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**CEASING TO RUN UNDERGROUND: 20TH-CENTURY WOMEN WRITERS AND HYDRO-
LOGICAL THOUGHT**

by

ANNIE M. CRANSTOUN

**A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy, The City University of New York**

2016

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**This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate
Faculty in English to satisfy the dissertation requirement for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy.**

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Abstract

CEASING TO RUN UNDERGROUND: 20TH-CENTURY WOMEN WRITERS AND HYDROLOGICAL THOUGHT

by

Annie M. Cranstoun

Advisor: Nancy K. Miller

Starting from two central ecopoetic convictions—the constitutive role of environment in human experience (and vice versa), and text’s ability to connect with the world—this dissertation then moves in a different direction from most ecocritical projects. Instead of looking at the ways literary representation flows back into nature in the forms of attitude, praxis, and policy, this study focuses on the earlier part of the loop: the emergence of text from environment, particularly its aquatic parts, via the faculty of the imagination. In its scrutiny of images that spring directly from matter and its faith in the concept of a personal element that governs the reveries, beliefs, passions, ideals, and philosophies of an entire life, it recalls *Water and Dreams*, Gaston Bachelard’s 1942 phenomenological study of the “material imagination.”

Only, whereas Bachelard’s main investments are poetry, the masculine point of view, isolated waters (particularly small, smooth, mirror-like bodies of water that call up, through the myth of narcissus, the individual self), and limpid waters that serve the material imagination as a pure matter par excellence, “an example of the kind of natural morality learned through meditation on a fundamental substance,” my own are: prose (the novel in particular); the female (feminist) point of view; waters that are indivisibly, manifestly systemic; and a hydrosphere that is decidedly degraded, a “tragic commons” (à la Garrett Hardin) calling for the very different sort of “natural morality” that is rigorous stewardship. I approach these through the writings of

seven 20th-century woman writers who have written so relentlessly and richly about water that they must be called “hydro-logical”: Britons Virginia Woolf and Penelope Fitzgerald; Anglo-Caribbean Jean Rhys; North Americans Rachel Carson and Joan Didion; Native American (Chickasaw) Linda Hogan; and East Indian Arundhati Roy.

While most broadly “hydro-logic” denotes a general thinking-through-water, it entails several specific habits of mind: 1) a privileging of the water element in one’s imaginative landscapes, and an attraction to thalassic and/or riparian settings, as well as the smaller or more hidden parts of the hydrosphere (springs, ponds, groundwater, etc.); 2) a particular susceptibility to the metaphoric/symbolic potential of planetary waters, and an especial faculty for transubstantiating conventional associations (e.g. river = flow; sea = masculine adventure) into more private equivalences (the river = androgyny, moral imagination, oral tradition; groundwater = untold stories); and 3) a deep allegiance to the intuited fact that the hydrologic cycle *is* a cycle, and one whose central dynamic is also that of creative and particularly literary endeavor (with the inflow of reading and the outflow or writing), human relationship (give and take), and ecology itself, with its “endless cyclic transfer of materials from life to life” (Carson, *Silent Spring*).

These authors’ appreciation of water’s universal seaward movement and its ultimate indivisibility manifests socially and spiritually as a longing for the state of mind Freud called “oceanic”—“a feeling of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole”—and literarily as a tact for Unanimism (from the French *Unanimisme*), with its emphasis on group consciousness, collective emotion, and the writer’s need to merge with the larger cycles of life, nature, and art. This essentially ethical view of life explains the natural instinct that all my authors, even those working before or outside of mainstream environmentalism (Woolf, Rhys, and Fitzgerald) have for conservation. How, they ask, can we ravage the element that makes up over two-thirds of our very selves? How does environmental despoliation affect the stories we tell? And if, as Joan Didion has famously asserted, “we tell ourselves stories in order to live,” can

we not tell stories in order to protect the life that began, in our planet's waters, over 3 billion years ago?

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Introduction: Towards a Female Hydro-logic

*ee um fah um so
foo swee too eem oo—*

So goes the immemorial song that issues from the street singer in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, a song of love that arcs from the age of swamp, mammoth, and tusk, to the moment when the sun dims and the earth "becomes[s] a mere cinder of ice" (81). It makes sense that this woman should croon in terms of geological time, as she herself is the voice of water, "the voice of an ancient spring spouting from the earth" (80), whose "old bubbling burbling song...stream[s] away in rivulets over the pavement... fertilizing, leaving a damp stain" (81). Water as spoken—written—by women is the subject of this dissertation. Not water as an isolated element so much as planetary water, the substance that circulates through this planet's rivers, lakes, and oceans through the great round of the hydrologic cycle.

Many hermeneutic currents roil where environmental awareness meets literary study, the main one being the ecocriticism that coalesced into a recognizable field in the 1990s. Put most simply, ecocriticism (alternately ecopoetics, environmental literary criticism, and green cultural studies) is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty xviii). Early formulations speak of an intention to make "place" a critical category along the lines of gender, race, or class, but "place" seems too flat, too abstract, for a field that is in many ways a "reengagement with realism, with the actual universe of rocks, trees and rivers that lies behind [poststructuralism's] wilderness of signs" (Parini). Ecocriticism turns the table on theory's physical-environment-as-social-construction approach and emphasizes the degree to which "humans and societies [are] themselves in considerable measure constructed by physical environment" (Buell 641). And yet, it would be quite wrong to see our embeddedness in and reliance on nature as the reason for ecocriticism's commitment to environmental praxis, as it is

exactly this default anthropocentrism, this perception of the earth as existing primarily in reference to humans, that ecocriticism rejects. The ecocentrism it mounts in its stead is not a placid nature appreciation, but an urgent sense that “we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet’s basic life support systems” (Glotfelty xx), hence what Lawrence Buell identifies as its two main investments: “protection of the endangered natural world and recuperation of a sense of how human beings have been and might be imagined as (re)connected with it” (Buell 640).

Put off by the overwhelming whiteness, maleness and Romantic “alone-with-nature” focus of traditional preservationism, Buell has advocated a more ecopopulist approach like that seen in the Environmental Justice movement, with its earthier balance of ecocentric and anthropocentric values, its “emphasis on populated spaces and community betterment” (648). Conceived this way, ecocriticism begins to look a lot like the feminist ecological criticism, or ecofeminism, that has grown up alongside it.

Ecofeminism is one of a number of subfields (along with environmental ethics, deep ecology, and social ecology) that has emerged “in an effort to understand and critique the root causes of environmental degradation and to formulate an alternative view of existence that will provide an ethical and conceptual foundation for right relations with the earth” (Glotfelty xxi). Its position: that there are particular and significant connections between women and nature, and, thus, the ongoing subjugation of woman and the growing ecological crisis are “two symptoms of the same illness” (Sydee and Beder 3), namely, *patriarchy*, which has maintained the whip hand by prosecuting (and establishing itself on the favorable side of) an entire complex of well-worn dualisms: reason/emotion, mind/body, active/passive, human/nature, and, of course, man/woman. “Ecofeminism” is an elastic term that encompasses materialist thinkers who focus primarily on the role of patriarchal techno-capitalism in today’s dire status quo, and more spiritually oriented theorists who “celebrate women and their association with nature as a source of strength, power and virtue” that could prove reparative for both nature and society (2).

One thing its proponents do agree on is that specifically androcentric values have brought nature way too close to the brink of collapse.

This dissertation is indebted to both ecocriticism and ecofeminism and will, I hope, find a place in the more recent hydro-critical conversation that received disciplinary sanction in the Oceanic Studies issue of *PMLA* (May 2010). In that issue's editor's column, "Sea Trash, Dark Pools, and The Tragedy of the Commons," Patricia Yaeger focuses on the parlous state of our oceans. Her title references Garrett Hardin's seminal 1976 article in *Science*, "The Tragedy of the Commons," which explores the phenomenon by which resources deteriorate under the rational but ruinous human drive to externalize costs and privatize gains. His example: the village herdsman who adds one animal to his total every year, and so profits individually at the expense of the increasingly overgrazed communally held land resource. Though Hardin's thesis is demonstrably valid—human beings *do* behave this way—his example of shared village pastureland is removed from many of us in time and space.¹

Meanwhile, oceans' status as true commons is more present to us than ever. The role they have played in the rise and diffusion of "civilization," the degree to which their fruits have supported entire economies, the way their currents regulate Earth's climate, and perhaps even some blood-memory of our oceanic origins mean not only that they "serve the interests of everyone" (Yaeger 525), but that we feel almost intuitively that they should. Unfortunately, they are also commons in Hardin's sense, "mired in capitalism's profit making, its systems for externalizing costs" (Yaeger 532). Appalled by the way we "throw sophisticated junk into the sea and eviscerate its cleaning crew" (532), Yaeger dismisses "ecocriticism" as too quaint (and pure) a critical lens through which to apprehend the enormity of what we have done to our oceans, and proposes instead *ecocriticism*\$, a postindustrial "techno-ecopoetics" dedicated to exploring how a world-ocean that is increasingly "more techno than ocean" (527) "rolls under, beneath, and inside the edicts of state and free market capitalism" (529).

Part of *ecocriticism*\$'s mandate is considering how literary images both old and recent

“are part of a network or meshwork of ordinary ideas that echo throughout the oceanic commons with real economic effects” (531). Though ill-equipped to speak on the economic side of things, I am interested in the “tragedy of ocean wasting” (533) and the role that literary representation has played and continues to play in it.

Ecocriticism, ecofeminism, and ecocriticism\$ all assume the constitutive role of physical environment in human history and “text’s capacity to connect with the world” (Buell 641). While they consider how texts emerge from the environment, their main interest is in how these stories—their tropes and images—flow back into it as attitude, praxis, policy (e.g., Yaeger asking how Emily Dickinson’s poetic rendering of the sea as “deep Eternity” has helped perpetuate the myth of inexhaustible abundance that has fueled marine exploitation). Though I am interested in the “real world” implications of literary texts for the environment (as will emerge in my third chapter), my focus falls for the most part on the first half of the loop: the emergence of text from environment, specifically its aquatic parts—not just the ocean—via the faculty of the imagination. So, while I will draw from all the above-listed conversations, my project is more closely related to Gaston Bachelard’s in *Water and Dreams* (1942).

In this work, Bachelard looks at the “material imagination,” that is, “images that stem directly from matter” (1). By “matter” he here means those “hormones of the imagination” (qtd. in Stroud vii), the pre-Socratic elements of earth, fire, air and water. Not especially interested in the ancient correlation—scientifically bogus yet oneirically true (4)—of these elements with the four organic temperaments (choler=fire, melancholy=earth, phlegm=water, blood=air), he is very invested in the idea that a material element can be “linked to a type of reverie that controls the beliefs, the passions, the ideals, the philosophy of an entire life,” and how, for its “faithful followers,” that element “profoundly and materially is a system of poetic fidelity” (5). His concern in *Water and Dreams*, like mine here, is for those who are under the sway of water. Like him, I believe in the concept of a personal element and its effects on a person’s creativity, ethics, interpersonal style, and fundamental ideas about and images of life and death.

As an introduction to the differences between my approach and his, I wish to call attention to certain aspects of his work. For starters, his focus on poetry. Believing that the imagination's true work is not forming images of reality but images that go *beyond* reality, such as those one finds in poetry, he is of the opinion that "the only possible way of illuminating a psychology of the imagination is through the poems it inspires" (16). While I do not doubt poetry as a prime vessel in which to view the reaction between an "element" and the imagination, I think that prose—particularly long-form prose—has its own revelations to make regarding the play of an element (its insistence, its polysemy) in the author's mind. Bachelard himself counsels that "[i]f a reverie is to be pursued with the constancy a written work requires...it must discover its matter" (3). It stands to reason that the different types of constancy required by poetry and prose will shed different lights on the imagination's uptake of matter.

Next is the fact that Bachelard's view of water is always that of a heterosexual man, emphasizing receptivity, grace, and a "constant movement responding to the environment and to possibility" (Stroud ix) that recalls heteronormative ideas about womanhood. Given certain etymological links (*mère*, *mer*) and the womb-sea association, his identification of marine waters as part of the "mother-landscape" (Bachelard, *Water*, 116) seems right, but his thoughts on the beguiling, refreshing, tempting waters that belong to the "woman-landscape" (4), less so. Take the *Nausicaä complex* under whose influence certain males cannot so much as think of a spring, brook, or pond without imagining an attendant nymph, nereid, dryad, undine, etc. Though he mocks this response as bourgeois, artificial, and pedantic, he goes on to posit that "the sexual function of the river...is to evoke feminine nudity" (33).² The swan, meanwhile, is a literary substitute for the nude, white female bather (34). (What to make, one wonders, of the Canada Goose?)

Then there is Bachelard's take on the oneness of water. He does mention the "unity of the element" (11) and the cohesion it guarantees in a poetics of water, "despite the variety of ways in which it is presented to our eyes" (15)—an idea he reprises more poetically and psychologically

in his assertion that “the same memory flows from all fountains” (8). And yet, at no point in his work does he cover the imaginative impact of water’s indivisibility, or cite poems animated by this planetary fact, even though the aggregating powers of the water cycle are a perfect correlate, model even, for the esemplastic powers of the mind. Instead, the waters in Bachelard’s study are isolated: specific rivers that speak of specific valleys, certain wells dedicated to particular saints.³ This seems to connect up with his association of water—particularly smooth, mirror-like water—with the specific self through the phenomenon of narcissism, though he is quick to point out that he does not mean a simple “egoistic narcissism” but a “cosmic narcissism,” e.g. “I am handsome because nature is beautiful, nature is beautiful because I am handsome” (24).

Finally, the waters in Bachelard’s study are, for the most part, limpid. It is his wish “to show especially that *material imagination* finds in water a pure matter par excellence, a naturally pure matter”; that in water “we have an example of the kind of *natural morality* learned through meditation on a fundamental substance” (133; 14, emphasis original in both). To this end he does acknowledge the great divide between water that is pure/potable and water that is not, and, as adjunct to this, the gulf between “rational” (empirical) standards of impurity and older notions “belonging more to a psychological analysis of repugnance than to an objective analysis of matter” (138). Believing that rational knowledge has no place in a study of the imagination, he favors the latter. So while he does mention factory-poisoned rivers (137), his concern is more with quaint impurity: tainted wells (136), streams feculent with nature’s own contaminants. Again, he does not really take up the representation of impure water. The closest he comes is a sustained reading of the dark, heavy, dead waters found in the works of Edgar Allan Poe, otherworldly waters whose “pollution” is entirely psychological.⁴

Over and against Bachelard’s investments—poetry, the masculine perspective, distinct waters (and egoism), and unspoiled waters—I offer my own: prose (the novel in particular), the female (feminist) point of view, waters that are indivisibly and manifestly systemic, and a hydrosphere that is decidedly degraded.⁵

Whereas he aims at a comprehensive phenomenological study of the hydric imagination, I do not even claim to present a general review of water and the female imagination, but rather a reading of several 20th-century “hydro-logical” women writers—Britons Virginia Woolf and Penelope Fitzgerald; Anglo-Caribbean Jean Rhys; Americans Rachel Carson and Joan Didion; Native American (Chickasaw) Linda Hogan; and Asian Indian Arundhati Roy.

Hydrologic and Hydro-Logic:

All streams flow to the sea,
yet the sea is never full.
To the place the streams come from,
there they return again.
—*Ecclesiastes* 1:7

There is, for starters, the denotative use of “hydrologic” (and “hydrological”), the adjectival form of *hydrology*, the scientific study of the properties, distribution, and effects of water on the earth's surface, in the soil and underlying rocks, and in the atmosphere.

Approximately 71% of the Earth's surface is covered with water, making our planet more *aqua* than *terra*. Though the oceans hold about 96.5% of Earth's water, the hydrosphere comprises other reservoirs, too: rivers, lakes, groundwater, subterranean aquifers, glaciers, polar icecaps, and atmospheric moisture (snow, rain and clouds). The hydrologic cycle, also known as the water cycle, is the name given to the continuous transfer of water across the hydrosphere, from one state (liquid, solid, gas) to another, one reservoir to another. Driven by solar energy and gravity, it involves such processes as precipitation, evaporation, transpiration, runoff, melt, infiltration, and advection.

Water has several special properties that make it crucial to life on earth. Due to its hydrogen bonds, it has high cohesion (it sticks to itself), which is why it beads on certain surfaces (leaves, a waxed car); however, it is also adhesive (sticks well to other things), which is why it spreads out in a thin film on other surfaces (glass). It is a master dissolver, the “universal

solvent,” in fact. It has a high heat of vaporization (you need to put a lot of heat into it to convert it to steam), as well as a high heat of fusion (you need to take a lot of heat out to convert it to ice). As Rachel Carson explains, water’s “enormous heat capacity [means that] the ocean can absorb a great deal of heat from the sun without becoming what we would consider ‘hot,’ or it can lose much of its heat without becoming ‘cold’” (*Sea Around Us* 170)—a fact that, coupled with the redistributing function of the ocean’s currents, goes a long way “to make up for the uneven heating of the globe by the sun” (170). Also, there is the fact that water, unlike most compounds, is denser as a liquid than a solid, accounting for the fact that ice floats, essentially insulating the water beneath it. Were this not the case, smaller bodies of water would freeze from the bottom up (and very possibly completely), making winter fatal to many aquatic organisms.

Having said all this, water’s significance to life on this planet is as much due to its implication in a cycle (made possible, in part, by these properties) as to the properties themselves—a cycle wherein the total amount of constituent water remains constant, propelled through its various reservoirs by processes of inflow and outflow. In transferring water from one reservoir to another, this cycle purifies it, replenishes the land with freshwater, and distributes minerals about the globe. It reshapes the geological features of the Earth through such processes as erosion and sedimentation, and, as mentioned, maintains temperatures at life-friendly levels.

Such is the importance of the water cycle, Donald Worster explains in his “Thinking Like a River,” that it served “[e]arly civilizations [as] a figure of the most basic pattern of life, the cycle of birth, death, and return to the source of being,” to which “ancient religious metaphor” science has added a new perception: that “the movement of water in an unending, undiminished loop can stand as a model for understanding the entire economy of nature” (124). This is what Aldo Leopold was getting at when he adapted the Round River mentioned in his native Wisconsin’s Paul Bunyan saga to ecological purposes, describing its current as “the stream of energy which flows out of the soil into plants, thence into animals, thence back into the soil in a never-ending

circuit of life” (158).

In addition to this standard, unhyphenated term, I offer “hydro-logic.” Most broadly, this denotes a general thinking-through-water—what Bachelard calls the “water mind-set” (*Water* 5). However, there are more specific habits of mind that make writers hydro-logical:

1. Hydro-logical writers privilege the water element in their imaginative landscapes, demonstrating an attraction to thalassic and/or riparian settings, as well as the smaller or more hidden parts of the hydrosphere (springs, ponds, groundwater). Whatever the size, these waterscapes fall under the heading of “active setting.” That is, they make stuff happen in their respective texts: moving people closer together or further apart; drowning, soothing, and inspiring them; swallowing possessions; tendering the occasional gift; and so on.⁶

2. Such authors exhibit a particular susceptibility to the metaphoric/symbolic potential of planetary waters, and an especial facility for transubstantiating conventional associations (e.g. river = flow; sea = masculine adventure; small waters = parochialism) into more private equivalences (the river = androgyny, moral imagination, oral tradition; pond = thwarted literary ambition; groundwater = unheard stories).

That being said, this dissertation does circulate what might at first seem a commonplace view of the sea not unlike the “oceanic state” that Freud defines, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, as both “a sensation of ‘eternity,’ a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded” (11) and “a feeling of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole” (12). Never having experienced such ocean-mindedness, Freud dismissed it as a vestige of an early stage of ego feeling (“which might seek something like the restoration of limitless narcissism” [20]) quite inferior to the discriminating me-versus-them powers of the mature ego, which is all about separation and dominance, and coheres into communities only under the

pressure of necessity.

The authors discussed here display a very different regard for both nature and the collective, and, in keeping with the latter, show a tact for many of the principles and practices of literary Unanimism (from the French *Unanimisme*), a French literary movement spearheaded by Jules Romains in the early 1900s, which held the unifying principles in human groups to be more significant than personal individualities, and thus emphasized group consciousness, collective emotion, and “the need for the poet to merge with this transcendent consciousness” (“Unanimism”). It is not surprising that unanimists and would-be unanimists should find a natural correlative for collective consciousness in the planet’s biggest waters: its oceans.

Of course, writing requires a distillation of the individual essence as well as periods of social immersion, that “noiseless operation of one’s isolated Self [which] precedes community” (Walt Whitman, qtd. in Hyde 255). And while water exhibits strongly confluent tendencies, it also provides an analogue for seclusive inclinations in the form of the raindrop. Hydro-logical writers sense and avail themselves of such metaphors.

3. These authors never lose sight of the intuited fact that the hydrologic cycle *is* a cycle, and one whose central dynamic is also that of creative endeavor, human relationship, and nature itself. To read them is to get a sense of a storysphere that is animated by the complementary processes of inflow (reading, listening, taking) and outflow (writing, telling, publishing, giving), and in which no writer is an island, and works, like the indivisibly systemic waters of our planet, “continue one another, in spite of our habit of judging them separately” (Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* 80).

In proposing a “storysphere” that has certain commonalities with the hydrosphere, I am doing what Patricia Yaeger warns against: “transforming literature into ecology” (526). And why not? It has not been unusual to speak of literature as an economy—a matter of consumption and production, and even, as Northrop Frye semi-quipped, “an imaginary stock exchange” wherein individual commodities (aka authors) are at times bullish, at times bearish. The term

