connection necessary to facilitate the representation of Mrs. Ramsay and James. These semiotic "impressions" allow her to move beyond the representation of such symbolically "classical iconography" (Roe, "Impact" 168) as a mother and child and "construct [a] form... which [is an] equivalent image... [of], rather than [a] scientific representation... of the things or figures seen" (168). By retaining this connection, Lily is able to represent the form of Mrs. Ramsay and James as a purple triangle "without irreverence" (Woolf, TL 45). Meanwhile she also succeeds in "resist[ing] any attempt to define" (Moriconi 74) her subject and thereby avoids the patriarchal denial of maternal connection which threatens to negate her vision. In the representation of Mrs. Ramsay and James by an “equivalent” geometric shape, Lily finds "expression in surface" (Roe 168), and makes her first breakthrough in the struggle to represent her vision. However, she finds at the time that "one could not say what one meant," (Woolf, TL 19) for she cannot accurately convey her "love" (19) for Mrs Ramsay in this first painting, held back as she is by the feelings of "her own inadequacy, [and] her insignificance" (19) perpetuated by patriarchal social order. This dilemma, combined with the other aesthetic challenges she grapples with, leads her to condemn her first painting as "infinitely bad" (Woolf, TL 42).

Later, however, while working on her second painting in "The Lighthouse," Lily reaches a place
between silent impressions and spoken language, [when] taking up the brush, [she] refuses to let [the] connection between women be muted.... Her unity with Mrs. Ramsay moves beyond the clutch of a male speaking subject's symbols and phrases, beyond his systems of representation, beyond the male mirror. (Moriconi 74)

With the absence of the tyrannical patriarchy of Mr. Ramsay, due in part to his physical absence (Woolf, TL 129), and in part to the reduction of his character upon the deaths of his wife, daughter, and eldest son (122); and Mr. Tansley, who is present only in recollection (132), Lily is able to move past "the blasts of doubt" (131) and "make... something permanent" (133) of the memory of a "moment of friendship and liking" (Woolf, TL 133) shared all those years ago with Mrs. Ramsay. Thus, achieving the subversion of the Thetic is not enough, for Lily must also maintain a distance from the symbolic structures of patriarchal social order. In "The Window," patriarchal forces encroach upon Lily's artistic space (Woolf, TL 18), denying her the "room of her own" necessary for her to attain the "truth" and clarity of vision she seeks. It is only in "The Lighthouse" when some temporal and physical distance has been achieved that Lily may forget that "she was such and such a person, [and] had such and such relations to people" (Woolf, TL 130) and in her undefined, semiotic state, bridge the gap between her vision and the canvas.

The presence of the patriarchal symbolic which seeks to undermine Lily's quest for a feminine aesthetic is enforced most glaringly by the figures of Mr. Ramsay, and Mr. Tansley. The "patriarchal negation" (Moriconi 63) of Lily by these characters comes about in different ways. First, and most obvious, is Mr. Tansley's mantra of "Women can't paint, women can't write" (Woolf, TL 42) which resounds throughout the novel. This statement proves haunting to Lily, and rings in her ears in moments of anxiety or despondence (Woolf, TL 42, 131). Mr. Ramsay, prone to the tempers and narcissism of a child, "wears Mrs. Ramsay to death" (Woolf,
TL 24) with the strength of his need for attention and validation. After Mrs. Ramsay's death, he turns to Lily, demanding that she "look at him" and "think of him" (Woolf, TL 126), but she denies "his demand for sympathy" (126), and ignores his "immense self pity" (126). By refusing to sacrifice her vision to Mr. Ramsay's demands, and Mr. Tansley's criticisms, Lily "ignore[es] the perpetual admonitions of the eternal pedagogue" (Woolf, AROO 97) of symbolic patriarchy, and moves forward with work on her own vision. Together, Mr. Tansley and Mr. Ramsay represent the "persistent voice, now grumbling, now patronizing, now domineering, now grieved, now shocked, now angry, now avuncular, that voice which cannot let women alone, but must be at them, like some too conscientious governess," (Woolf, AROO 97), which tries to prevent or quell any and all attempts at difference or feminine expression.