“ecology,” as Jane Jacobs reminds us in *The Nature of Economies*, was coined along the lines of “economy” by Victorian botanists who were impressed by the interdependence, very like that seen in economic relationships, on display in the plant communities they were studying. Jacobs’s book explores how “economic development [uses] the same universal principles that the rest of nature uses” (31), and suggests that one of the reasons economies exist is to give human beings what is essentially the ecological (and specifically hydro-logical) experience of “partak[ing]...in a great universal flow” (146).

~~~

For whatever we lose (like a you or a me),  
It’s always our self we find in the sea.  
—e.e. cummings

In *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*, Lewis Hyde examines many of these same ideas specifically through the lens of art. His main points are that art is a gift, not a commodity; that the spirit of a gift is kept alive by constant circulation; and that this circulation—which is forever bidirectional, flowing towards the artist as inspiration or influence, and away from her as creative issue—forges relationships that straightforward capitalism cannot. “[T]he work of the artist can only come to its powers in the world,” he writes, “when it moves beyond the self as a gift—from the artist to his audience or, in its wider functions, as that image-making work” whose circulation preserves the spirit of the collective and slowly builds a culture, a tradition (263).<sup>7</sup>

Since a main point of Hyde’s is that artwork *must* circulate, it makes sense that hydrologic metaphors should abound in his book. In contrast to capital that tends to “lose its motion and gather in isolated pools” (29), works of the gifted artist, possessing true liveliness, “circulate among us as reservoirs of available life, what Whitman calls ‘the tasteless water of souls’” (33).<sup>8</sup> “If we think of the gift as a constantly flowing river, we may say that the [person] who treats it

correctly does so by allowing herself to become a channel for its current. When someone tries to dam up the river, one of two things will happen: either it will stagnate or it will fill the person up until he bursts” (9). Hyde shares a Kashmiri folktale about two women who, seeking to accrue the benefits of almsgiving without the cost, merely give back and forth to one another and are reincarnated as two wells so poisonous that no one can drink from them, as “no one else can drink from ego-of-two,” which is but “an infant form of the gift circle” (22).

To the question of why one would submit to such channelization, Hyde replies that “[t]he ego’s firmness has its virtues but at some point we seek the slow dilation...in which the ego enjoys a widening give-and-take with the world and is finally abandoned in ripeness” (21). I take as an article of faith that all human beings long, at least intermittently, to experience this dilation and “partake...in a great universal flow” (Jacobs 146), especially artists, who often forgo small consummations in favor of the larger one of getting their work out there.

Whether this trading of the “me” for a “we” that widens like ripples around a cast stone is sought more by water-minded writers than those of other elemental dispositions I cannot prove, but only feel, to be true. Water is, after all, a spectacularly unitary element across both time and space. (The water that is on this planet now has always been here; and the hydrologic cycle means that no single molecule of H<sub>2</sub>O is truly separate from any other.) As for which comes first in the genesis of an oceanic disposition—the attraction to water or the craving for communion—again, I have no answer. But that they are necessarily connected is, I think, borne out by the work of the hydro-logical writers who follow.

### **Why women?**

No one wrote about the wife of Marco Polo, the first journeyer. As far as anyone knew, no one wrote about the women who were left at home when their husbands were at war or searching for other worlds or traveling out of pure longing. The wife combs her hair. She takes on a job, a mission, a love, or she becomes weak with sadness.

—Linda Hogan, *People of the Whale*

Let it be clear that I am not claiming hydro-logic as a uniquely feminine disposition. On the contrary, in its purest expression, with its emphasis on human interdependence, commonality, and connection with nature, hydro-logic transcends rigid gender opposition. Yet, the fact remains that a person asked to compile a list of water-centric texts would most likely begin with the works of Melville and Conrad, *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, *Two Years Before the Mast*, *The Old Man and the Sea*—books that either exclude women altogether or reduce them to vague shore-bound presences wringing their hands anxiously in anticipation of a husband's/son's/lover's/father's/brother's return. Of course, this was in the past. As Virginia Woolf wrote more than 85 years ago in "Women and Fiction," women's lives have "ceas[ed] to run underground," part of which "above-grounding" has been a steady stream of female-authored books about water that runs alongside the "big fish stories" of canonical English Literature. This dissertation is a brief punt on this stream.

### **Why now?**

The places where water comes together with other water. Those places stand out in my mind like holy places.

—Raymond Carver, *Where Water Comes Together with Other Water: Poems*

...the meeting place of land and water, there, surely, is a place to stop and reflect.

—Penelope Fitzgerald, *Offshore*

Mine is a timely topic, as it is well nigh impossible these days to get through a news week without hearing or seeing at least one mention of anthropogenic change to the water cycle: fishery collapse (the dread "commercial extinction"), sea level rise, ocean warming and acidification, aquifer overpumping, groundwater salinization, oceanic deadzones, catastrophic floods, megadrought, and on and on. Perhaps we are finally wising up to the fact that it is ruthless, reckless, plain old stupid to destroy (quickly) the environment into which we have

evolved (slowly). Or maybe we are accepting that the ocean and its extensive and intricate web of life have rights of their own.

There is also a chance that the recent turn towards land and water is a reaction to living in the increasingly “postplace” society Marc Augé describes in *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*. Here he analyzes those homogenized “spaces of circulation, consumption and communication” (viii) which, unlike conventional “anthropological places,” seem to exist outside of history and meaningful relationship. Writing in 1992, he was thinking predominantly of airports, railway stations, ATMs, hypermarkets, motorways, and international restaurant, hotel, and retail chains; but has since had to expand this list in this era of almost schizoid distraction and devices that let people turn even the richest *here* into an *elsewhere*.

Like all ecocritics, I accept as an article of faith that we are hardwired to connect with places, in part through storytelling, and that environmentalism reflects the will to reconnect with the here and now. And I believe that water margins—places where water meets land, and which, until relatively recently, represented the limit of how close we landlubbers could get to the water world—are amongst earth’s most magnetic and inspiring rebuttals to postplace society. Places of “intimate immensity,” as Bachelard said. *Hyperplaces*.

Inspiring wonder, these sites not only sustain and inspire in their own right, they remind us of our imbrication in larger cycles that will continue long after we are gone, and, indeed, of our very capacity for wonder, inspiration, love, and care. *Ee um fah um so, foo swee too eem oo, indeed.*



## Chapter 1: *The Waves*, A River of One's Own, and the Fascination of the Pool:

### Virginia Woolf's Hydro-Logic

On the one hand, it would seem easy to talk about water in the works of Virginia Woolf. For starters, the one thing most everyone knows about her is that she drowned, even if they don't know the actual date (28 March 1941), or the specific river (the Ouse), or the conditions (spring was in the air; yellow flowers were in the fields; the river was running fast and high). A famous writer—pioneer of the “stream of consciousness”—drowns herself: surely that can (and should) be read back into her work. And then, every Woolf scholar knows that one of her earliest memories was “of lying half asleep, half awake, in bed in the nursery at St. Ives.... of hearing the waves breaking, one, two, one, two, and sending a splash of water over the beach; and then breaking, one, two, one, two behind a yellow blind” (*Moments of Being* 64). She called this “the most important of all [her] memories,” going so far as to say “If life has a base that it stands upon, if it is a bowl that one fills and fills and fills—then my bowl without a doubt stands upon this memory” (64).

Two of her most renowned books, *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *The Waves* (1931), are manifestly oceanic, but a steady stream of freshwater runs through her oeuvre, too. Woolf's first novel moves reader and characters down London's great tidal river, out through the Thames estuary, across the Atlantic, and eventually up an exotic (fictional) river. Her last unfolds around an ancient lily pool.<sup>9</sup> Her very last story, “A Watering Place,” has water running through it, though in a very different way. Writing about all of Woolf's water turns out to be as easy as fitting a lake in a bucket, because of both its ubiquity and its multifunctionality as setting, metaphor, image, and formal principle. It laps at the edges of many of her central themes: gender, the body, illness, madness, storytelling, literary tradition, history, silence, love, and the clash between self and crowd, to list only a few. It also provides analogues for some of Woolf's

thematic and formal concerns: impersonality and unanimism (associated with the ocean), and androgyny and profluence (associated with the river). Of course, these are not absolute associations, but then for Woolf these creative values flowed into one another as surely as do the planetary waters. An intuitive sense of this ultimately ecological fact is part of Woolf's strong hydro-logicality, which manifests very literally as a distinct and discernible hydrologic cycle stretching from her first published words to her last.

### **Liquid Pre/History**

Hermione Lee has said that one of the questions she fielded most frequently as Woolf's biographer involved her subject's putative snobbery, so it is with pleasing irony that Gillian Beer teases out the importance of the word "common" in Woolf's lexicon. There are the two volumes of criticism addressed to the "common reader"; the fact that in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), she defines the *real* life "not [as] the little separate lives which we live as individuals," but as "the common life" (113); and finally, the mini-manifesto slipped into the late essay "The Leaning Tower" (1940), in which she claims that "Literature is no one's private ground; literature is common ground. It is not cut up into nations; there are no wars there. Let us trespass freely and fearlessly and find our own way for ourselves" (*Essays* 6: 278). At once eminently accessible, indivisible, and trackless, the "common ground" of literature sounds much more like ocean than terra firma.<sup>10</sup>

### ***The Voyage Out***

Woolf's first novel, 1915's *The Voyage Out*, contains a vast amount of structurally and symbolically important water. This hydrosphere is both mystical and technical, encompassing all but calling out to only a few. (Early on, the narrator muses about how "very few people [think] about the sea" (26). One of the book's minor characters, steward of the ship that conveys the heroine and her aunt and uncle from England to the fictional South American settlement of

Santa Marina, heartily and crankily agrees: “What does any man or woman brought up in England know about the sea? They profess to; but they don’t.” This is unpropitious, given “what a very small part of the world the land [is]” [52]).

According to the narrator, Steward Grice is a “fanatic” (52), and so can hardly be taken as a mouthpiece for Woolf’s philosophy. Interested more in his jars and drawers full of aquatic curios than in human beings, Grice cannot be expected to see the main value of the ocean for the other characters: that it connects Santa Marina and its river back to the Thames, and so, to Blighty (“It was this sea that flowed up to the mouth of the Thames; and the Thames washed the roots of the city of London” [233]). Connections between people, especially women and men, is one of this book’s central subjects.

In her introduction to the novel, critic Phyllis Rose suggests that Woolf uses exotic staging and flashy but stock landscape description to paper over her inability to render Rachel and Terence’s love (xii). Water plays a key role in this use of landscape. During the hotel dance that gives Rachel and Hewet their second contact, “It was as though the room were instantly flooded with water. After a moment’s hesitation first one couple, then another, [and eventually Terence and Rachel] leapt into midstream, and went round and round in the eddies” (166). It is overlooking the local river valley that Rachel first wonders “What is it to be in love?” (193). Meanwhile, to her Aunt Helen, Rachel’s mounting, unexpressed emotion is like “the sliding of a river, quick, quicker, quicker still, as it races to a waterfall [...] racing because the earth is shaped to make it race” (252). After all this, it is fittingly during an excursion up the local Conradesque river, amidst heavy fruits, “sword-like” leaves, and musky flowers, that the lovers will make their wooden declarations:

‘We love each other,’ Terence said.  
‘We love each other,’ she repeated. (311)

Interestingly, during this entire episode, Rachel and Terence are only able to relax into their love when they reach a point on their tropical river that “almost reminds one of an English park” (320). For a second, this river could be the Thames—somewhere along the long way, their threads do tangle—an illusion that validates, *grounds* their love (i.e., this is no vacation fling). But this Thamesishness *is* an illusion, much like their hotel’s Englishness, and all through their romance try as they do to imaginatively translate their relationship over onto river-split London, they cannot quite pull it off. As Rachel lies dying, Terence reflects that there “had always been something imperfect in their happiness, something they had wanted and not been able to get” (396). It may be that, her own new relationship with Leonard notwithstanding, Woolf was not yet able or ready to envision in her own culture, on her native soil, a marriage that honored both parties and their creative vocations.

Fascinatingly, this something-wanted-and-not-gotten is cast as a vast oceanic impersonalism. When the couple first converse they are looking out over the sea, as they are again when having their first intimate conversation. In the latter case, this backdrop colors Rachel’s account of growing up a girl, anonymous and inconsequential: “No one cares in the least what she does. Nothing’s expected of her. Unless one’s very pretty people don’t listen to what you say...And that is what I like [...] the freedom of it—it’s like being the wind or the sea” (244). Terence finds this oceanic impersonality of hers dispiriting, it suggesting the unlikelihood of her ever favoring one person over another. Soon it is Rachel’s turn to despair over his impersonality when, gazing out to sea, he talks about the “extraordinary satisfaction” of writing. And so it goes. One moment Terence admires the “impersonality” Rachel’s musicianship produces in her (334); a few pages later he dreads it: “There’s something I can’t get hold of in you [...] You don’t want me as I want you—you’re always wanting something else” (347). “There are moments,” he balks, “when, if we stood on a rock together, you’d throw me into the sea” (342). She agrees, thinking that it wouldn’t be so bad to be flung into the sea, “washed hither and thither, and driven around about the roots of the world” (342). A quick scan of the horizon

confirms that she does want “many more things than the love of one human being—the sea, the sky” (347). Here speaks an oceanic soul.

And in a sense Woolf gives her an oceanic destiny, in the form of her final illness. The waves are breaking on the shore with a sound “like the repeated sigh of some exhausted creature” (374) when she announces her initial headache.<sup>11</sup> Her descent into sickness takes the form, at first, of nightmares of being in a tunnel under the Thames, and later of a sense of falling “into a deep pool of sticky water, which eventually closed over her head. She saw nothing and heard nothing but a faint booming sound, which was the sound of the sea rolling over her head. While all her tormentors thought that she was dead, she was not dead, but curled up at the bottom of the sea” (391-2). I agree with critic Phyllis Rose that in contrast to the flat jungle description, this sickroom writing is the best in the novel (xiii), very probably, one gathers from Hermione Lee’s reading of Woolf’s diaries, because of Woolf’s own somatic experience:

“Never was anyone so tossed up & down by the body as I am, I think.”  
(Feb ’28, qtd. in Lee 182)

“Oh, its beginning its coming—the horror—physically like a painful wave about the heart—tossing me up. I’m unhappy unhappy! Down—God, I wish I were dead. I’ve only a few years to live I hope. I can’t face this horror any more—(this is the wave spreading out over me).” (Sept ’26, *ibid.*)

Even in times of calm, as when reading *The Faerie Queene* and noticing the irregular pulse of her interest, Woolf wondered if it were not “the ebb and flow of my feeling [...] at the back of it” (Feb ’35, qtd. in Lee 402). Ten years after *The Voyage Out*, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, she would have so sound a character as Richard Dalloway cast circadian rhythms in thalassic terms (“There are tides in the body” [113]), and would burden Septimus Smith with the tempestuous physicality.<sup>12</sup>

Rachel’s illness, in shifting the book’s attention from vast planetary waters to the more intimate, but hardly less turbulent, waters of the body, picks up on the novel’s earlier discourse on small waters: the “butterfly effect” sermon given by the hotel chaplain, Reverend Bax—

As a drop of water, detached, alone, separate from others, falling from the cloud and entering the great oceans, alters, so scientists tell us, not only the immediate spot in the ocean where it falls, but all the myriad drops which together compose the great universe of waters, and by this means alters the configuration of the globe and the lives of millions of sea creatures, and finally the lives of men and women who seek their living upon the shores—as all this is within the compass of a single drop of water, such as any rain shower sends in millions to lose themselves upon the earth, to lose themselves we say, but we know very well that the fruits of the earth could not flourish without them—so is a marvel comparable to this within the reach of each one of us, who dropping a little word or a little deed into the great universe alters it; yea, it is a solemn thought, alters it, for good or for evil, not for one instant, or in one vicinity, but throughout the entire race, and for all eternity. (*Voyage* 264)

This figuring of each act, utterance, and agent as a droplet that is at once discrete and necessarily complicit in the hydrological cycle is a compelling way of symbolizing the tension between the individual life and the common life. The emphasis on influence sets up an expectation, making us wonder about the career of the “great welling tear” (2-3) that Helen cries into the Thames at the very beginning of the novel, leaning on the balustrade near Waterloo Bridge, already missing her children. Where will it wind up? What effect will it have?

There is here an implicit awareness that the water covering almost 71% of earth’s surface is not separate from that which makes up approximately 70% of the female body and 60% or so of the male, thus serving as an elementary link between organism and environment, individual and society. And because the water on the planet now is the water that has always been here, it forms a substantive connection between past, present, and future; between prehistory, posthistory, and everything in the middle.

For Woolf, history often takes the form of ground, recorded “in layers, in strata,” below every great city, “scarring that stretch of earth deeper and deeper, making it more uneasy, lumped and tumultuous, branding it for ever with an indelible scar” (*London Scene* 39). One might think of these archaeological deposits as a facing-page translation of what Beer calls history’s “triumphalist narrative of development” (10). Prehistory, on the other hand, “implies a pre-narrative domain” that resists plot and its facile resolutions (9), as well as its binary

oppositions. I agree with Beer that Woolf's interest in the prehistoric/primeval and the sea "may be related to her search for a way out of sexual difference" (17). A scene in *Voyage* suggests this. Rachel and Richard Dalloway are trying to have a conversation and not quite succeeding. She thinks his enlightened imperialism does not make enough allowance for feelings; he, that she does not grasp the practicalities of governance. He is content to let the subject drop, feeling that it is in a woman's nature to lack "the political instinct," but Rachel pushes for some type of mutual understanding, if not agreement. She is "haunted by absurd jumbled ideas—how, if one went back far enough, everything perhaps was intelligible; everything was in common; for the mammoths who pastured in the fields of Richmond High Street had turned into paving stones and boxes full of ribbon, and her aunts" (68). That is: in the beginning there was the swamp, and in this watery prehistory, all was connected. Then parts of it were drained, paved over and turned into androcentric hubs of power, commerce, and learning. (As *Between the Acts's* Mrs. Swithin reads in her *Outline of History*, "Prehistoric man, half-human, half-ape, roused himself from his semi-crouching position and raised great stones" [218].) In the case of Oxbridge, all this leveling, ditching, digging and draining, not to mention the raising of the great stones themselves, was made possible by another type of stream, "an unending stream of gold and silver" (*Room 9*). As *A Room of One's Own* argues, these quadrangles and cities owe their existence to the male ego, battened on centuries upon centuries of feminine adoration. "[W]ithout that power, probably the earth would still be swamp and jungle" (35).

For the most part, Woolf loved "civilization" and its hallowed spaces, yet she balked at the barbarism of patriarchy and the ironic way that the sex credited with inspiring male endeavor was so frequently denied its fruits. This silent sneer over Rachel's spinster aunts' dull ribbon-snipping tenure in Richmond while every man in *The Voyage Out*—Richard Dalloway, Willoughby Vinrace, Ridley Ambrose, St. John Hirst, Terence Hewet, and even the insignificant Mr. Pepper and the dopey Arthur Venning—can lay claim to some part of London or Oxbridge, is a foretaste of the educational and spatial arguments of *A Room of One's Own*.

The idea of water's story as an alternative to land's can also be found in *The London Scene*, a series of essays that appeared bimonthly in the British *Good Housekeeping* between 1931 and 1932. If Woolf's sense of Outsiderism was activated by the mental picture of masons raising "with infinite labor" a few buildings out of the marshes of Oxbridge, "where the grasses waved and the swine rootled" (*Room* 9), it is tempting to imagine what the sight of London did, especially as glimpsed, as it is at the beginning of *Scene*, from a Thames cruiser: the rubbish tips giving way to Greenwich Hospital, "the stateliest buildings ever raised by the hand of man," and "the authority of the city begin[ning] to assert itself" just past Tower Bridge, where "the buildings thicken and heap themselves higher," actually making the clouds "heavier, purpler" (9). The *hand of man, authority*—these flat notes betray the times when Woolf felt the city's "brotherhood" and male bustle as "alien" forces (Lee 320).

In "Locating a Native Englishness in Virginia Woolf's 'The London Scene,'" Sonita Sarker reads these six essays as Woolf's more humane, feminist response to masculinist cartography—a fact that fell by the wayside when *The London Scene* was first published in 1975 *without* the sixth essay, "Portrait of a Londoner." Streets and buildings are very good, this piece argues, but "[n]obody can be said to know London who does not know one true cockney" (69). Significantly, Woolf's cockney of choice is one Mrs. Crowe, conversation junkie and gossip. An arch inclusionist, she disdains any patter that is too deep or clever, for its power to make the less gifted "feel out of it" (71). Her real genius is for gleaning whatever social intelligence she can from her many callers and "throwing it into the common pool" (76) so that no one feels excluded. I agree wholeheartedly with Sarker that this essay's omission from that first edition removed both the human and the feminine from Woolf's re-mapping of London, but I think that the "common pool" metaphor points to another counter-monument (besides Mrs. Crowe) to London's patriarchal stones: its sinuous river.

Because of *The London Scene*, *A Room of One's Own*, and "Street Haunting: A London Adventure," readers already have a mental picture of Woolf navigating London's grey streets,



visiting Westminster Abbey and Keats's and Carlyle's houses, and patronizing the British Library, but thanks to Hermione Lee, we also have a picture of her climbing down a flight of steps onto the Thames banks under Southwark Bridge, and making her cold way along "this rat haunted, riverine place, great chains, wooden pillars, green slime, bricks corroded" (qtd. in Lee 702). Lee supposes that anyone looking down from the bridge and seeing this woman "walking alone among the debris of London's low tide, perhaps talking to herself, ... might have thought her a shabby-genteel vagrant, or a mad person" (703). Woolf herself, however, considered this "a very sensible day" (Lee 703). This mud-margined Thames is Woolf's Thames—not the river as reclaimed, after the garbage dumps, by Greenwich Hospital's columns and domes, "again a stately waterway where the nobility of England once walked at their ease on green lawns" (*London* 9), but an elemental, lasting, fertilizing stream possessed of "some irresistible current" that draws ships large and small, battered and splendid, from ports around the globe, "from the storms and calms of the sea, its silence and loneliness to their allotted anchorage" in the London docks (6).

The life-giving aspect of this watercourse is key, as is its centrality to London. "I am eddying quicker and quicker into the stream, into London," Woolf wrote in her diary in late April 1929. And life, particularly "life going on," was, as she put it, "the stream that I am trying to convey" (28 May 1929). So London is a stream and life is a stream. The third part of the syllogism, London, appears in the list of things Clarissa Dalloway loves, coming between—and running into—"life" and "this moment of June" (*Dalloway* 4).<sup>13</sup>

It is in *The London Scene's* second essay, "Oxford Street Tide," that Woolf's interest in the real Thames, its actual fluid volume, spills over into her depiction of the city, providing a point of comparison. Unlike those early buildings heaved stone by stone out of the swamps and in some cases still standing, Oxford Street edifices are confected and devoured like so many meringues, part of the "architecture that shows off the dressing-case, the Paris frock, the cheap stockings, and the jar of bath salts to perfection" (25). The purpose of these eclectic stone

fantasias is not to last but to pass and, in the process, “to persuade the multitude that here unending beauty, ever fresh, ever new, ever cheap and within the reach of everybody, bubbles up every day of the week from an inexhaustible well” (25). But this font, a favorite target of moralists, is a false or at least a minor one. Woolf’s guide-persona advises the conscientious moralist to keep dowsing, suggesting that if he will choose “to take his afternoon walk along this particular thoroughfare, he must tune his strain so that it receives into it some queer, incongruous voices” (25). Those of the tortoise seller, the great merchant, the female shopper of modest means, the woman pickpocket are only a sample of the “thousand such voices...always crying aloud in Oxford Street” (26). These voices are London’s true wellspring, pushing up through those lumped strata of history like so much ground water. A fanciful reading, perhaps, but one supported by Woolf’s 1929 short story “The Fascination of the Pool.”

In this short piece, the narrator, convinced that “pools have some curious fascination” (*Complete Shorter Fiction* 226), cannot resist stopping for a rest by a small but deep pond. Reflected in its center is a poster advertising the sale of a nearby farm, but these mirrored letters, “ly[ing] very thinly on the surface” (226) are not what fascinates. *That* is what goes on beneath:

...some profound under-water life like the brooding, the ruminating of a mind. Many, many people must have come there alone, from time to time, from age to age, dropping their thoughts into the water, asking it some question, as one did oneself this summer evening. Perhaps that was the reason for its fascination—that it held in its waters all kinds of fancies, complaints, confidences, not printed or spoken aloud, but in a liquid state, floating one on top of another, almost disembodied. A fish would swim through them, be cut in two by the blade of a reed; or the moon would annihilate them with its great white plate. The charm of the pool was that thoughts had been left there by people who had gone away and without their bodies their thoughts wandered in and out freely, friendly and communicative, in the common pool.

Among all these liquid thoughts some seemed to stick together and to form recognisable people—just for a moment. (226)

And so there coalesce, one after the other, the words of a man who knelt to refresh himself after the Great Exhibition of 1851; of a girl who lay nearby with her lover and, heartbroken, later

drowned herself; of a contented angler recalling the giant carp he saw the day Nelson died at Trafalgar; and beneath all of these, “the voice we all wished to hear,”<sup>14</sup> for which the other voices roll aside—one so sad, “it surely must know the reason of all this” (227). And it does not stop here: “There was always another face, another voice. One thought came and covered another. For though there are moments when a spoon seems about to lift all of us, and our thoughts and longings and questions and confessions and disillusionings into the light of day, somehow the spoon always slips beneath and we flow back again over the edge of the pool” (227).

It is an odd story, with a thesis as beguiling as it is melancholy: that given the difficulty of finding issue for one’s thoughts and words, one is justified in imagining, wherever there has been human settlement, a deep well of that which has gone unexpressed or at least unrecorded. This is particularly true in the case of women. So it is that thinking about the “infinitely obscure lives” of women not yet and perhaps never to be written, the narrator of *A Room of One’s Own* takes a mental stroll through the streets of London, “feeling in imagination the pressure of dumbness, the accumulation of unrecorded life” (89).

In the fluid anthology that is the Fascinating Pool, two of the first three voices we hear are male and bluffly yoke together a personal memory and an historic event. The lone female voice, on the other hand, tells of a purely personal grief which leads, much like Judith Shakespeare’s, to the ultimate self-silencing: suicide. The last distinct voice in the pool, the one that “surely must know the reason of all this,” recalls, though more mournfully, the

*ee um fah um so  
foo swee too eem oo—*

of the street singer in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), a voice “bubbling up without direction, vigour, beginning or end...the voice of no age or sex, the voice of an ancient spring spouting from the earth” (*Dalloway* 80). Like a funnel or a rusty pump, this old woman—for it is a woman—purls a song of love and loss and the end of the world. And though Peter Walsh and Rezia Warren Smith pity her, the narrative instead emphasizes how, as

this ancient song bubbled up opposite Regent's Park Tube station still the earth seemed green and flowery; [and] still, though it issued from so rude a mouth, a mere hole in the earth, muddy too, matted with root fibres and tangled grasses, still the old bubbling, burbling song, soaked through the knotted roots of infinite ages, and skeletons and treasure, streamed away in rivulets over the pavement and all along the Marylebone Road, and down towards Euston, fertilising, leaving a damp stain. (81)

This ancient, elemental, numinous and unsexed voice, as well as the impulse behind it, is the true, fecundating spring of the city.

### **A River of One's Own**

Anyone who recalls the thought-fish of *A Room of One's Own*<sup>15</sup> does not need reminding that this relentlessly spatial essay has a river running through it, a meandering one that surfaces multiple times: as the river that runs through Oxbridge and past Fernham; the Thames near Westminster, by which the narrator, "Mary Beton" lives; the essay's own profluent undercurrent<sup>16</sup>; and, most importantly, at book's end, the street-river that Beton sees in her mind's eye while standing at her London window.

A single leaf detached itself from the plane tree at the end of the street, and in that pause and suspension [of traffic] fell. Somehow it was like a signal falling, a signal pointing to a force in things which one had overlooked. It seemed to point to a river, which flowed past, invisibly, round the corner, down the street, and took people and eddied them along, as the stream at Oxbridge had taken the undergraduate in his boat and the dead leaves. Now it was bringing from one side of the street to the other diagonally a girl in patent leather boots, and then a young man in a maroon overcoat; it was also bringing a taxicab; and it brought all three together at a point directly beneath my window; where the taxi stopped; and the girl and the young man stopped; and they got into the taxi; and the cab glided off as if it were swept on by the current elsewhere. (96)

Several key concepts meet in this spectral stream. Right on the surface is the properly riverine idea of flow or profluence, which Woolf creates mimetically with a sequence of ever-lengthening sentences rich in soft stops—commas, then semicolons—culminating in a rush of polysyndeton.<sup>17</sup> Fluency is an important aesthetic principle of Woolf's, particularly for the

essayist, whose main objective must be “to sting us awake and fix us in a trance which is not sleep but the intensification of life—a basking, with every faculty alert, in the sun of pleasure” (“The Modern Essay,” *Common Reader* 212). Verbal infelicities, incongruities, half-assimilated quotations—any one of these can break the trance. So, for that matter, can the excessive ornament one sometimes finds in such a lapidary genre as the essay. Then, “[i]nstead of sparkling or flashing or moving with a quieter impulse which has a deeper excitement, words coagulate together in frozen sprays,” and “*the current, which is the life-blood of literature*” slows to a halt (214, emphasis mine).

As Woolf herself knew, *A Room of One's Own* pleases and entrances, skimming along even when a fluttering beadle, an admonitory librarian, a striking clock, a missed turning, an unceremoniously served bowl of soup, and a restaurant bill interrupt the narrator's train of thought. The entire work is a plea for the right to *not* be interrupted, either in these obvious, material ways (e.g. the creaking of Jane Austen's drawing room door), or in more insidious psychological ones, like Charlotte Brontë's justifiable feminist rage, which produced “awkward break[s],” twists, and deformities the flow of *Jane Eyre* (*Room* 69).

Flow is important to Woolf in part because of its sociocultural implications. Individuals who are well fed and well funded, who have leisure and license to run the gamut of life's experiences, to say nothing of encouragement and tradition to goad them on, will not only have a richer vein of material to tap, but will stand a much better chance of getting that material “fused” and expressed whole, without break or impurity. And in 1929, as well as all the years before and most since, such individuals were much more likely to be male than female.

(This is not to say that men didn't have their own prisons and mental impurities. When Mary Beton leaves Oxbridge, gate after gate bangs shut behind her. When she reaches Fernham College and the lack of any such checkpoint lets her walk right into the comparatively wild grounds, it occurs to her that “unpleasant [as] it is to be locked out; ... it is worse perhaps to be locked in” [*Room* 24]. Though snug inside their well-appointed colleges, are not men penned up

in their ideas about superiority; their often furious resistance to change [unlike Charlotte Brontë's, theirs is "anger disguised and complex, not anger simple and open" (32)]; and their sonorous, ancestral sentence? Beton scents something of the paddock in the expensive, impressive education of the Oxbridge-trained student who has "no doubt some method of shepherding his question past all distractions till it runs into its answer as a sheep runs into its pen," while she, diplomaless, finds hers flying "like a frightened flock hither and thither, helter-skelter, pursued by a whole pack of hounds" [28]. Strike out the "frightened," dial down the pace, and this latter way sounds a bit like the essayist's. Montaigne, Lamb, Hazlitt, Beerbohm—all knew how to stop paddling and let themselves drift on the mind's current, the result being not only pleasurable but honest, as "it is in our idleness, in our dreams," Woolf assures us, "that the submerged truth sometimes comes to the top" [31].)

It turns out that dreams and truth are intimately connected both with the river and the room of one's own. In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard argues that the primary function of the house is to protect the dreamer/daydreamer while dreaming (6), and Woolf makes a similar claim about the room of one's own. In arguing that the house needs to be both fastness and launch pad (his examples include both nest and shell), Bachelard recognizes the human need for enclosure as well as wide open space. Woolf recognizes the same oscillatory needs when she entreats her female readers to secure a berth and then leave it whenever possible in search of new forms and new subjects. Not only is it "so agreeable after the solitude of one's own room" to step out of the house and "become part of that vast republican army of anonymous trampers" ("Street Haunting," *Essays* 4: 481), but once that door shuts behind us, we become something less, and so more, than our usual self. "The shell-like covering which our souls have excreted to house themselves, to make for themselves a shape distinct from others, is broken, and there is left of all these wrinkles and roughnesses a central oyster of perceptiveness, an enormous eye" (481). That is, the room both protects us from drowning in the sea of sensory and social stimuli, and grants us the access to it that we need as gregarious, imaginative beings.

The room is only part of it. Woolf also wants her readers to possess themselves of “money enough to travel and to idle, to contemplate the future or the past of the world, to dream over books and loiter at street corners and let the line of thought dip deep into the stream” (*Room* 109). Here river and street again flow into one another, and are held up as a healthier environment for would-be writers than the opulent holding tanks of Oxbridge, which take young dons and crease and crush them into aquarium oddities “which would soon be obsolete if left to fight for existence on the pavement of the Strand” (8–9). The Strand is significant, as it holds fossil-like in its very name (from the Old English *strand*, meaning ‘bank’ or ‘shore’) the fact that it once overlapped the shallow bank of a much wider Thames. It is on the Strand, atop an omnibus, that Elizabeth Dalloway remembers poor Miss Kilman’s words—*Every profession is open to the women of your generation*—and “breasting the stream of the Strand,” liking its splendor and busyness, determines that “she would like to have a profession. She would become a doctor, a farmer, possibly go into Parliament, if she found it necessary, all because of the Strand” (*Dalloway* 136). In a sense, this ancient thoroughfare also gives Woolf her profession: it is here that she buys her metonymic pencil in “Street Haunting.”

So the street-river of my original passage brings together Woolf’s investment in profluence as a formal attribute and her faith in the now laminar, now turbulent flow of city life as a source of artistic material. Much like the river in *The Voyage Out*, its real power lies in its ability to bring together the feminine and the masculine, here the girl in patent leather boots and the young man in the maroon overcoat. Throughout Woolf’s work, courtship (and the courtship crisis in particular) is associated with water, especially rivers and lakes.<sup>18</sup> The Dalloways fall in love while boating on the lake at Bourton, as Peter realizes with anguish when Richard rows them back in (*Dalloway* 63). In *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs. Ramsay recollects her husband as she “had first known him, gaunt but gallant; helping her out of a boat” (99). Even the Olivers of *Between the Acts* meet fishing in Scotland, “she on one rock, he on another” (48). The depiction of Terence and Rachel’s courtship differs qualitatively from these snapshots not

only in making up so much of the action of *The Voyage Out*, but in promising, like the marriage of the Lady Orlando and Shelmerdine (who meet by a pool), to bring about a different sort of union between the masculine and feminine principles.

From early on in *The Voyage Out* it is clear that neither Terence nor Rachel is a neat fulfillment of Edwardian gender expectations. Like so many of Woolf's male characters, Terence has literary ambitions, but his ideas about writing sound an awful lot like those of a feminist writer. As discussed previously, he is a much needier, more anxious lover than Rachel, and he is a dabbler, talking about the books he hopes to write rather than writing them, while Rachel is the disciplined (amateur) artist. When she sits down at the piano after the hotel ball, fluently translating one musical idiom into another and ultimately playing not for her audience but for herself,<sup>19</sup> Terence chassés down the floor, "swaying his arms and holding out the tails of his coat, [swimming] down the room in imitation of the voluptuous dreamy dance of an Indian maiden dancing before her Rajah" (182). ("There's something of a woman in him—," says Evelyn Murgatroyd [283]). Later at the villa, in their most physically playful scene, it is *her* turn to swim through the room, and his turn to throw her from the pretend rock into the imaginary sea. It is no matter, she assures him—"I'm a mermaid! I can swim" (342). Whether in the end these two would have made one another profoundly happy or intensely miserable one cannot say, but during the pre-honeymoon, at least, his "man-womanliness" her "woman-manliness" (c.f. *A Room of One's Own*) seem admirable complements.

Marriage is good insofar as it invites a robust integration of the masculine and the feminine, and then it is good, so goes Woolf's logic, because it mirrors our own "profound, if irrational, instinct in favour of the theory that the union of man and woman makes for the greatest satisfaction, the most complete happiness" (*Room* 98). The idea that we crave this union not just interpersonally but internally, and that mental androgyny is as essential to creativity as the room and the £500, is a central one in *Room*, though not one without confusion. In "Virginia Woolf and Androgyny," critic Marilyn Farwell sees Woolf's pet concept



as open to two quite different constructions. In one, the fusion model of androgyny, masculine and feminine are melded into a metasexual ideal—objective, impersonal, universal—which, like so many ideals, is monistic, changeless, and implicitly masculine. It is associated with “a single model of response and knowing” (Farwell 435). The other, the balance model, is a more dynamic state in which traditionally “masculine” and “feminine” modes—the aggressive and gentle, adventurous and nurturing, rational and intuitive, subjective and objective, manic and depressive, “knowing by apartness and knowing by togetherness”<sup>20</sup>—are all in play in the individual, resulting in a “width of perception rather than [...] a single, universal mode of knowing” (435). Farwell argues that Woolf really has the balance model in mind, but fudges the language to placate her critics. I cannot agree, feeling that when, at the end of *Room*, Woolf enjoins her audience to think beyond gender, she is not advocating a one-size-fits-all androgyny but rather balking at the “effort” of thinking “of one sex as distinct from the other” (*Room* 97), and honoring a “profound, if irrational” instinct of her own: not against sexual difference per se but single-minded sex-consciousness and the power of its “logic”—either/or, us/them, superior/inferior, surface/depths, insider/outside—to put men on the offensive and women on the defensive. She can hardly be advocating a single epicenism when she has specifically stated that two sexes are not enough, and speaks repeatedly of the “renewal of creative power”—that is, the fertilization—“which is in the gift only of the opposite sex to bestow” (86).<sup>21</sup> With its fluidity, the balance model is supported by the metaphor of the river, that great generic symbol of flux that is constantly redefined by conditions, topography, and human intervention, and which, in the essay under discussion, flashes between the actual, the fictional, the symbolic, and the rhetorical.

The fictional female novelist of *A Room of One's Own*, Mary Carmichael, has not achieved Shakespearean mental androgyny, but does at least enjoy the advantage that men are no longer for her generation “the opposing faction” (92). If anything, she seeks a rapprochement between the sexes. Beton finds this heartening, as she does the fact that in her first book, *Life's*

*Adventure*, Carmichael manages to get a mixed party—three men, two women, and the reader—into a canoe and up a river that connects the river of Woolf's own debut novel, *The Voyage Out*, with the half-actual, half-spectral river of *Room*, by which Beton stands, “where the waters are churned up by the weir” (*Room* 14) reciting Tennyson and Rossetti, and thinking about the effect of postwar sex-consciousness on the previously antiphonal relations between men and women. Her famous conclusion is that men, unable to take their superiority for granted after suffrage, now needed to drive it home with a double campaign of egotism (I-I-I) and “putting woman in her place.” This is what Carmichael's equally fictional contemporary Mr. A, a writer “in the prime of life and very well thought of...by the reviewers,” seems to be doing when he brings a man and a woman together on a beach, and shows the former putting the latter in her place there on the sand, “under the sun...very openly...very vigorously...over and over...and over again” (101).

“Nothing could have been more indecent,” Beton concedes, but her objection is not to any salaciousness, but rather to the surflike relentlessness of the sex scene, which functions like the famous male ‘I’ to obliterate the (female) other.<sup>22</sup> “[I]n the shadow of the ‘I’, all is as shapeless as mist,” she says, unable to identify at first that the thing on the beach is a woman walking toward her man—“she has not a bone in her body” (100). “Then Alan got up and the shadow of Alan at once obliterated Phoebe. For Alan had views and Phoebe was quenched in the flood of his views” (100). In *To The Lighthouse*, Paul Rayley and Minta Doyle's romance, which Lily Briscoe cannot but imagine ending badly, also begins with an embrace on the beach that annoys Andrew Ramsay and deeply perturbs his younger sister Nancy, who has only just been amusing herself with a tidepool.

This might make ocean sound like a negative value in Woolf's work. It is not. Her objection, rather, is how ocean is made a backdrop for supreme sex-consciousness, whereas according to her logic—or hydro-logic—this is dead wrong. Sex-consciousness is part of ego-consciousness, and though water has been the medium of various imperialisms, it is not ego's

proper element. I have already shown how this plays out in both *Room* and *The London Scene*, where river serves as countermonument to the “edifice complexes” of London and Oxbridge. Whereas land is a constant record of who has come before, from down in its strata up to the graffiti Mary Beton sees as a male imperative,<sup>23</sup> water’s memory of us seems more selective. Woolf thought writing should honor personality without falling into egotism, and water, as she depicts it, has just this paradoxical quality of remembering and forgetting. On one hand, there is the river at Oxbridge that quickly forgets the undergraduate who rows across it, “completely, as if he had never been” (*Room* 5), like one whose name was writ on water (Keats being, of course, one of Woolf’s mental androgynes). On the other, there is the Fascinating Pool, which remembers individual essences but mingles them in a fluid collective, a vest-pocket version of humanity’s ocean. Though *The Voyage Out*’s Reverend Bax argues the importance of the individual droplet-self in his sermon, we do well to remember Woolf’s definition of “real life” as “the common life” and not the “little separate lives which we live as individuals” (*Room* 113), that is, as ocean life rather than droplet life.

This might seem complicated, but it is not: the androgyne abandons single-sex-consciousness, a disavowal that is part of self-transcendence, the “building up out of the fleeting and the personal the lasting edifice which remains unthrown” (*Room* 93). It is Woolf’s belief that greater impersonality “will encourage the poetic spirit” that she finds so weak in women’s writing, and allow female authors to “look beyond the personal and political relationships to the wider questions which the poet tries to solve—of our destiny and the meaning of life” (“Women and Fiction,” *Essays* 5: 34). As the meaning of life is bound to be tied up with “real life”—that is, the common life—it is possible to chart a fairly direct course between androgyny and impersonalism and, finally, unanimism, a philosophy central to Woolf’s vision<sup>24</sup> which finds its ultimate correlative in the planet’s largest waters. It makes perfect hydro-logical sense that the river, associated with anonymity and androgyny, should lead to the open ocean of unanimistic experience.

Mary Carmichael, who, according to Mary Beton, has mastered “the first great lesson” for an aspiring female novelist: writing “as a woman, but as a woman who has forgotten that she is a woman, so that her pages [are] full of the curious sexual quality which comes only when sex is unconscious of itself” (*Room* 93), and who injects a measure of impersonality into Chloe and Olivia’s friendship (based, in part, on their shared work in a lab)—exhibits an implicit grasp of this hydro-logic. She understands how river runs to sea, how a more laissez-faire attitude toward sexual identity and relationship opens out into the more oceanic truths of “our destiny and the meaning of life.” She is not quite ready for the open ocean—is “still afraid of something; afraid of being called ‘sentimental’ perhaps”—and so Beton finds reading her clipped sentences like “being out at sea in an open boat. Up one went, down one sank” (81). But she is a lot better off than Mr. A, who can stand in front of something as elemental, aggregative, ancient, and numinous as the ocean and say only “He–He–He” or “I–I–I.”

This follows Woolf’s assertion in *Room* that androgyny is more in line with the feminine because of women’s natural affinity with anonymity. (“Anonymity runs in their blood[,] the desire to be veiled still possesses [them]” [50]). In the mid-1920s, somewhat bored by the sexual lopsidedness of Bloomsbury parties—all male with a few accessory females—Woolf wrote to a friend of her intention “to cultivate women’s society entirely in future. Men are all in the light always; with women you swim at once into the silent dusk” (to Jacques Raverat, 5 Feb 1925, *Letters* 3: 164). Being the element of anonymity, water is, in Woolf’s eyes, women’s element.

### ***Mare tenebrarum, mare tranquillitatis***

So for Woolf, water remembers, water forgets.<sup>25</sup> It sounds like a very unstable substance. Yet, molecularly speaking, water is so stable precisely because it is literally ambivalent—positively charged on one side, negative on the other. Thus it is apt that Woolf’s attitude towards the ocean should oscillate between the positive and the negative: between awe

for this realm of the eternal, the life-giving, and the collective; and revulsion at this force of relentlessness, dissolution, and indifference. Within the compass of four short paragraphs, the narrator of *To the Lighthouse* describes the view from the beach as “a scene calculated to stir the most sublime reflections and lead to the most comfortable conclusions,” and then, the waves as “disport[ing] themselves like amorphous bulks of leviathans whose brows are pierced by no lights of reason, [...] mount[ing] one on top of another, and lung[ing] and plung[ing] in the darkness or the daylight...in idiot games, until it seemed as if the universe were battling and tumbling, in brute confusion and wanton lust aimlessly by itself” (134–5). Earlier, during a rare quiet pause, Mrs. Ramsay hears the

monotonous fall of the waves on the beach, which for the most part beat a measured and soothing tattoo to her thoughts and seemed consolingly to repeat over and over again as she sat with the children the words of some old cradle song, murmured by nature, ‘I am guarding you—I am your support,’ but at other times suddenly and unexpectedly, especially when her mind raised itself slightly from the task actually in hand, had no such kindly meaning, but like a ghostly roll of drums remorselessly beat the measure of life, made one think of the destruction of the island and its engulfment in the sea, and warned her whose day had slipped past in one quick doing after another that it was all ephemeral as a rainbow—this sound which had been obscured and concealed under the other sounds suddenly thundered hollow in her ears and made her look up with an impulse of terror. (16)

Mr. Ramsay’s susceptibility is to the menacing aspect of the ocean. Simultaneously bowed down and staked up by his work, sees himself out “on a spit of land which the sea is slowly eating away...a desolate sea-bird,” his fate being “to stand on his little ledge facing the dark of human ignorance, how we know nothing and the sea eats away the ground we stand on” (44). At the same time, the narrator assures us that, at least before the war, “the mystic, the visionary, walking the beach on a fine night, stirring a puddle, looking at a stone, asking themselves ‘What am I,’ ‘What is this?’ had suddenly an answer vouchsafed them: (they could not say what it was) so that they were warm in the frost and had comfort in the desert” (131).

Clearly, the ocean can stand in for both healthy curiosity and painful existential doubt. And its correlation with unanimism and the common life, generally so positive, has its own

shadow side, implying the potential for an unwelcome dissolution of the self. We see this in the case of Mr. A's Phoebe, dissolved in Alan's will. And Lily Briscoe predicts such a whelming, with a shudder, in the future of Minta and Paul. Though she at first views the newly engaged Paul with a pang of envy, seeing him "bound for adventure" and herself "moored to the shore" (*Lighthouse* 106), only minutes later she is swamped by a deep distaste for the monomania, the cruelty of romantic love ("this strange, this terrifying thing" [101]), and rejoices that she "need not marry, [...] was saved from that dilution" (102). (She is willing enough to risk the dissolution of artist-in-work.) In this regard she sits across the continuum from Mrs. Ramsay, that quasi-unanimist who wants to know the "device for becoming, like waters poured into one jar, inextricably the same, one with the object one adored" (51).

### ***The Waves***

Woolf's ambivalence about water is front and center in her most overtly oceanic book, *The Waves*, which she famously described as having been written to a rhythm rather than a plot.<sup>26</sup> The conceit of the waves harkens back to her early impression of the surf at St. Ives, of course, but there is more to this "seismic" metaphor than memory. Waves "can express both long continuity and ephemerality, the single and the common life" (Beer 65). Indeed, the wave—a temporary, unique form carved by energy out of the oceanic commons—is the premier figure for the tension between individuality and communality, and the artist's obligations to both.

In her compelling Kristevan reading of this novel, Chloë Taylor looks at the linguistic access of both sexes and finds the novel's three male characters firmly grounded in the symbolic, while their female counterparts are more precariously placed: Susan, in the maternal-semiotic; Jinny, trying to fit into the paternal-symbolic, but necessarily doing so on its terms rather than her own; and Rhoda, who is between the orders and consequently goes mad. The idea is that the men can afford, from their solid positions within the symbolic, to look back towards the semiotic, whereas the women can do so only at great personal risk. This is persuasive, though it

is not really borne out here at the level of text, as all the characters speak in the same voice, even if they do say different things. Taylor's unique reading—that Bernard narrates the entire book, not just the final soliloquy—lets her sidestep this objection, as the characters could not help sharing a voice if “solipsized” by a single narrator. If, however, one accepts the more common interpretation that each character speaks in his or her own voice, the philosophical ramifications are huge: namely, that despite the urgings of ego, and regardless of sex, class, and personality type, consciousness has a similar rhythm, because we are all of the same substance. That is, that we are ocean first, wave second.<sup>27</sup>

Taylor also looks at how each of these female characters is associated with one of the elements: Susan with Earth, Jinny with Air, and Rhoda with water. This is persuasive enough, but here, equating water and ocean is sloppy. If ocean is, as Elias Canetti suggests in *Crowds and Power*, a crowd symbol, it has no business being tied in with a solitary soul like Rhoda. For her, the sea is a fearsome entity, a metaphor for the life that persecutes her: “Let me pull myself out of these waters. But they heap themselves on me; they sweep me between their great shoulders; I am turned; I am tumbled; I am stretched, among these long lights, these long waves, these endless paths, with people pursuing, pursuing” (*Waves* 28). Later, at the very London party where Jinny triumphs, “rid[ing] like a gull on the wave...,” Rhoda resents the insincerity and pressure that grow with every new arrival: “I am to be cast up and down among these men and women, with their twitching faces, with their lying tongues, like a cork on a rough sea. Like a ribbon of weed I am flung far every time the door opens. The wave breaks. I am the foam that sweeps and fills the uttermost rims of the rocks with whiteness; I am also a girl, here in this room” (107). “I ride rough waters,” she later says, “and shall sink with no one to save me” (160). And yet, neither does individualism (wave identity) move her: “I hate all details of the individual life,” she says (105).

At one point Bernard evokes Rhoda as his opposite (281), and in this regard of oceanic unanimism, that is right enough. As a man of the crowd, Bernard knows that his “character is in part made of the stimulus which other people provide” (133); that “the lake of [his] mind, unbroken by oars, heaves placidly and soon sinks into an oily somnolence” (37). “I do not believe in separation,” he propounds, “We are not single...we are one” (67-8). Like the narrator of Woolf’s “An Unwritten novel” (1921), which Hermione Lee identifies as “the crucial turning-point” between the relatively conventional *Night and Day* and the experimental *Jacob’s Room* (Lee 400), Bernard is “abnormally aware of circumstances...can never read a book in a railway carriage without asking, Is he a builder? Is she unhappy?” (*Waves* 76).<sup>28</sup> And it is in a railway carriage, when “charged in every nerve with a sense of identity” after his recent engagement, that Bernard seeks the counterpressure of the crowd, and luxuriates in the “*splendid unanimity*” (111, my emphasis) that broods over any group of people who share a destination. Once off the train he lets himself “be carried on by the general impulse. The surface of [his] mind slip[ping] along like a pale-grey stream reflecting what passes.” “Am I not,” he asks, “trembling with strange oscillations and vibrations of sympathy, which, unmoored as I am from private being, bid me embrace these engrossed flocks; these starers and trippers...” (113).

Though all the characters have their oceanic turns of expression, Bernard is the most oceanic-unanimistic as well as being self-possessed, and this bodes well for him as a writer. During her discussion of the creative mind in *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf posits that a good part of the brain’s mystery and power lie in its ability to “separate itself from the people in the street [...] and think of itself as apart from them, at an upper window looking down on them. Or [...] think with other people spontaneously, as, for instance, in a crowd waiting to hear some piece of news read out” (97). That is, its ability to bridge both ocean and wave consciousness.

What might be at the root of Bernard’s and Rhoda’s radically divergent attitudes towards oceanicism/unanimism? In a word: ego. Though I said earlier that water is not ego’s element, the fact is that one needs a certain amount of selfhood in order to brave the social flood, much



as, in Taylor's Kristevan reading, one must have a firm foothold in the symbolic before diving into the semiotic. We see this dynamic at play the one time Bernard's social nerve fails him, towards the end of the group's visit to Hampton court:

The sound of the chorus came across the water and I felt leap up that old impulse, which has moved me all my life, to be thrown up and down on the roar of other people's voices, singing the same song; to be tossed up and down on the roar of almost senseless merriment, sentiment, triumph, desire. But not now. No! I could not collect myself; I could not distinguish myself; I could not help letting fall the things that had made me a minute ago eager, amused, jealous, vigilant and hosts of other things into the water. I could not recover myself from that endless throwing away, dissipation, flooding forth without our willing it and rushing soundlessly away out there under the arches of the bridge, round some clump of trees or an island, out where seabirds sit on stakes, over the roughened water to become waves in the sea—I could not recover myself from that dissipation. (279)

This is anomalous for Bernard, who generally has sufficient confidence in his discrete selfhood to risk social immersion. His take on identity is strikingly similar to Reverend Bax's notion of the droplet self: that much as we must merge with the great waters, effecting them for good or ill, our individual essence persists. During the high unanimism that follows his engagement, he experiences the self-extension of potential parenthood: "My daughters shall come here, in other summers; my sons shall turn new fields. Hence we are not raindrops, soon dried by the wind; we make gardens blow and forests roar; we come up differently, for ever and ever. This then serves to explain my confidence, my central stability, otherwise so monstrously absurd as I breast the stream of this crowded thoroughfare..." (114).

Compare this with the view of the insecure Louis, that "our separate drops are dissolved; we are extinct, lost in the abysses of time, in the darkness" (225).

Yet it must be noted that even with this fragile sense of self that makes almost every social transaction painful, Louis is able now and then to put pen to paper and record words that Bernard suspects could "outlast us all." This is not so for Rhoda. Then, Woolf's writing suggests that (would-be) female artists have to brave heavier seas than their male counterparts. Take Mary Carmichael, who generates her own chop worrying about male critics and her own

possible sentimentality, or Lily Briscoe, for whom the airy planning of a picture bears the same resemblance to the actual painting of it that waves viewed from a cliff top—so symmetrical!—bear to those, all “steep gulfs, and foaming crests,” experienced by a swimmer (*Lighthouse* 157). Her strength lies in feeling that waves or not, the plunge must be taken, “the mark [on the canvas] made” (157). And so, in the last pages of the *To the Lighthouse*, we see her taking up her brush to finish the painting she began so long ago. Her mental seas are rough indeed as she begins her “dancing rhythmical movement” before the canvas, “[d]own in the hollow of one wave [seeing] the next wave towering higher and higher above her.” The turbulence is not surprising, as one of the “habitual currents” in her mind is Charles Tansley’s “women can’t paint, women can’t write,” which clashes head-on with “some rhythm which was dictated to her...by what she saw, so that while her hand quivered with life, this rhythm was strong enough to bear her along with it on its current” (159).

Given this picture of the female creative process, it is not surprising that Rhoda, “the nymph of the fountain,”<sup>29</sup> who regularly feels “rocked from side to side by the violence of [her] emotion” (*Waves* 43), should avoid risking artistic immersion, and should be throughout the novel associated with small waters: the basin in which she rocks her petal ships, the puddle in the school courtyard that she cannot cross (“Identity failed me. We are nothing, I said, and fell” [64]), the dark pool in her dreams (105). As Beer points out, “both pillar and pool are Rhoda’s images” (71), perfectly emblemizing the predicament of being stuck between the masculine symbolic and feminine semiotic.

Meanwhile, Bernard straddles both. Androgyny is part and parcel of his unanimism: “For this is not one life; nor do I always know if I am man or woman, Bernard or Neville, Louis, Susan, Jinny or Rhoda” (281). He could be a distant descendant of the ageless, sexless street singer in *Mrs. Dalloway*, with his font-like qualities. “And now, let Bernard begin,” says Neville, “Let him burble on, telling us stories...” (*Waves* 37). “Up they bubble,” these stories (38), a fact that Bernard, himself, appreciates: “More and more bubbles into my mind as I talk, images and

images” (84). Meanwhile, Rhoda feels “some check in the flow of [her] being; a deep stream presses on some obstacle; it jerks; it tugs; some knot in the centre resists...” (75).

And yet, fertile as Bernard is, it does not seem that he actually completes any literary work. Early on, aware of the sometimes overwhelming pull of his own oceanic sympathies, he predicts that Neville, generally so neat and self-contained, “will reach perfection, and I shall fail and shall leave nothing behind me but imperfect phrases littered with sand” (91). All of the notebooks he has filled “with phrases to be used when I have found the true story, the one story to which all these phrases refer,” have in effect been fruitless, as he has “never yet found that story. And I begin to ask, Are there stories?” (187). The endless stream of words and images has hit a logjam, and Bernard must acknowledge his own “vague and cloudy nature full of sediment, full of doubt, full of phrases and notes to be made in pocket-books” (274)—more like a dammed rivulet than the wide blue sea. And yet, there is no denying his oceanic susceptibility, elegantly compared by Neville to that of “seaweed hung outside the window, now damp, now dry” (19).

In the end, despite its characters’ very different fates, legacies, and creative issue, the overwhelming impression this text gives is of shared consciousness, a confirmation of the idea that as beautiful, fascinating, instructive and endearing as individual difference is, the real life is, indeed, the common life. The tension between these modes is the subject of the last scene, where the last wave to rise in Bernard—“It swells; it arches its back”—is the simple animal impulse against death: “Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!” (297). But, of course, the ocean has the last word—“*The waves broke on the shore.*” As Gillian Beer puts it, “At death the waves of the individual break and are drawn back into the sea of shared memory, memory which then itself is loosed and scattered but never entirely lost, since the body of waters remains” (65). Here sounds an environmental note (*Nature will outlast us all!*), if not an apocalyptic one (...*But in what form?*).

### ***Between the Acts***

If one looks at Woolf's work, there is a whole chain of woman-water associations. Next up from Rhoda's tiny waters is the lily pool that oozes up amidst the historic terraces of Pointz Hall in Woolf's final (posthumous) novel, *Between the Acts* (1941), fed by an ancient spring and filled with ancient carp and wind-sown lilies. (It even has on its surface petals, a "fleet of boat-shaped bodies" like Rhoda's fleet [43]). While the lily pool lacks the awesomeness of *The Waves*'s ocean, it is polysemic enough, serving not only as a vestige of the primitive amidst the gentility of the village fete, and of the deep past amidst a nervous, war-shadowed present, but also as the center—at least, the central landscape fact—of a deeply unanimistic novel.<sup>30</sup> It also provides a key to one of the text's central questions, put by its foremost unanimist, old Mrs. Swithin<sup>31</sup>: "People are gifted," she muses, "—very. The question is—how to bring it out?" (59), that is, how to increase their creative outflow. This character might be asking about 'people,' but as always, Woolf's real concern is *women*. This novel offers three "case studies" in female creativity, all of them assessable in terms of the hydrological cycle, and all of them arrayed around this dual-natured pool that is at once ancient, spring-fed, and wild; and also contained, domesticated, issueless.

Remembering "The Fascination of the Pool" one expects to lower her ear to this pool's surface and hear a fluid polyvocality, but this pondlet between Pointz Hall and the great lawn is associated in estate lore with only one story: that of a lady ("for the ghost must be a lady's") who drowned herself for love (*Between* 44). This ghost is the first case study. Her story is most likely apocryphal and certainly conventional. Indeed, it is almost identical to that of the girl in "The Fascination of the Pool" (ending, like hers, like Rhoda's, in the ultimate silencing of suicide), the only difference being that there we hear the girl's aqueous echo, whereas here there is no specific voice, only the wash of common gossip. "Servants," says one of the characters, "'must have their ghost.' Kitchen maids must have their drowned lady" (44). Her story, *about* a woman rather than *by* one, sits like a sheen on the top of the pool, penetrating no deeper.

The second case study is daughter-in-law of the house and would-be poet Isa Oliver. In her case (as in Bernard's) the words keep bubbling up, but find no outlet as she murmurs them to herself, "taking care not to move her lips" (181), or scribbles them in a book bound like an account book "in case Giles [her husband] suspected" (15). She personifies Mary Beton's statement that in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century women's writing, "it is the poetry that is still denied outlet" (*Room 77*). With its subterranean source and lack of robust outflow, this pool is a perfect correlative for her private, dammed literary efforts. She is deeply unfulfilled, not just artistically but romantically. ("Abortive" is how she describes herself.) During the first part of the village pageant, even her thoughts include only the smallest waters: a beaker of cold water (she is parched) and a wishing well whose "waters should cover me..." (*Between* 103).

Yet Isa longs for immersion in larger waters, too. During the play's opening acts, she hums to herself to about wanting to fly away "and issue where—no partings are—but eye meets eye" (83). When the first intermission begins, she picks up the refrain from the gramophone, *Dispersed are we, Dispersed are we*, and hums along: "All is over. The wave has broken. Left us stranded, high and dry. Single, separate on the shingle" (96). That she dreams of a place of oceanic oneness and figures the unifying spectacle of the play as a wave whose ebb disperses the audience suggests in her both unanimistic leanings as well as an inchoate appreciation of the hydrological cycle as a paradigm of both artistic production and connection. Even still, whether because of faintheartedness, indolence, or an underdeveloped feel for the impersonal (note her Bovaristic daydreams about the gentleman farmer who once handed her a cup of tea and a racquet at a tennis party), she cannot participate fully in the cyclicity of literature which requires inflow (reading) as well as outflow (writing). Her predicament shows when old Mrs. Swithin asks whether she agrees with the Reverend Streatfield's essentially unanimistic interpretation of the play: "that we act different parts but are the same" (215). She cannot decide but, ironically, experiences her uncertainty in oceanic terms: "It was Yes, No. Yes, yes, yes, the tide rushed out embracing. No, no, no, it contracted" (215). But while the language here suggests a dynamic surf,

Isa's waters are in fact slack, lying still much like the lily pond's, which sit "four or five feet deep over a black cushion of mud" (43).

Miss La Trobe, author and director of the novel's village play and the third case study, is very much inside the flow of literature, plunging into the author-audience cycle much as she plunges into village life—stolid, undeterred, direct, "like a great stone into the lily pool" (65). This is in the nature of a compulsion, though not a painless one. The ebb and flow currents that worry Isa tug at her more violently. She is an outcast—"Nature had somehow set her apart from her kind"—yet is repeatedly pulled back into the fold as the "slave" of her audience (211). This psychosocial diastole/systole is echoed by the "*Unity—Dispersity [...] Un .. dis...*" heard over the gramophone right before La Trobe unplugs it (201).

It is not clear to what degree La Trobe's play is a success. She certainly does not consider it one, and there is some disagreement amongst the voices that bubble up from the audience: "I thought it brilliantly clever," says one; "I thought it utter bosh," says another (197). Old Oliver thinks it "Too ambitious" (213), while it stirs in Mrs. Swithin a sense of her "unacted part." The one thing it does do, without question, is unite those present. And this is important, as division is literally in the air, with all the talk of war on the Continent and the bombers streaking overhead. These planes, slicing through the Reverend's speech and actually bisecting a word—"opp... ..portunity" (193)—function very differently than the one that zooms out of the clouds in *Mrs. Dalloway*, uniting much of London in an effort to read a toffee advert before it blows away. That is a gloriously unanimistic scene, and a healing one, in a postwar book that thematizes, among other things, the isolation of shellshock. This final novel implies that something has changed, and that much as people need and crave unanimous experience—"What we need is a centre. Something to bring us all together..." says one nameless playgoer (198)—they will find it harder and harder to come by. (The movies are blamed, as are improvements in transport and our increasing distance from nature.) The Mrs. Swithins are giving way to "the young who can't make, but only break; shiver into splinters the old vision; smash to atoms what was whole"

(183). “That’s what’s so nice,” says another voice about La Trobe’s play—“it brings people together” (160).

As a dramatist, La Trobe is a professional unanimist.<sup>32</sup> She is also a natural hydrologician, frequently speaking and spoken of in the language of the water cycle. (“Where did she spring from?” asks of the book’s many anonymous speakers, mindful of her vaguely foreign face and name [57].) In her final act, she has her actors hold small mirrors to the audience, hoping thus to remind them that they are all “orts, scraps, and fragments” of a greater oceanic whole. More boldly still, she includes ten minutes of unscripted time “to expose them, as it were, to douche them, with present time reality” (179). When the time comes she worries that her intentions have not quite hit their mark but stalled one step earlier in the water cycle, dooming her play to be little more than a “cloud that melted into the other clouds on the horizon” (209). And yet she cannot but feel when the first act ends, just as Isa is thinking of the play as a retreating wave, that she has at least fleetingly been an orchestrator of waters: “Flowing, and streaming, on the grass, on the gravel, still for one moment she held them together—the dispersing company” (98).

For all her agony and awkwardness, the woman-manly La Trobe<sup>33</sup> emerges as a privileged daughter of the water cycle when a fortuitous cloudburst interrupts her unsuccessful attempt to “douche” the audience with reality: “Down it poured like all the people in the world weeping. Tears. Tears. Tears.” No one has seen it coming yet the shower is on top of them, “sudden and universal” (180), establishing a connection between the afternoon’s mostly farcical pastiche and the great wellspring of human suffering, between the planet’s rains and surface and subsurface waters. It is the second time during this production, La Trobe reflects, that “Nature...ha[s] taken her part” (181), the first occurring earlier when the estate’s cows fill a dramatic lull with loud lowing like “the primeval voice sounding loud in the ear of the present moment” (140).

La Trobe's is not the elemental free-flow of the street singer in *Mrs. Dalloway* (her art is a more difficult, allusive, ambitious one), but if she does not speak in this trickling voice of the earth, she is sufficiently attuned to it to recognize when it is speaking to her. After the sudden shower she acknowledges that "it [had been] the other voice speaking, the voice that was no one's voice," one that "wept for human pain unending" (181)—that is, one very like the voice from the bottom of the Fascinating Pool. She honors it. And as soon as she circulates this play, another begins to seep to the surface: "From the earth green waters seemed to rise over her. She took her voyage away from the shore.... She raised her glass to her lips. And drank. And listened. Words of one syllable sank down into the mud...The mud became fertile...She heard the first words" (212). The cycle begins again.

Miss La Trobe's play is not a major artistic triumph any more than the lily pool is a great sea, but both are parts of their respective cycles, the literary and the hydrologic. If its author is not yet on the open seas of literary production, her dedication to craft and willingness to put her work out there, as well as the balance she strikes between expressiveness, anonymity, and unanimity, makes her worthy of larger waters, and so it is that backstage she is likened to "a commander pacing his deck...an Admiral on his quarter-deck" (62).

### ***Orlando***

Another place where we see language like this is in Woolf's diaries, in the early days of her affair with Vita Sackville-West, when she wrote of Sackville-West's "maturity & full breastedness: her being so much in full sail on the high tides, where I am coasting down backwaters; her capacity I mean to take the floor in any company, to represent her country, [...] to control silver, servants, chow dogs, her motherhood [...] her being in short (what I have never been) a real woman" (21 Dec. 1925, *Diary* 3: 52). As critic Victoria Smith points out in her article "'Ransacking the Language': Finding the Missing Goods in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*" (57), similar words crop up in *Orlando*, right as the title character meets her future husband, who



explains how he had known her name before being told it: “For if you see a ship in full sail coming with the sun on it proudly sweeping across the Mediterranean from the South Seas, one says at once, ‘Orlando’” (251). This metaphor continues a few pages later, when he hears her cutting through the woods like “a ship in full sail, heaving and tossing a little dreamily, rather as if she had a whole year of summer days to make her voyage in; and so the ship bears down, heaving this way, heaving that way, nobly, indolently and rides over the crest of this wave and sinks into the hollow of that one, and so, suddenly stands over you (who are in a little cockle shell of a boat, looking up at her) with all her sails quivering” (260). As a fully seaworthy self, Orlando sits at the pinnacle of Woolf’s woman–water pairings: the full-fledged woman who can live, love, write, enjoy, captivate, and so forth.

Even more than *A Room of One’s Own*, *Orlando* plays with the convergence of masculine and feminine principles, and the particular convergence that is androgyny, so if there is any t(r)opological consistency across Woolf’s work, this “biography” will have a river running through it. It does, and a familiar one at that—the Thames. Only when we first see this watercourse in the novel, it is frozen solid. Though the freezing of the river at this moment (the winter of 1608-09) is historically accurate, it seems to violate Woolf’s hydro-logic, in which the river emblemizes the coming together of fluid female and male, either externally in relationship or internally in androgyny. After all, here it is, the very early days of James I’s reign. Though *A Room of One’s Own*’s Professor Trevelyan describes how women of this period have little say in their own marriages and may be “locked up, beaten, and flung about the room” according to whim (*Room* 43), Elizabeth I’s long, slender shadow still falls across the throne room, heroic women still loom large in drama, and a certain mixing of doublet and skirt in the blood is permissible. Judith Shakespeare is not yet possible, but William—with his incandescently androgynous mind—is. This miscibility of masculinity and femininity recalls *Room*’s flowing street-river, and leads one to expect a similar profluence in the Thames that courses through Jacobean London. Instead, it is frozen epically solid.

This is, in part, down to the pure, hyperbolic 17<sup>th</sup>-century winter, but it also seems like a natural intervention on Orlando's behalf, to save him (he is at this point in the text a he) from making a terrible mistake. A good heterosexual marriage can unite and even temper each partner's gender conditioning with the other's, bringing about greater androgyny of mind in both people. A bad one will most likely result in greater distance and difference between man and woman, and will be miserable for anyone, but absolutely catastrophic for a true epicene like Orlando. Marrying such a stock character in the war between the sexes as Sasha (the "faithless temptress") would have frozen him onto the other side of the gender continuum, as the complementary cliché, "the jealous, cuckolded husband." So it is fitting that it is the sudden thaw of the river that simultaneously alerts Orlando to the princess's treachery, washes her out of the picture, and frees him up for his/her gender-bending destiny. Clearly under the river's protection, Orlando is another favored child of the water cycle.

In actuality, the last time the Thames froze solid was in 1814. But in *Orlando*, the Victorian era's disruption of hydro-logic causes the river to grow sluggish. Bombast, euphemism, domesticity, mawkishness, respectability, and prudishness set in, and with them a sort of meteorological equivalent: a creeping, prismatic damp that permeates everything, even Orlando's pen, which thenceforth produces nothing but blots and tendrilly nothings (227-233). "[T]he sexes [draw] further and further apart" (229), and without the easy mingling of masculine and feminine currents to keep things moving, stagnation strikes along with its attendant devil, humidity. Marriage, that great Victorian ideal and pastime, is no fix, but part of the problem, encouraging the fusion model rather than the "balance" model of androgyny. Orlando is confounded by the couples that "trudged and plodded in the middle of the road indissolubly linked together," moving "all in one piece, heavily." "It did not seem to be Nature," she thinks (242). Tellingly, in the passage describing the 19<sup>th</sup> century's "matrimonialism," some form of "indissoluble" appears three times, suggesting an institution that defies liquescence (242).

There is no doubt that this marriage-mindedness, as well as the related fact that it was no longer possible to “say what one liked and wear knee-breeches or skirts as the fancy took one” (231), is what makes the Victorian age so “antipathetic” (244) to Orlando. Even so, she is not immune to its pressures, and without any real desire to marry, finds herself with severe itching of the ring finger (of her writing hand). In this mindset she sets out on a walk and comes upon a “silver pool, mysterious as the lake into which Bedivere flung the sword of Arthur” (248). It is by the side of this pool that she understands herself to be the bride of nature; it is also where she breaks her ankle and is rescued by the man who will become her flesh-and-blood husband. Now, even though this is no androgynizing river, resembling rather the Fascinating Pool or Pointz Hall’s lily pond or the dark pools of Rhoda’s dreams, the scene recalls the street-river scene of *A Room of One’s Own*. There, a “single leaf” falls from a plane tree, ushering in the pause during which Mary Beton sees the spectral river that sweeps together the young woman and young man. Here it is not a single leaf but a single feather that quivers in the air before dropping into the center of the pond by which, minutes later, Orlando meets Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, Esq. Clearly Orlando’s marriage is an infinitely more profound union of masculine and feminine than two young folks getting into a taxi together. It is the ultimate exercise in androgynization: the joining of one epicene and another, and, so, less the union of feminine and masculine than of man-womanly and woman-manly. “[I]t was to each such a revelation that a woman would be as tolerant and free-spoken as a man, and a man as strange and subtle as a woman” (258), that they must quiz one another:

“You’re a woman, Shel!” she cried.  
“You’re a man, Orlando!” he cried. (252)

And later:

“Are you positive you aren’t a man?” he would ask anxiously, and she would echo, “Can it be possible you’re not a woman?” (258)

How different this is from the flat echolalia of Terence and Rachel's

"We love each other," Terence said.

"We love each other," she repeated. (*Voyage Out* 311)

And though Rachel has artistry and a yearning for broader horizons that hint at the oceanic, it is not clear that Terence, with all his feminist leanings, is the one to bring them out. As noted earlier, her oceanic side alienates him. And liberated as his thoughts about writing might sound, a man determined to tell women's stories is still a ventriloquist. Lastly, his intensity recalls that of Peter Walsh.<sup>34</sup> In spite of Rachel's hydro-logical leanings, Woolf does not give her the benefit of either an androgynizing (or even disastrous) riparian marriage or a benthic immersion in her art. She takes her first heroine as far as the shores of death and no further.

Orlando's story is altogether different—triumphant, even. S/he is in a unique position to write with both sides of the brain, and has a deep respect for anonymity, both appreciating "the delight of having no name, but being like a wave which returns to the deep body of the sea," and seeing obscurity's power to "set[] running in the veins the free waters of generosity and magnanimity," and to "allow[] giving and taking without thanks offered or praise given" [104-5]. Ultimately, she is able, as is evident from the nonchalance with which she accepts her spontaneous sex change, to go with the flow. As coda, she winds up with a sea captain who is able to recognize her, at first glance, as a fellow ocean traveler. It is only after contracting a fantastically ideal marriage to this opposite-sex sharer that she is able to finish her masterpiece, "The Oak Tree," and put it into circulation, breaking out of the small-pond-without-an-outlet mentality (though her beloved estate has its own ancient, Pointz Hall-like koi pond [327]), and sailing those free waters of generosity into the deep body of the sea. In fact, in the last scene, the silver pool by which she met Shelmerdine has merged with the dark pool of the mind (into which, once upon a time, she could only peer deeply during one of her long faints) and expanded to become one with "the Atlantic itself" (327).

Victoria Smith stresses how in addition to being a work of appropriation, mourning, and wish-fulfillment, “restor[ing] lost loves and lost objects” (59) to both Sackville-West and Woolf, *Orlando* is a sort of “putting in place” in which Virginia shows up Vita’s inferior talent. Smith emphasizes the passage about the goose that has evaded Orlando at every turn, always flying “too fast out to sea,” and adopts Victoria Glendinning’s reading of the bird as “genius or greatness—the true art of expression and feeling that was always just out of reach” (qtd. in Smith 66). But despite knowing Woolf’s eventual estimation of Sackville-West’s writing—“she writes with a pen of brass” (qtd. in Smith 66)—I cannot but feel that the stress in this ‘fairy tale à clef’ (to borrow Marjorie Garber’s term) falls more heavily on Orlando’s great talent for living than on Vita’s shortcomings as a writer. After all, writing is damn hard, a fact put with admirable succinctness by both Mary Beton (“probably no book is born entire and uncrippled as it was conceived” [*Room* 52]) and Orlando herself (“Life? Literature? One to be made into the other? But how monstrously difficult!” [*Orlando* 285]). A writer’s feeling evaded by the wild goose of literary greatness is par for the course and does not count for much. And in any case, Orlando *does* catch up with the goose on the final page, when it springs up from behind Shelmerdine as he jumps down from an airplane to meet her, and so stands less, it would seem, for literary brilliance than for total fulfillment, or, to echo the word Orlando herself uses so frequently in the last pages of the book, “ecstasy.”

Furthermore, one should not discount “The Oak Tree,” the “sea-stained, blood-stained, travel-stained” (236) manuscript that Orlando carries about in her dress like an Elizabethan love apple or a fledgling, “shuffling and beating as though it were a living thing” (272). Yes, it wins a big prize and is acclaimed by that undying hack Nick Greene (still going strong three centuries after “ruining” Judith Shakespeare in *A Room of One’s Own*) for having been “composed with a regard to truth, to nature, to the dictates of the human heart” (280), but to Orlando, these things are totally beside the point. After all, “[w]hat has praise and fame got to do with poetry?” (325).

Was not writing poetry a secret transaction, a voice answering a voice? So that all this chatter and praise, and blame and meeting people who admired one and meeting people who did not admire one was as ill suited as could be to the thing itself—a voice answering a voice. What could have been more secret, she thought, more slow, and like the intercourse of lovers, than the stammering answer she had made all these years to the old crooning song of the woods... (325)

This being a poem about nature written at the pace of nature (during Orlando's preternaturally long life), it is only fitting that Orlando hopes to return it to nature—"a return to the land of what the land has given me" (324)—by burying a copy of it beneath the actual oak tree that inspired it. The soil is thin over the ancient roots, however, and she has brought no trowel. Besides, "no luck ever attends these symbolical celebrations" (324). Still, the original intention shows an inherent appreciation of the system dynamics of both nature and literature. Having experienced in propria persona the changing literary climate of three hundred and fifty years, Orlando is in a unique position to understand how things come and go and come again; how "books continue each other, in spite of our habit of judging them separately" (*Room* 80); how "masterpieces are not single and solitary births; [but] are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice" (65). So her poem, a voice answering a voice, maybe the voice of the street singer or that issuing from the depths of the Fascinating Pool, is part of the dialogic cycle, and a further acknowledgement that one cannot take and take, but must put something back into circulation. This is the way of the hydrologic cycle, a true hydro-logical insight.

Of course, if Woolf was able to create such a consummate hydro-logician as Orlando, it is because she was a greater one still. Perhaps the strongest confirmation of this comes in the form of the hydrological cycle that circulates through her corpus, watering it from beginning to end. We can observe its mechanism by using as a tracer molecule the tear that Helen Ambrose cries into the Thames in the first pages of *The Voyage Out*. It enters that river, presumably is whipped around the world in the arms of various oceanic currents, and eventually evaporates, becomes part of a cloud, and reappears in the final pages of *Between the Acts* as part of the

storm that pours down “like all the people in the world weeping. Tears. Tears. Tears” (180). Repeat cycle. These raindrops, are *not* soon dried by the wind; they “make gardens blow and forests roar; [they] come up differently, for ever and ever” (*Waves* 114).

## Conclusion

Should this be the end of the story? a kind of sigh? a last ripple of the wave? A trickle of water to some gutter where, burbling, it dies away?  
—Bernard, *The Waves* (267)

Water is so abundant in Woolf’s writings, I have barely plumbed the depths. But as Hermione Lee points out, aqueous images would have come still more easily to Woolf in the fall of 1940 when a bomb-burst river bank, heavy rains, and a spring tide caused the Ouse to flood, bringing its swollen waters up to the very edge of her field, making the bridge and roads impassable, and turning the marsh into “a sea with gulls on it [...] As if dear old nature were kicking up her heels” (3 Nov. 1940, *Diary* 5: 236). The aesthetics of this “island sea” mesmerized her (“The haystack in the floods is of such incredible beauty”) as did the primordially: “Oh may the flood last forever,” she wrote, “—a virgin lip; no bungalows; as it was in the beginning” (5 Nov 1940, *Diary* 5: 336). But if it was comforting in the midst of this very modern war to find this prehistoric loveliness, there also may have been something discomfiting in its posthistoric aspect, as though the end of “civilization” really were nigh.

It does seem that in the final months of her life, Woolf grew more attuned to water’s negative valence, the aspect of it that ate away at Mr. Ramsay’s intellectual efforts and Rhoda’s sense of self, that carried Rachel and Septimus through illness and ultimately to their deaths. There is that sudden rain of *Between the Acts*, pouring down either “like all the people in the world weeping” (180) or like “someone [weeping] for us all” (200), and connected by one of the pageant-goers with the Walt Whitman poem “Tears,” which traces the continuity between the sobbing of a storm and “the unloosen’d ocean, Of tears! tears! tears!” (qtd. in 200). The voice

Woolf was replying to at this point was more the voice at the bottom of the Fascinating Pool speaking of sadness than of the woman in *Mrs. Dalloway* singing of love. In fact, there were too many voices altogether, spilling one into the other, as though the floodwaters had receded but left a ghost-sea of utterances in their place. “I begin to hear voices, and can’t concentrate,” she wrote in an early draft of her suicide note (*Letters* 6: 481).

And yet, if her village of Rodmell had had something of the Fascinating Pool or the Pointz Hall lily pond about it, wartime obligations had changed it into something altogether less numinous: “I was thinking about vampires. Leeches. Anyone with 500 a year & education is at once sucked by the leeches. Put L. & me into Rodmell pool & we are sucked—sucked—sucked” (*Diary* 5: 342). The desiderata of *A Room of One’s Own*—the £500, education, the room (it was from her writing lodge that Woolf set out towards the river that last morning)—had morphed into a dark, draining sinkhole; and the riverine profluence that she celebrated and mastered in that essay had become something more halting and tumultuous, as one can see simply by comparing the relative fluency of her “rough” suicide note (written on either Tuesday March 18<sup>th</sup> or Tuesday the 25<sup>th</sup> and folded into some other papers) and the short, crashing word-torrent of the note she actually left for Leonard on March 28<sup>th</sup>.<sup>35</sup>

One of the very last waters Woolf wrote about was smaller even than Rodmell pool. The very short story “The Watering Place” (1941) is set in a seaside town, which “like all [such] towns [...] was pervaded by the smell of fish” (*Shorter* 291). This is the most authentic thing about the place, whose relationship to the sea is otherwise thoroughly sham: varnished shells in the toy and souvenir shops, and inhabitants who have “a shelly look—a frivolous look as if the real animal had been extracted on the point of a pin and only the shell remained” (291). The old men in their pseudo-sporty get-ups “could no more have been real sailors or real sportsmen than the shells stuck onto the rims of photograph frames and looking-glasses could have lain in the depths of the sea.” The women, too, seem the mere “shells of real women who go out in the morning to buy household stores” (291).



At one o'clock this "frail varnished shell fish population" streams into a reeking seafood restaurant. The narrative focus is here—in the ladies' room, where three young women touch up their make-up and do their best to gossip, "their talk [...] interrupted as by the surge of an indrawing tide" (291) as the toilet flushes. This happens several times, as "[t]he tide in the watering place seems to be for ever drawing and withdrawing. It uncovers these little fish; it sluices over them. It withdraws, and there are the fish again, smelling very strong of some queer fishy smell that seems to permeate the whole watering place" (292).

By any light this is a disheartening piece, but read in the context of Woolf's hydro-logic, it is devastating. The denizens of this town have traded a real relationship with the sea into one of easy consumption—restaurant seafood, varnished bric-a-brac—and in so doing, have lost something of their humanity, becoming little better than picked shellfish or sprats worthy only of small, manmade "tides." They have become entombed in the "shell-like covering which our souls...excrete[] to house themselves, to make for themselves a shape distinct from others ("Street Haunting," *Essays* 4: 481), and are thus cut off from the vast, nourishing sea of other souls.<sup>36</sup> Their attitude towards the ocean is not unlike that of Pauncefort, the Thomas Kinkadee-like painter of *To The Lighthouse* who seeks to turn sea's awesome prospect into pastel postcards. And the three young ladies making up and gossiping in the loo are no Lily, no La Trobe, and certainly no Lady Orlando. They are not even Rhoda, though in an untitled, unpublished fragment from this time Woolf sketches a Rhoda-like character: "The woman who lives in this room has the look of someone without any consecutive (?) part. She has no settled relations with her kind. She is like a piece of seaweed that floats this way, then that way. For the fish who float into this cave are always passing through...She inhabits a fluctuating water world...constantly tossed up and down like a piece of sea weed. She has no continuity. The rush of water is always floating her up and down" (qtd. in Lee 742).

By the time Woolf walked into the Ouse on that March morning, her fictional waters had contracted a great deal, but that was not the way friends and admirers wanted this deeply hydrological soul's story to end. Before her body was recovered—three weeks after the suicide, not far from where Woolf originally entered the water—Vita Sackville-West wrote to Harold Nicholson: “They have been dragging the river, but are now giving up the search. As the river is tidal, she has probably been carried out to sea. I hope so. I hope they will never find her” (qtd. in Stape 81).

## **Chapter 2: Jean Rhys, Penelope Fitzgerald, Houseboats and Eels: The Hydro-Logic of Homing**

Certainly for artists of all stripes, the unknown, the idea or the form or the tale that has not yet arrived, is what must be found. It is the job of artists to open doors and invite in prophecies, the unknown, the unfamiliar; it's where their work comes from, although its arrival signals the beginning of the long disciplined process of making it their own. Scientists, too, as J. Robert Oppenheimer once remarked, "live always at the 'edge of mystery'—the boundary of the unknown." But they transform the unknown into the known, haul it in like fishermen; artists get you out into that dark sea.

—Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (5)

Rebecca Solnit's idea that "artists get you out into that dark sea" has special relevance in the case of hydro-logical writers, who are predisposed to see all sorts of parallels between the scope, reach, and processes of the sea (both actual and metaphorical) and of writing. Viewed through this quote, *A Room of One's Own* argues that a writer hoping to transport her readers out into that dark sea (or bright sea or calm sea or tempestuous sea, for water is nothing if not polysemic to the hydro-logician) will first need to get herself out into it, which she will only be able to do if possessed of a room that meets certain conditions.

Though it is easy to think of Virginia Woolf's misfortunes—the early deaths of her mother, step-sister, and brother; the heavy paternal air of 22 Hyde Park Gate; her painful, debilitating struggles with mental illness—one must concede her relentless good fortune in never, not even in her father's house, being without a room to write in, a room from which her entire hydro-logic—its storm, pond, river and ocean writings—debouched. The writers I turn to now, Jean Rhys and Penelope Fitzgerald, also felt the need for such a room, but were not as lucky in procuring it. Indeed, both endured many hand-to-mouth years when even the most basic housing drifted almost out of reach. While this privation can only be adduced as a possible explanation of why these two fundamentally hydro-logical writers never managed a literary water-cycle quite as elegant or comprehensive as Woolf's, it certainly accounts for their both

becoming such brilliant expositors of the difficulties, particularly for women, of finding one's place, that true room (and home) of one's own where one can, in Woolf's advice to herself, "get down into the depths, and make the shapes square up" (qtd. in Fitzgerald, *Afterlife* 200).

Temperamentally, it is hard to imagine two more different writers than Rhys and Fitzgerald: the former so un-English (even anti-English), egocentric, vain, self-pitying, intemperate, uneducated, morbid and modern; the latter so very English, self-effacing, "mustn't grumble," industrious, scholarly, fatalistic and Georgian. They never met, the only actual point of contact between them being a one-page review ("Raging Martyr") that Fitzgerald wrote of Carole Angier's *Jean Rhys: Life and Work* (1985), yet in this one page Fitzgerald put her finger on two central facts about Rhys: that she "spent her life with lovers or husbands, but wrote about loneliness," and that "in choosing these men—or letting herself be chosen, for there was an oddly passive side to her nature—she wanted protection (otherwise she was frightened) and also risk (otherwise she was bored). The contradictions were never resolved" (*Afterlife* 223). Rhys knew this about herself. Recalling a particularly felicitous period of her life, she wrote, "I was happy because both sides of me were satisfied—the side which wanted to be protected...and the side which wanted adventure, strangeness, even risk" (*Smile Please* 118).

If Fitzgerald was sensitive to this ambivalence in Rhys, it is probably because it mirrored her own. In an essay on the role of plot in fiction, she hypothesized that "[e]veryone has a point to which the mind reverts naturally when it is left on its own" (*Afterlife* 361). In her case, imagination's gravity pulled towards "closed situations that created their own story out of the twofold need to take refuge and to escape" (361). This alternating current of refuge and escape is at the heart of her second novel, *Offshore*, about a group of people living on houseboats in the Thames. "It was a pity," she wrote later,

that the title was translated into various European languages with words meaning 'far away' or 'far from the shore,' which meant the exact opposite of what I intended. By 'offshore' I meant to suggest the boats at anchor, still in touch with

the land, and also the emotional restlessness of my characters, halfway between the need for security and the doubtful attraction of danger. Their indecision is a kind of reflection of the rising and falling tide, which the craft at anchor must, of course, follow. (*Afterlife* 345)

In *The Poetics of Space* (1958), Gaston Bachelard identifies “indecision” as a part of human nature (creative nature in particular), and argues that it is just as well that “[poetic] images are incapable of repose” (36), since it is only when “contradictions accumulate” that “everything comes alive” (39), both in art and life. Far from being pathological, seeming contradictions like this alternating need for safety and risk, retreat and expansion, feed the imagination. Given that for Bachelard the chief function of the house is to shelter the imaginer/dreamer, it makes sense that his ideal dwelling should demonstrate this vivifying “attraction of opposites” (*Space* 52) and be habitable “in security [as well as] adventure” (51), as in the case of the tree house that, “well-rooted” but with a “branch... sensitive to the wind,” is simultaneously fastness and aerie (52). Thus seen, dwelling is a dialectical affair wherein “the more concentrated the repose, the more hermetic the chrysalis, the more the being that emerges from it is a being from elsewhere, the greater is his expansion” (66). Woolf herself acknowledged this dynamic, and recommended to would-be writers a room with easy access to the street-river as well as a lock on the door.

Considering that he had already published *Water and Dreams* (1942), it is surprising that Bachelard did not include in *The Poetics of Space*’s discussion of “dream homes” the houseboat, a domicile that as both snug and vehicle is ideally suited to the imagination’s alternating current of claustrophilia and claustrophobia.<sup>37</sup> Both Rhys and Fitzgerald felt its attraction and attempted (very briefly in Rhys’s case) life afloat. Though in each case poverty lit the way toward these unconventional digs, hydro-literary factors cannot be discounted. After all, boats, built to withstand choppy waters, are designed first and foremost to produce the forward movement—the departures, returns, and horizon-chasing—that make up literary plot, a fact that must have chimed directly with Rhys’s and Fitzgerald’s artistic investments in the concepts of

return and homecoming. As Fitzgerald wrote in "Following the Plot," "although you can easily spend your whole life wandering about, you can't do so in a book without recurring coincidences and, after all, a return" (*Afterlife* 383). Rhys, she thought, also felt that "a novel has to have a shape" and was troubled that "life doesn't have any," and consequently gave her life the structure of a "pattern, which disastrously recurred: a cycle of effort, excitement, happiness, collapse, unexpected help, resentment at being helped, black rage, violent scenes, catastrophe" (223).

The houseboat, with its conceptual echoes of voyage, return, and cyclicity, is a special type of home that invokes the animal concept of "homing," which also surfaces—in the form of the eel—in both Rhys's and Fitzgerald's writings. These motifs might seem eccentric, but they help us get out into the dark seas of these two hydro-logical authors.

## **Rhys**

Even before the first page, *Wide Sargasso Sea* confronts readers with "the problem of [its] title" (Nebeker 123). One prevalent reading is that Rhys's Sargasso is "an oceanic morass, an aporia between British and Caribbean ways of knowing and epistemologies of space" (DeLoughrey 704). Another is that it represents patriarchy: an "apparently navigable but in fact treacherous ocean [whose] surface offers inviting opportunities, but [whose] real substance chokes all progress" (Kubitschek 23).<sup>38</sup> Persuasive as these readings are, they nonetheless sound the unmistakable note of "theory," which Rhys, herself, did not.

Yet, anyone looking for a firsthand explication of the title will not find it in Rhys's letters, though these brim with a sense of how much titles meant to Rhys—"Almost half the battle" (*Letters* 154)—and this title in particular, to which she stayed loyal despite her feeling that "nobody knew what I meant" (154). Before settling on *Wide Sargasso Sea*, she considered many alternatives:

*Solitaire*  
*Before the Break of Day*  
*Speak for Me*  
*Before I was Set Free*  
*Le Revenant*  
*Gold Sargasso Sea*  
*Purple against Red*  
*(Across the) Wide Sargasso Sea*  
*I hear Voices*  
*False Legend*  
*Dream*  
*Mrs Rochester*  
*Le Rouge et Le Noir*  
*Marie Galante*  
*Sargasso Sea (the Wide) Crossing Across*  
*The Image*  
*The Question and the Answer*  
*All Souls*  
*Three Voices*  
*Sargasso Sea*  
*Story of the first Mrs Rochester*  
*Wild Sea of Wrecks*  
*That Wild Sea of Wrecks where I was Wrecked*  
*That Wild Sea of Weeds where They were Wrecked*  
*There Comes a Time*

(Pizzichini 277)