However, not all the male characters in To The Lighthouse aim to suppress Lily's creativity. As Moriconi states, "the wifeless and childless Mr. Bankes,... is an exception to the patriarchal negation represented by Mr. Ramsay and Mr. Tansley... [because he] does not seek her assimilation to his desires and vanity" (67). He is permitted to view her painting, as his gaze is not one of domineering patriarchal condescension, nor does it threaten the realization of her vision. Lily and Mr. Bankes share an understanding of Mr. Ramsay's patriarchal tyranny, and as such Lily is able to garner "the courage to share her vision" (Moriconi 76) with the older man. Mr. Bankes' openness to the post-impressionist, female aesthetic Lily is striving for is evidenced through their discussion of her first painting; Mr. Bankes is "interested" (Woolf, TL 45) in the work, and though accustomed to scientific representation, he is quick to admit to "his prejudices" (45). His openness leads him to take her artistic experimentation in stride (Woolf, TL 45), and thus accept its right to exist outside patriarchal structures. Such a sentiment ties closely with the notions of écriture feminine evident within Woolf's “Modern Fiction”; for such
a form of expression may be practiced by and expressive of both genders. In fact, Woolf offers the writing of modernist James Joyce (Woolf, “MF” 150) as the premium example of such a writing. This is, of course, not to negate the "genius... [and] integrity... required in the face of all that criticism, in the midst of that purely patriarchal society, [for women] to hold fast to the thing as they saw it without shrinking" (Woolf, AROO 97). Rather, it speaks to the fluidity and flexibility such an aesthetic offers its followers.

This fluidity is achieved by defying the Thetic in order to access the semiotic, and in doing so moving past patriarchal conceptions, to the acceptance that any signifying system "is... necessarily marked by an indebtedness to both" (Kristeva 34) the semiotic and the symbolic. For Lily, this is enabled in part by her use of a traditionally male-dominated medium. As demonstrated by both Kristeva (47) and Irigaray (Kozel 116) one strategy for attaining this mixing of realms, and thus reaching a place of true female expression, is the practice of mimesis. In this context, mimesis moves beyond the common definition of mimicry, and becomes an act of subversion. Kristeva states that mimesis

is a transgression of the Thetic when truth is no longer a reference to an object that is identifiable outside of language, it refers instead to an abject that can be constructed through the semiotic network, but is nevertheless posited in the symbolic, and is, from then on verisimilar. (Kristeva 47)

That is, it is now the appearance of truth, without the presupposition that it must be truth. Through the mimicking of what has been a predominantly male form of expression—as Mr. Tansley perpetually reminds both the reader and Lily herself (Woolf, TL 42)—Lily is able to bring down the wall the Thetic has built to shield the symbolic from the semiotic, and access a mode of seeing and expression that are more representative of her feminine artistic vision.
Therefore, mimesis in feminist theory becomes "a powerful tool available for women to subvert the social order as it is presently defined and preserved by patriarchal structures...[by] consciously stepping into the sexual stereotypes provided for them by men" (Kozel 116). Considering Lily's work within a predominantly male form of expression, mimesis may seem irrelevant, but this is clarified by an observation from Mrs. Ramsay, who states condescendingly that because of her appearance, Lily "would never marry," nor could one "take her painting very seriously, [though] she was an independent little thing" (17-18). Such a judgement from the incarnation of the Victorian "angel in the house" reveals that Lily does not fit into such a domestic role. Therefore, the patriarchal stereotype she takes on is that of the unmarried eccentric, who, due to a lack of familial duties, dabbles unsuccessfully with artistic expression, and serves as an easy scapegoat when making criticisms about "the folly of women's minds" (Woolf, TL 29). It is this position which allows her to carry on with her experimentation, and work towards the realization of her vision without being detected by those who would destroy it.