Looking at this list, certain themes recur: voice, dream, gossip, paranoia, lore, color, wilderness, danger. Even still, “Sargasso” pervades.

In actuality, the Sargasso is a United States–sized oddity in the middle of the Northern Atlantic, an area “so different from any other place on earth that it may well be considered a definite geographic region” (Carson, *Sea Around Us* 25). Its uniqueness owes largely to its being bordered not by land but more sea, or rather the “rivers in the sea” that are the great North Atlantic currents: the Gulf Stream on the west, North Atlantic Current on the north, Canary Current on the east, and North Atlantic Equatorial Current on the south. These currents simultaneously pull into the Sargasso’s gyre all sorts of flotsam—notably plastic (hence the sea’s new moniker: the North Atlantic Garbage Patch)—to float alongside its eponymous sargassum weed, and isolate its warm, salty water from any cold, fresh infusions from either coastal rivers or melting polar ice. Coinciding with the intermittently windless “horse latitudes,” this much-

written-about sea was a notorious dead zone for sailors and was, because of its surface calm, believed (mistakenly) to be biologically inert. In fact, it is home to a host of marine species—shrimp, crab, white marlin, porbeagle shark, and dolphinfish—and an important migratory node for humpback whales, tuna, and many seabirds.

Rhys's Sargasso is a place of impasse, languishment, ruin. But while there is peril in its breadth, there is also grandeur; and though obstructive, it is still a site of passage, as implied by the references to crossing and width (for what is width but something to be traversed?). Rhys herself made this crossing three times, the first time as a hopeful 16-year-old going to Britain in 1907, and again as a round-trip in the 1930s. During that first voyage, the Sargasso announced itself principally as a drop in temperature as the Caribbean sun gave way to the North Atlantic cold, afflicting Rhys with a giddy chill that would linger, prompting her Cambridge-based Aunt Jeanette to slip a pitiful "Poor lamb, poor lamb" into her parting words months later. "Perhaps," Rhys mused, "she knew that I was bound for a stormy passage [in life] and would be seasick most of the time" (*Smile* 57).

Biographer Carole Angier speculates that it was during Rhys's next transatlantic voyage, back to Dominica in 1936, that the Sargasso imprinted itself on her consciousness as "a bar: a place where sea and air conspired to stop you, to prevent passage from the West Indies to England, from England to the West Indies" (352). A seasoned storyteller by this time, Rhys may well have been struck by the contrast between this sea's rich "storied-ness" (culminating literarily in Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*) and its physical quiescence, the North Atlantic Gyre being a place where the planet's various ways of communicating with itself—winds; currents; even the great drama of the food chain—seemingly drop to a hush.

One of the interesting things about this transatlantic round-trip is that Rhys is forced to share it with Edward Rochester of Thornfield Hall. He, too, has experienced the horse latitudes—under canvas, no less (Rhys, of course, was on an ocean liner)—and would have felt the drop in currents and winds, the ship slowing to a crawl under flapping sails. If the idea of a



blank in which calmness and silence can be treacherous should have occurred to anyone, it is he. Yet it does not—at least, not where other people are concerned. In writing to his father, as Rhys has him do, he is certainly aware of the unsaid in his own tale: “As for my confused impressions they will never be written. There are blanks in my mind that cannot be filled up” (*Sargasso* 76). Yet when he reads the maliciously gossipy letter that ultimately wrecks his relationship with Antoinette, the woman he has traveled to the Indies to marry, it never occurs to him to ask whether the account put forth by its resentful, vengeful author might contain important omissions. It does, leaving out all mention of the fire at Coulibri which killed Antoinette’s younger brother, destroyed her childhood home, and drove her mother mad.

Having raised doubts about Antoinette’s past, Rochester is none too interested in hearing her fill in these blanks. “You have no right to ask questions about my mother and then refuse to listen to my answer,” she says; “I might never be able to tell you in any other place or at any other time” (129). Said in the heat of argument, this remark nonetheless reveals one of Rhys’s most closely held beliefs: that story-telling is a place-based activity—*specifically*, in the sense that certain stories are inseverable from their original landscapes, and *generally*, in the Woolfian sense that, without a place (home/room) from which to dive deep, the would-be storyteller stands a much smaller chance of finding her voice.

Antoinette starts out neither voiceless nor placeless. When she first brings Rochester to Granbois, her family’s mountain retreat, she boasts that “[t]his is my place and everything is on our side” (74). Rochester feels this and comes to resent it. In fact, his unwillingness to hear Antoinette’s story stems from his sense of Granbois’s hostility. “I feel very much a stranger here,” he says, “I feel that this place is my enemy and on your side” (129).<sup>39</sup> By the time this exchange takes place, suffering has stripped Antoinette of any sentimentality, so that she is able to tell Rochester, quite drily:

You are quite mistaken. [...] It is not for you and not for me. It has nothing to do with either of us. That is why you are afraid of it, because it is something else. I

found that out long ago when I was a child. I loved it because I had nothing else to love, but it is as indifferent as this God you call on so often.<sup>40</sup> (130)

And yet, this passage notwithstanding, Antoinette cannot avoid the strong human disposition toward topophilia, a desire to love the important places in our lives and even to feel that they might, just maybe, love us back. She *has* loved Granbois. Even before fire destroyed Coulibri (it, too, was a “sacred place”—“They trampled on it,” she tells a skeptical Rochester [132]), this house of her mother’s was the happy childhood home—and Rochester ruins it.

Do you know what you’ve done to me? [...] I loved this place and you have made it into a place I hate. I used to think that if everything else went out of my life I would still have this, and now you have spoilt it. It’s just somewhere else where I have been unhappy, and all the other things are nothing to what has happened here. (147)

It is unlikely that Rochester meant to desecrate Granbois, but once he has, he is not particularly bothered, sounding alternately resigned (“I’d sell the place for what it would fetch. I had meant to give it back to her. Now—what’s the use?” [173]) and triumphant (“She said she loved this place. This is the last she’ll see of it” [165]). Again, as with his indifference to “the blanks...that cannot be filled up” in Antoinette’s story, he displays an extreme lack of empathy for this loss of love and place. His final long meditation revolves around the idea of pity (“It gives me no rest. Pity like a naked new-born babe striding the blast” [164]), but only *self*-pity. Acutely aware of his own plight—sold, for a fat dowry, to “a drunken lying lunatic” (164) who has nonetheless left him “thirsty,” so that “all [his] life would be thirst and longing for what [he] had lost before [he] found it” (172)—he does not spare a thought for what Antoinette has suffered: the lingering effects of colonialism and the plantocracy; the burning of Coulibri; the gruesome death of a younger brother and total emotional loss of a mother; the inadequate convent education; or the fact of being married to a foreign fortune hunter who has no use or love or respect for her.

Add together Rochester’s lack of fellow feeling, his wish to dominate, his indifference to nature, and his emotional parsimony (“...perhaps you can love her again. A little... [I]like you can love,” says Christophine [157]) and what you have is a decidedly un-oceanic personality. And so

it is that while debating whether or not to meet with the man who is out to destroy his marriage to Antoinette, Rochester sits with his back to the sea, displaying a willingness to trade the humbly grand for the petty and venal, the sea's larger story for the poisoned well of gossip.<sup>41</sup> For Rhys, gossip proved to be, along with the weather, among the worst features of English village life, its partial truths not so different from the "sad, tamed sea" that fringes the English coast, its drab waters sliced into sluggish tranches by steel-grey piers. Unlike in Dominica, the land of Jean's birth, "[t]he sea here did not go on forever. It did not sing and play in the sun" (Pizzichini 84). Rochester, on the other hand, is unnerved by the sprightliness of the Caribbean waters.<sup>42</sup> The implication seems to be that different national characters find expression, if not their origin, in different territorial waters.

And yet, there is wonderful reprieve towards the end of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in which the chilly, insular Rochester experiences the spell of Antoinette's island not as black magic but white, and regretting his small-mindedness, longs for a truly hydro-logical life:

...[S]uddenly, bewilderingly, I was certain that everything I had imagined to be truth was false. False. Only the magic and the dream are true—all the rest's a lie. (168)

He remembers Antoinette singing:

*Here the wind says it has been, it has been  
And the sea says it must be, it must be  
And the sun says it can be, it will be  
And the rain...?*

*'You must listen to that. Our rain knows all the songs.'  
'And all the tears?'  
'All, all, all.'*

Yes, I will listen to the rain. (168)

In this moment, at least, he is willing to give himself over to the place, not in hopes of forcing its secret<sup>43</sup> so much as of learning its lessons, even the sorrowful ones. Yet it is not a life of sniveling that he imagines for himself and Antoinette, but a life of *carpe diem* plenitude:

Like the swaggering pirates ['For every voyage might be their last' (168)], let's make the most and best and worst of what we have. Give not one-third but everything. All – all – all. Keep nothing back. No, I would say—I knew what I would say. 'I have made a terrible mistake. Forgive me.' (169)

In this quote critic Helen Nebeker sees “the secret of love, the symbolic death of self through which the larger SELF emerges—male and female as one” (165). Read thus, this moment merges with certain Woolfian waters: the androgynizing river of *A Room of One's Own*, the unanimistic ocean of *The Waves*, the rollicking but navigable seas of *Orlando*, and the cycle-completing cloudburst of *Between the Acts* whose “Tears. Tears. Tears.” is echoed in the “All—all—all” here.

Hydro-logically speaking, this is a breakthrough for Rochester. Unfortunately, it comes too late. Seeking out Antoinette's gaze in his exultation, he finds nothing but hatred glaring back, for he has stemmed some crucial flow in this sea-attuned girl who used to dream of running away with the island's fishermen and sailors (156), and whose special place, Granbois, “crane[s] eagerly out to the distant sea” (71). Her naturally oceanic spirit had also shown in her generosity to Granbois's freeloaders (her “relatives”); her complex interracial relationships with Christophine, Tia, Sandi, and schoolmate Louise de Plana; and her conduct, in this very scene, toward the emotional young porter who helps carry their things to the boat. “What is the matter with him? What is he crying about?” Rochester fumes (170). Antoinette explains that he wants to accompany them to England in the role of servant: “He doesn't want any money. Just to be with you. Because—he loves you very much. So I said you would. Take him” (171). Immediately sensible of the impracticability of such a plan, Rochester castigates Antoinette for speaking on his behalf, despite his own penchant for putting words into her mouth.<sup>44</sup> (Indeed, this exchange full of fragmented utterances happens right as Rochester is taking her off to Martinique, where he will begin locking [and breaking] her up in earnest.) That she is able, even in the thick of her own calamity, to think of someone else's happiness and make a gentle push for it—“He has tried very hard to learn English,” she says of the boy (171)—invites a damning comparison between her capacity for empathy and Rochester's.

It would seem that the Rhys heroine, in previous novels too imprisoned in her own suffering to care about anyone else's, has undergone an ethical saltation. Angier considers *Sargasso* Rhys's masterpiece "because it is the most humane" (240), and sees in her work as a whole an "enormous journey" towards understanding of the opposite sex: "from none at all for Heidler in *Quartet*, through reluctant beginnings with George Horsfield in *Mackenzie* and Walter in *Voyage in the Dark*, to wry sympathy (but still from the outside) with René in *Good Morning, Midnight*, to a sustained effort in her last novel at a real understanding of her opposite and enemy: the cool, rational, worldly Englishman" (215). Whether or not Rhys achieves a "real understanding," she does at least acknowledge "that there is a male point of view that can be inhabited: that men too have fears and feelings, seek love and—in their way—are destroyed by its loss" (529).

Furthermore, *Wide Sargasso Sea* leaves the lion's share of self-pity and revenge to its parent text, *Jane Eyre*. As several critics have noted, "the most unbearable part of Antoinette's story, the last and worst rejection of all [Rochester's infidelity with Amelie], is not told by Antoinette herself (except in one small section), but by Rochester" (Angier 529). (Even Christophine is left to figure it out for herself.) Rhys thus denies Antoinette a prime opportunity for aggrievement. As for revenge, it is here merely a dream of what is to come in *Jane Eyre*. There, Bertha Mason is nothing but the shadowy presence who destroys Thornfield Hall and very nearly its inmates. Since Charlotte Brontë provides no context for this malevolent act, the reader is left to attribute it to Bertha's madness and bad (un-English) blood. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, we have context aplenty, yet the story does not end with a murderous act of arson, but with a dream, and this ends not, as does Bertha's story in *Jane Eyre*, with an act of self-destruction—the suicidal plunge onto Thornfield's terrace—but with an act of reparation, communion: namely, Antoinette's jumping into the bathing pool at Coulibri, where her childhood friend Tia awaits.

Midway between her mother (Annette) and Rochester, it is Tia who is Antoinette's "lost relationship." There is a childhood intimacy ("we had eaten the same food, slept side by side, bathed in the same river" [*Sargasso* 45]), and yet a relatively minor quarrel is enough to ignite both girls' racial prejudice and tip the friendship towards hatred. On the night of the Coulibri fire, in the midst of so much animosity, Antoinette forgets all this and, seeing Tia in the crowd, runs toward her as the sole vestige of her previous life. In response, Tia picks up a stone and throws it. Seconds later the girls stand opposite one another, blood on one face, tears on the other: "It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking-glass" (45), remembers Antoinette. But in this final dream all discord has been erased—Antoinette and Tia are island sisters again, swimming and splashing amidst the most unitary element. As one critic puts it,

[U]nlike the metaphoric looking-glass in which [Antoinette] sees Tia/herself reflected earlier in the novel, the surface of this new 'mirror' is permeable. By jumping into the pool, Antoinette will not only achieve victory over Rochester, she will also be able finally to reach the other side of the looking-glass and merge with both the colonial blackness and the lost mother-bond Tia represents, thereby achieving a wholeness that until now eluded her. (Adjarian 208)

Although the bathing pool is small, this is not a small-water moment. Taking into account the text's efforts to transcend single-sex consciousness, self-pity, and vengeance, as well as the central hydrological fact that even the smallest puddle is of a piece with the grandest sea, it strikes me as legitimately oceanic.

Angier is quite right to connect Antoinette's final vision of a "(fearful but) joyous escape" (649)—from Thornfield, Rochester, England, and non-belonging—with an August day in France in the 1930s, when Rhys stopped at La Napoule, on the road between Theoule and Cannes, to enjoy the sea:

...I was sitting in the hot sun thinking and then not thinking and then being intensely happy, for I no longer existed. I was the wind and the blue sea. The "I" was left behind – a horrible dream of prison. Everything was laughing with joy. Do you see now? I knew that my life on earth had been just a dream of prison.  
...Perhaps if one could have this feeling of being merged with other human beings it would be salvation but I cannot get it. I can get it partially with books. I can get the feeling that 'I' 'you' 'he' 'she' 'they' are all the same – technical distinctions not real ones. Books can do this. They can abolish one's individuality,

just as they can abolish time or place. People cannot do it, not with me. (qtd. in Angier 733-4)<sup>45</sup>

There is a lot in this passage: the urge to trade the prison of solipsism for the ocean of unanimism (in direct opposition to Woolf's "Mr. A"); an awareness of the difficulty of doing so; and faith in books as the best means of effecting this communion. While this oceanic epiphany had little impact on Rhys's interpersonal style—she remained morbidly self-involved to the end—it seems to lie at the heart of her final novel.

So, what finally allowed Rhys to escape the confines her previous "small water" heroine and create the oceanic Antoinette? Though the alchemizing power of time and experience must have played their part, I propose an additional magic ingredient: home.

This is an elusive desideratum for Rhys's female characters, who generally shack up in bleak rented rooms waiting for men to whisk them off to better ones. (V.S. Naipaul describes them as "wom[e]n who have 'lost the way to England,'" and who find themselves "adrift in the metropolis.") Marya Zelli, the protagonist of Rhys's first novel, *Quartet* (1929), is such a woman. *Quartet* opens with her meeting one Miss Esther De Solla, a minor character who is structurally significant in that she introduces Marya to the Heidlars (famously based on Ford Maddox Ford and Stella Bowen) while embodying the English censoriousness Rhys feared, and exemplifying, with her live-in studio, the woman who has both meaningful (if not successful) work and a room of her own. Marya, by contrast, has nothing to do and, after her husband's imprisonment (for theft), no accommodation in which to do it.

It is in this bored and homeless state that Marya agrees to move in with the Heidlars, an arrangement that quickly deteriorates into a hellish and unsustainable folie à trois after whose dissolution Heidler moves Marya to the seedy Hotel de Bosphore overlooking Montparnasse station. Though "used to a lack of solidity and of fixed backgrounds" (*Quartet* 15), Marya cannot help likening this room, with its view of so many comings and goings and its traces of past

assignments, to “a bedroom in hell” (119). This is the first of a long string of nightmare rooms, way-stations rather than havens, in Rhys’s work.

In *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* (1931), Julia shuttles between dire bed-sits in Paris and London. *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) is a cavalcade of terrible rooms: those Anna shares with her fellow chorus girls, those she rents on her own, the one she sublets from the miserable Ethel, the one in which she recuperates from her botched abortion. The suite her well-heeled lover rents for her—so smart, so comfortable—is perhaps the worst, because Anna is there on sufferance that she knows cannot last.

*Good Morning, Midnight* (1939) gives the room a whole new primacy. Sasha Jensen has temporarily traded her dingy room in the Gray’s Inn Road for a slightly better one in Paris. It is a room trying to pass itself off as a “nice room.” These are not idle terms, as in this book the whole range of human fortune maps itself onto the hierarchy of accommodation:

That’s the way it is, that’s the way it goes, that was the way it went...A room. A nice room. A beautiful room. A beautiful room with bath. Up to the dizzy heights of a suite. Two bedrooms, sitting-room, bath and vestibule. [...] Swing high...Now, slowly, down. A beautiful room with bath. A room with bath. A nice room. A room.... (*Midnight* 33–4)

And yet, Sasha assures us, this is just so much socio-economic froth: “All rooms are the same. All rooms have four walls, a door, a window or two, a bed, a chair and perhaps a bidet. A room is a place where you hide from the wolves outside and that’s all any room is” (38). “*Homo homini lupus*” (24)—man is a wolf to man (and something worse still to woman).

One trace of the wolfishness Sasha has experienced bubbles repeatedly to the surface of her mind: “Why didn’t you make a hole in the water? Why didn’t you drown yourself...” (42). While it is unclear who said these words or in what circumstances, they have obviously added to her sense of the sea as a *mare tenebrarum* (sea of darkness), less warm Caribbean than frigid North Atlantic, and of herself as a person “saved, fished up, half-drowned” (10). As for who has saved her, this, too, is murky. The friend who paid for her “nice room” (“my place to hide in—what more did I want?” [42])? Perhaps. It is true that, here in Paris, she is an entire channel



away from chilly, disapproving England, though not from fate: “[a] dark river that swept you on you didn’t know where—nobody knew where” (*Quartet* 144). This fateful liquescence runs through all of Rhys’s works—in *After Leaving Mr. MacKenzie* (1930) it surfaces as “the Seine, brown-green and sullen” which makes her room “much colder” (15)—but crests in *Good Morning, Midnight*, where the *terra firma* that has never been very solid for Rhys’s women “breaks up and disappears altogether” (Angier 407).<sup>46</sup>

In fact, the way fate pushes in at the door of Sasha’s room at the end of this novel—in the form of desire, pain, René, the commis voyageur—proves how terribly porous Sasha’s nice room is.<sup>47</sup> Some critics read this ending as a final lapse into abjection and self-abasement, a harrowing dissolution of self. Others see it as an act of affirmation expressing a will to connect even with someone as repulsive as the commis voyageur. That both readings have merit lends this scene an ambiguity, and thus an ambivalence, in keeping with the water that surfaces in this book alternately as something to drown in and float on.

My own inclination is to interpret the scene positively, as a sort of La Napoule moment for Sasha. Imagining that René is en route back to her room, she at first frets about her appearance: “How awful I must look! I must put the light out...” But then rises above this: “[I]t doesn’t matter. Now I am simple and not afraid; now I am myself” (189). She reclines, eyes closed, hoping, when the door opens, that it is the young gigolo but knowing that it is the commis voyageur who has so disgusted her. “I look straight into his eyes,” she confesses, “and despise another poor devil of a human being for the last time. For the last time...” (190). Having gone beyond loathing, she ends her story with the resoundingly affirmative “Yes – yes – yes” (190), a trisyllable that bridges Woolf’s “Tears. Tears. Tears.” (*Between the Acts* 180) and the “All, all, all” of *Wide Sargasso Sea* (168), again suggesting a moment of hydro-logical return.

Readers less inclined to this expansive reading will still find hints of an oceanic will to connect in this book; for example, the transcendent incident in which Sasha gives an old woman some money and minutes later sees her walking out of a boulangerie with a long loaf, smiling

and waving gaily. “I wave back. For a moment I escape from myself” (49). Beneath her defensively vain exterior there is the person who wishes, more than anything, to merge with a larger humanity; and who *dreams*, “...the dreams that you have alone in an empty room, waiting for the door that will open, the thing that is bound to happen” (100). Without dream, or regular access to the part of the mind that dreams, there can be no art. And without this room—porous but buoyant—there is no dream. “While I can sleep, let me sleep,” says Sasha, “A boat rocking on a river, a smooth, green river” (139). (This is the appeal of drink, too. In *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, it is only at night that Julia can love the cold, sluggish Thames—“Then it seemed mysteriously to increase in width and the current to flow more strongly. When you were drunk you could imagine that it was the sea” [15].)

Perhaps it is this line, as well as the sense of breadth and the glimmers of something beyond solipsism, that makes *Good Morning, Midnight* seem like “a boat that’s cut its moorings and drifted free”—of solid land, of England and most of France, of “the possibility of both love and hate” (Angier 408). A boat that, finding no safe harbor in the present or future, must float back toward the past and the colorful sea of the West Indies. For Rhys’s final, West Indian novel is less about ‘the room’ than ‘home’ and, indeed, homing.

When Charlotte Brontë put Bertha Mason in Thornfield’s attic, she clearly offered her as the anti-Jane Eyre. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the two characters are still antitheses, and yet Rhys gives them important commonalities: agonizing loneliness; outcast status; the finding of refuge in all-female environments (the reformed Lowood Institution for Jane; the convent school for Antoinette); a tremendous need to love and be loved; and homelessness.<sup>48</sup> In Jane’s case, this no longer applies at the end of her story, by which time she has become the angel in Rochester’s house. In Antoinette’s, however, the shift is *towards* homelessness, as she loses Coulibri, Granbois and, ultimately, up in her dark English cell, any sense of place at all.

If Antoinette becomes Rhys's most dis-placed and un-homed character, *Wide Sargasso Sea* also contains her most appealing examples of female homeownership in Aunt Cora and Christophine. These, however, are exceptional women.<sup>49</sup> For a more typical example of the distaff lot, one must look to Grace Poole, eager to hold onto her place at Thornfield, whatever its challenges, because (in her words, as imagined by Rhys), "[a]fter all, the house is big and safe, a shelter from the world outside which, say what you like, can be a black and cruel world to a woman" (178).<sup>50</sup>

Ultimately, homelessness is only one form of spatial disfranchise—the "locked out" sort that Woolf mentions in *A Room of One's Own*. *Wide Sargasso Sea* has plenty of "locked in," as well. Antoinette is not only cruelly un-homed and dis-placed (from Coulibri, Granbois, and Dominica generally), but progressively imprisoned: first, in the shuttered house Rochester rents in Martinique after leaving Granbois; then in the cabin on the ship (where she tries to kick out the porthole); and, most famously, in Thornfield's attic. If "Housed everywhere but nowhere shut in" is, to Bachelard's mind, "the motto of the dreamer of dwellings" (*Space* 62), then Antoinette's plight, housed nowhere and everywhere shut in, is truly nightmarish.

Rhys herself knew the inmate's lot, and not just as the wife of two men who served time. Her friend and editor Diana Athill speculates that her family had her committed at one point, and it is certain that in 1949 Rhys was ordered to serve five days in Holloway Prison. Courtesy of her divided nature, even this episode was seen, at least fleetingly, in a positive light: "They thought they were shutting her in. What they did not realize was that they were shutting 'all those other dam' devils out'" (Pizzichini 257). I believe the explanation for this unusual reaction lies in Rhys's embattled experience of "home."

Rhys was apparently happily housed as a child. Her family had a comfortable residence in Roseau, but her heart's home was Geneva Estate, where her mother had been born and her beloved Great Aunt Jane still lived (with a parrot like Annette's and a patchwork counterpane

like Aunt Cora's and Christophine's).<sup>51</sup> The grounds were every bit as Edenic as Coulibri's, which Antoinette describes as "large and beautiful as that garden in the Bible – the tree of life grew there" (*Sargasso* 19). Rhys would never forget bathing in its river, "clear and cold with a strong current at the side. Lying in the current and being swept away, the loveliest feeling" (*Smile* 28).

After this tropical childhood came the move to grey, chilly England; a stint at boarding school followed by a year at drama school and then a stay with an unsympathetic aunt who, nonetheless, was the one to suggest Rhys try writing and keep at it when the first rejection slip came. The two women would sit in the back garden, listening to the purling of the River Elwy, which so impressed Rhys that she resurrected it in her late story "Overture and Beginners Please" as the River *Afon* (Welsh for river). It may be that Rhys associated water's voice with her first stirrings of vocation.

After this came Rhys's "career" as a touring chorus girl, with its bleak rented rooms, hostile landladies, and shabby seaside towns. Later she found a room in Bloomsbury, began to drink, and met the love of her life, wealthy Lancelot Grey Smith, whom she would remember in *Smile Please* chiefly in terms of his house in Berkeley Square—"the warmth, the fires all over the house, the space, the comfort" (92). When this ended, there were other men, other shabby rooms.

Like her heroines, Rhys looked to men as bridges out of squalor, marrying ones who were sympathetic and seemed to offer rescue (Angier 439). In 1919 she married quixotic, crooked Jean ("John") Lenglet, a stateless person<sup>52</sup> with whom she lived in Holland, France and, Vienna, sometimes in ratty rooms, sometimes—as when John got rich off illegal currency dealings—in smart ones. Eventually Lenglet was arrested and sentenced to ten months in prison, at which point Rhys, on her own with nowhere to go, took up with Ford Maddox Ford.

After that ended (and Jean and John's marriage with it), Rhys met her second husband, Leslie Tilden Smith (m. 1928-1944), who seems have acted the Leonard to her Virginia: encouraging her, acting as literary agent, and tapping into his own meager resources to set her

up in a bed-sit of her own when her claustrophilia was waxing, and fund her travels when claustrophobia was on the rise. Almost all of her published work dates to this time, only *Wide Sargasso Sea* and two books of short stories coming after (and more than half this material—including a first version of *Sargasso*—was drafted in the '30s). It was Leslie's father's death that provided the means for Rhys's long-hoped-for return to Dominica in 1936.

When Jean and Leslie returned to England (virtually penniless) after this trip, Leslie's family helped them rent a nice flat in Chelsea: "I've even got a little room with a desk in it to write my next 'masterpiece' on. All I've got to do is start it go on with it and then finish it – Nothing!" wrote Rhys (qtd. in Angier 363). It was typical of Rhys's perversity that she would "spend years and years longing for just such a room of her own," only to feel oppressed when she had it (ibid.). This was the essence of her oscillatory nature, which would sicken of the nest and crave flight, but once flying, ache for the nest.<sup>53</sup> No room meant no writing, whereas the room meant no excuses—no reason to hide from the pressures and demands of difficult and often painful work. Leslie understood this and, when the little room in Chelsea started to chafe, borrowed money to send Rhys to Paris, where she wrote most of *Good Morning, Midnight*.

During World War II Leslie took an administrative position with the RAF, which meant provincial postings where the Tilden Smiths sometimes lived together, sometimes apart. Not long after the war, Leslie died in a holiday cottage at the edge of Dartmoor, while Jean either searched half-heartedly for a doctor or sat in another room smoking. (This event, retold in the short story "Sound of the River," shows the river in its darkest guise, the somber sister of the Geneva in which she swam as a child, and the Afon by which she wrote her first story.) Again on her own, Rhys cast about for "a flat, rooms, or a cottage" where she could "live quietly and write" (Angier 431). The haziness of her whereabouts at this time have led her biographer to frame the entire period, including the war years, as a sort of personal Sargasso Sea for Rhys: "She fell back into the water, and it closed over her head; only occasionally can we glimpse her white face" (Angier 411).

In 1947, Rhys married her third and final husband, Max Hamer—another match that promised much. Max owned a nice house in Beckenham which they would renovate and rent out, in part, to lodgers. After this ended badly for Rhys (five days in Holloway for assaulting a lodger), they left Beckenham and embarked on a particularly itinerant phase that took a still more interesting turn in 1950, when Hamer was arrested for larceny and obtaining money by false pretences and sentenced to three years in Maidstone Prison. Again, Rhys found herself seeking a quiet room where she might live cheaply and write (458), and again she disappeared. When she resurfaced in Maidstone the following year the stars aligned and granted her now unambivalent wish for a room in which to write. It was here, in a congenial room above the Ropemakers Arms pub, that she produced the brutally honest “Ropemakers Diary” (1952), whose introspection seems to have been a prerequisite for *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

After Max’s release it was back to searching for lodgings. In January 1953 Rhys wrote to a friend about wanting to “try again” to write a novel: “The chief is a place to write in. Any peaceful place. But what a lot to ask!” (*Letters* 97). A subsequent letter spoke again of the “really important difficulty” of finding a “place, room, cave, cabin to write in. I cannot see how I can manage without that – Or how anybody can” (106).<sup>54</sup> Her and Max’s flat in Southeast London had “some advantages,” but there was “no vestige of space outside or in and not much privacy. The walls are so thin. It faces a row of low-ceilinged houses like rabbit hutches. One feels so shut in” (98-9). No enclosure, no expansiveness—again, the exact opposite of Bachelard’s dream house, which provides just enough of both.

It is hardly shocking that after this deeply unfulfilling residential history Rhys should find herself drawn to impossibly Bachelardian homes that spoke to her simultaneous need for quiet and adventure, haven and launch. First, she fancied a caravan in Cornwall that could serve as a “jumping off ground” (99); then she joked with her daughter (with Jean Lenglet), Maryvonne, about buying a fishing boat and calling it the *Je M’en Fous*. Only, it was not a joke. In 1953, she and Max tried to live on a houseboat (the “Yacht Atlast”) moored in a Welsh estuary

(Angier 467). That this was an unqualified disaster (among other things Jean fell down the ship's ladder, smashing her face and head) did not fully exorcise her fantasy of a house that would jibe, literally, with her need for enclosure and freedom, her history of voyage and return, her complex relationship with both Europe and the Caribbean, and her conflicting impressions of the ocean as the epiphanic "blue sea" off Napoule and the dull, cold water of the Atlantic crossing. When her brother, appalled by her anti-Woolfian lodgings in Cornwall,<sup>55</sup> offered to buy her and Max a cottage, she did not know whether to be grateful—"I would give anything at all at, including the rest of my life (& even my new Hat) for nine months peace real peace to finish my book" she wrote to Maryvonne (Angier 481)—or resentful at being dependent, once again, on her family's charity and choice. But after Edward settled on a little workman's cottage in damp, isolated Cheriton Fitzpaine with the poetical (and Bachelardian) address of 6 Landboat Bungalows, Rhys began looking forward to the day she and Max could move into her "new Jerusalem," her "abode of peace," her "*Ark*" (483, my italics).

This, of course, was *fantasy*. In *fact*, 6 Landboat fell short both as land—there were no bookshops, no libraries, just "water all around"—and as boat. There were no voyages, to Paris or anywhere else. Rather, Rhys was stuck in a damp, isolated cottage with an ailing husband. (Max died in 1966.) While her neighborly relations were better than usual, she still wrote about the place in language that recalls Woolf's wartime frustration with the leech pool-like villageness of Rodmell:

The silent field powdered with moonlight,  
And the low hills  
The low, meek unaspiring hills.  
And the tall trees  
The tall proud dark trees  
Leaning down to shallow water  
Looking into shallow water. (qtd. in Angier 487)

"[S]hallow water is right," she wrote to friend Francis Wyndham, "'Shallow water' title but not for book. Not mine anyway" (*Letters* 204). Interestingly, this is echoed toward the end of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, when a very disoriented Antoinette recalls the outing with Grace Poole during

which she bought the knife she has turned on Richard Mason: “That afternoon we went to England. There was grass and olive-green water and tall trees looking into the water. This, I thought, is England” (183). So that, for Rhys, was England—shallow water—offering yet another key to her mysterious title. At roughly three miles deep, the Sargasso is anything but shallow and, in this sense anyway, is the anti-England.

Despite all its shortcomings, Rhys was able, with a tremendous amount of encouragement, to sail in the unpromising “houseboat” that was 6 Landboat from England’s shallows all the way back towards the Caribbean depths, and produce her masterpiece. If she was still thinking of this bungalow in terms of a boat, and the writing itself as a sea voyage, then this last work must have seemed, in retrospect, very much like crossing the Sargasso, “*That Wild Sea of Wrecks Where I was Wrecked*.”<sup>56</sup> All told, it took nine years.

If ‘home’ in the domestic sense was essential to Rhys’s writing and particularly her authorship of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, so was ‘home’ in the sense of *patria*. While V.S. Naipaul has written of Rhys’s avoidance of “geographical explicitness,” her unwillingness to “‘set’ her scene, [whether] English, European, or West Indian,” I must disagree, at least in the third case. If she does show a tendency to reduce London and even her beloved Paris to psychological correlatives in her writing, she accords Dominica a remarkable degree of selfness, a sense of quiddity that surely got a boost from her 1936 trip there, an act of homing that reconnected her with her island’s stories as well as its undeniable placeness and so helped breach the “supreme egois[m]” that made “most places (like most people)...reflections of her own moods and feelings more than simply themselves” (Angier 350). Even as a girl Rhys had felt this autonomy of nature’s: “I wanted to identify myself with it, to lose myself in it. (But it turned its head away, indifferent, and that broke my heart)” (*Smile* 66). No doubt this was at the root of Antoinette’s “It is not for you and not for me. It has nothing to do with either of us” (*Sargasso* 130). This move away from



the solipsization of landscape was an important shift from egocentricity towards the objective, the suprapersonal, even the unanimous.

Rhys was particularly alert to the Sargasso's different valences, "sometimes so calm and blue and beautiful, but underneath the calm—what? Things like sharks and barracudas are bad enough but who knows, not the wisest fisherman nor the most experienced sailor, what lives in the Cuba deep. [...] I preferred to see it in the distance, the blue, the treacherous, tremendous sea" (*Smile* 71). And there were other creatures out there—not threatening like sharks, but slimier, creepier—that she preferred to overlook. "They say the Sargasso Sea is full of eels," she wrote to Francis Wyndham in 1961, "but who cares?" The irony is that Rhys herself had certain commonalities with these strange, snake-like fish, as one critic implies in her description of the young Jean:

[Rhys] was strangely languid—her inactivity was often commented upon. Perhaps she was gathering her energy for the long journey ahead that would take her from the Caribbean, across the Sargasso Sea, into the cold, grey stretches of the North Atlantic and deep into Europe's capital cities. Here she became a wanderer, never belonging, haunted by a sense of loss. Dominica, she would say many years later, was 'the only home I ever had.' (Pizzichini 8)

The warm, salty, shoreless waters of the Sargasso Sea play a central role in the lifecycle of the American and European eel. Whereas most fish are anadromous, spawning in fresh water, living as adults in saltwater, and returning to their native rivers to spawn and die, eels are catadromous, meaning that they are born in the open ocean—in the warm mid-Atlantic gyre of the Sargasso—and by a much more mysterious but surefire mechanism, distribute themselves proportionally in the estuaries and rivers of their respective continents (*Anguilla Anguilla* always in Europe; *Anguilla Rostrata* always in North America), where they mature, eventually returning to the Sargasso to spawn and dissolve back into the sea.<sup>57</sup>

Though Johannes Schmidt first identified the Sargasso's role in eel life in the early 1900s, much remains unknown: the precise location and depth of spawning grounds, the exact method of spawning (prevailing theory favors a process known as panmixia), and pretty much

all the hows of the homing instinct. However, much like Rachel Carson, who uses the eel (in her first book, *Under the Sea-Wind*) as an empirical-literary device to demonstrate the complex connections between inland and marine waters, eel fancier James Prosek celebrates them as “a thread that tie[s] the ocean and the rivers together,” making the world seem like a totality “held by one interconnected system of beauty, magic, and mystery” (*Eels* xiii).

What is clear to anyone who has tried to keep eels, only to find them jumping out of or injuring themselves against their tanks, is how “relentless” they are in their “effort to return to the oceanic womb.” Through a combination of drive and natural contrariness (spawning against the grain, so to speak), they succeed. So, too, did Rhys successfully obey the urging of her (literary) homing instinct, managing—despite colonialism, sexism, poverty, itineracy, alcohol, perceived enmity and general truculence—to stay the course and arrive back in her native waters in her final, transcendent novel.<sup>58</sup>

One thing eels’ mysterious but unfailing homing instinct does do is underscore the major difference between animal and human wayfinding: the relative difficulty, for humans, of truly finding one’s place, our having no positive faculty telling us where we belong (though a nose, *post facto*, for where we do not). But then, this parallels the differences between animal purpose and human purpose. The eel’s objective, after all, is simple: to make more eels. Human purpose is more elusive. (Though with roughly 7.4 billion of us on this planet, the reproductive drive can hardly be discounted.)

Rhys was lucky enough to have figured out her *raison d’être*, and to have articulated it to herself (as replies to an italicized cross-examiner) in her Ropemaker’s Diary:

*The phrase is not “I do not know” but “I have nothing to say.”*  
The trouble is that I have plenty to say. Not only that but I am bound to say it.

*Bound?*  
I must.

*Why? Why? Why?*

I must write. If I stop writing my life will have been an abject failure. It is that already to other people. But it will be an abject failure to myself. I will not have earned death. (qtd. in Angier, 463)

As seen back in the La Napoule episode, books were for Rhys the best, almost only, means of connecting with others. One might say, remembering the seaside context of her epiphany, that they served as estuaries linking her various private streams—Geneva’s river; the Afon, by which she wrote her first story; the morient rill of “The Sound of the River,” which recalled her husband’s death; the calm green street river of *Good Morning, Midnight*—and the oceanic experience of oneness, wherein “I’ ‘you’ ‘he’ ‘she’ ‘they’ are all the same” (qtd. in Angier 733-4), that Rhys, half of her anyway, craved. She was here to write, and to write was to connect.

## **Fitzgerald**

Penelope Fitzgerald’s *The Bookshop* (1978) tells the story of Florence Green, a widow and (aspiring) “business woman in middle life” (65) who has “recently come to wonder whether she hadn’t a duty to make it clear to herself, and possibly to others, that she existed in her own right” (7). She does not intend to write books but, rather, to sell them, being convinced that her village would benefit from “a place where people could stand and look at” titles both factual and fictional (10).

Squeezed between ocean and river, the aptly named Hardborough is not an easy place to live. The year is 1959 and still the town bears scars from the historic flood of 1953: the sea wall gone, making the harbor dangerous “except at very low tide” (12); and the swing bridge, ditto, so that the Laze River can only be crossed now via rowboat. (Inconveniently, the daily schedule is chalked up on the door of the ferryman’s shed, on the far shore.) The building that Florence has bought to shelter herself and her books still carries floodwater in its basement.

Water is such a pressing reality in this place that it periodically infiltrates the narrator’s choice of metaphor, as in the exchange between Florence and the town’s bank manager.

Formerly receptive to her plan to buy the Old House, Mr. Keble now sounds a more discouraging, condescending note, his voice “launched on the familiar current...gather[ing] pace, with the burden of many waters” (9). It is there, too, in the description of Milo North, a minor character who plays his own role in Florence’s downfall because of a “fluid personality [that] tested and stole into the weak places of others until it found it could settle down to its own advantage” (23). These are sneaky moves on the narrator’s part, making us believe that it is water, rather than other more invisible forces, that is responsible for the difficulty of life in Hardborough.

In his speech, Mr. Keble gives Florence some superfluous business advice. “If over any given period of time the cash inflow cannot meet the cash outflow, it is safe to predict that money difficulties are not far away” (9). This basic economic rhythm of inflow/outflow is only one of this book’s dynamics. Another announces itself in the novel’s opening image: a heron flying over the estuary with an eel alternately one-fourth, one-half, and three-fourths of the way out of its beak. The fact that the world is “divided into exterminators and exterminatees, with the former, at any given moment, predominating” (34) is central to the book’s moral vision, and something that Florence fails, to her peril, to grasp right away.

If in Hardborough’s food chain Florence is the eel, the heron is elegant, scheming local arts doyenne Violet Gamart, who resents Florence’s initiative as an incursion into *her* realm. Despite living very comfortably in The Stead, a house which, in a cold, damp town, has known neither cold nor damp, Violet also seems to begrudge Florence her residence in the Old House, and tries to get her to move self and business over to the recently vacated (and decidedly inferior) Deben’s wet fish shop almost immediately after she has moved in, so that she (Violet) and her cronies can open an arts center in the Old House.

At first Violet attempts this by bogusly laying claim to a gift—“or perhaps it’s an instinct” (25)—that Fitzgerald herself genuinely uses to great advantage: a talent for matching people with houses.<sup>59</sup> Florence, Violet is sure, is a terrible fit for the Old House. Meanwhile, Fitzgerald

has done well to put the hard, glossy Violet in the solid and luxurious Stead, with its etymological echoes of both “place” (she is well-placed) and “proxy” (she has no problem either arrogating power or having others do her bidding). Same with elderly, infirm Edward Brundish, one of the last living members of one of the county’s most ancient families (they actually share a name with one of Suffolk’s civil parishes), who lives over in Holt House. “Holt” denotes either a coppice or the burrow of a small animal—perfectly apt associations for this descendant of “the earth-loving Brundishes,” who “live[s] as closely in his house as a badger in his sett” (12) and knows what is going on in Hardborough “as though he had drawn it in through unseen roots, without moving from Holt House, without seeing or listening” (115).<sup>60</sup> Somewhat awed by his chthonic pedigree, Violet is sure that this high-minded old gentleman will stand on her side as regards the “arts centre,” and is outraged when he does not (“How can art have a centre?” he asks [82]), but throws his support (and friendship) behind Florence instead. *Courage*, he tells her—“You, Mrs Green, possess that quality in abundance” (83).

She does, which makes her, despite Violet’s assertions to the contrary, a good match for the Old House. Much as she has lived, quietly and without much consequence, on her widow’s pension for eight years, this structure—the oldest in Hardborough after Holt House—has sat empty for seven. The bookshop is a second chance for both of them. There are other similarities: “Built five hundred years ago out of earth, straw, sticks and oak beams, the Old House owed its survival to a flood cellar down a flight of stone steps. In 1953 the cellar had carried seven foot of seawater until the last of the floods had subsided. On the other hand, some of the seawater was still there” (16). Florence, too, is constructed out of modest but time-tested materials—kindness, humility, industry—and has hidden reserves to help her weather any storm, such as the courage Mr Brundish admires. She also has a sense of purpose that springs, in part, from her faith in books.

In the *New Criterion*, Bruce Bawer once asked why a person as lacking in critical training as Florence—“I haven’t been trained to understand the arts,” she explains, “and I don’t know

whether a book is a masterpiece or not" (*Bookshop* 69-70)—would set up as a bookseller, yet is not at all mysterious. Bookselling, the occupation of her youth, in which context she met her late husband, is what she knows. As for the books themselves, when properly shelved for sale, they model a sort of ideal society in which order and convenience serve the cause of greater knowledge, and the shabby-genteel second-hand hardcovers nod respectfully across the shelves to the "cheerfully colored, brightly democratic" (39) rabble of paperbacks, and vice versa. This inclusive fantasy is Florence's, but the sentiment is Fitzgerald's. Given the resemblance between her critical essays (collected in *The Afterlife*) and Woolf's, it is not surprising to read of her "absolute sympathy" with the "common reader" (*So I Have* 496). ("We just have to assume that they exist—the common readers, I mean" [496].) She also applauded Alberto Manguel for ending one of his books with the concept that "The history of reading has no end" (476)—a complement to Woolf's notion that works are not solitary births, but continuations of one another. Fitzgerald's idea of "what books mean and continue to mean in a human society" (501) piggybacked on what she thought writing should and could do. For her own part, she wrote in order to "give voice" to the "compassless" (*Afterlife* 368), but she also seemed to be following a piece of advice that fellow coastal writer and kindred spirit Sarah Orne Jewett gave the young Willa Cather: "You must write to the human heart, the great consciousness that all humanity goes to make up." "Otherwise," Fitzgerald added, "it may remain unexpressed" (18). At their best, books give issue to that which flows most deeply in us, and which binds us as a species. That Florence feels this, too, explains her faith in the Everyman Books motto that baffled and even spooked her as a child: "*A good book is the precious life-blood of a master spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life*" (*Bookshop* 39). Much as the blood in our veins serves as a biological legacy of our evolutionary stint in the ocean, the "life-blood" one finds in books molecularly recalls this "great [oceanic] consciousness that all humanity goes to make up."

If books are benevolent spirits, Florence's bringing them into the Old House can be seen as

an effort to restore balance to a property that is haunted, “not...in a touching manner”

(*Bookshop* 17), by a poltergeist (a “rapper,” in local parlance).<sup>61</sup> When we first see the rapper, it has moved from its customary position in the upstairs hall to a temporary post in the kitchen, as Florence realizes one morning when she is unable to get into her kitchen.

She wasted only a moment’s thought on stiff hinges, warped wood, and so on. The hostile force, pushing against her push, came and went, always a little ahead of her, with the shrewdness of the insane. The quivering door waited for her to try again. From inside the back house came a burst of tapping. It did not sound like one thing hitting another, more like a series of tiny explosions. Then, as she leaned against her door, trying to recover her breath, it suddenly collapsed violently, swinging to and fro, like a hand clapping a comic spectacle, as she fell forwards on to the brick floor on her knees. (35)

Later it pesters Florence and her young assistant, Christine Gipping, as they drink tea in the front parlor. “That’s going down my arm like a finger walking,” says Christine, rocking herself in her seat, “That stops slowly at the top of my head [...] That doesn’t want us to go [...] That wants us to stay and be tormented” (67). First keeping Florence out, then making her stay—this poltergeist has talents in both forms of spatial dispossession, and seems itself to be the very spirit of trappedness. No one who has heard its racket, “with its suggestion of furious physical frustration, as though whatever was behind it could not get out,” can doubt this (17).

For another victim of the opposing predicaments of uprootedness and imprisonment, we need look no further than the eel of the opening scene, plucked from its native element and being carried heaven knows where. The other eel we see in this book “swim[s] uncomfortably in a glass tank” (101) just as Christine learns the result of her eleven-plus exam. On the level of story, it is there simply as part of a classroom nature lesson; on the level of text, this trapped fish signifies the girl’s narrowing options as she learns that she will be attending the local Technical, rather than the Grammar School. (“I’ve got nothing against the Technical,” explains Christine’s mother, “but it just means this: what chance will she ever have of meeting and marrying a white-collar chap? She won’t ever be able to look above a labouring chap or even an unemployed chap and believe me, Mrs Green, she’ll be pegging out her own washing until the day she dies” [102-

3].)

The heron-eel image is on Florence's mind when she nearly bows to Violet's pressure to vacate the Old House. Ironically, it is the rapper's attempt to keep her out of her own kitchen, which strikes Florence as an unpardonable occult liberty, that resolves her to stay. Again, courage.

But in the end, courage cannot keep Florence in business or in her home, as it is a long-brewing perfect storm that washes her out. Her business, once disconcertingly brisk, is down, thanks in part to a new bookshop-cum-giftshop someone (an acquaintance of Violet's) has opened a few towns over. Hardborough's new public library, finally pushed through the county council by some mysterious hand, has forced the closure of Florence's lending library, cutting off a much-needed revenue stream. (Ironically, this new library goes into Deben's fish shop, the same building into which Violet and her supporters had hoped to displace Florence.)

Other attempts to weaken Florence's resolve—a report to the Education Authority about Christine's "employment"; solicitor's letters about pedestrian traffic caused by the sale of *Lolita*—have not worked. She is also unfazed by a notice in the *Times* about a new parliamentary bill, the Access to Places of Educational Value and Interest Bill, which empowers local councils "to purchase compulsorily, and subject to agreed compensation, any buildings wholly or partly erected before 1549 and not used for residential purposes, provided there [be] no building of similar date on public show in the area" (99). The buildings so acquired are to be used "for the cultural recreation of the public." Why should she worry? She *is* using the Old House for "residential purposes." It is, she reminds her solicitor, "my only home" (37)—a fact that is worrying in and of itself, since winter has torn a bunch of tiles from her roof so that a "patch of damp [spreads] across the bedroom ceiling, inch by inch, just as the sea [is] eating away the coast" (99). (One can see this disappearing coast just north of town, where sit the ruins of a housing estate built without consideration for coastal erosion. One of the never-lived-in villas straddles the verge, ripped in half and fully exposed to the elements. Florence generally avoids



this path.<sup>62</sup> One of the times she does not, she meets slippery Milo North, who enters the wrecked villa's kitchen and idly opens the tap, out of which pours rust-red water that underscores the link between blood and ocean.)

Milo is conveniently fired from the BBC (for indolence) right around the time that Christine, in retreat from the world of books and learning after her failed eleven-plus exam, quits her job at the Old House Bookshop. He offers to fill in and just happens to be on hand in Florence's shop to let in the inspector (Christine's father) who takes note of the water in the cellar.<sup>63</sup> According to the amended version of Violet's nephew's Parliamentary bill, the local council can now buy a historic property even if it is occupied, provided that it has stood vacant at any point in the past for more than five years and there is no other building of comparable age that might be seized instead. (Coincidentally, the Oyster Warehouse that came with the Old House, which Florence had been trying unsuccessfully to have demolished for some time, has just been pulled down with amazing alacrity.) Compensation will not be offered if a property is "so damp that it [is] unfit for human habitation and subsidence [is] threatened" (121), as seems to be the case with the Old House.

Florence protests—her house is not *that* damp; she *is* living in it; it has stood for hundreds of years without subsiding. All that aside, surely the land itself is worth something? Only, it happens, if it *is* land. And it is not clear that Florence's property, found by Inspector Gipping to stand in half an inch of water, actually is.

The problem here, of course, is not water, but the legal spin that certain well-placed people give it. As the dust jacket of my edition explains, *The Bookshop's* real subject is, in the style of Balzac, the cruelty people inflict on one another in a small town. And yet, the exterminator-exterminatee dynamic is not the only one in Hardborough, which is also a town of lonely people who long to throw off their loneliness, including Florence and the august recluse Edward Brundish, whose nascent friendship never has the chance to move past the tentative, semi-

formal phase. If one considers, as Fitzgerald seems to, acts of cruelty to be (occasionally very destructive) surface disturbances on the deep sea of human commonality, then this book's true subject is not predation but connection, a state of affairs admirably symbolized by the eel.

### *Offshore*

Fitzgerald's next novel, *Offshore* (1979), is yet another story about a woman's struggle to make a home for herself. Unlike Florence Green, Nenna James is not alone, but lives with her two daughters, Martha (eleven) and Tilda (six). Her ineffectual husband, Eddie, though back in England after a failed attempt to earn money abroad, is not with them, but is staying across London in the house of a friend's mother. He can neither comprehend nor forgive the impulse that made Nenna buy *Grace*, a decrepit Thames barge moored in the shadow of Battersea Bridge, and flat out refuses to live on it. Having had only £2000 to work with, Nenna wants Eddie to acknowledge that she has "done well in finding somewhere for [all of them] to be" (37). He cannot give her this, not merely because he "is not much used to giving" (38), but simply because he is impervious to *Grace's* charms. And Nenna, though generally amenable, cannot relent because she is not.

As Fitzgerald's narrator explains, the barge-dwellers are a very specific subspecies:

[C]reatures neither of firm land nor water, [they] would have liked to be more respectable than they were. They aspired towards the Chelsea shore, where, in the early 1960s, many thousands lived with sensible occupations and adequate amounts of money. But a certain failure, distressing to themselves, to be like other people, caused them to sink back, with so much else that drifted or was washed up, into the mud moorings of the great tideway. (10)

Though this account casts houseboat living in terms of failure, Nenna and her fellow boat owners are positively drawn to this life half on water, half on land, to the degree that they recognize another, more distressing type of failure: "to sell your craft, to leave the Reach, was felt to be a desperate step, like those of the amphibians when, in earlier stages of the world's

history, they took ground. Many of these species perished in the attempt” (10).

Landlubbing feels “desperate” because these are not strictly solid-ground folk. As Maurice, owner of the next boat over, explains to Nenna:

It’s right for us to live where we do, between land and water. You, my dear, you’re half in love with your husband. Then there’s Martha who’s half a child and half a girl, Richard who can’t give up being half in the Navy, Willis who’s half an artist and half a longshoreman, a cat who’s half alive and half dead... (47)

If Nenna cannot fully fathom her “awkward persistence about *Grace*” (37), left-brained ex-RNVR Richard Blake, who could easily afford a nice house but lives instead, with his discontented wife, on the spotless converted minesweeper *Lord Jim*, is even more confounded by his choice: “if the river spoke to his dreaming, rather than his daytime self, he supposed that he had no business to attend to it” (11). But he does.

The river’s edge, the narrator reminds us, is “where Virgil’s ghosts held out their arms in longing for the farther shore, and Dante, as a living man, was refused passage by the ferryman, the few planks that mark the meeting point of land and water, there, surely, is a place to stop and reflect” (21-2). What we are being asked to see in this shifting jointure of water and land is the imperfect divide between the daytime and the nighttime selves, rational thought and reverie. This place to pause and make meaningful connections is indeed one of the planet’s “hyperplaces,” a natural corrective to the 21<sup>st</sup> century’s onslaught of “nonplaces.”

Much as in *A Room of One’s Own* the river (modeled, in fact, on this very Thames) stands for a fluid merging of masculine and feminine without which true artistry is impossible, this particular stretch of river and its shifting proportion of solid ground to water (at Battersea the ebb lasts 6.5 hours, the flood 5.5) reflects another creative necessity: a healthy balance between the part of the brain that reasons and knows, and the part that imagines and wonders.

As an artist (a classically trained singer), Nenna should accept her indecisiveness, but as a woman with an estranged husband and two practically fatherless girls, she cannot. It is the free-

spirited, big-hearted Maurice that tries to talk her round:

Why should you think [deciding is] a good thing to do? Why should it make you any happier? There isn't one kind of happiness, there's all kinds. Decision is torment for anyone with imagination. When you decide, you multiply the things you might have done and now never can. If there's even one person who might be hurt by a decision, you should never make it. They tell you, make up your mind or it will be too late, but if it's really too late, we should be grateful. (46-7)

This link between river, imagination, and ethical conduct will feature heavily in Fitzgerald's later books.

In *The Bookshop*, the North Sea is predominantly, through nothing like fault, a taker: it takes Hardborough's sea-wall, its swing bridge, its housing estate, and ultimately (indirectly) the Old House. In this novel, the Thames does its share of taking, too: Willis's *Dreadnought*; the three businessmen from the *Waalhaven* who drown after their dinghy capsizes; and *Maurice*, with its human cargo; but it also has gifts to give. (Indeed, Richard Holmes argues that *Offshore* is "really about generosity.") For starters, there is its aforementioned numinousness. During their late night tête-à-têtes, Nenna and Maurice watch the gleams on the foreshore and listen to the water's soft chuckling as it waits to lift the boats; "at flood tide they [see] the river as a powerful god, bearded with the white foam of detergents, calling home the twenty-seven lost rivers of London, sighing as the night decline[s]" (*Offshore* 45).

To a certain type of person—Nenna's younger daughter, Tilda, for instance—the river imparts a "careless mastery of life" (40), alerting her to life's dangers without letting her dwell on them, and forcing her to live in a long present moment of observation that, in the end, fosters resourcefulness. (At one point Tilda imagines herself to be a 6-year-old sailor boy, and mentally sets out to sea on the canvasless *Grace*, "cunningly making use of the hidden drifts" [28].)

Occasionally the river offers a less abstract gift, like the pair of Edward de Morgan lusterware tiles that Martha and Tilda find during a spot of mudlarking. Part of the cargo of a barge that went down years before, these tiles occasionally surface in the tidal mud, but rarely

two in one morning, and rarely ones of such quality. As the girls clean the mud off the first tile, “patches of ruby-red luster, with the rich glow of a jewel’s heart, appeared inch by inch, then the outlines of a delicate grotesque sliver bird, standing on one leg in a circle of blue-black leaves and berries, its beak of burnished copper.” Meanwhile, “[t]he sinuous tail of a dragon, also in gold and jewel colors, wreathed itself like a border around the edge of the other tile” (66). There is “something frightening” about the “brilliant gold-beaked bird” (66), which, along with the dragon’s snaky tail, recalls *The Bookshop’s* eel-and-heron tableau. Indeed, the suggestion of hostile counterforces to the homing instinct are just as pertinent here as there, and more general, since in this novel it is not just the heroine who loses her home.

Despite the narrator’s remark about the robust biological “success” of “most tideline creatures,” including the boat owners (“They were not easily dislodged” [10]), the fact is that come book’s end, nearly all Fitzgerald’s characters are forced to leave the Reach. Having been stabbed by Maurice’s thug acquaintance, Richard convalesces on dry land while his wife rushes *Lord Jim* onto the market; Willis, the old marine painter, has watched his *Dreadnought* succumb to leaks and been taken in as a charity case by the Woodies, who have just put their *Rochester* in dry dock for winter (Responsible for towing and salvage costs, Willis is actually worse off than Florence Green); Nenna has finally been persuaded to sell *Grace* and move with her daughters back to her native Halifax, where her family (more daytime people than dreamers) can keep an eye on her. Then, of course, there is what happens to *Maurice*.

Unlike the metaphorical “perfect storm” that brings down Florence Green, *Offshore* ends with an actual squall. “[S]torm weather began to blow up on the Reach. There had been a good deal of rain, the Thames was high, and a north westerly had piled up at the river’s mouth, waiting for a strong flood tide to carry it up” (133). As the wind rises and tide turns, the generous, loving Maurice, despondent at the loss of his friends and neighbors, sits below deck and swallows whisky after whisky. Drunk as he is, he is not as far gone as Eddie when he, on this night of all nights, stumbles aboard *Maurice* looking for Nenna. Once Maurice recognizes Eddie

as Nenna's husband, he tries to help him over onto *Grace*. It is during this maneuver, with one of them hanging onto the ship's ladder and the other collapsed over the gunwale, that the boat heaves free of its anchor, and "with the two of them clinging on for dear life, put[s] out on the tide" (141).

In a 1979 letter to Frank Kermode, Fitzgerald felt pressed to defend this ending: "...you said in passing that the 'apocalyptic flood' at the end of *Offshore* wasn't a success and I expect it isn't, but it really isn't meant as apocalyptic either—I only wanted the Thames to drift out a little way with the characters whom in the end nobody particularly wants or lays claim to. It seems to me that not to be wanted is a positive condition and I hoped to find some way of indicating that" (*So I Have* 452).

I suppose one could argue that the role water plays in this negative denouement, taken along with its general violence in *The Bookshop*, seems to weigh against Fitzgerald's hydro-logicality. I disagree. Bachelard is right that a strong elemental disposition in a person is always accompanied by ambivalence, since it is ambivalence that gives images their power. ("For the material element to engage the whole soul, there must be a dual participation of desire and fear, a participation of good and evil, a peaceful participation of black and white" [Bachelard, *Water* 12].) Less abstractly, to understand the negative valence Fitzgerald gives water here, I suggest that one read between the lines of her letter to Kermode to consider the manifold ways, other than shipwreck, that life can make a person feel unwanted and unclaimed. An easy one: it can deny her a home (homelessness is also "a positive condition"), a place in which to do the work that makes her feel, to use Rhys's words, that she has "earned death."

Anxiety about this work and the requisite room of one's own crop up in this work twice. First, in the sly introduction of Edward de Morgan. Like Fitzgerald, de Morgan was a late-blooming novelist who published his first book, quite successfully, in his late sixties. A ceramicist by inclination and training, he was deeply wounded when, after a lifetime spent "trying to make beautiful things" (his words), a lack of consumer interest forced him to leave his

last pottery at Sands End (Martha can just make out NDS END on the back of one of the tiles she and her sister find) and take up a second, more lucrative but less heartfelt art. Through him, Fitzgerald connects the predator-prey/heron-eel motif not only with the homing struggle, but also fears about audience receptivity and later-middle-life reinventions.

The specific difficulties, for a woman, of securing creative space Fitzgerald projects onto her artistic proxy, Nenna, who speculates, with annoyance, that the people “who asked her why she didn’t make use of her talent and give singing lessons had perhaps not tried to do this while living in two rooms over a greengrocer’s, and looking after young children” (*Offshore* 33). Though it is never stated explicitly, *Grace*—despite its Bachelardian credentials—cannot be much better than those two rooms, with its unpartitioned cabin acting as a passageway for the girls and “a succession of persons, including the milkman, trampling overhead” (36).

For her part, Fitzgerald claimed to have made peace with the sort of interruptions that maddened Rhys in her inadequate digs and that were behind Woolf’s idea of the room of one’s own in the first place:

I believe that most women will always be kitchen-table writers and worse still that they become irreversibly conditioned to it. Just as Napoleon, if he had ten minutes to spare, allowed himself to go to sleep for ten minutes exactly, so a woman, in my experience, can pick up her draft novel and go on with it, precisely until the telephone, the doorbell, the egg timer, or the alarm clock rings. Women adapt in a peculiar way to the battle between Time and Nature. (*Afterlife* 369)

And so it was, she confessed, that she could *only* write in London, amidst “the noise and the squalor and the perpetual distractions and the temptation to take an aircraft somewhere else...” (*So I Have* 385). Yet, if all this makes her sound like a woman who did not need that room of her own and did not resent not having it, her career tells a different story, for it was not until she was well and truly housed that she began producing her novels.

In 1975, while living with her ailing and long-impecunious husband, Desmond, in their cramped London council flat, Fitzgerald wrote to her daughter, “Oh, what I wouldn’t give for a

little house and a garden, and an attic to put things in” (170). After his death, she lived quite comfortably with one daughter, then another, publishing four novels inside of five years. As her responsibilities as a writer and researcher grew, she acquired in addition to the filial home base a writer’s pied-à-terre: “2 strange little rooms (but they suit me) at the top of [a] house” (302) in Saint John’s Wood. This was followed, in the late ‘80s, by a perch in Highgate. “I’m here in my little green room—and it is small, as I told you, but it looks out of the garden and the trees and I love it” (316). It was in these treehouse-like snuggeries that she was able to leave behind the oblique autobiography of the early novels and make increasingly bold imaginative forays into 1950s Italy (*Innocence*, 1986), pre-revolutionary Russia (*The Beginning of Spring*, 1988), post-Edwardian Cambridge (*The Gate of Angels*, 1990), and 18th-century Germany (*The Blue Flower*, 1995)—a trajectory that seems to prove Bachelard’s claim that “the more concentrated the repose, the more hermetic the chrysalis, the more the being that emerges from it is a being from elsewhere, [and] the greater his expansion” (*Water* 66).

But to return, briefly, to her seemingly unhydro-logical rendering of the Thames and the sea beyond at the end of *Offshore*, no reading would be complete without mention of the fact that there was in Fitzgerald’s life, as in Rhys’s, a long literary silence, a sort of biographical Sargasso Sea, that deepened considerably in 1963 when the real *Grace*, the barge on which Fitzgerald lived with her husband and three children, sank for the second time, taking with it every letter, notebook, and story, as well as nearly all records of her wartime work at the BBC, the early “prosperous” phase of her marriage, her editorship of the *World Review*, her early years as a mother, and her time spent living with her family in Southwold (the basis for Hardborough) in a damp oyster warehouse that had been plastered with sea salt (Dooley xv). That all of this was suddenly, irretrievably gone, swallowed by the river, was one battle between Time (posterity) and Nature (the majestic Thames) that Fitzgerald never quite adapted to. Years later she wrote to a friend that “there is a point with living conditions when things have to get



better—I felt this when we were awash in the Thames” (*So I Have* 384). It is very possible that the river’s ferocity at the end of *Offshore* is an echo of this pain and frustration.

Whatever houseboat living proved to be in reality, it clearly spoke to her at one point as persuasively as it did to her fictional barge-dwellers. Her son-in-law and literary executor Terence Dooley speculates that *Grace* was bought as much for its name as its cheapness (Dooley xxix), as there had been two definite episodes of artistic grace in her life: an “epiphanic childhood moment” when the sun shone through Edward Burne-Jones’s stained glass window of the Last Judgment in Birmingham Cathedral, awakening in her “a sense of ideal beauty in art” (xxiv)<sup>64</sup>; and an instant during her trip to China (funded with the money from *The Knox Brothers*, her 1977 biography of her father and uncles), in which “she had the revelation that all writers await. She saw as in a blinding light how to transmute the events of her own life into serious fiction” (xxv). Something in this barge and its happy name must have chimed with her own deep-flowing creative impulse and her need to both affect and be affected through art.

Grace is very much in line with the river as it emerges in two of Fitzgerald’s later novels.

### *The Beginning of Spring*

*The Beginning of Spring* (1988) is the story of Frank Reid, a Russian-born printer of English parentage, who returns from work one day to find that his wife, Nellie, has left with their three children (though these she sends back the next morning via train). It is Moscow, 1913. Winter is drawing to a close, and the Moskva River churns slowly through the city, thick with breaking ice and the rubbish it accumulated when, frozen solid, it served as a highroad: baskets, crates, way-posts, wash-tubs, wheels, cradles, and—according to one newspaper that runs the story every year—a pair of lovers frozen into one another’s arms (*Beginning* 71). More objects will be added before book’s end: metal type, printers’ equipment, a Webley pistol, an uncensored copy of Tolstoy’s *Resurrection*.

Though Frank does not live on the Moskva or even beside it, he is, as a Russian-born Englishman and the owner of a printing press in a time of increasing censorship, a sort of tideline character, marginal. He is decent, sensible, and generally reliable but, according to Selwyn Crane, his Tolstoyan friend and accountant, deficient in at least one regard: “You have courage, Frank, but I think you have no imagination” (11).

This is a heavy charge in a book that is primarily about imagination, specifically, the “latent Fitzgerald idea about the moral necessity of imagination” (Holmes).

It is true that Frank, so shocked by Nellie’s departure, seems not to have imagined her needs and possible dissatisfactions, or the possibility of her leaving, either with or without the children. He does not for a second imagine that Selwyn might have played a role in her departure; or that the student who later breaks into his press might not be a revolutionary, but a jealous lover; or that Lisa Ivanovna, the beautiful young woman who looks after his children in Nellie’s absence, might not be a mere lover, but a revolutionary. (When asked by the chaplain’s wife whether Lisa might not belong to a revolutionary group, Frank accuses the asker of letting her imagination “run away” [*Beginning* 137].) Yet, he is not the only one lacking in this area. Selwyn fails to imagine himself as a potential adulterer, and so just barely catches himself in time. Nellie cannot imagine that Selwyn will fail their tryst, or how her sending her children back alone on the train might affect them, or how disappointing leaving her husband might be.

These moral-imaginative lapses are one thing. They happen probably even to the most vigilant do-gooders, and do not necessarily make a person immoral. But what about instances in which one imagines the ill effects of an action and does it anyway, as does Frank in the case of Miss Kinsman, the dowdy, unemployed, temporarily homeless Englishwoman who, having heard of Nellie’s departure, hopes to find a way of remaining in Moscow by acting as governess to Frank’s children? In pursuit of this goal, she one night follows (rather forces) Frank to the edge of the still-frozen Moskva. Due to a blessed bit of miscommunication, she believes herself to be speaking with an associate of Frank’s rather than the man himself, which makes it easier

for him to warn her off—despite the claims made on him by her Englishness, her unwantedness, her name (if you will not help a kins[wo]man, who will you help?), and what he can imagine about the life awaiting her back in England. The problem is that he can also imagine the effect, on his children and himself, of living with this dogged, unfortunate person (a relative, surely, of *Mrs. Dalloway's* Miss Kilman). So Selwyn is wrong, when he chides Frank for his inability to “pictur[e] the sufferings of others”:

Now, you're not an imaginative man, Frank. If you have a fault, it's that you don't grasp the importance of what is beyond sense or reason. And yet that is a world in itself. 'Where is the stream,' we cry, with tears. But look up and lo! there is the blue stream flowing gently over our heads. (155)

The cause of Frank's moral misstep is not a problem of imagination, but desire's deflections.

One might say that *The Beginning of Spring* is a tale of two rivers: the ideal blue stream of moral imagination spoken of by Selwyn—pellucid and flowing unimpeded towards the great ocean of *agape*; and the feculent Moskva, a perfect correlative for human nature as it actually is, on its way to the sea, but littered with passions, violent urges, dogmas, jealousies, and so forth. The idea that either stream flows “gently” is of course an oversimplification, whose falseness is shown by Selwyn's own hypocrisy concerning Nellie, and also by the fate of *Offshore's* Maurice, who speaks so wistfully of the practical drawbacks of imagination, and of whom the narrator says that “[t]he dangerous and ridiculous were necessary to his life, otherwise tenderness would overwhelm him” (135). (Of course, at the end of the book he is overwhelmed, literally, and swept out to sea.) This is an echo of Fitzgerald's assessment of her own need to treat her real subject matter—courage, weakness, defeat, “the tragedy of misunderstandings and missed opportunities”—as comedy, “for otherwise how can we manage to bear it?” (*Afterlife* 347).

That Fitzgerald here returns both to these themes and the need to “give voice” to the compassless and the unwanted confirms her own theory that “[e]veryone has a point to which the mind reverts naturally when it is left on its own” (361). On the level of plot, *The Beginning of Spring* is also about life's pattern of endings and beginnings, departures and returns, most

obviously the cycle of the seasons. For Frank's family, the end of winter means trips to the dacha, a more modest and boreal Granbois-type retreat, half of the woods, half of the waters, where Fitzgerald sets one of her most haunting and enigmatic scenes.<sup>65</sup> (Lisa Ivanovna, alone at the dacha with the children, has planned to run away with the mysterious folk who await her amidst, and almost indistinguishable from, its surrounding trees late one night, and only returns to the house because Frank's eldest daughter, Dolly, has followed her.) Here, the "cycles of seasonal regeneration" inseparable from the myth of the Russian birch forest (Holmes) come face to face with "the ghosts of the future" (Dooley xxxv)—nature's predicable rounds clashing with history's uncertain "progress" as the political ice shifts, dispersing this novel's characters as surely as *Offshore's* barge dwellers. By book's end, Lisa Ivanovna has already fled to Berlin (no goodbyes, no explanations), and Bernov, the press's accountant, and Tvoydorov, its compositor, are off to England, as are Frank and his brood. Selwyn's plans are appropriately vague. As for Nellie, her movements recall those of Eddie, Nenna's not-quite-wanted husband in *Offshore*, for just as he shows up at the boats in time for the storm surge, she arrives right as the windows of the Reid home are being stripped of their winter sealant and flung open to the spring's breath.

As Fitzgerald has the poet Friedrich "Fritz" von Hardenburg, aka Novalis, say in her biographical novel about him, *The Blue Flower*, "If a story begins with finding, it must end with searching" (112). Similarly, if a novel begins with leaving, it must end with arriving—or in this case, returning. For it turns out that this, too, is a novel of homing, even if the journey (Nellie's) happens offstage, and is as mysterious to us as the minutiae of the eels' Atlantic circuit. Whereas Miss Kinsman and Lisa Ivanovna belong to the large group of women teetering on the brink of homelessness, Nellie has a secure place in her husband's large, well-heated, populous household at 22 Lipka Street. (At least until the political situation drives the Reids out of Russia altogether, as it must.) Hers is the stress of being, or feeling, "locked in." Any political, marital, and/or vocational suffocation she feels is emblemized by this house that is sealed up tight against the cold for much of the year, so that it is "deaf, turned inwards, able to listen only to itself"

(*Beginning* 187). This might suit Lisa Ivanovna during her brief stay, creature of silence and stillness that she is, but Nellie “ha[s] never been much of a sitter-still,” more a “jumper-up and walker-about” (83), and a talker—though not so much recently, it occurs to Frank. We never do hear what is on her mind. For, unlike Fitzgerald’s other books, *The Beginning of Spring* is notably light on female both consciousness and voice.

There is another voice that is absent but due to make its seasonal return. Recalling his many years in Russia, Frank thinks of how now, as in his childhood,

the first sign of spring that couldn’t be mistaken had been a protesting voice, the voice of the water, when the ice melted under the covered wooden footpath between the house and the factory. The ice there wasn’t affected by the stoves in the house or the assembly-shop furnace, the water freed itself by its own effort, and once it had begun to run in a chattering stream, the whole balance of the year tilted over. At the sound of it his heart used to leap. (110)

It is significant that the return of Nellie’s voice (the curtain drops just before she speaks) should coincide so neatly with that of water’s, and that it should happen just as 22 Lipka Street, now open to the elements and other voices, should embody the Bachelardian compromise of enclosure and exposure.

The idea of nature’s voices surfaces more intently in *The Blue Flower*, where the central character, Fritz von Hardenburg, is actively nostalgic for the time of universal language, “the golden age when plants and animals spoke and told their secrets to mankind” (Dooley xxxvii). This idea is completely of a piece with his other beliefs that “all subjects are, all knowledge is, one” (*Flower* 51) and (after Fichte) that “there is only one absolute self, one identity for all humanity” (80). As characters go, Fritz is as oceanic as they come, so it is fitting that Selwyn’s quote about the blue stream should come from the real-life Fritz’s (aka Novalis’s) unfinished novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1800). The turbulent tributary of moral imagination is, indeed, one of the quickest ways to the ocean of beyond-self.

Published when she was eighty, *The Blue Flower* was (perhaps consciously) Fitzgerald's final novel, so it is only appropriate that it, too, should be a story of homecoming. Richard Holmes riffs on Novalis's pronouncement that "Philosophy is really homesickness; the wish to be everywhere at home," and ventures that "All historical fiction...is a form of homesickness." (*Wide Sargasso Sea* is a historical novel, too.) By this reckoning, *The Blue Flower*—a philosophical historical novel—is a two-ply homing attempt, and this does not take its author's biography into account. Like Rhys, Fitzgerald was very happily housed as a child and had occasion to learn, when sent to boarding school, "that homesickness is a real illness and that reason has no power against it" (*Afterlife* 340). She later saw in her childhood a parallel with her father's that explained why she felt so at home in the eccentric, brilliant world he shared with his three brothers, which she tried to capture in 1977's *The Knox Brothers*.<sup>66</sup> ("I still think that they were right," she would say in her seventies, "and in so far as the world disagrees with them, I disagree with the world" [*Afterlife* 338].) If one buys the further parallel that Holmes sees between the rarefied Edwardian air of her father's family home and the strict high-mindedness of the otherworldly Hardenburgs, then *The Blue Flower* looks like Fitzgerald's voyage back to her own past through both Novalis's and her father's.

One thing that is certain is that there existed for Fitzgerald a strong day-to-day associative link between these homecomings, the river, the houseboat, the spiritual, the aesthetic, and the blue flower, in St. Mary's Battersea, the church directly across from *Grace's* mooring where Fitzgerald worshipped during her Thames years. Dooley describes how "[i]nside that lovely eighteenth-century church, the first thing that one sees, among a wonderful collection of modern stained-glass windows, Blake and the grain of sand, Turner, Franklin and the promise of happiness, on the left side of the door is a large and beautiful blue flower" (xlii).

## **Lost Rivers**

If the tide was low they watched the gleams on the foreshore, at half tide they heard the water chuckling, waiting to lift the boats, at flood tide they saw the river as a powerful god, bearded with the white foam of detergents, calling home the twenty-seven lost rivers of London, sighing as the night declined.  
(*Offshore* 45)

Two ideas merge in this passage: a polluted Thames and lost rivers. Of course, they are not distinct ideas, as one way for a river to become “lost” is for it to become so polluted it can no longer support human or animal life.<sup>67</sup> In this sense, Rhys writes about the lost rivers of Dominica. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette offers her husband three different draughts: the second is the tumbler full of honeymoon punch; the third, the glass of wine spiked with Christophine’s love potion; the first, handed over during the initial trek up to Granbois, the leaf-cup of mountain water, silver blue. Rochester drinks it and marvels at its sweetness. In the ‘30s, during Rhys’s visit to Dominica, this scene played very differently. Touring the remains of her family estate and hoping to get a taste of the past, she attempted to drink some river water only to have her tour guide slap her hand away from her mouth, talking of pollution, illness. “How many times had I drunk from that river when I was thirsty?” she later wondered. “There are supposed to be three hundred and sixty-five rivers in the island, one for every day of the year. Were they all dirty?” (*Smile* 29).

The Thames that flows through *Offshore* is not as trashed as the 1913 Moskva that courses through *The Beginning of Spring*; still, it is foamy with surfactants and, even in the early ‘60s, littered with plastic containers (*Offshore* 63). And yet, the “lost rivers” Fitzgerald mentions in the passage above are more literally lost, being the ones that were buried, one after another, during London’s long expansion, as waters that were originally needed for drinking, transport, industry and sluicing, became noisome, rubbish-choked health-hazards, or simply got in the way.<sup>68</sup> One of these, the Westbourne, is mentioned by name in *Offshore*, when Willis, the old nautical painter, draws the attention of Nenna’s youngest to the massive iron pipe that carries the buried stream over the tracks at the Sloane Street tube station (50).<sup>69</sup> Much as there

is currently a reevaluation in process regarding the Sargasso Sea, once regarded as a dead zone but now known as a sort of “blooming desert,” recent years have seen a concerted effort to “unbury” some of these long-lost waterways.<sup>70</sup>

Which returns me to Virginia Woolf and her assertion, in *A Room of One's Own*, that women's lives “hav[e] ceased to run underground” (“Women and Fiction”). Underground (uncirculated) stories have always been as important to the storytelling cycle as underground waters are to the water cycle. It was because of her inherent belief in this idea that Woolf spent the balance of *Room* sketching out the myriad forces that had kept women's stories beneath the surface: the systemic educational and professional biases; the lack of encouragement and tradition; the disempowering spatial practices, various locking outs and locking ins, of which the lack of private creative space was only one aspect (though an important one). The above-grounding of which she spoke had two sources: women's increasing willingness to write about female experience, and their attempts to “unbury” such women's writings as had been silted over by time and/or indifference.

Rhys's writing the story of “the first Mrs. Rochester” is one of literature's prime examples of the former, wherein the author blasted a hole in one of the canon's bedrock “masterpieces,” exposing feminine groundwaters of a totally different color and temperature. Less celebrated, but no less important, was her contribution of other undertold stories: those of chorus girls; kept women; island girls going “home” to England; lonely, aimless women of a certain age. Fitzgerald's tack was subtler. “You might not call [her], at first glance, a feminist writer,” conceded Hermione Lee, “but she is one” (Lee, *Afterlife* xv). Though her later books are remarkable for their female silences (Nelly's and Lisa's in *Beginning of Spring*; Sophie's and Karoline Just's in *The Blue Flower*), *The Bookshop* and *Offshore* are firmly—or liquescently—rooted in female experience and Fitzgerald's commitment to give voice to the voiceless. Her most sustained act of above-grounding, however, came in the form of her 1984 biography of the poet Charlotte Mew, who had sunk into obscurity despite Thomas Hardy's assertion that she



“will be read when others are forgotten” (qtd. in *Afterlife* 127). Mew herself had hoped, at one point, to bring out a Collected Poems of Emily Brontë, as there was no such edition even fifty years after Brontë’s death (though, unbeknownst to Mew, two were in the works).<sup>71</sup>

This Fitzgerald-Mew-(Emily) Brontë stream illustrates two things—Woolf’s (or Mary Beton’s) claim in *A Room of One’s Own* that “as women we think back through our [literary] mothers” (76); and the feminist determination to unearth long-hidden literary springs. As Fitzgerald wrote to her friend Francis King on receipt of his book of poems, *The Buried Spring*, “It’s an ambiguous title, like others of yours, but I don’t find it depressing, because springs are buried (like the Twill mill-stream) only until they reappear again” (*So I Have* 288). Or until they are made to reappear.

## **Conclusion**

Whereas some of Woolf’s characters are triumphant either at living or writing or both—the small-craft sailors of Clarissa Dalloway, Lily Briscoe, Miss La Trobe; a river captain like Mary Beton; a true ocean voyager like Orlando—Rhys’s and Fitzgerald’s characters are not especially successful. Despite her best efforts to stake out a place in the community and act, in the role of bookseller, as a sort of cultural ferrywoman for Hardborough, Florence Green fails miserably. Neither can Nenna, driven from her own boat into the protective (and possible smothering) arms of her family, be called victorious. And then, of course, there is Antoinette, who could be called a success only under a very extraordinary definition (though according to her mad logic, that of a cruelly unhomed exile and prisoner, she does what she has to do).

Rhys and Fitzgerald, on the other hand, *were* triumphant. Despite slim odds and occasionally hostile forces, both found a room of her own in which to sail back to her home truths, Fitzgerald navigating the sometimes blue, sometimes grey river of moral imagination, Rhys breasting I-dissolving waters like those she glimpsed on that 1930s day from the beach at

La Napoule. Both participated in the ebb and flow, the reading/writing rhythm, of the literary cycle, Rhys merging her little reflective pool with the wide Sargasso, Fitzgerald speaking for society's tideline population. Both wrote "to the human heart, the great [oceanic] consciousness that all humanity goes to make up" (*Afterlife* 18). Diving deep, making the shapes square up, both achieved hydro-logical mastery.

### **Chapter 3: River Stories, Dam Lies, and Thinking Back Through Our Mothers:**

**Joan Didion, Arundhati Roy, and Linda Hogan**

*Be praised, My Lord, through Sister Water; she is very useful, and humble, and precious, and pure.*

—St. Francis of Assisi, *Canticles of the Sun*

So far I have looked at various personal metaphorizations of rivers: for Woolf, the river as the merging of male and female principles (and an alternative to masculine cities); for Rhys, as a stand-in for lost/buried narratives; and for Fitzgerald, as a figure for moral imagination. Persuasive as these equivalences are, they are idiosyncratic. Undoubtedly the river's most persistent traditional association—more essence than association—is flow. Speaking with more hydrological sophistication, one can say that rivers are flows of information—between the upstream and downstream environments, between continent and ocean. They are one of the dialects in which the planet talks to itself.

The authors I look at in this chapter—Joan Didion, Arundhati Roy, and Linda Hogan—allow me to triangulate the river with two other (related) information flows: storytelling and matrilineage (a narrative continuity as well as a genetic one). This involves looking at, among other things, the stories that river people tell, the way stories (especially ones about water) trickle down from the women of one generation to those of another, and the ways in which storytelling processes resemble riparian ones. Proceeding from last chapter's theme of "lost rivers," I will approach these ideas negatively, asking what happens when any one of these interrelated flows of information is disrupted or at least threatened. The particular disruption that interests me falls on the river corner of the triangulation: the dam.

Didion, Roy and Hogan have all written fictively, factually, and editorially about dams. In addition to their different social, cultural, and philosophical influences, I am interested in how

their personal experiences and backgrounds have inflected their attitudes toward river management and storytelling.

### **Unsilent Rivers: a planetary dialect**

Anyone interested in the specific interrelated effects dams have on rivers cannot do better than look at Patrick McCully's *Silenced Rivers: The Ecology and Politics of Large Dams*. McCully's Carsonesque title foregrounds the sensual loss inflicted by dams, the stifling of some of the earth's earliest music. His text lays out in myriad detail the more figurative silencing that occurs when rivers are prevented from carrying their usual burden of information downstream, across continents and into the oceans. In carrying water that is volumetrically, thermally, and chemically a real-time expression of local conditions, a wild river speaks a local dialect that is a shout in wet seasons, a whisper in dry, and an intelligent patter the rest of the time. The recent science of "disturbance ecology" has revealed how important these fluctuations are for an ecosystem (McCully xix), and that one of the worst effects of a dam is the loss of "normal" flooding.<sup>72</sup> This has less to do with the water such floods unleash than the sediment they distribute onto floodplains. This sediment—a mixture of "dissolved minerals and the nutrient-rich detritus of plants and animals, both dead and alive" (8)—is no less a part of a river than its water, and no less affected by damming. In fact, dams' ability to trap sediment—to "silt up"—is the main factor in their surprising functional obsolescence.

It is not merely that a dam radically *changes* a river's unique temperature, chemistry and sediment load, as well as its seasonal flow pattern and the processes of erosion and deposition by which it continually shapes its own course, but that it effectively *standardizes* these things, not unlike the way colonial powers try to subdue a mess of indigenous dialects into the one official language. Dams transform fluent "floodplain rivers" into largely static "reservoir rivers" (31), relatively uniform habitats that do not support species diversity. They then also disrupt the connections that foster diversity, isolating species' upstream and downstream populations and

cutting off migratory routes (32), as we saw in the case of the eel. They also deplete groundwater, waterlog and salinize land, and may even trigger earthquakes.

This is only a partial list of large dams' ecological costs. The socio-cultural ones, especially in developing countries, are every bit as catastrophic and hard to catalogue exhaustively: large-scale human displacement, with its economic and psychological fallout; the loss of fisheries and prime agricultural land; the loss of wood, game, fruits and medicinal plants in the submerged areas; the loss of cultural and archaeological and aesthetic sites; the spread of disease; and deaths and damage caused by dam failure. As Arundhati Roy puts it, big dams are "a Government's way of accumulating authority (deciding who will get how much water and who will grow what where). They're a guaranteed way of taking a farmer's wisdom away from him. They're a brazen means of taking water, land and irrigation away from the poor and gifting it to the rich" (*Cost* 14). When you consider that large dam-centric irrigation schemes do all this while consuming massive amounts of energy *and* generally falling (very) short of projected drinking water, irrigation, hydropower and flood control targets, it is not hard to see why many hydrologists, including McCully and Roy, have proclaimed the end of the Big Dam era.

As ruinous as it has proven, this habit of seeing our rivers as "cash flow" rather than "the lifeblood of the land" is deeply ingrained (Worster 125). (Both Arundhati Roy and geographer Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt tell how in India, water left to run its course to the sea is considered "wasted.") It is textbook human hubris for us to believe that our limited, largely economic way of thinking trumps the planet's organic rationality. In "Thinking Like a River," Donald Worster advances the idea that the meanderings of a creek and its "wild riparian edges" express a "fundamental rationality" that differs from economics, and that we do not yet fully understand (125). His argument: that nature's survival, as well as our own, depends on our learning to think like a river.

What might this entail? It could mean imagining ourselves as rivers, which is prelude to granting them "personhood," in rights discourse parlance. This is an activist approach to the

question. A more epistemological one might pick up on the “stream of consciousness” trope, and involve recognizing the riverine aspects of human thought. By mentioning “meanderings” and riverbanks, Worster seems to say that river thinking embraces our mind’s divagations, shallows and depths, rapids and calms, as well as the often slippery margins between the terra firma of “fact” and the liquescence of “fancy.” This latter reading is supported by Jane Jacobs’s *The Nature of Economies*, in which Jacobs argues that we cannot avoid following nature’s principles, even in planning our economies, because we are part of nature and its processes are our own. If this is true of economies, how much truer must it be of thought?

Before sounding out this metaphor, it makes sense to ask what we gain from thinking like a river. The most basic answer seems to be that if we let such an exercise affect our praxis, we waste fewer resources fighting the ineluctable fact that “a river constantly seeks the most energy efficient path to the ocean” (Worster 128). Good. But what do we net—rather, what to do I hope to add—by analogizing rivers and storytelling? Comparing water-flow and story-flow reinforces the importance of both for human life on this planet. (It is so hard to resist the anthropocentric turn.) By protecting our watercourses, we preserve some of the most imaginatively and narratively fruitful parts of our planet. By safeguarding storytelling traditions, we reinscribe the importance of the places recounted in these stories, as well as our connection to them. (Not for nothing do cultures heavily invested in storytelling tend to live close to nature, as seen in indigenous cultures where cultural movements are inevitably conservation movements.) We see this collateral investment to an increasing degree in Didion, Roy, and Hogan.

I would go so far as to say that there are specific parallels between hydrologic and narrative processes. In “The Weather in Proust,” Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests a link between water’s “life-giving round of physical metamorphoses” (3) and “the very processes of condensation and precipitation that animate any imaginative project of writing” (16). Sedgwick

is right to specify *writing*, as this multi-phase rhythm seems truer of written than spoken storytelling, which is more immediate, in-the-moment, demotic, and phatic. Ideally, the recounted story flows; the written, on the other hand, seems to require periods of accumulation and precipitation, even when flow is the goal. (The oral tradition as a whole, of course, involves a great deal of recursion, rethinking, and retelling, and so bears out the metaphor beautifully.) Rarely does either follow a perfectly straight course. Except perhaps in affidavits, meanders and oxbows are the rule, whether forced by a sudden detail requiring digression or a fondness for the scenic route, narratively speaking. Yet, if stories are unlike water in rarely taking the shortest course to their point of debouch, surely the more important detail is that both have such a point. All water heads to the sea, whereas all stories have as their destination an audience, whether actual or imagined.

### **Rivers, Dams and Women**

In a working paper for the World Commission on Dams, *Balancing Pains and Gains: A Perspective Paper on Gender and Large Dams* (2000), Lyla Mehta and Bina Srinivasan discuss the differential effects of dams on women and men in terms of health, social organization, processes of production and consumption, and access to natural and financial resources. For starters, dams increase the burden of work for women in their capacity as household water gatherers. Writing of India's Sardar Sarovar Dam, Roy describes how upstream "huge deposits of silt, hip-deep and over two hundred metres wide, have cut off access to the river, [so that w]omen carrying water pots now have to walk miles, literally *miles*, to find a negotiable entry point" [*Cost* 49].) By submerging valuable common lands, dams also either destroy or block access to the fuelwood, fodder, wild vegetables, medicinal plants and other produce that the commons provide to those living at the subsistence level—items whose collection and preparation falls to women. Women are also more likely to suffer from the rending of kinship networks caused by dam resettlement, and less likely either to qualify for compensation for lost

land or make the transition from small, flexible local economies to the larger strictly money-based market economy. As Mehta and Srinivasan write, “technology is not gender-neutral or apolitical” (2), and the degree to which dams “aggravate existing inequalities and increase rather than close gender gaps” (2) warrants much more attention than it has gotten in the past. However, my interest here is in more abstract associations between women and dams.

McCully describes how across the globe, rivers historically have been hailed as mothers (10). What does damming mean in this context? In “Imagining Rivers,” Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt describes the general approach to rivers as resources to be controlled rather than as living, life-giving entities as the reduction of “mother” nature to “dutiful daughter” rivers. This classic ecofeminist refame exposes a parallel between the treatment of women and the treatment of nature, treatment which is in line with another patriarchal strategy: the legitimization/consideration of only a certain type of capital-H History.

In *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (2006), Rebecca Solnit, looking to her own process, proposes a fix: an alternate historiography based on sources usually discounted by patriarchal historicism:

The histories I've written have often been hidden, lost, neglected, too broad or too amorphous to show up in others' radar screens, histories that are not neat fields that belong to someone but the paths and waterways that meander through many fields and belong to no one. Art history in particular is often cast as an almost biblical lineage, a long line of begats in which painters descend purely from painters. Just as the purely patrilineal Old Testament genealogies leave out the mothers and even the fathers of the mothers, so these tidy stories leave out all the sources and inspirations that come from other media and other encounters, from poems, dreams, politics, doubts, a childhood experience, a sense of place, leave out the fact that history is made more of crossroads, branchings, and tangles than straight lines. These other sources I called the grandmothers. (58–59)

In her own analysis, one of the reasons Solnit became a historian is that she “didn't have a history” (58). Yet, amidst this dim, patchy familial past (two of its shadowiest figures, Solnit's grandmothers), she did have an aunt, “the keeper of the family stories and photographs,” which,



Solnit concedes, “served less as buttresses of a stable sense of the past than phantasms and fictions that metamorphose continually in accordance with the needs of the present” (56). Herein meet two themes of this chapter: women as keepers of the record (compilers of history with a lower case h), and the fluency of these histories, which, with their meanderings and branchings, are more like rivers than canals.<sup>73</sup>

In my introduction I talk about *Civilization and Its Discontents*, the 1930 essay that Freud opens with a consideration of the “oceanic feeling,” a sense of “an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole” (12). Freud makes no secret of the fact that he does not experience this feeling, and that in his mind, such a supra- and interpersonal feeling is primitive and childish (16), a seeking after “something like the restoration of limitless narcissism” (20). For him, the mature ego is at bottom about separation, competition, and mastery. So when he ultimately concedes the value of “becoming a member of the human community,” it is seemingly because of the superiority of the group’s (versus the individual’s) power in “going over to the attack against nature and subjecting her to the human will” (27). “[P]rotect[ing] men against nature” is one of the purposes of civilization (42); cultural activities are those which “are useful to men for making the earth serviceable to them, for protecting them against the violence of the forces of nature, and so on” (42). Freud adduces, as a specific example of such technological triumph, the fact that in “civilized” countries, “rivers which threaten to flood the land are regulated in their flow, and their water is directed through canals to places where there is a shortage of it” (44).