Although Lily mimics the use of the canvas as a medium, this is as far as her mimesis goes, for the aesthetic "vision" she seeks with her painting is very different from that of her male contemporaries. In the novel, Lily reveals that it is "fashionable... to see everything as pale, elegant and transparent" (Woolf, TL 19) in the impressionist style of Mr. Paunceforte, whose style is speculated to have been modeled after that of English impressionist Philip Wilson Steer (Woolf, TL 174). However, Lily finds little truth in the "lemon coloured sailboats, and pink women" of Mr. Paunceforte's paintings. Such an aesthetic, though impressionist, does not depict the "bright violet" of the jacmanna or the "staring white" of the wall (Woolf, TL 19) that she can see "so clearly, so commandingly when she look[s]" (19). In response to this, Lily seeks a new, post-impressionist aesthetic which speaks in a "new language... of subjective experience... [and
therefore offers] new ways of depicting the rhythms of inner life" (Roe, "Impact" 165-166). Such a language is designed to better capture "the deposit of each days living, mixed with something more secret than... had ever been spoken or shown in the course of all those days" (Woolf, TL 45). Lily's language has ties to Woolf's search for a modernist aesthetic, and in it can be seen the experiments in writing the author undertook to "show-up elements of colour, light, [and] transpositions in language and human character" (Roe, "Impact" 164). A common goal of expression for both women can be found in “Modern Fiction." Both Woolf and Lily strive to "record the atoms as they fall upon the mind ...[and] trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance" (Woolf, "MF" 150). This goal requires opening oneself up to the Other in order to harness the semiotic sensory impressions. This, for Woolf, is the height of the modernist aesthetic and evidence of its connections to feminist theory, and écriture feminine in particular.

Woolf's experimentation with fiction and form, described above, works towards this goal. Her forms of experimentation were strongly influenced by "the developments of post-impressionism and... the ideas and techniques of painting" (Roe, Preface xiv), through fellow Bloomsbury members Roger Fry, Clive Bell, and her sister, Vanessa Bell (xiv). As a result, visuality features strongly in the modernist aesthetic she works within, in part because it fosters the "quality of immediacy" (Roe, Preface xvi) she strives to preserve. Her "attempt to come closer to life, and preserve more of what interests and moves [her], even if to do so [she] must discard most of the conventions that are commonly observed" (Woolf, "MF" 151) is reflected in the artistic vision of her character. Lily strives to capture what she sees—the "immediacy," the "very jar on the nerves"(Woolf, TL 158), the first burst of sensory impression before meaning is attached—in her painting. As Roe has demonstrated, the post-impressionist aesthetic Lily strives
for can be seen in the work of Woolf's sister, Vanessa Bell (Roe, "Impact" 166). Her painting Studland Beach (1912) has much in common with the "vision" Lily strives to convey. The work starkly demonstrates "the implications of [the] experimentation with form" (Roe, "Impact" 166) both Bell and Lily undertake in their painting. The result is "colour burning on a framework of steel" (Woolf, TL 42); not a "scientific representation of the scene at hand" (Fry 20), but rather "an expression and a stimulus of this imaginative life, which is separated from actual life by the absence of responsive action" (20). While working on her second painting in "The Lighthouse," Lily realizes that only a deeper connection with this largely hidden part of herself, this Other, which does not obey the symbolic tendencies to "solicit urgently" (Woolf, TL158) for wisdom, creativity, or solutions, but rather forms a realisation or impression that must be left to "let... come, if it... will" (158) can serve her artistic vision. This is the solution Lily has been urgently seeking with her painting. The aesthetic she has created for herself facilitates expression in a way that departs from the structures of the established Symbolic, and moves towards a radical new vision of artistic "truth": a visual écriture feminine steeped in impression.

Within the realms of modernism and post-impressionism, both Lily and Woolf struggle to create an aesthetic which does not reproduce objective reality, but rather communicates the truth of their visions, however distorted from the patriarchal construct of reality they might be. Their search for a written and painted écriture feminine with which to come closer to life as it is experienced "half blind with dust" from "in the crowd" (Woolf, "MF" 146) is troubled by its relationships with the semiotic and symbolic. In order for the artist to gain access to the semiotic sensory impressions necessary to facilitate the capture of "the atoms as they fall" (Woolf, "MF" 150) the Thetic must be subverted, and with it the tyranny of patriarchal order, as Lily achieves through mimesis and the preservation of spiritual connection with Mrs. Ramsay. Neither Woolf's
writing nor Lily's painting presumes to offer "a nugget of pure truth to [be] wrap[ped] up between the pages of... notebooks and kep[t] on the mantelpiece for ever" (Woolf, *AROO* 4). Rather, Woolf and her character attempt to adhere honestly and faithfully to the truth of their respective artistic visions. Écriture feminine provides each with the "immediacy" of impression encouraged by the modernist aesthetic, and the freedom to express "what they see" without the patriarchal structures that demand scientific realism. Thus, écriture feminine serves as the vantage point from which Lily and Woolf may "see the world through different eyes" (Woolf, *AROO* 175), and achieve liberation from the trappings and limitations patriarchal artistic conventions place upon feminine expression.

**************************
Works Cited