As I have already argued, if you replace the religious overtones with strictly hydrological ones, the “oceanic” that Freud rejects is a lot like my “hydro-logic.” Thus, it makes sense that whereas Freud was pro-dam, the writers I look at will be anti-dam. Hydro-logical writers are pro-connection, and more inclined to see nature *not* as something to tame, to cut up and

distribute (probably inequitably), but as a common inheritance that unites us, and that can serve—when viewed through an ecological lens—as an analogue for our interconnectedness and even interdependence. As I said, this makes perfect sense, but as we are striving here for the logic of the river rather than the canal, we should not expect it to work out so neatly. And so it is that the authors I look at here will demonstrate different degrees of anti-dam commitment: Roy and Hogan looking immediately and always like dam opposers; Didion, not so much.

### **Didion**

Water is important to people who do not have it, and the same is true of control.  
— *White Album* (65)

There is no question that Didion is a water writer. She begins *Where I Was From*, her 2004 look at how California “adds up,” with a look at the state’s water situation, tracing the course of the Sacramento River from its headwaters in the Klamath Mountains all the way to its debouchment into San Francisco Bay. Drawing on the vocabulary of William Kahrl’s *California Water Atlas* (1979), she talks about the Sacramento Valley’s collecting canals, seepage ditches, gauging stations, weirs, headwater dams, check dams, forebays, afterbays, and diversions. This is not nature’s Sacramento, but rather technology’s.

Didion’s interest in artificial water systems goes back a long way. In 1948, as part of her eighth grade graduation speech (“Our California Heritage”), she boasted that her state had “had an irrigation problem, [and] so...built the greatest dams the world has known” (*Where* 17). Thirty years later her second essay collection, *The White Album*, included two essays about western waterworks, “Holy Water” and “At the Dam.” The first describes a day Didion spent at the Operations Control Center for the California State Water Project, a room in Sacramento from which the state’s entire water system “takes on the aspect of a perfect three-billion-dollar hydraulic toy” (*White* 62). The second, touching on her lifelong fascination with Hoover Dam, depicts a tour of the dam site that culminates with her, at the behest of her Bureau of

Reclamation tour guide, pressing her hands against the turbine—a moment “so explicit as to suggest nothing beyond itself” (200). Both bespeak her unabashed obsession with “plumbing on a grand scale,” and seem to place her squarely in the Freudian “control over nature” camp. (A Bachelardian would say that her imagination is powered more by artificial than natural waters.) Perhaps this makes her seem a strange fit in this dissertation, but she is not, as *Where I Was From* shows. It is true, however, that such early texts as *The White Album* and her first two novels, *Run River* and *Play It As it Lays*, give a different—and must less hydro-logical—impression.

One of the hallmarks of hydro-logical thought is its holism, and its particular emphasis on the nature and flow of interconnection between people, places, and ideas. In her infamous take-down of Didion, “Only Disconnect,” critic Barbara Grizzutti Harrison attacks her on just this point: “Part of Didion’s appeal [...] lies in her refusal to force connections (notably between the personal and the political or between the personal and the transcendental.” Yet, Didion makes clear that the central intellectual task of *Where I was From* is figuring out how it is that despite the many connections in California life, “not much connects” (*Where* 61). One of the disconnects Didion examines is how, in spite of its aridity, the San Joaquin Valley was turned into “the nation’s garden”—“*just by adding water*” (48). The disingenuousness of this tickles her. She knows all too well what is involved in *just adding water*, and laments the fact that so few questions were asked before the dams were built:

Henry George asked what the railroad would bring, but not too many other people did. Many people would later ask whether it had served the common weal to transform the Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys from a seasonal shallow sea to a protected hothouse requiring the annual application on each square mile of 3.87 tons of chemical pesticides, but not too many people asked this before the dams; those who did ask, for whatever reason, were categorized as ‘environmentalists,’ a word loosely used in this part of California to describe any perceived threat to the life of absolute personal freedom its citizens believe they lead. (88)

This 2004 text contains moments when Didion, that despiser of mass movements (a way we “assuage private guilts in public causes” [*Slouching* 162]), sounds a bit like an environmentalist herself. In fact, two of the California thinkers she claims as influences, Robinson Jeffers (1887-1962) and John Muir (1838-1914), seriously questioned, on environmental grounds, whether *homo sapiens* had any rightful place in California. The only human encroachers Muir tolerated were Native Americans, who, as he saw it, “walk softly and hurt the landscape hardly more than the birds and squirrels” (qtd. in *Where* 68). Jeffers was still less tolerant. A self-described “Inhumanist,” he considered mankind “a botched experiment that has run wild and ought to be stopped” (qtd. 68–9), and went so far as to advocate war as a means of population control. While admitting some degree of risibility around Jeffers (“his poetry could be pretentious, his postures ugly”), Didion also concedes that “read in situ, ... [he] makes fatally seductive sense” (69).

Yet, twenty-five years before, it was not an ultimately triumphant nature that fired her imagination, but transcendent technology. “At the Dam” ends with Didion strolling across the marble star map meant to tell future generations the sidereal date of Hoover Dam’s dedication. As her guide explains, this is for “when we are all gone and the dam [is] left” (*White* 201). It then hits her that this “was the image I had always seen, seen it without quite realizing what I saw, a dynamo finally free of man, splendid at last in its absolute isolation, transmitting power and releasing water to a world where no one is” (201).

~~\*~~

The conquest and settlement of the dry US West in the late nineteenth century  
owes more to dams than cowboys.

—Patrick McCully (10)

From whence Didion’s obsession with controlled water? According to the writer herself, the source is obvious: aridity. She celebrates as the best definition of the West she has ever read Bernard DeVoto’s pronouncement that “[t]he west begins where the average annual rainfall

drops below twenty inches”—“It goes a long way toward explaining my passion for seeing the water under control” (*White* 65). Larry McMurtry, another western writer,<sup>74</sup> makes a similar point about the West’s dryness but reaches different conclusions, and therefore serves as a useful control subject in ascertaining the degree to which Didion’s mania for controlled waters comes down to aridity.

In *Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen* (1999), McMurtry contemplates “The Storyteller,” Benjamin’s “[t]remendous elegy to the storyteller as a figure of critical importance in the human community” (14). As the grandchild of pioneers (“potent word” [21]), he is particularly interested in how the storytelling tradition described by Benjamin requires, even presupposes, a certain population density. By settling on their hill in Archer County, his grandparents effectively started a town, with its eventual promise of an audience. They chose their spot because “a fine seeping spring assured them of plentiful water” (21), and before long, their front porch (in the summer) and hearth (in the winter) had become places of gathering for people looking to chew over local events. Here we can trace a direct, if wavy, line between water, settlement, audience, and storytelling.

Yet these occasional front-porch colloquies notwithstanding, McMurtry remembers Archer City as suffering the same “social drought” that dogged other small West Texas towns (13). When he discovered reading, it was with all the relief and jubilation of someone striking water in the desert, so it is apt that he should speak of “the great stream of literary endeavor” (134) and a “river of literature,” complete with depths and shallows (176).<sup>75</sup>

Benjamin had called Proust “the Nile of language,” and McMurtry runs with this, musing that if Proust was the White Nile, “then Virginia Woolf, in her diaries and letters, may have been the Blue—and joining these great waters were the long tributaries of Joyce, Lawrence, Musil, and many others.” (Most of his reading life “has been a trip up [these] Niles, into the riverine abundance of European literature” [45].) It is worth noting that in addition to the river analogy, McMurtry thinks of Proust and Woolf as “those two great word-givers” (202), celebrating not

only the abundance and profluence of their work, but its generosity. By connecting rivers and giving, and recognizing that literature, like the more informal storytelling Benjamin celebrates, is meant to flow from writer to reader, teller to listener, McMurtry shows himself to be a true hydro-logician.

It is interesting that he should compare modernism's two great geniuses with a river that, famous for its intractable but fecundating rhythms, is almost the opposite of Didion's computer-and-concrete-tamed Sacramento. Considering that both writers are children of aridity, one has to ask how this happens. For the answer, we must return to the idea of "social drought," which is to say, "word drought." One of the things that McMurtry remembers about growing up in his town is silence, especially female silence. There was the reticence of the farmer who shot himself one morning (after milking the cows) and, more hauntingly, that of the "skunk woman" who had reportedly been traded as a young teenager for over fifty skunk hides (19) and whose stories were probably "not of the sort to be shared with little boys" (20). As in the case of Solnit, there was also the silence of his own grandmother, a weary frontierswoman and mother of twelve, who was "through with talk" (20) by the time he came along. His ancestors did not bequeath him many stories.

Didion's narrative inheritance falls on the other end of the continuum, a disparity that comes across in a single detail. Though according to McMurtry there was a "nostalgia for reading" amongst his grandparents and their ilk, "books were heavy and would have taken up space in the wagon that was needed for axes and saws, hammers and harness, spades, churns, skillets, cook pots, and progeny" (90), and so were left behind. Not so with Didion's people. After traveling with the Donner-Reed party as far as the Humboldt Sink, her great-great-great-grandmother's family spent the winter of 1846–47 in a makeshift cabin precisely because they were "unable to get their wagons through a steep defile on the Umpqua River without abandoning Josephus Cornwall's books" (an option which, Didion points out, "seems to have presented itself only to his daughters" [*Where* 4].)

It becomes clear in *Where I Was From* that when Didion's people migrated west, they not only brought story with them, but kept on making it and making sure it was passed down. ("The gravity of the decisive break [toward the west] demands narrative" [30].) There was great-great-great-great-grandmother Elizabeth Scott Hardin (b. 1766), from whom Didion inherited recipes for cornbread and India Relish that were carried west in 1846 by the above-mentioned great-great-great-grandmother, Nancy Hardin Cornwall. From *her*, Didion has a piece of appliqué worked on the crossing ("embroidery," of course, connecting back to the local oral tradition [3]). There is also a photo of the stone marking that Oregon cabin (on the thenceforth named Cabin Creek). Then there are the accounts—two written, one transcribed—left by three of Cornwall's children, as well as the journal Didion's great-great-grandfather William Kilgore wrote of his 1850 arrival in Sacramento.

Finally, there are other mute yet articulate items: a quilt bearing "a blinding and pointless compaction of stitches" (6), made during another hard crossing by another great-great-grandmother (one of whose daughters also left some written recollections), and a mess of family artifacts in store at the Pacific University Museum: a desk, a wedding blouse, a shawl, and a potato masher carried across the plains in 1846.

If McMurtry's past is a word drought, Didion's is a narrative deluge. But whereas it was men (Jeffers, Muir, Josiah Royce, Frank Norris, Jack London) who spun the California Story she ponders in *Where I Was From*, in her own family it was the "daughters and granddaughters" who preserved "fragments of local oral history...on legal pads and the backs of envelopes" (157)—fragments that became the "stuff" of her first novel, *Run River*. Didion recognizes this fragment-preservation instinct in herself and writes about it in "On Keeping a Notebook," where one can clearly see note-taking in hydraulic terms, as holding facts, images, vignettes in reserve for imagination's dry spells, much as dams store water against times of drought.

Of course, if irrigation is one function (or at least promise) of a dam, flood control is another.<sup>76</sup> Though this section's epigraph—"Water is important to people who do not have it,

and the same is true of control”—connects water control and scarcity, California’s story is also one of periodic flooding. Reading over her great-great-grandfather William Kilgore’s breezy 1850 description of a pre-dam Sacramento River that, with its 2-foot tidal variation and low banks, was “subject to inundation for several miles back” (*Where* 19), Didion marvels that a pattern of flooding that turned the entire valley into a “seasonal shallow sea” and was identified by the Army Corps of Engineers as “more intense and intractable than that on any other American River system including the Mississippi,” “seems not to have presented itself [to her ancestor] as an argument against immediate settlement” (20). Yet, nature’s vagaries did not deter people so much as stimulate their ingenuity, and the United States Bureau of Reclamation (BuRec)—an appurtenance of Manifest Destiny if ever there was one—was born.<sup>77</sup> Though BuRec’s legacy and future are now the subject of heated debate, for decades its projects were collectively celebrated as the miracles that made the desert bloom. This is the policy climate in which Didion grew up, so it is easy to see how she might have developed the notion that her family’s stories—themselves a strand of the nation’s Westward Ho metanarrative—needed to be managed in order for her own to find expression.

Back in the crossing days, her ancestors—particularly the women—may have proven “in their deepest instincts clinically radical” (*Where* 7), made of truly tough stuff that let them pick up stakes and forge frontier lives, but amongst her more recent kinsfolk the neurasthenic precursors of her own migrainous sensitivity are obvious: her quixotic, tearful grandmother; her depressed (and ultimately institutionalized) father; and her resigned mother, so liberal in the use of that existential check-valve, “What difference does it make?” (207). Overwhelm was a real possibility and had to be guarded against. “In time of trouble,” Didion explains, “I had been trained since childhood, read, learn, work it up, go to the literature. Information was control” (*Magical* 49). Sensible advice for the product of such a diluvial family.

One need not work too hard to trace a line between the narrative deluge in Didion’s past and her intensely researched, highly controlled prose. It is perhaps trickier to beat a direct path



between this extensive back-story and her life-long fascination with managed waters, yet Didion draws similar analogies herself. In fact, for her, part of the California landscape's irreducible power lies in its ability to "present itself as metaphor, even as litany" (*Where* 66). In *The Year of Magical Thinking*, she describes the degree to which landscape, and to an even greater degree geology, has always carried meaning for her, recalling how as a child she could always find an antidote to the meaninglessness that was "the most prominent negative feature on the horizon" (191) by thinking about lithospheric processes, particularly the tectonic movements that seemed for her the terrestrial embodiment of the words "as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end" (189–90). As the granddaughter of a geologist, she "learned early to anticipate the absolute mutability of hills and waterfalls and even islands," counting on knowledge's help in making order out of chaos. "A hill," she writes, "is a transitional accommodation to stress, and ego may be a similar accommodation. A waterfall is a self-correcting maladjustment of stream to structure, and so, for all I know, is technique" (*Democracy*, qtd. in *Magical* 18). That is, as with a river, the speed, volume, depth, and froth of a piece of writing are real-time responses to the constantly changing contours of message and meaning. If Didion likes her writing tightly controlled, why not her water?

While would-be water *controllers* take it to an extreme, the aim of water *management* is reasonable enough (McCully xviii-xix): making sure that there is neither too much nor too little. Didion explores both these situations in her first two novels, connecting the amount of water to the amount of available story (and meaning), and making clear that, in both cases, there can be too much as well as too little.

### *Run River*

Set along the Sacramento River, Didion's first novel, *Run River* (1963), is a tale of killer flood. It is the story of the Knights and the McClellans, two "old California" families brought together by marriage. Everett McClellan proposes to Lily Knight out of an almost fatidic sense of

nostalgia and tradition. Passive and indecisive, Lily does not so much accept the proposal as let the marriage happen. If these characters and their dealings seem flat and vague at times, the landscape in which Didion places them is “solidly realized” (Stout 151). This is no wonder, as according to Didion, she wrote *Run River* when young, living in New York, and in the grip of “a yearning for California so raw” that she sat down and “wrote [herself] a river” (*Where* 156–7).

The ‘stuff’ of the novel [...] was the landscape and weather of the Sacramento Valley, the way the rivers crested and the way the tule fogs obscured the levees and the way the fallen camellias turned the sidewalks brown and slick during the Christmas rains. The stuff, too, was in the way those rains and those rivers had figured in the stories I had been told my entire life, stories predicated on the childhood memories of relatives (Kilgores and Reeses, Jerrets and Farnsworths, Magees and Cornwalls) who were by then long dead themselves, fragments of local oral history preserved by daughters and granddaughters on legal pads and the backs of envelopes. (157)

These family stories of floods, jerry-rigged boats, wet rescues and other ordeals by water served, “like the potato masher that crossed the plains, like the books that did not get jettisoned on the Umpqua River, [as] evidence of family endurance, proof of our worth...” (158).

The river as written in this novel is hardly a thing to inspire homesickness. By book’s end, five characters have died in or directly beside it: Lily’s father, Walter Knight, and his girlfriend, Rita Blanchard; Everett’s sister, Martha; Martha’s and Lily’s sometime lover and symbol of the “new California,” Ryder Channing; and, ultimately, Everett himself. Walter’s and Rita’s deaths are accidental—a direct effect of those tule fogs. Ryder’s and Everett’s (a murder and a suicide, respectively) are products of familial revenge, sexual jealousy, and Everett’s disdain for New Californians and their shallow, strictly acquisitive and developmentalist interest in the land. Martha is the only character to die at the river’s hands, so to speak, and her death has a deeper resonance than the others.

In a book in which all the main characters are “afflicted by memory” (*Run* 246), and where the blood that runs through Lily’s, Martha’s, and Everett’s veins—blood “come down through twelve generations of circuit riders, county sheriffs, Indian fighters, country lawyers,

Bible readers, one obscure United States Senator from a frontier state a long time ago” (263)—tugs at their lives like a river in flood, only Martha is actively obsessed with California’s story. Under her influence, the McClellan living room is decorated with various bits of California memorabilia, including “river maps showing channel depths during the summer of 1932” (58). Her own childhood bedroom had been hung with “a framed deed signed by John Sutter in 1847, a matted list of the provisions carried on an obscure crossing in 1852, a detailed relief map of the Humboldt Sink, and a large lithograph of the Donner Pass on which [she] had printed, in two neat columns, the names of the casualties and the survivors of the Donner-Reed crossing” (100). (Her favorite childhood role-playing games were “Donner Party” and the railroad-based “Central Pacific.”) On the morning Everett leaves for Fort Lewis, it is Martha who rushes to the train station to bring him a copy (her copy) of *The McClellan Journal: An Account of An Overland Journey to California in the Year 1848*. And yet, despite this historic bias, she—quite unlike her brother and Lily—is determined to learn the stories of New California, meeting its developers at parties in its new apartments and new country clubs (208), and reading advertising materials for and touring many new subdivisions, with their redwood siding and faux fieldstone, their kidney-shaped pools and artificial lakes. She is a character drowning in story, and rather neatly, the apex of her personal overwhelm coincides exactly with the cresting of the river that drowns her.

Aptly, she is buried in an old sea chest in which her mother kept storied sundries, including “the ivory fan carried by Martha’s great-great-grandmother Currier at Governor Leland Stanford’s Inaugural Ball in 1862” (220). In a further breach of custom (and state law), this chest is interred not in a cemetery, but on the family ranch, along its 1.5 miles of riverfront. Waters are still running high and the grave begins to fill with seepage even as Martha’s body is lowered into it. Looking on, Lily realizes that in all likelihood it will be washed out by evening, “the unnailed lid of the sea chest ripped open and Martha free again in the water” (221)—a

prospect that, Didion explains in *Where I Was From*, “seems to deter, as ‘true’ Californians, neither [Everett nor Lily]” (*Where* 161).

And yet, free waters are not what Lily pictures while watching the burial. In an effort to keep her feelings in check, she concentrates deliberately on river management, wondering where the levee will give if it does give, and riffling back through her inner “file of information, gathered and classified every year there was high water... At what point had they opened the Colusa Weir. How many gates were open at the Sacramento Weir. When would the Bypass reach capacity. What was the flood stage at Wilkins Slough. At Rough and Ready Bend. Fremont Weir. Rio Vista.” She finds these thoughts of water management “obscurely comfort[ing]” (*Run* 222).

Despite having witnessed her increasingly bizarre behavior, many of *Run River’s* peripheral characters are clueless or polite enough to accept Martha’s death as an accident, even if they do marvel that anyone raised on the river should try boating during a flood. Lily cannot so kid herself, especially after finding Martha’s notebook, teeming with “all the torrents of hatred and tension she was not able to speak” (Stout 155), its final seven pages a totally illegible scrawl. As bad as drowning is, it is preferable to the other common California fate: institutionalization. As Didion explains in *Where I Was From*, “[asylums] survived through my childhood and adolescence into my adult life, sources of a fear more potent even than that of drowning in the rivers (drowning meant you had misread the river, drowning made sense, drowning you could negotiate), the fear of being sent away—no, worse—‘put away’” (197-8). If drowning is a matter of misreading a river, losing one’s mind means the end of reading, comprehension, storytelling altogether. Faced with the latter, Martha chooses the former.

*Run River* is a western novel. So, as Nick Carraway frames it towards the end of his tale, is *The Great Gatsby*: “I see now that this has been a story of the West, after all—Tom and Gatsby, Daisy and Jordan and I, were all Westerners, and perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadaptable to Eastern life” (177). Didion’s novel tells the

opposite story: of ill-fated characters who are *too much* of the place where the action unfolds. Yet if Lily, Everett and Martha are all California people through and through, they are products of the old California, not the new. Although *Where I Was From* is in part a record of Didion's disillusionment with Old California's self-mythologizing, it is still the product of a person who cannot truly leave her home state. Though she has finally come to see it as "strikingly unearned," the pride she feels at being of a California family "born here for generations," is plain to see (95). After all, "new people" did not understand "that the water that came from the tap in, say, San Francisco, was there only because part of Yosemite had been flooded to put it there. New people did not understand the necessary dynamic of the fires, the seven-year cycle of flood and drought, the physical reality of the place" (96). In other words, to truly be *from* somewhere is to understand its sacrifices, its cyclicity, literally, how its waters flow—knowledge denied the arriviste. And yet, both *Run River* and *Where I Was From* illustrate the liability of truly being so deeply from a place: the risk of being overwhelmed by its stories. Her second novel, *Play It as It Lays*, explores the opposite possibility.

### *Play It as It Lays*

In every sense, *Play It As It Lays* (1970) is a drought novel. As critic Cynthia Griffin Wolff points out, this is a novel in which all the would-be sources of water have dried up, as "[e]verything that should soothe or refresh or create anew has dried and blistered in the desert heat" (490). And this physical drought is more than matched by existential and even stylistic drought. Whereas *Run River* is "stylistically the fullest of [Didion's] novels," giving "little hint of the minimalist style to come" (Stout 148)<sup>78</sup>, *Play It As It Lays* is full of ellipses and blanks—vast stretches where the narrative stream dries up and the dry riverbed of the blank page shows through.

In this new California of movie people and developers, there are "cuts" and "scenes" but no profluent narratives (take *Maria*, the film in which main character Maria Wyeth's ex-

husband reduces her to a bunch of isolated scenes: Maria doing this, Maria doing that), a choppiness that disturbs Maria as much as it does the Didion of “The White Album,” who laments that though expected to know life’s plot, she can only know what she sees: “flash pictures in variable sequence, images with no ‘meaning’ beyond their temporary arrangement, not a movie but a cutting-room experience” (*White* 13). Isolated frames and jump cuts do not a story make, and as Didion has so famously stated, “We tell ourselves stories in order to live” (11). And so it is that all of us, especially writers, “live entirely...by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images” (11). That is, we try to make a river out of isolated patches of water. (Aptly, Maria’s ex is shooting his current film in a town “on a dry river bed between Death Valley and the Nevada line” [*Play* 187].)

Though Maria claims to be past the point of asking questions (“What makes Iago evil? some people ask. I never ask” [3]), she does seek to find connections, reasons, recognizable narratives—a fact reflected in the book’s final words (“Why not?”) as well as her interrogatory maiden name: *Wyeth*. In the vapid, arid world of the novel, she is the closest thing to “the keeper of the record” (Wolff 486), that jotter of local stories on the backs of envelopes. Come story’s end, it is clear that she has survived solely “in order to tell [her] tale” (486). Her desire for profluent stories that establish connections between things is reflected in the obsessive way she drives the freeways, “as a riverman runs a river, every day more attuned to its currents, its deceptions” (*Play* 17). And yet, there is no river, just the “flawless burning concrete” (17) of the interstates.

Critic Katherine Henderson sees this as a novel about inheritance from the fathers. Yet, while its title apparently echoes advice given Maria by her card-playing father, the book itself seems more preoccupied with mother-daughter relationships. Maria makes it clear that the only reason she keeps playing the game at all is for her daughter, Kate, who suffers from an unspecified neurological disorder and has been “put away” in a care facility. Then, there are Maria’s feelings about her own mother, who died (seemingly of suicide) and whose body,

probably devoured by coyotes, was never recovered. “From my mother I inherited my looks and a tendency to migraine,” Maria tells us (*Play* 3). And it is her mother—and patently *not* her father—who Maria recalls following the abortion that serves as the book’s fulcrum. She steadies herself by thinking of the Red Cross manual her mother made her read as a child, with its recognizable rescue narratives: what to do in case of snakebite, drowning.

Though advised to see it as “a humane operation,” Maria experiences her abortion as an abdication of maternity, a violation of the intergenerational compact, and it haunts her. Having heard her abortionist flush the fetus down the toilet, she dreams repeatedly of her house’s mundane complex of pipes and drains as a female reproductive system that keeps clogging with fetal tissue—a nightmare potent enough to drive her out of her house and into a rented apartment (on Fountain Avenue, yet) and, when that drain grows sluggish, back to her house again. (Around this time, a dream vision of the East River full of fetuses “translucent as jellyfish, floating past the big sewage outfalls with the orange peels” [116], is enough to scuttle a planned visit to New York.) For Wolff, it is a small analytical jump from these domestic waterworks, oneirically associated with negated maternity, to the massive Hoover dam, “this monumental damming of water with its life-giving force stand[ing] as emblem for all those processes that have offered ‘nothingness’ where vitalizing moral and emotional commitment ought to be” (Wolff 492).

Given the data on large dams, Wolff’s reading makes perfect sense: dams *are* life destroying. But was this Didion’s opinion in 1970, right around the time she wrote “At the Dam”? And if the Dam is a monument to death, why is a woman as thirsty for existential redemption as Maria so drawn to it? And she is drawn to it, sensing its pull across the desert after an aimless fortnight in Vegas. If those small dams and levees in *Run River* represent control, Hoover is also about raw power and “energy [and] the massive involvement with power and pressure and the transparent sexual overtones to that involvement” (*White* 199). It is also,

of course, about water—masses and masses of it. In fact, control, power, storytelling and water meet syllogistically in the great dam:

Water is important to people who do not have it, and the same is true of control. (*White* 65)

*In time of trouble, I had been trained since childhood, read, learn, work it up, go to the literature. Information was control. (Magical 49)*

We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images. (*White* 11)

We tell ourselves stories in order to live. (*White* 11)

Dammed water embodies control; information is control; storytelling is a channelization of information; and all these things are like water in that without them, we cannot live.

When dealing with such a crucial element, nature's vagaries are unsettling. It is no wonder that someone who has lived "beneath...a river when it was running in flood, and gone without showers when it was running dry" (*White* 65), and remembers "the coughing in the pipes that meant the well was dry, and...all-night watches on rivers about to crest" (64), should be such a fan of that ultimate California trapping, the swimming pool. What is a pool but "water made available and useful"—"a symbol of control over the uncontrollable" (64)? And what are Didion's pellucid, lapidary, idea-rich essays but literary swimming pools?

Symbolically, water has a feminine valence for Didion. As Wolff's reading of the dam implies, there are strong associations with maternity there. Even Maria's hypnotist makes this connection. "You're lying in water," he tells her, "and it's warm and you hear your mother's voice" (*Play* 124). One of Didion's main objections to the Women's Movement was what she considered its naïve, prepubescent rejection of "one's actual apprehension of what it is like to be a woman, the irreconcilable difference of it—that sense of living one's deepest life underwater, that dark involvement with blood and birth and death" (*White* 117), as well, perhaps, as with



family histories jotted on the backs of envelopes. It seems that far from seeing Hoover as a life-killer, Maria experiences it as maternal embrace and recognition of the blessing/burden that is female fertility.

Finally, for the Didion of 1970 (like the Didion of that 8<sup>th</sup>-grade graduation speech), Hoover represents humanity's capacity for grand endeavor, in contrast with the paltry ambitions and achievements of Maria's associates. These "New California" types tan, party, screw around, get written up in the gossip pages. The men make movie deals and the women diet, shop, and do their best to fight off the physical effects of time. The stories this culture produces are trivial at best (who spoonfed whom cheese soufflé at the bistro; who has had cosmetic surgery) and nightmarish at worst ("the four-year-olds in the abandoned refrigerator, the tea party with Purex, the infant in the driveway, rattlesnake in the playpen" [*Play* 100]).

Though Didion spends the first part of *Where I Was From* poking holes in the old California myths of frontier heroism and can-do individualism, at least those stories were potentially "improving." The tales out of New California, on the other hand, seem to Didion to *negate* meaning: RFK's assassination; the Manson Family; Betty Lansdown Fouquet, the 26-year-old woman who left her five-year-old daughter to die on the median of Interstate 5; the Ferguson brothers, who tortured actor Roman Novarro to death. Of course, the 1960s did not have a lock on narratives in which "[d]isorder [seemed] its own point" (*White* 37). In *Where I Was From*, Didion also considers Lakewood, the Levittown-like Los Angeles suburb that grew up in the glow of the aerospace industry and has crumbled along with it. Specifically, she is taken with the mindless nihilism of Lakewood's Spur Posse, a group of youths that garnered (and basked in) widespread media attention in the 1990s for tracking and comparing their sexual conquests of underage girls. The perpetrators, with their lack of remorse or even understanding, their spiral-eyed greed for fame and money, and their slack-jawed incomprehension of anything beyond the most basic English, strike Didion as the perfect human

correlative of California's Gateway Cities, with its endless concrete lined with "body shops, minimarts, Pentecostal churches and walk-in dentists" (*Where* 152).

In the end, no matter how awed by the technological sublime she has at times seemed, Didion understands that the urban sprawl of this new, ever more drought-prone California will, like its stories, not last. The warehouses and factories will eventually pancake down into rubble and be reclaimed, someday, by the sandy soil. At least a place like Santa Monica, as hard as McDonald-Douglas tried to cover it with aerospace infrastructure, still has "its ocean, its beaches, its climate, its sun and its fog and its climbing roses." The Gateway Cities, meanwhile, "only [have] their warehouses" (152).

Given her geological fascination, it is only right that Didion should appreciate the ultimate durability of nature's bestowals over mankind's contrivances, and that, her early feelings about Hoover notwithstanding, she should have claimed, even in 1977's "Holy Water," to know "as well as the next person that there is considerable transcendent value in a river running wild and undammed, a river running free over granite" (*White* 64). It seems that all along, Didion has been a hydro-logician at heart, despite the seemingly un-ecological (and disingenuous) moment in that essay when, visiting the California State Water Project's Operations Control Center and seeing the engineers deliberate over whether to drain Quail Reservoir, Didion writes: "I knew at that moment that I had missed the only vocation for which I had any instinctive affinity: I wanted to drain Quail myself" (62). For only pages later, she quotes the final stanza of Karl Shapiro's "California Winter":

It is raining in California, a straight rain  
Cleaning the heavy oranges on the bough,  
Filling the gardens till the gardens flow,  
Shining the olives, tiling the gleaming tile,  
Waxing the dark camellia leaves more green,  
Flooding the daylong valleys like the Nile. (qtd. in *White* 66)

Didion realizes, "I wanted to be the one, that day, who was shining the olives, filling the gardens, and flooding the daylong valleys like the Nile. I want it still" (66). So it comes down to

McMurty's Nile, Benjamin's Nile, the Nile of Proust and Woolf. Deep down, even during her pro-dam phase, Didion longs for the ancient abundance, unruliness, and fecundating power of this iconic river, a trickle of which has run down through the story-minded women in her family.

## **Roy**

In "Holy water," Didion claimed an "obsessive interest, not in the politics of water but in the waterworks themselves...in plumbing on a grand scale" (*White* 59). As regards the political side of the picture, at least, Arundhati Roy could not be more different, as suggested by the snapshot each offers of her young self vis-à-vis her local river. Didion portrays herself at seventeen, "caught, in a military-surplus life raft, in the construction of the Nimbus Afterbay Dam on the American River near Sacramento...the raft spinning into the narrow chute through which the river had been temporarily diverted." The turbulence of these controlled waters makes her "deliriously happy" (60).

Roy's river recollection is also underpinned by joy, but of a very different sort, and over a very different river:

I owe rivers a debt of gratitude for all kinds of understanding. I grew up in Ayemenem on the banks of the Meenachal. I always think that as a very young child those hours that I spent catching fish were the hours that made me the writer that I am. The hours of silence, the hours of contemplating and trying to insinuate yourself into the head of an unsuspecting fish. It was easier for me to understand the Narmada Valley and the problems there because I think I understand the river, not as an environmentalist or as an ecologist, but just because a river was my friend when I was little. And the loss of a river is a terrible, aching thing.

This quotation comes from DAM/AGE, a documentary about Roy's campaign against the massive Narmada Valley Project ("the most ambitious river valley project ever conceived in human history" [*Cost* ix])—a plan to reconstitute the Narmada and its 41 tributaries through a series of 3,200 dams (930 large, 135 medium, 2135 small). As she writes in her 1999 polemic against this project and all Big Dams, "The Greater Common Good," this project would not only

“alter the ecology of the entire river basin of one of India’s biggest rivers” (*Cost* 28) and tear at the “ancient, intricate web of interdependence” (25) between that ecology and its 25 million inhabitants, but would displace millions of people, mostly tribal folk and dalits, without offering anything like a workable resettlement plan. And while this has been sold as Development, Progress, a case of “Local Pain for National Gain” (15) that will bring water and power and flood control to large numbers of Indians, it is in fact a way for the Indian government to get the country’s “poorest people [to subsidize] the lifestyles of her richest” (19).

Everything about this project outrages Roy—its crazy oversizedness, its inequality, its profound anti-ecologicality, its stupidity, its *deadliness*:

Big dams are to a Nation’s ‘Development’ what Nuclear Bombs are to its Military Arsenal. They’re both weapons of mass destruction. They’re both weapons Governments use to control their own people. Both Twentieth-Century emblems that mark a point when human intelligence has outstripped its own instinct for survival. They’re both malignant indications of civilization turning upon itself. They represent the severing of the link, not just the link—the understanding—between human beings and the planet they live on. They scramble the intelligence that connects hens to eggs, milk to cows, food to forests, water to rivers, air to life and the earth to human existence. (*Cost* 80)

Trying to chop up something as fundamentally cohesive as water is absurd—as absurd as trying to regulate something as inherently expansive and unitive as love. And yet Roy’s river-split novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997), is precisely about India’s ancient Love Laws, which “lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much” (33), and by extension shines a light on the issue of who gets water and how and how much, and the stories that are told (or not told) about this ecological injustice.

The river to which Roy feels indebted, the Meenachal, is the same that flows through *The God of Small Things*, the “before and after” story (Benoit 78) of an affluent family in Kerala, India. The “before” part, set in 1969, focuses on two weeks in the lives of those living in Ayemenem House: Ammu, a divorcée forced to return (unwelcomed) to the family fold with her

young fraternal twins, son Estha and daughter Rahel; her haphazard, Oxford-educated brother Chacko, who, as man of the house, “runs” the family Pickle business and pines for his London-based ex-wife (Margaret) and daughter (Sophie Mol), whose visit to Ayemenem is coterminous with the main action of the book; Mammachi, the blind, son-obsessed matriarch; Baby Kochamma, Mammachi’s bitter, scheming sister-in-law; and Velutha, the incredibly gifted paravan (“untouchable”) handyman/engineer who keeps the pickle factory and family home up and running, and is beloved by Estha and Rahel, and ultimately Ammu. The “after” part takes place in 1993, and describes Rahel’s return, after a long residence in the United States, to Ayemenem and her twin.<sup>79</sup>

Roy’s already quoted childhood recollection of the Meenachal shows us the river’s placid face, when a child could fish meditatively on its waters. And yet, the novel reveals another, fiercer aspect. On the very first page we hear about climatic fluctuations: how in May the river shrinks, but by June, the monsoon waters flood the roads, filling even the potholes with small fish (*God 3*). These are the normal fluctuations of a monsoon climate. But *The God of Small Things* chronicles greater caprices than these, ones that are not at all natural, but the result of India’s overreaching water management program. In fact, it is fair to say that this two-fold narrative is irrigated by two different rivers: the pre-dam Meenachal of 1969 and the post-dam Meenachal of 1993.

In 1969, the monsoon-fattened river is a wild thing, and the story it bisects is, like *Run River*, a flood story in which four of the book’s central characters cross the river one night when it is in spate, and one of them drowns. In 1993, the river is a ruin, and what plays out around it, fictionally and semantically speaking, is essentially a drought story.

1969. Rapid, alive, full-throated, the Meenachal is a central presence in this main part of the narrative. For 7-year-old Estha and Rahel, it is a tripartite entity. There are the familiar shallows of *This Side*. Then there is the middle part, the *Really Deep*, “[w]here the current was swift and

certain (downstream when the tide was out, upstream, pushing up from the backwaters when the tide was in)." Finally, there are the unfamiliar shallows of the *Other Side* (God 194). The second and third parts have been forbidden to them as "no place for children to Linger, Loll or Learn Things" (194).<sup>80</sup> It is not only children who should beware. Even before Velutha warns them of the river's danger, his paralyzed brother, Kuttappen, speaks of the Meenachal's whims and caprices. "This river of ours—she isn't always what she pretends to be. [She poses as] a little old churchgoing ammooma, quiet and clean...Minding her own business. Not looking right or left," when really she is "a wild thing," fond of whiskey and brandy, and "mind[ing] *other* people's business" (201).

Embedded in this didactic rhetoric about the river is not only the homologization of wild waters and unpredictable women, but a lesson about place that goes straight to "the truth of marginalization" that critic Pranav Jani identifies as one of this novel's main themes (207). The implied message is that one should content oneself with the familiar, "safe" margin, and not press towards the center of power (the part of society responsible for dam building and nation-building), or to the other, less familiar, more perilous margin of dissent and revolution—a message that Roy and her novel ignore.

Ironically, in this case the warning is justified, as the river proves the site of an event that blights Estha and Rahel's lives: the drowning of their English cousin, Sophie Mol. As on the night of Martha McClellan's drowning, the river is dangerously rapid on the night Rahel, Estha, and Sophie pile into a boat to cross it. Yet, if in *Run River* Martha's semi-intentional drowning is the result of her willful immersion in the currents of local story, here nine-year-old Sophie, just visiting from London, is purely the victim of a story/river whose crosscurrents she cannot fathom: the forbiddenness of Ammu and Velutha's love; the depth of Baby Kochamma's grudge against Velutha, Ammu and the twins; the political ambitions of one Comrade Pillai—for these are the local and familial stories that belong to the lower-case h history that Roy, like Didion, conceives in terms of the river. However, if the essentially apolitical Didion is content to leave

off before the river of local history empties into the ocean of capital-H History, with its seemingly unalterable currents of conquest, victory, and defeat, Roy is not, and makes us feel the role that the larger tides of caste, colonialism, post-colonialism, and patriarchy play in Sophie's death.

In one of his more pompous moods, the twins' Uncle Chacko compares History to "an old house at night. With all the lamps lit. And ancestors whispering inside" (*God* 51). To understand, one must go inside and listen. The problem, he explains, is that as Indian Anglophiles, they are doomed to stand peering into this house without ever gaining entrance, "[s]oldiers in and victims of a war that has made us adore our conquerors and despise ourselves" (52). "We belong nowhere. We sail unanchored on troubled seas. We may never be allowed ashore" (52), he says, alluding to the oceans' role in the colonial endeavor.

With that childhood genius for conflating the abstract and the concrete, the twins decide that this theoretical "History House" is actually a moldering old house across the river that was once occupied by an Englishman gone native ("Ayemenem's own Kurtz" [51]). Despite its close proximity to the Conradesque Meenachal, it is, in keeping with Chacko's metaphor, an ocean house of "weather-colors" (291) and "billowing ship-shaped shadows" (51), resembling nothing so much as "sunken treasure dredged up from the ocean bed. Whale-kissed and barnacled. Swaddled in silence. Breathing bubbles through its broken windows" (291). As it appears to Estha and Rahel after seeing Sophie die, this oceanic History House is more shipwreck than ship. They do not yet know that Velutha, an untouchable and thus one of History's discards, will die within its walls before the night is through.

This oceanic association might seem surprisingly negative for a hydro-logical writer, but Roy is admittedly a river lover (and writer)—a characteristic she bestows on her most sympathetic characters: Ammu and Velutha, whose love of the Meenachal and one another eventually converts the riverbank into an erotic space; and the twins, for whom the river, "their river" (116), provides solace at various stressful junctures, "because water always helps" (108).

In addition to her conceptual alignment of it with local history, Roy makes the river a correlative for storytelling in general, and uses it to illustrate how, where landscape, history, and storytelling are concerned, damage to one becomes damage to all. So it is that when Rahel returns to Ayemenem in 1993, she finds the History House part of a “heritage resort” operated by a 5-star hotel chain—a nonplace where History is turned into an amusement for the wealthy. Ironically, the wave of Progress that has produced this theme park on the riverbank is the same one that has killed the river. And murdered it is, no longer “shimmer[ing] like wild silk” (317), but greeting Rahel “with a ghastly skull’s smile” (118).

Once it had the power to evoke fear. To change lives. But now its teeth were drawn, its spirit spent. It was just a slow, sludging green ribbon lawn that ferried fetid garbage to the sea. (119)

Plastic bags blow across its viscous surface (119); it emits a constant stink of “shit and pesticides bought with World Bank loans” (14); except for a few stragglers suffering from boils and fin-rot, it is fishless (14). The main reason for its dramatic shrinkage is the erection of a barrage downstream, to regulate the inflow of saline water from the backwaters that open into the Arabian Sea—a political ploy to get the votes of a bloc of influential paddy farmers. “So they now had two harvests a year instead of one. More rice, for the price of a river” (118).

So this landscape feature that should be a selling point becomes a liability, the hotel people doing their best to isolate their property from it, replacing it with a pool around which bored guests eager for just a bite or two of the local flavor can enjoy Kathakali, Kerala’s classical dance-theater, in simplified, abridged performances—“[t]runcated swimming pool performances” (218). All the flow, the natural grandeur, the lulls and rushes of epic storytelling and its sedimentary accumulation of meaning have been replaced with these shrunken, sanitized tales. Roy thus directly analogizes the abridgement and treatment of water and narrative. She explains how

...Kathakali discovered long ago that the secret of the Great Stories is that they have no secrets. The Great Stories are the ones that you have heard and want to



hear again. The ones you can enter anywhere and inhabit comfortably. They don't deceive you with thrills and trick endings. They don't surprise you with the unforeseen. They are as familiar as the house you live in. Or the smell of your lover's skin. You know how they end, yet you listen as though you don't. In the way that although you know that one day you will die, you live as though you won't. In the Great Stories you know who lives, who dies, who finds love, who doesn't. And yet you want to know again. (218)

That is, these stories share a seamlessness, a recycledness, a balance of antiquity and eternal newness, with the water cycle. How much more ironic, then, when they are removed from it and harnessed to small, artificial waters—water made, in Didion's words, "available and useful" (*White* 64) but not vitalizing.

It is worth noting that the particular tale Roy has her Kathakali troop perform, Karna's Oath, recounts the birth and abandonment of Karna, son of the Sun god Surya, and Kunti, an unwed mother who, in order to avoid social stigma, places the child in a basket and sets it adrift on a river. Set in part near a river, this drama, in addition to associating uncontained female sexuality with the watercourse, raises the question of site-specific storytelling and suggests what a tale (and its audience) lose when a story can no longer be told in or even near its natural setting.

This correlation between the health of the river and the quality of stories persists throughout the book. In 1969, when the river is wild, stories thicken the air in and around Ayemenem house. There are all the narratives the twins learn as part of their English education<sup>81</sup>—Kipling's *Jungle Book*; the Lambs' abridgement of *The Tempest*; the Classics Illustrated version of *A Tale of Two Cities*; *The Sound of Music*—as well as Chacko's stories of the History House and the Earth Woman (in which Chacko illustrates the relativities of geological time to his niece and nephew by likening the planet to a woman). There is Kuttappen's cautionary personification of the river, and the fiction that the twins and Sophie Mol enact when they show up at Velutha's dressed as Mrs. Pillai, Mrs. Eapen, and Mrs.

Rajagopalan. There are the stories that characters literally tell in order to [stay a]live, such as the tale of a made-up twin brother that Velutha invents after he is spotted at a Communist march, and which the twins cling to after seeing Velutha beaten to death (“It isn’t him. I can tell. It’s his twin brother” [295]). More on the life-destroying than life-giving side are the fictions spun by Comrade Pillai, the political aspirant and “professional omeleteer” (15) who does not think twice about breaking an egg like Velutha in order to get the untouchables out of his precious and “inclusive” Communist Party; and by Baby Kochamma, who first tells the police that Velutha has raped Ammu (his willing lover) and kidnapped the children (who have run away), and then, in order to save her own skin, tells the twins that they and their mother will go to jail for Sophie Mol’s murder unless they corroborate her story for the police.

When Rahel returns to Ayemenem in 1993, human-to-human storytelling has dried up, and what has bloomed in its place is a massive satellite dish that fills the air with crap TV: wrestling, soaps, Donahue. These “[b]londes, wars, famines, football, sex, music, coups d’état” (27) are not unlike the stories Didion associates with the New California—plastic, fleeting, unsustaining.

This narrative dry spell finds a parallel in the Estha of 1993, a human example of word drought whose silence “wasn’t an accusing, protesting silence as much as a sort of estivation, a dormancy, the psychological equivalent of what lungfish do to get themselves through the dry season” (12). When Rahel returns to Ayemenem, words come with her: “The world, locked out for years, suddenly flooded in, and now Estha couldn’t hear himself for the noise. Trains. Traffic. Music. The stock market. A dam had burst and savage waters swept everything up in a swirling” (16).

Much as we are given the reason for the Meenachal’s attenuation (the saltwater barrage), we are told exactly when Estha’s word supply begins to dry up: the moment he is forced by both the police and Baby Kochamma to betray Velutha, thereby sealing his fate. (“The Inspector asked his question. Estha’s mouth said Yes.... Silence slid in like a bolt” [303].) It makes sense

that damming and Velutha's death are associated in this way, given how strongly Velutha is linked with the river, the ocean and, through his lucky leaf birthmark "that made the monsoons come on time" (166), nature's cyclicity itself.

As prelude to the novel's final scene, in which upper-caste Ammu and untouchable Velutha consummate their scandalous passion, Velutha floats, undistinguishable, in the nighttime river. Seeing him emerge, Ammu understands

that the world they stood in was his. That he belonged to it. That it belonged to him. The water. The mud. The trees. The fish. The stars. He moved so easily through it. As she watched him she understood the quality of his beauty. How his labor had shaped him. How the wood he fashioned had fashioned him. Each plank he planed, each nail he drove, each thing he made had molded him. Had left its stamp on him. Had given him his strength, his supple grace. (316)

He epitomizes the ingenuity and elegance of nature, which parallels that of the perfectly actualized artist, indivisible from his own creations. In this regard, he is similar to the Kathakali man, "the most beautiful of men. Because his body is his soul. His only instrument. From the age of three...planed and polished, pared down, harnessed wholly to the task of storytelling" (219). Thus does Velutha bear traces of all the minute gifts he has made for Ammu over the years—"tiny windmills, rattles, minute jewelry boxes out of dried reeds...perfect boats out of tapioca stems and figurines on cashew nuts" (71).

The gift language that is so tied up with hydro-logic abounds in this novel. This is perhaps most obvious in the case of Velutha and Ammu's relationship, in which both are struck by the revelation that though he has always been the one to give the gifts, "*she* ha[s] gifts to give him, too" (168). The Meenachal, itself, is as likely to give as to take. (In the words of a fisherman who has fished it his entire life: "[n]o one knows what it may snatch or suddenly yield" [245]). Kathakali is framed, unequivocally, as "a gift. The promise of a story" (182). Part of the Kathakali troop's power is their clear understanding of both this and the reciprocal nature of gift economies. Their performance in the Ayemenem temple the night Rahel attends is an offering, though less a straightforward gift of thanksgiving than a gift of atonement. They realize that by

performing abridged swimming-pool versions of their culture's classic tales for tourists, "with their lolling nakedness and their imported attention spans" (22), they risk offending the gods, so they perform wild, full versions for none but these gods. They understand that they cannot earn their bread from these stories, give nothing back, and continue to prosper. For in the gift economy to which true artworks belong, what goes around comes around.<sup>82</sup>

Rahel understands the nature of the gift that is Kathakali, and arrives at the temple to watch it not empty handed, but with a coconut for the temple elephant. Of course, she is the recipient of one of the book's most significant gifts: the lucky, custom-made fishing rod she receives from Velutha. Given what Roy says in the above-quoted passage about fishing being a sort of writer's apprenticeship, this fishing rod emerges as a pen-proxy, not unlike the pencil in Virginia Woolf's "Street Haunting."

In addition to giving Rahel this implement, Velutha himself is a storyteller. This emerges not only in the tale of his made-up twin, but in the way he is willing and able to enter into the children's stories, as when Rahel, Estha and Sophie Mol show up at his house dressed in saris and kohl and he treats them like fine ladies, serving them refreshments and giving them gifts. The narrator describes this easy narrative complicity as part of his grace: "It is after all so easy to shatter a story. To break a chain of thought. To ruin a fragment of dream being carried around carefully like a piece of porcelain. To let it be, to travel with it, as Velutha did, is much the harder thing to do" (181).

Breaking a chain of thought, arresting a flow of information or fancy—this is essentially the action of a dam. Velutha, as "a teller and nurturer of stories," is both anti-dam and "antithesis of the state and history" (Jani 208). (After all, Dams, History and the State are all part of the same politico-industrial complex.) For this very reason, he does not emerge as a central (in fact, the titular character) until late in the text. In critic Pranav Jani's reading, this distances the reader from him and his story, and "highlights the difficulties of communication across rigid social

barriers” (208), which, as it happens are not so different from the difficulties of communicating across dams, those rigid physical barriers.

On the afternoon Ammu and Velutha first re-notice one another, Ammu dreams of swimming in the sea with a cheerful one-armed man, an “Afternoon-mare” that revisits her later, “mov[ing] inside her like a rib of water rising from the ocean, gathering into a wave” (312). She knows exactly who this man is. Velutha.

The God of Loss.

The God of Small Things.

The God of Goosebumps and Sudden Smiles. (312)

The concept of smallness is crucial to this novel, as is the big/small dichotomy that one can align with the History/storytelling binary. Jani considers how “official, ‘big’ histories suppress [ordinary people’s] voices” (193) in the way that “big things” usually seek to “overwhelm all acts of subaltern agency and resistance” (201), much as a Big Dam suppresses the natural rhythms and communications of an entire river valley and its inhabitants. Yet, over and against this conspire the forces of the small—the “ordinary people and small lives” that make up small-h history (192-3). As Jani sees it, “Roy’s text is not simply about the power of storytelling in the abstract but about the need to tell the stories of the small” (206). It does this in the case of Velutha, who, despite his natural charisma and talent, is one of the smallest characters in the book socio-politically speaking. On the level of personhood, he is right down there with the Meenachal. And *The God of Small Things* tells both their stories.

Roy addresses the big/small opposition herself in “The Greater Common Good,” when thinking about how to stem the seemingly unstoppable sweep of Development. In order to do that,

We have to support our small heroes...We have to fight specific wars in specific ways. Who knows, perhaps that's what the twenty-first century has in store for us. The dismantling of the big. Big bomb, big dams, big ideologies, big contradictions, big countries, big wars, big heroes, big mistakes. Perhaps it will be the Century of the Small. Perhaps right now, this very minute, there's a small god up in heaven readying herself for us. Could it be? Could it possibly be? (*Cost* 12)

While suggesting that there might very well be such a small god, Roy's novel asks who will listen to him/her in a political order where the "logic of the small" is as likely to be disregarded as the "logic of the river" to which it is so closely related. And what if this god happens to be an untouchable (like Velutha) or a "she" (like the speculative god of the passage)? Interestingly, Roy raises the gender issue in *Velutha*, and in one deft detail—Ammu's red cutex, which he indulgently lets the twins apply to his fingernails—assigns him a touch of the androgyny that Woolf considered the hallmark of any true creator.<sup>83</sup> Associatively, Roy urges us to see the paravan as both the female river and the man who swims in her; the creative potential of the river when free, and its silence when dammed.

There is a Woolfian sheen to the Meenachal insofar as it comes to stand, like the street-river of *A Room of One's Own*, for the merging of masculine and feminine. *The God of Small Things* has two endings, that of the core story (1969) and the frame story (1993), and both involve the sexual union of a man and a woman. There is the regressive, desperate search for complementarity that brings the twins together in an act of incest (1993), and then the passionate, liberatory act of sensual communion between Ammu and Velutha (1969), the "tragic" and the "triumphalist" in Jani's analysis. The former is somewhat removed from but still associated with the river, occurring in the twins' childhood home, which retains even after the Meenachal's death a "rushing, rolling, fishswimming sense" (*God* 30). The latter, however, occurs directly beside the still untrammelled river, and closes with the novel's hopeful last word: *tomorrow*.

For Roy, “tomorrow” has no reference to dams either technically or normatively. While Didion might once have been able to fantasize about a dam operating into the posthuman future, Roy never could, knowing full well that these structures function “only as long as it takes Nature to fill them with silt” (*Cost* 15)—a striking obsolescence that hardly recommends them to the future. Whereas Didion could at one point see the Hoover Dam, with its massive turbines and gushing spillways, in terms of sexual power, Roy can only conceptualize such a construct in terms of political power and the oligarchs willing to remake an entire river system so that a universally vital resource flows not according to its own logic or even human need, but towards money. She cannot put from her mind India’s 33 million “project affected persons” (a very conservative 1999 estimate) who have been forced off their land, sometimes more than once, to make room for dams or other development projects or even other project affected persons. (“Once they start rolling, there’s no resting place” [20]). These people, mostly tribal folk and dalits, lose their homes, livelihoods, communities, health, and connection with nature, often without any compensation. This is a far cry from the picture of dam-affected Californians that Didion shares in “Holy Water,” wherein a freak tropical storm cancels all water releases from Davis Dam, thus delaying shooting on a Sam Peckinpah film that requires a stretch of the Colorado to run a full eighteen feet deep (*White* 63)—a New California story to be sure.

Whereas in Didion’s writings “connection” carries the unmistakable socio-political charge of “who you know,” in both Roy’s and Hogan’s it takes on the tone of Mary Daly’s pronouncement, in *Gyn/Ecology*, that “everything is connected” (11). That is, that racism, classism, sexism, and ecological domination are all products of the same hierarchical structures within society, structures

[i]mpelled by feelings that were primal yet paradoxically wholly impersonal. Feelings of contempt born of inchoate, unacknowledged fear—civilization’s fear of nature, men’s fear of women, power’s fear of powerlessness. Man’s subliminal urge to destroy what he could neither subdue nor deify. Men’s Needs. (Roy, *God* 292)

Both Roy and Linda Hogan present rivers, and our attitudes toward these planetary connectors, as prime places to see this complex hierarchy at work.

The connection between ecological despoliation and sexism gains strength in Roy's novel from the traditional East Indian association of rivers and femininity. Indian nationals speak of *Narmadai*—"Mother Narmada."<sup>84</sup> Aware that "[h]uman beings have often personified rivers," Indian Geographer Kuntala Lahiri Dutt considers the way her county's water management policy has aimed to reduce this powerful mother element to "obedient daughter" rivers (2395). Roy's book, obliquely about the breaking of a river, is also the tale of a family's and a culture's effort to turn a willful mother, Ammu, into an obedient daughter—a "paternal, protective" act that mirrors the "paternal, protective morality of the Soviet-style centralised State" that characterized India's development paradigm under Nehru, in contrast with the "nurturing, maternal morality of romanticised village Republics" and traditional local knowledge that flourished under Gandhi (*Cost* 11). Because of his famous "Dams are the Temples of Modern India" speech ("one that he grew to regret in his own lifetime" [13]), the paternalistic Nehru is seen particularly as the father of these constructions. So, dams—and the drought, lack of connection, and interrupted communication they connote—emerge as "an inheritance from the fathers" in Roy's writing just as surely as in Didion's.

One of the ways Roy emphasizes India's cultural paternalism in her novel is by omitting actual fathers. Ammu and Chacko's father—a bitter, jealous, ineffectual man—is already dead when the story begins, and the twins'—a craven alcoholic wastrel—only appears "off stage." (Chacko's brief experience of on-the-scene fatherhood ends in disaster, i.e. his daughter's drowning.) Functioning in their stead are institutionalized forms of "man's subliminal urge to destroy what he [can] neither subdue nor deify" (*God* 292): the Indian Government, the Communist Party, the Police, the World Bank (whose loans and pesticides destroy the river).

Except for Chacko, the mother-spoiled prodigal who dabbles in "running" the pickle factory between flirtations, and the young Estha, Ayemenem House is a small matriarchy



comprising Mammachi; Baby Kochamma; the dwarf servant Kochu Maria; Ammu; and Rahel. Yet the connections between these women are thin. There is only one instance—when Ammu, Rahel, and Baby Kochamma share a bathroom stall in the movie theater—during which Rahel feels like part of a continuity of women. (“Everyone pissing in front of everyone. Like friends.... They would never be together like this again” [92].) Years later, when Rahel is expelled from three separate schools, all her teachers agree that it is “as though she didn’t know how to be a girl” (18). And she does not. Yet in this country of many dams, where social structures are in place that prevent an *empowering* flow of information from the older generations of women to the younger, Rahel’s disconnect from her matrilineage results in “an accidental release of the spirit” (18). Left on her own, she is all the freer to befriend her river, to learn its lessons. Thus it is both remarkable and not that Rahel should survive to act as a channel for this story. Of course, as Roy’s proxy, she could do no less, Roy herself having displayed a remarkable vocality despite major efforts to dam her speech, namely a 1997 charge of “Corrupting Public Morality” (in response to *The God of Small Things*) and a 2002 Indian Supreme Court citation for contempt stemming from, of all things, her treatment of the court in her anti-dam essay “The Greater Common Good.”<sup>85</sup>

In this polemical essay, Roy considers the silence that both attends and follows dam building. When a river is dammed and thus converted into a reservoir lake, only not do its stilled currents grow quiet, but so do all the eloquent lands they submerge. How can Roy not despise a political formation that floods ancient pilgrimage sites and temples, and “thinks nothing of destroying the sacred hills and groves, the places of worship, the ancient homes of the gods and demons of tribal people....nothing of submerging a valley that has yielded fossils, microliths and rock paintings, the only valley in India, according to archaeologists, that contains an uninterrupted record of human occupation from the Old Stone Age” (*Cost* 63)? And again there are those 30 million-plus “oustees” who have been displaced by dams. What really confounds Roy, besides their loss of home and livelihood and the painful transition they are forced to make

from independent ruralists to completely disenfranchised slum-dwellers, is how effectively they are struck from the existential record. These millions of displaced people “don’t exist anymore. When history is written, they won’t be in it. Not even as statistics” (20). They leave “no trail at all” (52).

One of the bright spots for Roy in India’s dark saga of dam-building is the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), a broad-based coalition of Adivasis (India’s indigenous people), upper-caste big farmers, Dalits, and middle-class folk who, under the leadership of Medha Patkar, oppose the development of the Narmada Valley. “[A] forging of links between the urban and the rural, between the farmers and the fishermen and the writers and the painters” (Roy, “Interview”), this movement is a direct antidote to the social splintering that is a dam’s usual legacy. Like “The Greater Common Good,” like *The God of Small Things*, it is a woman-led effort to give voice to a threatened sister river, and the people who stand to disappear along with it. It is an effort to break the silence.

## **Hogan**

All of this chapter’s themes become outrageously explicit in Linda Hogan’s 1995 novel *Solar Storms*: rivers and river stories, damming and silence, women as the keepers of stories, history’s grandmothers, and dutiful daughters (though here duty is a matter of conviction and devotion to the land, rather than mere obedience). This novel fully develops the idea that storytelling converts the landscape into a sustaining, holy text, and that landscape in turn anchors stories and keeps them alive. Writing out of a Chickasaw cosmology, Hogan takes as her theme not the destruction of “mere” landscape, but of territory that is simultaneously ecological, ancestral, and tribal, and stands, as a result of this complex interrelationality, in a particularly tight, rich relationship with storytelling. Consequently, the river that runs through the landscape of *Solar Storms* offers the fullest depiction of what a river is, does, and can stand for.

Like Roy's writings, Hogan's novel is a work of literary resistance against governments and philosophies that are predicated on the exploitation of the seemingly powerless. It comprises the first-person narrative of Angel Jensen, a young Native American woman who, after years as a foster child in white America, returns to her reservation, specifically to the hamlet of Adam's Rib, to reconnect with the mother from whom she was taken and learn the story behind her scarred face. She quickly becomes attached to the landscape of her birth and enmeshed in the world of her grandmothers Bush (a "step-grandmother"), Agnes (her great-grandmother), and Dora-Rouge (her great-great-grandmother). Not long after her arrival, word spreads of a large dam—clearly based on the James Bay Hydro-Project—whose broad ecological effects quickly become evident.<sup>86</sup>

In actuality, the eastern American-Canadian borderlands are a lacework of land and water, and the fictional Adam's Rib is no exception: a "place where water was broken apart by land, land split open by water so that the maps showed places both bound and, if you knew the way in, boundless. The elders [believe] it was where land and water had joined together in an ancient pact, now broken" (21). Hydrological truth is frequently reaffirmed here by "the storms that [move] in so quickly and [give] themselves back to water" (80). Early on, after seeing her great-grandmother return "refreshed and clear-eyed" from a spot where river joins lake, "as if the place where the two waters met was a juncture where fatigue yielded to comfort, where a woman renewed herself" (44), Angel realizes that the preponderance of strong women in this watery place is no accident.

In addition to being aquatic, life at Adam's Rib is, as Hogan's toponym suggests, gynocratic. Pueblo writer Paula Gunn Allen defines gynocracies as "woman-centered tribes in which matrilocality, matrifocality, matrilinearity, maternal control of household goods and resources, and female deities of the magnitude of the Christian God were and are present and active features of traditional tribal life" (*Sacred Hoop* 3-4).<sup>87</sup> In her article "Fighting for the Mother/Land," Silvia Schulterman identifies Angel's key realizations as being that her

“cultural legacy...depends on an intact matrilineage” (74), and that this continuity itself has an analogue in the surrounding topography. “Between us [women],” Angel explains, “there had once been a bond, something like the ancient pact land had made with water, or the agreement humans once made with animals” (*Solar* 22). However, when Hannah, Angel’s very damaged mother, injured and almost killed the young Angel, white Social Services broke this continuity, opting not to leave the child with her willing and able step-grandmother, Bush (no blood relation), but to move her to a series of foster homes in White America. As Agnes tells Angel, after child protective services intervened, they were all as waters separated by a dam: “there was no way open between us” (16).

Yet, something in Angel is drawn back to her own blood and waters, entities that are not so very different at Adam’s Rib, where the water is blood-red on account of its high iron content (33). (Iron happens to be the surname of Angel’s great-grandmother, Agnes, and the name that Angel herself takes.) When Angel first sees Agnes, her heart catches, having “recognized its own blood” (23). Within weeks Angel feels her homecoming to be of a hydrological rightness and inevitability: “It was a felt thing, that I was traveling toward myself like rain falling into a lake...” (26) and “these women were that lake” (55).

Since the pact between land and water is everywhere evident at Adam’s Rib, its rupture, in the form of the massive hydropower dam, can spell nothing less than full destruction for this town and its inhabitants, and in fact, the entire watershed. Fortified by her newly restored familial bonds and her grandmothers’ stories about the land, Angel joins her people in protesting this project. Eventually this entails the four women making an epic canoe journey into the heart of the threatened land (on waters that Angel soon feels she knows as “sure as tributaries of [her] own blood” [137]), during which they see the effects of the damming first-hand: rerouted waters, unnatural mudflats, drowned animals and trees, fish dead of the mercury leached out of submerged stones and vegetation.

Bush, the novel's main activist, undertakes the trip mostly in the interests of environmental justice, but also in tacit support of the other women's agendas: Angel's, to find her mother; Dora-Rouge's, to return to her native town, where she means eventually to die; and Agnes's, to transfer (however reluctantly) her mother to her death-place. In different ways, each of these personal quests is hydro-logical. Dora-Rouge and Agnes both seek to help a life, Dora-Rouge's, come full circle, like Aldo Leopold's round river itself.<sup>88</sup> Meanwhile, Bush and Angel hope to preserve or reinstate a flow—of water and its informational burden, and the matrilineal line and its stories—each of which has been threatened by white patriarchal intervention.

### *Water's stories*

Hogan's is a deeply ecological consciousness that assumes the general sentience and communicativeness of nature. That all parts of the planet speak their own language and tell their own stories is an indigenous *donnée* that speaks to a reverence for both nature and storytelling that is essential to Native American survival. In *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*, Paula Gunn Allen posits that since the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the only thing that has kept "the fragile web of [tribal] identity" from dissolving under Anglo-European pressure is the oral tradition, which has kept people "conscious of their tribal identity, their spiritual traditions, and their connection to the land and her creatures" (53).<sup>89</sup> Leslie Marmon Silko echoes this in her discussion of the Pueblo people, for whom "stories," or oral narratives, have been "the medium in which the complex of [tribal] knowledge and belief [are] maintained" (1007). Collectively remembered and retold, and aimed at "a communal truth, not an absolute" (1008), these stories have not only unified the people but transmitted valuable information about the scant resources of the American Southwest. At the same time, "the continuity and accuracy of the oral narratives are reinforced by the landscape" (1010).

The culture (and landscape) on display in *Solar Storms* is, indeed, a richly storied one. As Dora-Rouge explains to Angel, her own people's model of creation (the Inuit) is ongoing,

extending well beyond Genesis's six days and a day of rest. On the eighth day, "human beings were given their place with the earth"; on the ninth, stories were created; on a later, unnumbered day, songs and singing were devised (181). What's more, these powers of story and song were not restricted to human beings alone.

If every facet of nature does in fact have a story to tell, we are idiots not to listen. This is the bottom line of Hogan's essay "A Different Yield." Read agriculturally, the "yield" here is corn, the "grandmother crop"<sup>90</sup> planted in Hogan's mind by the work of Nobel Prize-winning cytogeneticist Barbara McClintock. According to Hogan, McClintock's method was simply to "listen to what corn had to say....a whole approach...that bridged the worlds of woman and plant" by assuming that corn has an "inner voice" as surely as woman does (*Dwellings* 72). Which brings us to the metaphorical—epistemological—yield: what we glean from being willing to listen to nature's voices. In addition to affording us an "intuitive, alive and humane" way of doing science (72), such deep listening can be a source of artistic inspiration, taking us directly to what Hogan, paraphrasing Paul Klee, calls "the origins of things and their meanings, ... the secret places where original law fosters all evolution, ...the organic center of all movement in time and space, which is the mind or heart of creation" (73). ("This organic center," she explains, "comes down to us through long traditions of learning the world's own songs" [73].) Additionally, such listening can have healing effects, for people as well as nature.<sup>91</sup> As Hogan reasons, in a time of such wholesale environmental destruction, "our lives depend on this listening. It may be that the earth speaks its symptoms to us" (74).

In the polyvocality that is nature, water's voice is particularly important to Hogan, who makes full use of the idea that rivers are entities with mouths and, therefore, in a position to be some of nature's most important storytellers. When Angel's great-great-grandmother Dora-Rouge witnesses the hydrological disarray upstream from the dam site, she quickly diagnoses the central problem: "the mouths of rivers had stopped spilling their stories to the bays and seas beyond them" (*Solar* 205).

There are several direct references to the voice of water. One of the plainest occurs one night as winter approaches Adam's Rib, when Angel listens to "the sound of the lake talking to the sky, revealing some part of itself or what lay inside its blue-green light[, ...] recalling the memory of last year's ice, the jewelry lost in its waters, the fishermen who'd fallen through storms, and who lay inside it even now" (94). In "Crossings," a poem that positions whales and humans as evolutionary foils, one species having returned to the sea just as the other left it, Hogan suggests that we still have an inner organ that lets us hear/see in water, much as whales still have inner legs from "when [they] lived on land (*Medicines* 28).

What's more, Hogan discusses human language in terms that compare it to water's. "Without language," she says, "we humans have no way of knowing what lies beneath the surface of one another" (*Dwellings* 77)—and by 'language' she means not only words, but the more animal idioms of pose, gesture, expression, pheromone. Lying deeper than these "inner forms of communication," below even the oldest forms of embodied language, is the instinct that drives us towards poetry, dance, music, the visual arts. And beneath this still "is even more a deep-moving underground language in us. Its currents pass[ing] between us and the rest of nature" (77). That is, beneath all expressive impulses, cast in terms of the most ancient and life-sustaining groundwater, is the language we share with nature—the primer for which is in our blood:

This is what I know from blood:  
the first language is not our own.  
There are names each thing has for itself,  
and beneath us the other order already moves. ("Map," *Medicines* 37-8)<sup>92</sup>

When Paula Gunn Allen attributes an oral tradition's vitality to its ability to "[adapt] to the flow of the present while never relinquishing its connection to the past" (*Hoop* 45), she is subtly calling out its riparian qualities. Hogan enacts this concept in structuring *Solar Storms* as a river system, wherein the italicized tributaries of her grandmothers' stories flow into the mainstream of Angel's first-person narrative.

As Hogan says in her essay “Stories of Water,” “Earth is a Water Planet” (*Dwellings* 99). Human beings, ever a part of nature, are merely “alive water” (*Solar* 350) for whom, “...if water wasn’t a spirit...a god that ruled their lives, nothing was...” (62). For Allen also, water serves as a potent cosmic metaphor: “The nature of the cosmos, of the human, the creaturely, and the supernatural universe is like water. It takes numerous forms; it evaporates and it gathers. Survival and continuance are contingent on its presence. Whether it is in a cup, a jar, or an underground river, it nourishes life. And whether the ritual traditions are in ceremony, myth, or novel, they nourish the people. They give meaning. They give life” (*Hoop* 101).<sup>93</sup>

“Myth” is an important word for both Hogan and Allen. In “A Different Yield,” Hogan parses its modern derogation:

In recent times, the term ‘myth’ has come to signify falsehood, but when we examine myths, we find that they are a higher form of truth. They are the deepest, innermost cultural stories of our human journeys toward spiritual and psychological growth. An essential part of myth is that it allows for our return to the creation, to a mythic time. It allows us to hear the world new again. (*Dwellings* 73–74)

Meanwhile, Allen considers the term etymologically in *Grandmothers of the Light*:

The Greek terms [that ‘myth’] is derived from mean ‘one who is initiated’ and ‘a mystery, secret, a thing muttered,’ and are based on the Indo-Germanic root *MU*. A related Greek term, ‘a sound of muttering,’ and its Latin forms, *muttum* or *mutum*, meaning ‘a slight sound,’ both signify muttering and muteness.... Muttering, in which magicians frequently indulge, is an activity presently ascribed to the mad, the elderly, the female, and the powerless. Muttering is a word that once signified whatever mothering signified at the time the original root word was current—several thousand years ago. Even today, the German word for “mother” is *mutter*. Myth and mother—both discredited in the modern world—are nevertheless essential to the modern world’s existence. Certainly Jungians would argue that myth is (7) mother of life. Through it we contemplate the meaning of our existence and the significance of all our relationships, not only with human beings but with all varieties of people, animals, spirits or immortals, and divinities. Through it we capture intimations of the vastness that lies beyond linear understanding, ungraspable unless mother myth informs it with life. (7–8)



This puts an indigenous, etymological, ecological, and cosmic gloss on Woolf's notion that "we think back through our mothers."

Interestingly, in *Solar Storms* mother is the missing link in the matrilineal chain. The general tendency amongst critics is to connect the devastation of the novel's landscape with the starved, scarred body of Angel's mother, Hannah, both of them being "victims of an oppressive dominant culture" (Schultermandl 77). It is also possible to read this damaged character as a hydrological interruption—a sort of fierce, non-amniotic, anti-maternal water. Her scant biography is a study in hydrological turpitude: conceived and born in a time of drought, she reemerges at Adam's Rib, aged ten or so, walking out of a lake during a ferocious storm (*Solar* 34). Later, Bush describes blood and "the oceanic" as meeting in her in a terrifying way: "I saw it in time, her life going backward to where time and history and genocide gather and move like a cloud above the spilled oceans of blood" (101).

After having been at Adam's Rib long enough to associate strong women with area waters, Angel herself begins to see Hannah in hydrological terms: "I understood it first like this: the mouth of a river goes one way; my mother was the opposite. Things and people fell into her like into the eye of a storm, and they were destroyed" (105). In this, Hannah is very like the Hungry Mouth of Water, a warm eddy in the lake next to Adam's Rib that wears a deceptive scrim of ice in winter and has consequently swallowed all manner of things: snowmobiles, hunters, the skinned carcasses discarded by fur trappers, a shipwreck, and "lost men who had believed they knew the waters" (63). Invisible to a newcomer like Angel, this aqueous anomaly is well known and avoided by the locals, the wisest of whom placate it with small offerings when they must pass it.

One night, a drunken woman stumbles across Hungry Mouth and is lost. At her memorial, Angel is touched when the mourners bury with her things a song that is never to be sung again, *her* song. As much as the finality of this gesture appeals to Angel, she paddles out to the Mouth one night, braving the undertow, and sings the song into it one last time. She makes a

point of uniting this dead woman with her song because she is at heart a uniter,<sup>94</sup> and one who, in the true spirit of the novel, feels keenly the connections between woman, words, and water.

With this one generous act, she establishes herself as the antithesis of her mother, who takes rather than gives, and stands for the negation of story rather than its continuity. In this river text swirling with the tributary voices of Angel's grandmothers, Hannah is a narrative obstacle. Although Bush, Agnes and Dora-Rouge do their best to explain to Angel Hannah's inexplicability, none of them says a word about what Hannah did to Angel's face. Instead, Angel learns this from the two women who drop by Hannah's northcountry house as she (Hannah) lay dying of a stab wound. "[S]he bit your face with her teeth," they tell her, confirming what she's always known, that Hannah "was a cannibal, a cold thing that hated life" (246-7). Beyond being the negation of story, Hannah is almost the negation of speech, saying only four things in the course of the book. To Angel: "I never hit you," "I never laid a hand on you," and "You look fat" (231); and to the air or a ghost: "Why are you following me?" (249).

When she dies, all is peace. Angel, understanding (in part negatively, through Hannah) the concept of matrilineal flow, reinstates it both by forgiving her mother and assuming responsibility for her newly discovered infant sister, Aurora. Yet she is careful to create a beneficent interruption around this death, removing Aurora from Hannah's deathbed in order to keep the blighted woman's story from spilling over into her.

Afterward Angel and Bush, both storytellers, wrap this dead woman who has resisted and frustrated language, in newspaper. "How appropriate it was to place her on words of war, obituaries, stories of carnage and misery, and true stories that had been changed to lies. It seemed like the right bed for her. Some of the words stuck to her body, dark ink, but we did not wash them off; it was a suitable skin" (253). One of the headlines, fittingly, is about the dam.

If mother is absent from *Solar Storms*, grandmothers—in the literal sense as well as Solnit's—abound. In "A Different Yield," Hogan excerpts a poem by Cherokee writer Jimmie

Durham, “The Teachings of My Grandmother,” with the refrain “We probably knew that would be true.” Its gist: that we now wait for science, with all its alleged objectivity, to tell us what our more organic, intuitive, holistic native intelligence already knows. This ‘grandmother wit’—hailing from further back in the chain of human knowing than mother wit—is what Hogan celebrates. It emerges in her own poem “The Grandmother Songs,” which directly connects women, water and song/story. When we die, it suggests, the door to our life swings open and out walk the tribal grandmothers who have attended us since birth:

That’s when the rain begins,  
and when the mouth of the river sings,  
water flows from it  
back to the cellular sea  
and along the way  
earth sprouts and blooms, the grandmothers  
keep following the creation that opens before them  
as they sing. (*Medicines* 58)

It seems that water’s song and the grandmothers’ song are one and the same.

Like Roy, Hogan shows how Big Dams begin and end in silence, like so much of the Native American experience. Angel explains that “[i]f the American Indian Movement got little attention on television, the dams and diversions of rivers to the north were even more absent” (*Solar* 156). If not for two young men traveling by canoe and spreading news of the dam via word-of-mouth, again underscoring the association between mouths, speech, and rivers, Angel’s people would have been completely in the dark. When she and her grandmothers arrive at Two-Town (outside the dam site), there is “no press, no truth telling, and whenever questioned, the officials den[y] any wrongdoing” (312).

When the tribal people want to talk about the dams, they find that their previous experience has not given them the language to do so. “There were stories for everything,” Angel says, “But not for this. We needed a story for what was happening to us now, as if a story would guide us” (302). Instead, theirs is “the silent dread, still unformed, that comes to people when their world is threatened” (70). In addition to the lack of guiding narratives, these people face

the destruction of “every sacred site [they] had grown from, known, and told stories about” (295). Will these sites take the stories with them, their wisdom, their medicinal power?<sup>95</sup>

If the language of the dam builders, their attorneys and the government officials “[doesn’t] hold a thought for the life of water” (279), the women of *Solar Storms* do their best to align their speech and stories with “[water’s] needs, its own speaking and desires” (323). Dora-Rouge, the most grandmotherly of them, is the only character to speak directly with water, asking it what it wants when she makes a deal with the raging Se Nay River during their canoe journey.<sup>96</sup> (The Se Nay’s fury is the river speaking on its own behalf.) At one point, when opposition to the dam begins to split into those favoring peaceful protest, those advocating violence, and those driven by economic pressure to work at the dam sites, Angel is fascinated to see this social reality reenacted by the land as some of the river banks calve under the pressure of the dammed river’s erratic currents. “It was frightening and sad to see, but there was also a kind of defiance in that splitting, one that couldn’t be spoken except in the language of the earth, and it was a sign we couldn’t decipher, a meaning not known to us” (326).

But like Roy, Hogan’s characters know that these fluvial expressions cannot be heard by those who most need to hear them, who simply do not have the “inner ears.” Young and hopeful, Angel’s solution is to go on the radio program *Indian Time* and speak for the displaced and stifled waters, a small foretaste of *Solar Storms*, which is narrated in her voice. (Like Rahel, she survives to tell the story of her people and their landscape.) Bush, in many ways the novel’s true heroine, goes about it differently. In her, as in Ruth, the protagonist of her 2008 novel *People of the Whale*, Hogan embraces Bachelard’s idea of a personal element. Both characters are hydro-logical in their holism, their appreciation of the “round river” that is the water cycle, nature as a whole, and life in general. More basically, both are most at home on and in water. (Ruth is actually born with gill slits.) A natural hydro-logician, Bush is “a woman who puts things together” (*Solar* 95)—fossilized skeletons, the route for their trip, old maps, facts. Conversely, she is a sunderer of bad connections, rumored to know a song that breaks down “the wrong type

of bridges”—those between bad spirits and people that are not so different from the dams being built up north, “with muddy, earth-moving water flowing beneath them” (102). But much as there are no preexisting stories to instruct the people in dealing with the dams, there is no song, new or ancient, to break them up. Bush sees that the best way to dismantle them is to break the silence by putting together and circulating, for the generally ignorant and incurious public and its complacent news organizations, a text-and-photo account of BEEVCO’s activities and the resultant ecological and social effects.

BEEVCO, it is worth noting, is a fictional version of Hydro-Quebec, the authority behind the James Bay Project, and an ironic one at that, with its sly reference to beavers, the ur-creatures of Angel’s people. In their cosmology, it was beavers—nature’s dam builders—who created the first living earth on a planet that had been all water. After building these life-enabling dams, they then shaped humans, “strangers to the rest of creation,” and made a pact with them: “Beaver offered fish and waterfowl and animals. The people, in turn, would take care of the world and speak with the gods and all creation” (239). Of course, human beings have not kept their promise to speak to and for nature. Consequently, the beavers who used to sing out loud, “a song haunting and sweet” (239), have gone as silent as their rivers. What’s the point when no one listens anyway?

“BEEVCO” inverts the indigenous worldview in its second syllable as well. The “CO” here is irreducibly corporate, the desire to “control water, the rise and fall of it, the direction of ancient life,” to narrow rivers into the “thin black electrical wires that traversed the world,” and to sell this power to the highest bidder (266). The tribal way, on the other hand, is corporate in the now secondary sense of cooperative or collective. Late in her narrative, Angel reflects back on the time of the dam protests as one when her people still lived as a tribe:

Each of us had one part of the work of living. Each of us had one set of the many eyes, the many breaths, the many comings and goings of the people. Everyone had a gift, each person a specialty of one kind or another, whether it was hunting, or decocting the plants, or reading the ground for signs of hares. All of us

together formed something like a single organism. We needed and helped one another. (262)

Given my alignment of river and storytelling, the damming of this fictional river system should mean an attenuation of the narrative tradition and, consequently, the tribe. Instead, this eco-political assault serves to rally Hogan's people, who work hard to maintain their narrative coherence and tribal cohesiveness. As Silvia Schultersmandl proposes, "[i]t is not so much through their return to a pristine land within their tribal territories but rather through their activism for the preservation of tribal lands that [Hogan's] characters...reach a sense of completion to their identity quests" (69). When all is said and done, Angel thinks of how her people "had come to this through history, how there'd been a prophecy that we would unite and become like an ocean made up of many rivers. Even though we were afraid, it was a full feeling. We thought maybe this was our time" (*Solar* 300). After all, even "[t]ears have a purpose. They are what we carry of ocean, and perhaps we must become sea, give ourselves to it, if we are to be transformed" (340).<sup>97</sup>

In this sense (if not an ecological one) *Solar Storms* is a recuperative story not so unlike the story water itself tells as it travels in its "unbroken orbit from itself to itself" (*Dwellings* 106), for

[b]etween earth and earth's atmosphere, the amount of water remains constant; there is never a drop more, never a drop less. This is a story of circular infinity, of a planet birthing itself. After I learned this, [Hogan writes,] the clear raindrops began to break out of the sky, falling to the ground they had passed through before. I was overwhelmed with the beauty of the rain's sparkling clarity, the clear flow of it, and how any of it, in our toxic world, ever renews itself in its journey through earth and sky. (106)

Or rather, this is the story water has told *so far*. Though Hogan ends *Solar Storms* on a semi-hopeful note (the fact that Angel has survived to tell her people's stories is cause for celebration, anyway), she revisits the issue of hydro-degradation in *People of the Whale*, the

story of a fictional tribe, the A'atsika, living on the north Pacific coast in the fictional settlement of Dark River. The novel opens with the love story of Ruth Small and Thomas Just, childhood soulmates whose connubial joy is cut short after Thomas—high on booze, patriotism, and fraternity—joins the Army and ships out to Vietnam. From this point on the narrative follows two trajectories: Ruth's steady, tight orbit around her tribe's deepest ways and values, and Thomas's boomerang path away from and eventually back to them.

Though not a dam novel, *People of the Whale* has much in common with *Solar Storms*: strong women; characters more at home in and on water than on land; a blood-water connection; a daughter seeking a parent (this time a father); Vietnam Vets whose post-combat indifference extends to the land; a broken pact between humans and water; and a profound water-story analogy. A major difference is that here the violence done to nature is not perpetrated by the largely white techno-capitalist order, but by a faction of misguided tribesmen (and they are *men*) who, affecting a desire to return to tradition, take it upon themselves to stage a whale hunt. (American Indian subjugation hovers forever in the middle ground so that these tribesmen's actions are not simple culpability, but an example of "poverty / that when it ends / takes more than it needs" [Hogan, *Medicines* 22].) The deep wrongness of this in the tribal cosmogony cannot be overstated, the A'atsika believing themselves to have emerged from caves in the ocean

with their stories in their arms and on their backs or carried on the fins of the water animals, [...] the story of the whale, their ancestor, [being] one of these. All their stories clung like barnacles to the great whale, the whale they loved enough to watch pass by. They were people of the whale. They worshipped the whales. Whalebones had once been the homes of their ancestors who covered the giant ribs with skins and slept inside the shelters. The whales were their lives, their comfort. (*Whale* 43)

This species is directly connected to the A'atsikas' oral tradition, and so to their very existence. One of the settlement's ancient walls bears a carving of a whale giving birth to a human being

(278), yet more than “mother of life” (ibid.), whale is grandmother (283), with all that this term connotes for Hogan.

The hunt, when carried out, is a travesty of tribal values. The whale is not taken out of true need in the understanding that all useable parts will be turned to account and the rest returned to the sea, but rather for simple profit. There is no tribal consensus, just a behind-the-scenes plot on the part of the tribe’s business leaders to sell the animal’s meat to a bloc of Japanese buyers. On the day itself, instead of calling out to the whale and killing it cleanly and respectfully in the old way, the hunters—ignoring the pleas of Ruth and Thomas’s son, Marco, a “true whaler” who has been trained by the tribal elders and objects to the whale the hunters have sighted (it is too young, too friendly)—have at it with their rifles, a skirmish during which Marco is knocked overboard and drowned.<sup>98</sup>

The ocean Hogan depicts here is a wounded entity, polluted and overfished.<sup>99</sup> The death of this whale and one of its true descendants (Marco) is the final straw. The A’atsika have disregarded water’s own stories, particularly those passed down from that grandmother species, the whale, and also forgotten what Ruth, with her strong powers of aquatic hearing, tries to remind them in the run up to the hunt: that the ocean has its own hearing. “Tell the sea what you’re going to do,” she advises the secret all-male committee in charge of the hunt. “It is already listening to your words, deciding things in a new language. The whole world out there is waiting to escape your human grasping. The mind of water is listening, the mind of the water is thinking, is willing it another way. The thoughts of the world know” (83).

Although a tribal elder has predicted that a drought will follow the hunt (108), few of Dark River’s residents see a causal connection when the coastal rains dwindle, the river shrinks, the ground water dries up, and “the ocean takes itself into the distance, ... turning its back on them” (126), so that, before long, there is hardly enough water for people to cry, “and at a time when weeping might help” (127). Thomas and Ruth, however, understand the situation right away and seek in their different ways to repair the broken pact between their people and water.



Shocked into right-mindedness by the unholiness of the hunt and his son's suspicious death, Thomas knows the drought to be "the ocean ... mourning after so much has been taken from it," not just Marco and the whale, but the life that previously teemed in the dead zones and ruined reefs (136). First, he tries to restore balance by going to Washington to set the record straight regarding his time in Vietnam, how he turned on and then abandoned his platoon for attacking innocent villagers, storytelling riverfolk very like his own people. Then he vows to reconnect with Lin, the daughter he fathered with one of these villagers.

(Lin, it needs to be said, is another version of the dutiful-yet-strong daughter. Like Angel, she follows the pull of blood despite great obstacles, and having ocean as well as jungle in her blood [197], automatically responds to the local waters of her father's native land, especially the sight of "the [river] running seaward" [218]. Her attraction to oceanic convergence is of a piece with the unifying spirit she shares with Hogan's other strong women. Like Bush, Angel, and Ruth, Lin is a woman who brings things together, working for a Vietnamese organization that reunites families and repairs archives splintered by that country's long war.)

Ruth's efforts to call the waters back are more direct and stringent than Thomas's, as befits her profound hydro-logicality. Born with those gill slits and incubated in a basin of water, Ruth descends from a family "not bound to land" (34) and possesses the ability to hear through water. Like Bush, she is a truth-teller, "a rare woman who [is] not afraid to use words" (83), and a maintainer of blood-lines, extending a maternal hand to Lin, her husband's child by another woman. Her own people see her as the incarnation of two figures from their oral tradition: the woman who collaborated with the moon in "creat[ing] the cycles of growing plants, the movement of tides, and the falling rain" (28); and the girl who came from the sea and "[made] the People into what they were to be" by teaching them the language of the ocean and guaranteeing this linguistic continuity by offering pieces of her dead body to feed the sea animals (56). And so Ruth is connected, at the level of tribal narrative, not just with water's voice, but with those most hydro-logical concepts: cyclicity and reciprocity.

The hunt proves that the A'atsika have stopped listening and speaking to the sea. As a result, the hydrosphere has stopped communicating with them in its dialects of rain, cloud, river, groundwater, and tide. Hogan's poem "Drought" evokes just this sort of communication breakdown and suggests, as remedy, a sort of call-and-response:

Once we said thunder  
was the old man of sky snoring,  
lightning was the old man  
striking a match,  
but now we only want him to weep  
so we tell him our stories  
in honest tongues. (*Medicines* 39)

This image of a people offering its songs and words to the sky gods in hopes that said gods will (literally) rain down their own vitalizing songs in return neatly illustrates a heritage built not only on reverence for nature, but on a sense of reciprocal relationship with it. This idea of circular infinity, the round river in which what goes around comes around, is a central tenet of the aspect of hydro-logic one might call hydro-ethics. Over against this life-as-a-circle viewpoint is the more typical western "linear living," in which "one takes without giving back and progresses toward a goal without examining future consequences" (Dreese 9). Linearity necessarily implies a beginning, middle and end, and normalizes the idea that one "lives in accordance with the line towards bringing about that end" (9). If linearity is all about destructive behavior—to others, the planet, and ultimately ourselves—circularity is about "transformations instead of conclusions," and people "preserv[ing] and sustaining what they may someday need" (9). It is the truth of Paula Gunn Allen's *Sacred Hoop*, that "[l]ife is a circle, and everything has its place in it" (*Hoop* 1).

As a true hydro-logician, Ruth understands the particularly robust applicability of intercausality, particularly Newton's third law ("For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction"), in the ocean.<sup>100</sup> And so it is that she sees most clearly the drought to be the result of improper, unreciprocated taking, redressable only by selfless giving; and also recognizes herself

as the giver. Grasping that the way to reverse a drought caused by disregard for old songs, truths and stories is to go into the heart of old songs, truths and stories, it is she who reaches deep into tribal memory and summons the Rain Priest who helped them so long ago. This man and his “gift”—he could “call down the rains...call water to come” (*Whale* 130)—belong to the old ways and the northern wilds. Ruth must summon him via a stream of word-of-mouth, coming up with the smoked salmon, blankets, woven blankets, money “for each person who will speak and pass along word of [her people’s] need [for water]” (137). When the priest arrives, handsome and quiet with “an artist’s hands” (142), he requires a larger sacrifice. The elders suggest the fishing boat that has served Ruth as both home and livelihood. Momentarily hesitant—hasn’t she already given her son, Marco?—she agrees for the good of the tribe. Balance must be restored.

When she hands over her boat, during the first of the torrential rains, she thanks the priest and walks away, both scared and exhilarated by the thought that she owns nothing but what she carries. Though she has forgotten “how practiced she is in new beginnings” (137), the fact is that she is very like Didion’s female ancestors, at once “clinically radical” in her ability to begin anew, and possessed of a long memory and the urge to pass down its stories—another type of balance. So while the Rain Priest might seem to be the one to end the drought, it is Ruth’s faith in the old stories, her fluency in the logic and language of water, and her emphasis on reciprocity and generosity that precipitate his arrival and, thus, the rain that brings the tribe back to itself.<sup>101</sup>

## **Conclusion**

There was a time when Big Dams moved men to poetry. Not any longer.  
—Roy, “The Greater Common Good,” *The Cost of Living* (14)

In this chapter, I have explored some of the feminist anti-dam prose that has sprung up in opposition to this masculinist “poetry” of Development: Didion’s sedimentary facticity

(rightly described as “more a [matter] of accumulation than of argument” [Kachka 6]); Roy’s riparian baroque, with its lyrical turbulence; and Linda Hogan’s estuarial style, located midway between the riverine pull of individualism and the oceanic tug of collectivism. The thing is, no matter how mimetic and persuasive these writings are, they are voices of the river in only a figurative sense. Who can know their “real world” impact in a global culture where the strains of nature and literature and even common sense are drowned out by the global drone of high-octane military-industrial capitalism?

Hearteningly, there have been times when human beings speaking on behalf of rivers have indubitably been heard and gotten results. In “The Greater Common Good,” Roy tells the story of Bradford Morse, a consultant hired by the World Bank to conduct an independent review of the Narmada Valley Project after the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) raised its red flags. Against all expectations, Morse and his committee not only savaged the dams on engineering, environmental, and humanitarian grounds, but revealed “in temperate, measured tones... [a] balanced, unbiased yet damning indictment of the relationship between the Indian State and the World Bank” (*Cost* 44). Though it continued to support the project for several more months, the World Bank pulled out entirely in August 1993: “No one ha[d] ever managed to make [it] step back from a project before,” marvels Roy, “Least of all a rag-tag army of the poorest people in one of the world’s poorest countries” (46). While it is true that the NBA was not truly heard until Morse and his all-male first-world team added their voices to its protest, this was a victory of sorts.<sup>102</sup>

It says something about the silence and regulatory slipperiness surrounding dams that there is no official total count of these constructions in the United States.<sup>103</sup> Removals have been better documented. The group American Rivers reports 1,185 decommissionings in the past hundred years, with 72 of these happening in 2014 alone. On 29 August 2014, American anti-dam protesters scored one of their biggest victories to date when the National Park Service dynamited the last 30 feet of the once 210-foot-tall Glines Canyon Dam on Washington States’s

Elwha River. This demolition was the final act in a project, dating from September 2011, to remove both that dam and a smaller one (the 108-foot Elwha Dam) and thus restore the course of the Elwha from its headwaters in the Olympic Mountains to the Strait of Juan de Fuca.<sup>104</sup>

In the end, this coup was the work of many groups: the National Marine Fisheries Service, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Park Service (particularly the administration of Olympic National Park, primary landowner within the Elwha River Watershed), the Seattle Audubon Society, the Sierra Club, the Elwha Citizens Advisory Committee, and, last but in no way least, the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe, for whom the river and its environs are aboriginal lands. Just like the characters in *Solar Storms*, the Klallam saw the dams in terms of a broken treaty, literally (the dams violated 1855's Treaty of Point-No Point, which granted fishing rights to local tribes along the Elwha) as well as figuratively. The idea of dams as violators of the pacts between water and land, and people and water, and as disruptors of planetary communication, was very much in play.

The main casualty of these dams were the river's anadromous fish (fish that spend most of their lives in the sea, but are born in fresh water and return to those waters to spawn). Whereas pre-dams the Elwha hosted some of the west coast's greatest salmon runs (being one of a handful of rivers to contain all six species of native Pacific Salmon), the Glines Canyon and Elwha dams, built in violation of 19<sup>th</sup>-century laws protecting fish passage, put an end to this with their lack of fish passage devices. Once the dams went up, these fish, unable to travel between their upriver spawning habitat and the sea, dwindled from an estimated 400,000 to around 3,000 (Yardley; Tucker)—a decline which has also affected animal populations that feed on the salmon: bobcats, bear, mink, and river otters (Tucker). This is what happens when an anadromous species can no longer tell its river stories to the ocean and vice versa.

The dams endangered another type of fish story, to speak metonymically of the oral tradition of the Lower Elwha Klallam people. The Chinook, also known as King Salmon, though currently too scarce to fish, still figures prominently in stories passed down from generation to

generation (Yardley). Yet other stories, songs and rituals (such as the First Salmon Ceremony<sup>105</sup>), as well as the native Klallam Language, have suffered along with the river that nourished them (Tucker).<sup>106</sup> The question now is whether these cultural phenomena will benefit from the river's restoration as strongly as the salmon are expected to.

Perhaps an early answer to this lies in the unusual rock formation that is hailed, with its two basket-shaped holes, as the tribe's creation site, "where God washed the people clean in the river water [and f]or generations, young people...meditated to learn what their future held" (Tucker). Tribal Chairwoman Frances Charles has spoken in Hoganesque language of visiting this site, newly re-visible after 100 years under misplaced waters:

It was eerie in some ways.... It was emotional, with joy and happiness. We sang a prayer song and an honor song, and had the opportunity to stand there and really praise our ancestors and the elders for telling the stories.... To so many out there, [the creation story] was a myth. To be able to feel the spiritual tie to the land, and know, yes, this is real, the stories that you have heard, they are true. It is very, very powerful and very humbling.... The land continues to show us, it speaks. (qtd. in Mapes)

True to her role as tribal mother, Charles has taken it upon herself to pass down the river's stories and the tribe's, impressing later generations with a deep sense of relationship and maybe even identity with other river dwellers. At a traditional camp, she reminds tribal youths of their enduring ties and obligations to the tribe, and compares them to the Elwha's native Pacific salmon: "There's an instinct in the young salmon that makes them go downriver. They go down waterfalls and through the white-water. They go out to the ocean to see the world. But they don't get lost. And they always find their way back" (Tucker).

This sounds very like Angel's admission, in *Solar Storms*, that the dam protests helped her long-demoralized people feel like a tribe again, like many rivers coming together to form an ocean. It is inspiring that there are still people who think in these terms, and heartening to think that we might be seeing the beginning of a more mainstream shift away from a strictly anthropocentric approach to nature, toward a respect for *natura naturans*; that is, toward a willingness to think like a river.

## **“Conclusion”: Coming Full Circle/Rachel Carson**

For all at last return to the sea—to Oceanus, the ocean river, like the ever-flowing stream of time, the beginning and the end.

—Rachel Carson, *The Sea Around Us* (212)

It might seem that a treatment of women writers and water should begin with Rachel Carson, the *fons et origo* of popular environmental discourse. Yet it befits my central conceit, the hydrological cycle, to conclude with her, since one of the hallmarks of cyclicity is that the end is in the beginning and vice versa. And like all environmentalists, this source writer was concerned with ends, particularly the result of our continuing to treat nature as an inexhaustible resource.

Though most popularly known for *Silent Spring*, her 1962 Jeremiad against the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century’s faith in Better (bug-free) Living Through Chemistry, Carson’s first three books were ocean books that spoke to her belief that, in “the deepest part of his subconscious mind,” man carries “an unconscious recognition of his lineage” (*Sea Around Us* 14). First came *Under the Sea-Wind: A Naturalist’s Picture of Ocean Life* (1941), a “biocentric” text that explores nature’s patterns and processes through the migrations and survival and reproductive struggles of a sanderling, a mackerel, and an eel. Next was *The Sea Around Us* (1951), a predominantly oceanographic and cosmic treatment of the physical aspects of the sea. Following these was *The Edge of the Sea* (1955), an explicitly ecological field guide to the Atlantic coast.

Carson’s lyrical turn towards the planet’s waters began with a hydro-logical epiphany in college, when, reading “Locksley Hall” on a stormy night and encountering the line “For the mighty wind arises, roaring seaward, and I go...” (qtd. in *Always* 59), she grasped the necessity of finding a professional path that united her two passions: writing and the sea. And so it was that after earning her Master’s in Zoology from Johns Hopkins (1932) and putting in several

years as a government scientist, she started producing books that expressed her sense of earth as “a water world dominated by the immensity of the sea” (*Lost Woods* 154) and of “man’s dependence upon the ocean, directly and in thousands of ways unsuspected by most people” (letter to William Beebe, qtd. in Lytle 65), and her belief that “we will become more dependent on the ocean as we destroy the land” (ibid.). As it happens, her most cautionary work, *Silent Spring*, was also her most land-based, yet still warned against our dangerous indifference to this most crucial primeval element.

It is now a commonplace to identify *Silent Spring* as a watershed text that brought ecological ideas and questions of environmental justice into the mainstream, popularizing such terms as “food chain,” “biosphere,” “ecosystem,” and even “ecology” itself (Zwinger xxi), and generally producing an atmosphere in which it is pardonable to stop and consider the hydric implications of such mundane terms as *watershed* and *mainstream*. The latter literally refers to the principal current of a river that has tributaries, and by extension has come to mean a dominant trend, style, or movement. Figuratively, “watershed” connotes a turning point in a course of action or a state of affairs, a usage that derives from the original hydro-geological meaning: “an area or ridge of land that separates waters flowing in different directions to different rivers, basins, or seas.” More recently, in North America, this term has come to mean not the dividing line, but the river catchment area on either side of the ridge, the whole land area that drains into a particular river. Nineteenth-century geographer John Wesley Powell drew out the social implications of this when he defined watershed as “that area of land, a bounded hydrologic system, within which all living things are inextricably linked by their common water course and where, as humans settled, simple logic demanded that they become part of a community.”

Believing that “all life everywhere carries with it the impress of its marine origin” (qtd. in Lytle 70), Carson saw all beings as members of a community “linked, perhaps fatefully, by a shared water supply” (*Silent* 45). This water, forever enacting its “universal



seaward movement” (40), must always “be thought of in terms of the chains of life that it supports—from the small-as-dust green cells of the drifting plant plankton, through the minute water fleas to the fishes that strain plankton from the water and are in turn eaten by other fishes or by birds, mink, raccoons—in an endless cyclic transfer of materials from life to life” (46). In short, ocean and its edges were the best places to observe “that essential unity that binds life to the earth” (“Preface” xiv), “that intricate fabric of life by which one creature is linked with another, and each with its surroundings” (*Edge* 2).

It was precisely this sense of nature’s elegance and ingenuity, its canny repurposings and adaptations, that had made Carson think much of it “forever beyond the tampering reach of man,” because though “he might level the forests and dam the streams, ... the clouds and the rain and the wind were God’s...” (*Always* 248). However, the scientific advances of the 1950s, atomic science in particular, undermined this conviction that “the stream of life would flow on through time in whatever course...God had appointed for it—without interference by one of the drops of the stream—man” (248), and ultimately forced her to face the irony that the sea from which life first arose “should now be threatened by the activities of one form of that life” (“Preface” xiii). The particular threat she had in mind was the cavalier disposal of atomic waste in the ocean’s depths, wrongly assumed at midcentury to be static and more or less self-contained sinks. This misguided practice sprang from the very type of “compartmentalized nature” thinking she hoped to correct. While conceding the theoretical possibility of isolating and preserving natural plant communities which could then “serve as standards against which to measure anthropogenic change in ‘treated’ or ‘engineered’ fields,” she pointed out the impossibility of parceling off a comparable water control, it simply “not [being] possible to add pesticides to water anywhere without threatening the purity of water everywhere” (*Silent* 42).

This indivisibility was central to her ecological vision, which was more profound and revolutionary than the earlier conservationism that had concerned itself mostly with resource management and wilderness preservation. Taking people as “ecological creatures” (Hazlett 701),

Carson's more inclusive environmental ethic strove to balance the biocentric and anthropocentric, advocating not just for "vulnerable humans" (Bratton 2) but also the vulnerable—and intrinsically worthwhile—environment they lived in. As she explained to her friend, author Hendrik Van Loon, writing "biocentrically" meant that

...[t]he fish and other sea creatures must be central characters and their world must be portrayed as it looks and feels to them—and the narrator must not come into the story or appear to express an opinion. Nor must any other humans come into it except from the fishes' viewpoint as a predator and destroyer. (qtd. in Lytle 44)

The will to dominate nature was something Carson—whose working titles for *Silent Spring* alternated between "Man Against Nature," "Man Against the Earth," and "The Control of Nature" (Lytle 1)—had never understood. "The 'control of nature,'" she wrote, "is a phrase conceived in arrogance, born of the Neanderthal age of biology and philosophy, when it was supposed that nature exists for the convenience of man" (*Silent* 297). In thinking thus, she was diametrically opposed to Freud, for whom "civilization" was largely about mastery over Nature, much as psychological maturity was about the separate ego—two attitudes that were of a piece with his rejection of the "oceanic" that he dismissed for its quasi-religious overtones and its "seek[ing] something like the restoration of limitless narcissism" (Freud 20). Carson, on the other hand, did not shy away from the mystical, as illustrated by her attraction to a quote from Albert Einstein's *Living Philosophies* (1931), which, though seemingly about "the ultimate mysteries of the physical universe, rather than of the spirit," could, she thought, "have meaning in both realms":

The most beautiful and most profound emotion we can experience is the sensation of the mystical...To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms—this knowledge, this feeling is at the center of true religiousness. (qtd. in *Always* 67)

Her ecological understanding of the whole that is the hydrosphere more or less guaranteed that she would surpass "mere" oceanic mind for full hydro-logicality, both literally and figuratively.

Towards the end of her life, she dreamed of expanding her 1956 essay "Help Your Child to

Wonder,” into a full-length book that would include a chapter on the water cycle (*Always* 487). Before that, she refused to focus only on the planet’s high-profile aqueous hyperplaces—its great rivers, fabled fishing grounds, and photogenic beaches—giving sustained attention to the benthic depths that in fact hold most of the earth’s water. For many policymakers and even scientists, these regions were *nonplaces*—unexplored, misunderstood and (as in the case of that atomic waste) mistreated. Knowing human hubris’s knack for turning our very ignorance *against* the precautionary principle—e.g., if our large brains cannot fathom something, it must be inexhaustible, incorruptible, safe from anything we might do to it—Carson made it her mission to flesh out these difficult-to-imagine places and point out the general danger of letting our actions “proceed[] far more rapidly than our knowledge justifies” (“Preface” xiii).

### **Three Chapters in One Pond/Passage**

A pool contains a Universe.

—Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams* (50)

Carson begins the third part of *Under the Sea-Wind*, “River and Sea,” with the story of Bittern Pond, so called because of the herons (bitterns) that visit it in the spring, “their strange, pumping cries...thought by some who hear them to be the voice of an unseen spirit of the pond” (129). Every spring, young eels fresh from the Sargasso push beyond the estuaries into freshwater until they find a place to bide their time, sometimes a good many years, until the procreative urge calls them back to the sea. Then, when autumn swells the inland ponds and streams with its cooling rains, these mature eels ride the quickened waters all the way back out into the deep blue waters of the open ocean.

Carson has brought her readers to Bittern Pond on just such a fall night, when the female eel *Anguilla* is prompted to end her ten-year residence in the pool by a “dimly perceived [longing for] a place of warmth and darkness” that she had known once, “in the dim beginnings

of life, before memory began” (131). She slips over the sill of the pond and joins a shallow hill stream whose voice is “the noisy voice of a young stream, full of gurglings and tricklings” (131). Thus begins her voyage back to her original home in the Sargasso...

This passage shows Carson as a true source writer, possessed of hydro-logical mind so pure that it can distill my dissertaton’s themes into a single concentrated draught.

### *Chapter 1 Recapitulation: Carson and Woolf; Oceanic Commons and Tide Pools*

...pools have some curious fascination, one knows not what...

–Virginia Woolf, *The Complete Shorter fiction* (226)

A pool need not be large to hold beauty within pellucid depths.

–Rachel Carson, *The Edge of the Sea* (115)

Seeming to contain “the voice of an unseen spirit” (*Sea-Wind* 129), Bittern Pond recalls nothing so much as the small body of water in Woolf’s “The Fascination of the Pool,” which also holds the voice of an unseen spirit, one “so sad...it must surely know the reason of all this” (*Shorter* 227). This pondlet also contains, “in a liquid state, floating one on top of another,” the “thoughts and longings and questions and disillusionings” of all the other people who have lounged at its edge (226). Though Carson quickly dismisses *her* flight of fancy—Bittern Pond’s “voice” is birdsong, no more no less—Woolf stands by hers for the duration of her story, all two pages of it. But then, as much as Carson admired Woolf,<sup>107</sup> her own hydro-logic was that of a scientist who, writing at the very advent of creative nonfiction, could only let her rhetorical line drift so far out from the terra firma of fact. Even so, this imaginal coincidence is significant, and only the beginning of what these two authors have in common.

Take, for starters, their attitude towards the common itself. Like Woolf, Carson wrote for a common reader. Believing that “[t]he lasting pleasures of contact with the natural world are not

reserved for scientists but are available to anyone who will place himself under the influence of earth, sea and sky” (*Wonder* 106), she strove to make her writing accessible to the lay reader, to “give understanding...without being technical, ...to simplify without error” (*Always* 387). The “inborn sense of wonder” she spoke of (*Wonder* 55) was intensely demotic, especially when compared with the elite-sounding “refined taste in natural objects” (Leopold 149) that conservationist Aldo Leopold, cribbing words from *Field and Stream’s* editorial masthead, had encouraged people to cultivate in the 1940s. Even on the zoological level, as though to refute both the idea of humans as uniquely valuable beings and of some humans as more valuable than others, Carson tended in her books to take the perspective of “non-charismatic species” like mackerels and eels—the “common citizens’ of salt water” (Bratton 21).

What both Woolf and Carson knew was that political power is not common property; that society splits into those who make the decisions and those who must, without any real say, abide by them. Increasingly critical of this reality, both issued progressively polemical statements. 1929’s *A Room of One’s Own* takes on patriarchy’s spatial and cultural exclusion of women in a vivid, charming way. Woolf had predicted that her friends would cavil at its “shrill feminine tone,” but that, for the most part, the press would fail to take it seriously, talking of its “charm, & sprightliness” (*Diary* 3: 262). Nine years later, in *Three Guineas*, she vented her passionate feelings about “the rise of fascism, the retreat from pacifism, [and] the increasing inevitability of war” (Silver 345). It is a heavier read than *Room*—less impressionistic, more insistent. Though admired by some for its restraint, the fact remains that it is an angrier work than its predecessor, even if it smuggles in that anger behind its impeccably arranged rows of fact and argument.

Carson’s *Under the Sea-Wind*, with its charming and evocative “descriptive narratives” (*Sea-Wind* 3) is a bit like *A Room of One’s Own* in that it makes its point about humanity’s outsider status in nature quite gently. *The Sea Around Us* makes it more emphatically and still *The Atlantic Monthly* praised it as having “the charm of an elegant novelist and the lyric

persuasiveness of a poet” (qtd. in Lytle 81). *Silent Spring*, on the other hand, is written in “the crisper voice of an authoritative, well-informed, angry woman” (Zwinger xxv), and in this regard has more in common with *Three Guineas*.<sup>108</sup>

A perfectionist who worried about the reception of all her books, even the non-incendiary ones, Carson knew that *Silent Spring* would send “the brick bats...flying” (*Always* 431). It did. Book reviews and political cartoons from the early ‘60s reveal the amount of “gender-hazing” (Hazlett 708) at work in its reception. Carson was alternately depicted as that anti-expert, the “hysterical woman” dealing in (as *Time* magazine’s reviewer put it) “emotion-fanning words” and “unfair, one-sided, and hysterically overemphatic” arguments (qtd. in Stoll 4); as a witch pointing the way back to the Dark Ages with her broomstick (Hazlett 707); as a Communist (Stoll 4); and as mere nature-loving spinster. (Even sympathetic treatments showed her in domestic than rather scientific settings: talking to children, sitting at home with her cat [Stoll 4]).

Even in the absence of such obvious attacks, “the gendered cultural implications of ecological ideas limited many conservation organizations’ initial reactions to *Silent Spring*, and slowed or complicated their adoption of anti-pesticide agendas” (Hazlett 719). While ecological thinking is not inherently feminine (or feminist), by trading certain received inequalities—predator is greater than prey, animate greater than inanimate, human greater than non-human—for a more complex interdependency, it cannot but give the lie to a whole series of imbricated patriarchal oppositions: man vs. woman, civic versus domestic, objective versus subjective, culture versus nature, civilization vs. wilderness. To attack one is to attack all, so even though Carson did not explicitly identify as a “feminist” à la Woolf, the fact of her sex made her criticism of pesticide use read not merely as a critique of the military-industrial-capitalistic status quo, but as a takedown of masculinist praxis in general.

Critic Maril Hazlett argues that of all the oppositions Carson challenged, the most dangerous was that of human vs. nature, since when “the boundaries blurred between humans

and nature, the lines separating masculine and feminine lost some distinction as well,” resulting in a gender script that minimized the traditional notions of masculine and feminine, and “pointed toward alternative gender identities” (711). As I have argued, Woolf strongly associates such an “alternative gender identity”—the merging of masculine and feminine—with the river, and argues in favor of artistic androgyny in the fluvial *A Room of One’s Own*. While she does not specify which writerly qualities are “womanly” and which “manly,” the traditional notions are familiar enough: factuality, objectivity, impersonality on the masculine side; impressionism, subjectivity, relationality on the female. In the end, whether an artist was womanly-manly or manly-womanly did not matter as much to Woolf as her/his willingness to cultivate a fluid epigenism, as Woolf herself did in her blend of impression and fact, imagination and erudition (the latter being, courtesy of “Arthur’s Education Fund,” a traditionally male privilege).

For Carson, too, masculine and feminine were, as subsets of both human and non-human nature, part of the “stream of life” (a favorite phrase of hers). Whether she consciously thought of facts and feelings in terms of gender, she sought to balance both. Though vigilant regarding the emotional tone of her own work,<sup>109</sup> she depended on stirring readers’ emotions—that sense of wonder, and sympathy for/empathy with non-human nature—an “unscientific” strategy that sat well with the reading public but not so much with Carson’s critics. And yet, being as mystified and alienated by masculine egoism as Woolf, Carson might have asked about the scientific value of imperiousness. An interview with Frank Lloyd Wright in which he spoke of having had to choose between “honest arrogance” and “hypocritical humility” “crystallized [her] view that a large share of what’s wrong in the world is man’s towering arrogance—in a universe that surely ought to impose humility, and reverence” (*Always* 241). This resembles Mary Beton’s disappointment in Mr. A, who could stand on the beach before the vast ocean and think only of I-I-I.

For all their strong attraction to the ocean, Woolf and Carson, being true hydro-logicians,

are taken with more modest bodies of water, too. Rhoda's puddles in *The Waves*, Isa Oliver's lily pond in *Between the Acts*, the violently tidal toilet-ocean of the 1941 story-fragment "The Watering Place" all suggest a connection in Woolf's work between small waters and the thwarted creative ambition that has befallen women trying to work in a patriarchal tradition. Yet, against all these hydric symbols of limitation stands the Fascinating Pool and its promise of a wealth of voices, stories and information for the attentive passerby. This waterhole seems to second a proposal that Woolf makes in "Modern Fiction": "Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small" (*Common Reader* 150).

Carson was thoroughly of this mind. Believing that one might, in William Blake's words, "see the world in a grain of sand" (qtd. in *Always* 328), she was an avid student of tide pools, "where[in] all the beauty of the sea is subtly suggested and portrayed in miniature" (*Edge* 110). Readily accessible to anyone near a rocky coast, these marine excerpts allow for intense scrutiny and offer the wondering mind a glimpse into infinity, or at least an experience of profundity that is both mundane and humble. It is while looking into such a pool at a constellation of sponges—those ancient, basic organisms—that Carson recognizes herself as "a mere newcomer whose ancestors had inhabited the earth so briefly that my presence was almost anachronistic" (*Edge* 123).

While Carson herself was used to crunching massive amounts of scientific and government data, she was quick to defend the spirit over the letter where nature study was concerned. "Feeling is more important than knowing," she writes in *The Sense of Wonder* (originally published in 1956 in *Woman's Home Companion* as "Help Your Child to Wonder"). Here she encourages people to simply go outside—preferably with an as-yet unjaded child—and observe. In fact, the bias of certain industrial "researchers" eventually led her to adopt a sort of "alternative scientific method" in which she "gave people's observations and interpretations of their surroundings equal weight to the analyses of scientists" (Bratton 704). As she puts it in



*Silent Spring*: “The credibility of the witness is of first importance” (86). Again, it comes back to the common—an investment of Carson’s that surely got a boost from her knowledge of life’s common biochemical underpinnings, such as the process of cell division (*Silent* 210) and the existence of adenosine triphosphate (ATP), “the universal currency of energy—found in all organisms from microbes to man” (202). One might see in these processes the biochemical bases for the unanimism on display in Woolf’s work.

In *The Edge of the Sea*, Carson muses about how

... in the sea, nothing lives to itself. The very water is altered, in its chemical nature and in its capacity for influencing life processes, by the fact that certain forms have lived within it and have passed on to it new substances capable of inducing far-reaching effects. So the present is linked with the past and future, and each living thing with all that surrounds it. (37)

This sounds remarkably like the sermon Woolf has Reverend Bax deliver in *The Voyage Out*, in which each person is likened to a drop of water that “alters...not only the immediate spot in the ocean where it falls, but all the myriad drops which together compose the great universe of waters, ...[and so] alters the configuration of the globe and the lives of millions of sea creatures, and finally the lives of the men and women who seek their living upon the shores.” So is it, continues Bax, that each one of us, by “dropping a little word or a little deed into the great universe alters it...alters it, for good or evil, not for one instant, or in one vicinity, but throughout the entire race, and for all eternity” (*Voyage* 263-4). If this does not sound like the basis for a Water Ethic,<sup>110</sup> I do not know what does.

### *Chapter 2 Recapitulation: Carson, Rhys, and Fitzgerald; Eels, Home, and the Beginning of Spring*

When we see the eel, *Anguilla*, in the Bittern Pond passage, she is strangely restive. “For the first time in her adult life, the food hunger [has been] forgotten” (*Sea-Wind* 131) in favor of the stronger instinct to return “home” to the Sargasso, where “the young were to be born of the

darkness of the deep sea and the old eels were to die and become sea again” (153), thus perpetuating one of nature’s countless cycles. Like many of the migrations Carson depicts, *Anguilla’s* reveals the sea as “an environment [requiring] enormous waste of life” (Norwood 748). As a trained naturalist (and a realist), Carson had no choice but to be at home with the idea of “Nature, red in tooth and claw,” hence her “less than peaceful, but biologically accurate, descriptions of food webs, and her emphases on predator-prey relations, the danger of marine environments, and natural mortality” (Bratton 14).

But if her work vividly depicts the harsh Darwinian realities of nature, it also contains moments of comfort and near-serenity. As Vera Norwood points out, Carson’s “first three books provide a litany of natural and artificial places becoming havens, particularly for babies” (745), reflecting the author’s preoccupation with home (and homing). It is well known that “ecology” has its root in the Greek *oikos*, or house, an etymological fact that has sparked a longstanding debate about whether nature is best conceived as an economic *household* calling for an “efficiency- and production-oriented, managerial approach” (714), or as an organic *home* in which notions of human/nature interdependence and community are paramount. Carson is generally seen as falling into the latter camp by critics who, preferring to focus on her pure “nature writing” (*Under the Sea-Wind*, *The Edge of the Sea* and *A Sense of Wonder*), downplay the more blatantly utilitarian writings she produced for the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries (later the Fish and Wildlife Service) as well as *Silent Spring*, which is basically an ecological and economic cost-benefit analysis of mid-century pest management programs. In truth, both the economic household and “organic home” metaphors are in play in Carson’s work, but, as Norwood points out, both overfamiliarize nature and, so, fail to accommodate a central aspect of Carson’s message: “that human beings encounter the world most often as trespassers” (Norwood 742).

Susan Power Bratton expounds on our oceanic “outsiderness” in her “Thinking Like a Mackerel: Rachel Carson’s ‘Under the Sea-Wind’ as a Source for a Trans-Ecotonal Sea Ethic.” As air-breathers confined (in the absence of assistive technology) to one side of such ecotones as

the shoreline and the ocean surface,<sup>111</sup> we are relegated to something (considerably) less than full membership in the “sea community” (Bratton 3, 6, 12). Outraged, like Carson, by humanity’s recklessness toward nature, particularly its waters, Bratton is pleased to find the underpinnings of a “sea ethic” already present in *Under the Sea-Wind*. In her reading, Carson predicates such an ethic on our acknowledging: 1) that we are, in fact, “oceanic outsiders”; 2) that our understanding of the “scale and complexity of ocean ecosystems” is consequently limited; and 3) that our inadequate knowledge of and respect for natural communities, marine food webs, crucial aquatic nodes (e.g., estuaries, migratory routes, and spawning and feeding grounds), and the “adaptive limits of the species we harvest” (Bratton 20) are placing ocean ecosystems in serious jeopardy. Redemption demands that we “consciously visualize the extent and intensity of marine degradation we are causing” (19), that is, that we look simultaneously beyond the ecotones and past our own epistemological hubris—a type of seeing that is the sole domain of the mind’s eye, the imagination.

Besides the role imagination could potentially play in nature’s future, Carson seems to connect this faculty’s origin with our long-ago tenure in the sea. Unlike seals and whales who returned to the ocean perhaps as recently as 50 million years ago, our “decision” to remain on land has meant that we can only “re-enter it mentally and imaginatively” (*Sea Around Us* 14). Our need to do more than this, i.e. reenter it physically—whether based on those deep memories of our marine beginnings or the fact that “[i]t is always the unseen that most deeply stirs our imagination” (129)—has resulted in a centuries-long endeavor that has tapped “all the skill and ingenuity and reasoning powers” of the human mind (14), and almost certainly helped cultivate them alongside the imagination.

So in addition to seeing nature as an organic home inspiring wonder and respect, and also as an economic household calling for a judicious weighing of short-term and long-term interests, I want to argue that nature was for Carson a home in the Bachelardian sense of a space that nurtures the dreamer, the imaginer, in part because of its demonstration of contradictory

qualities. Of course, the creative inspiration Carson found in the House of Nature's alternating current of nurturance and violence is materially different from the psychological charge that Jean Rhys and Penelope Fitzgerald got from houses that spoke to their conflicted need for both safety and risk. Unlike them, she never opted to live in a houseboat (though she was very pleased that her nephew had chosen to sleep in a bed-boat complete with sail: "He sails here and there to pay imaginary visits to friends," she confided to a friend, "I am so pleased with the quality of his imagination" [*Always* 101]). Nor had her housing situation prevented her (as had, say, her government job) from writing what she had to write. Yet still she fantasized about finding a place that would let her marry her twin passions, the sea and writing, and become "the sea's biographer" (*Always* 59). She eventually attained this in the cottage she built, in 1953, in Southport, Maine, on a stretch of rocky coastline overlooking the meeting of the Sheepscot River and the Atlantic. She and her Southport neighbor (and soon dear friend and beloved) Dorothy Freeman would refer to this cottage as her "Dream House" (48, 407).

Ultimately, for Norwood, our decision to regard nature as a loved home or an economic household is moot, as "either metaphor leads to a comfortable and misleading sense of familiarity." What we need instead, she insists, is "a paradigm that acknowledges flux and surprise as well as regularity and stasis" (757)—a point that Carson makes often. "There is nothing static about an ecosystem," she writes, "something is always happening. Energy and materials are being received, transformed, given off. The living community maintains itself in a dynamic rather than a static balance" (Carson, *Lost Woods* 231). And then: "The balance of nature is not a status quo; it is fluid, ever shifting, in a constant state of adjustment" (*Silent* 246). Described in these terms, the whole of nature does indeed seem to find its perfect metaphor in the water cycle (c.f. Aldo Leopold's "Round River," whose "current is the stream of energy which flows out of the soil into plants, thence into animals, thence back into the soil in a never-ending circuit of life" [Leopold 158]).

Homing and eels are not the only literary motifs from my second chapter that Carson treats literally, which is to say scientifically. There is also the beginning of spring, which in Fitzgerald's novel of that name was as much about the end of a socio-political cycle (and perhaps the incommunicativeness of a marriage) as the beginning of the thaw. Spring was Carson's favorite season, and she took care to describe its role in the life of the ocean; how, come April, "the cold, heavy surface water—the winter water" would sink, causing the rise of the warmer, nutrient-rich bottom water, which, when kindled by the spring sun, would bring forth a surge of the single-celled plants that support the marine food chain. "Soon fishes of many kinds [would] be moving through the spring sea, to feed on the teeming life of the surface and to bring forth their own young" (*Sea-Wind* 70), for after the winter's seeming lifelessness, the spring sea everywhere provides "assurances that the cycle of life has come to the full, containing the means of its own renewal" (*Sea Around Us* 36).

If the beginning of spring sparkles throughout her ocean books, it is the End of Spring—the season of birdsong, migrations, roadside flowers—that motivated *Silent Spring*, as emerges in its opening "Fable for Tomorrow," which depicts an average "town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings" (1), until a "strange blight" creeps over the land, sickening the animals and people, burning the plants, and killing the birds so that "only silence lay over the fields and woods and marsh" (2). Moved by an Abraham Lincoln quote about "'the sin of silence' when one is aware of a wrong," Carson explained to Freeman that she *had* to write her "poison book"—"if I kept silent I could never again listen to a veery's song without overwhelming self-reproach" (*Always* 408). And so, according to the other meaning of "spring"—an upwelling of underground water—Carson's clarion call against ruthless anthropocentrism was indeed the emergent discursive spring that would grow into the cultural mainstream of environmentalism, a rivulet of ecological sensitivity scarcely distinguishable from Fitzgerald's "blue stream of moral imagination." For Carson's message—elegantly distilled by

David Suzuki into the catchphrase “We all live downstream”—grew increasingly ethical with each book.

Carson’s “water ethic” builds on that posited in *Water and Dreams* by Bachelard, who finds in the mind’s “automatic” conceptual yoking of “water” and “purity” “an example of the kind of natural morality learned through meditation on a fundamental substance” (14). It is now more likely to be the discrepancy between imagination’s default waters—clear, sweet, supremely quenching—and the altered ones that swirl through news coverage of oil spills, fishery collapse, and aquifer over-pumping, that lends urgency to this new “natural morality,” redrawing it more along the lines of Luna Leopold’s “Water Ethic,” or the efforts of such water crusaders as Donald Worster and Vandana Shiva, and, before any of them, Carson herself.

### *Chapter 3 Recapitulation: Carson, Didion, Roy, and Hogan; Nature’s Voices, Silenced Rivers and Thinking Back Through Our Mothers*

Carson’s nature is an eloquent nature. Birds speak, winds sing, waves break at the edge of land, “their voices...the voice of the sea” (*Lost* 87) warning of distant storms, the great cyclonic and anticyclonic winds. “[O]nly now are we learning to read their language,” Carson says (*Sea Around Us* 112). The sediments that rain down from the ocean’s surface to its floor are “a sort of epic poem of the earth,” telling the planet’s history in minute detail, but again, only if we endeavor to understand (76). Microplants write their “dark inscription” on the rocks of the tidal zone, a message only partially legible to us now (*Edge* 47).

If Carson seems most attuned to marine accents, that is because she was first and foremost an ocean writer. And yet, streams abound in her work—actual streams like the noisy one of the Bittern Pond passage, “full of gurglings and tricklings” (*Sea-Wind* 131), but also figurative ones: the “stream of life” (also known as that “that endlessly varied stream of living things” [“Preface” xiii]), “the unbroken stream of time” (*Edge* 247),<sup>112</sup> the flows of energy within each cell, and the genetic rivers that “keep the stream of life...flowing from generation to generation” (*Silent* 209).

Carson considered this “genetic heritage, our link with past and future” a possession “infinitely more valuable than individual life,” which makes the otherwise fragile world of life “‘more durable than mountains’.” This durability, she notes, quoting from the 1957 book *Life: An Introduction to Biology*,<sup>113</sup> is “‘wholly dependent on the almost incredible accuracy with which the inherited information is copied from generation to generation’” (*Silent* 210). This makes “genetic deterioration through man-made agents...the menace of our time, ‘the last and greatest danger to our civilization’” (208). How could the stream of life continue its course in the face of such subtle and shifting barriers? Would it become another silenced river?

Like Didion, Roy, and Hogan, Carson was concerned about the way stories pass down through the generations; and like all my authors, she was on the lookout for those who might be denied voice. In urging people to see the contamination of our world as “a question of moral responsibility,” she pointed out that it was not only a responsibility to one’s own generation,

but to those of the future. We are not properly concerned about somatic damage to generations now alive, but the threat is infinitely greater to generations unborn; to those who have no voice in the decisions of today, and that fact alone makes our responsibility a heavy one. (*Lost* 242)

She felt confident, as she finished *Silent Spring*, that people had finally begun to recognize “the heedless and unrestrained use of chemicals [as] a greater menace to ourselves than the [insect] targets,” and that “the river which is the science of biotic control [had begun to flow] again, fed by new streams of thought” (*Silent* 246), including the tributary of her own writings.<sup>114</sup>

If Carson’s work shows a serious investment in the free flow of storytelling/information down through the ages, her life demonstrates a strong matrilineal bent, illustrating how we do, indeed, think back through our mothers if we are women. In “HAVE YOU SEEN THE ROBINS?: Rachel Carson’s Mother and the Tradition of Women Naturalists,” Robert K. Musil describes Carson’s love for nature as passing down through her matrilineal line. It was her mother, Maria, who took her on long nature walks, helped her with her early writings, and encouraged her to submit her work to the children’s section of *St. Nicholas Magazine*. In so doing, Maria Carson

was drawing not only on the tutelage of her own nature-loving mother, but of “more than a half-century of work and influence arduously accumulated by a line of women naturalists, writers, educators, and conservationists who had come before” (Musil 13) whose example and work she set before Rachel. Amongst these were “America’s first popular nature writer,” Susan Fenimore Cooper (15); Graceanna Lewis (1821-1912), naturalist, ornithologist and social activist; Martha Maxwell (1831-1881), naturalist and pioneering taxidermist; Olive Thorne Miller (1831-1918), naturalist, ornithologist and children’s author; Florence Merriam Bailey (1863-1948), ornithologist and nature writer; Neltje Blanchan (1865-1918), scientific historian and nature writer; and Anna Botsford Comstock (1854-1930), artist, educator, and leader of the Nature Study movement, which advocated the teaching of science from tangible objects rather than books alone. Musil calls out the evocative, mildly anthropomorphic, ecological writings of Mary Austin (1868-1934), and the early work in environmental science and public health (particularly around water quality) of Ellen Swallow Richards (1842-1911) as particular influences on Carson’s development. He points out how nearly all of these women, excluded from formal education and posts, picked up their influence in science and nature from *their* female relatives, who, also denied educational and professional opportunities, turned their attentions to the schooling of the young, thus providing context for and explanation of the way women think back through their mothers, i.e. the fact that their mothers have thought forward through them.

Women played a more direct role in Carson’s intellectual and professional ecology, too. There was her mentor at the Pennsylvania College for Women, biologist Mary Scott Skinker, who encouraged her to undertake graduate work and, when she could no longer afford to study, helped land her job with the Fish and Wildlife Service in Washington; and her New York-based literary agent, Marie Rodell, who provided literary, moral, and contractual support. Many of her numerous friends were female, and towards the end of the life, she added to these a small retinue of female research and personal assistants. Most important of all was her beloved friend and confidant, Dorothy Freeman, with whom she shared a voluminous 12-year correspondence.



(Carson often thanked Dorothy for the “companionship of your letters” (*Always* 301), while Dorothy saw a reflection of their sustaining exchange in Sara Teasdale’s poem “Peace.”<sup>†</sup>) These letters illustrate the importance of reading in the development of Carson’s craft, with their large catalogue of titles read, some by “literary” authors—Woolf (particularly her diaries), T.S. Eliot, Keats, Hemingway, E.B. White, Elizabeth Bowen, Cather, Camus—but many more by naturalists and nature lovers, some of whom had become (or were to become) Carson’s friends.<sup>115</sup> What is striking about this list is how abundant a stream of (water-centric) nature awareness and conservationist thought ran through the first two-thirds of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There can be little doubt that with her minute understanding of nature’s ceaseless rhythms of ebb and flow, give and take, Carson would have seen her own books as return gifts to all the authors who had enlightened, informed, and infuriated her, and the entire conversation as an antidote to the “depressing record of destruction” written by man as a species (*Silent* 85).

One book she particularly appreciated was Joseph Conrad’s *Mirror of the Sea* (1906), in which the author describes his own relation with the sea, “which beginning mysteriously, like any great passion the inscrutable Gods send to mortals, went on unreasoning and invincible, surviving the test of disillusion, defying the disenchantment that lurks in every day of a strenuous life.” Conrad was as much of a hydro-logician as Carson, so it is likely that she would have approved of his description of the artist as one who

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<sup>†</sup> Peace flows into me  
As the tide to the pool by the shore;

It is mine forevermore,  
It will not ebb like the sea.

I am the pool of blue  
That worships the vivid sky;  
My hopes were heaven-high,  
They are all fulfilled in you.

I am the pool of gold  
When sunset burns and dies—  
You are my deepening skies;  
Give me your stars to hold.

appeals...to that in us which is a gift and not an acquisition—and, therefore, more permanently enduring. He speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation—to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts, to the solidarity...which binds together all humanity—the dead to the living and the living to the unborn. (Preface, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, qtd. in Hyde 198)

Here is the idea that in terms of both environmental and cultural stewardship, our duties flow to the past as well as the future, midway between which, “where the waters are churned up by the weir” (Woolf, *Room* 14), stands the artist.

Though a “scientist,” Carson never underestimated the power of art, and explained to Freeman that she “consider[ed her] contributions to scientific fact far less important than [her] attempts to awaken an emotional response to the world of nature,” e.g. “the ‘wonder’ book” (*Always* 231). Later she found a specific term for her “contribution”—“lyricism”—explaining that if her brand of it had an “unusual quality, it is, I think, because it springs from scientific fact and so rings true” (232). This was the direct result of Carson’s determination to step back and let nature speak for itself to the greatest possible degree (an endeavor enabled by her “dream house” in Southport, where her subject’s strong presence could not but infuse her writing).<sup>116</sup>

## **Storytelling**

A good deal of critical attention has been paid to how Carson begins *Silent Spring*—not with a display of facts or direct polemic, but a story, the Brothers Grimm-ish “Fable for Tomorrow.” Though critics considered its “flamboyant” apocalyptic rhetoric “unscientific” (Killingsworth 32), it was precisely Carson’s combination of narrative and a modulated apocalypticism that “criticize[d] science while holding out hope for a scientific solution” (30) that gave her work such traction with the public. By deploying narrative in order to safeguard species diversity, Carson shows how, in addition to telling ourselves stories in order to live, we can tell them to protect life.

In *The Nature of Economies*, as an alternative to the typical “feed and breed” model of evolutionary fitness, Jane Jacobs proposes a direct correlation between a species’ viability and its capacity for habitat preservation, to which end evolution might be suspected of providing us with “restraining traits” (131) that keep us from completely fouling our nest. Amongst some of the traits she suggests: aesthetic appreciation (including art and play), fear of retribution, awe expressed as veneration (which sounds a bit like Carson’s “wonder”), and corrective thinking and contriving, which can help us get back on track when our practices are clearly leading us astray (126-32). I would add to these restraints, as something different from “aesthetic appreciation,” our propensity for storytelling, given the role that Nature has played in storytelling and storytelling, in our survival as a species. According to an increasing number of evolutionary psychologists, we do, in fact, tell ourselves stories in order to live—and this is, in no small part, related to the way that stories help us understand and situate ourselves in nature.<sup>117</sup>

So, what happens to stories when the environment they imprint goes to pot? The writings of Didion, Roy and Hogan have already illustrated the link between the health of the environment and that of the storysphere, but what about books that do not set out to thematize this idea, and whose backdrop of a lush, unspoiled nature seems crucial to the telling? How would Jean Rhys’s final novel read if it were set in the Sargasso of today, no longer famous for its mysterious dead calm, masses of sargassum weed, and role in the eel’s life cycle, but for its heavy suspension of plastic?<sup>118</sup> The “fierce internecine wars of the Sargasso jungles, which go on without quarter and without mercy for the weak or unwary” described by Carson (*Sea Around Us* 25) would seem to jibe perfectly with Rhys’s “man is a wolf to (wo)man” viewpoint, but can battles stemming from the instinctual drama of the food chain really serve as an analogy for human brutishness? for Rochester’s cruelty to Antoinette? Isn’t the lesson of Sargasso 2.0., a.k.a. The North Atlantic Garbage Patch, that human beings do not realize what they should care for, and very often abuse those things that could, if treated rightly, give them the greatest

satisfaction? Might not this message be more to Rhys's purpose?

While it is true that certain familiar stories become grotesque when reimagined in ruined settings—Huck Finn rafting down a heavily dammed Mississippi, *The Awakening's* Edna Pontellier swimming out to her death in a post-Deepwater Horizon Gulf of Mexico—it would seem that our destruction of the environment in no way reduces our ability to connect with it imaginatively. Storytelling is just too integral a part of human existence (and survival) not to adapt to a degraded nature, ample proof of which is available in the booming world of scorched-earth fiction.

A worthwhile example of this “ruined nature” genre is Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003), an example of “speculative fiction” and, thus, a real “fable for tomorrow.” Set roughly 200 years in the future in a post-Humanities, STEM-centric society where the oceans are warm dead zones, most food is beyond ersatz (e.g. imitation SPAM), and the main pastimes are gaming, watching porn-cum-snuff films, and slumming in the “pleeblands” outside the gated communities of the elite, the story centers around Jimmy, aka Snowman, a “word person” who seems on course to be one of society's underpaid underachievers until his childhood friend Crake (given name Glenn), a biotech whiz in the pay of one of the big firms, hires him to help out with P.R. It is a cushy gig, at least until Jimmy finds himself the lone survivor of a worldwide pandemic created by Crake, having been spared in order to serve as guardian to Crake's newly bio-engineered race (aka the Crakers).

A genius, if a mad one, Crake has designed these placid, grass-eating, UV-resistant, insect-repelling creatures to survive simply, elegantly, and with a minimum of impact in the scorched husk of nature that will remain 200 years from now if we continue to act as we have been acting. To this end, Crake has bred out of them all aggression and sexual jealousy and such higher symbolic functions as myth making and religion. They thus stand in stark contrast to bitter, tormented, appetitive Jimmy, whose greatest comfort amidst humanity's extinction is words, lush, nuanced, archaic mots justes: *fungible, pullulate, pistic, cerements, trull, prattlement,*

*opsimath, subfusc, grutch, windlestraw, laryngeal, banshee, woad* (327). “Sometimes he’d turn off the [noise in his head], whisper words to himself. *Succulent. Morphology. Purblind. Quarto. Frass*. It had a calming effect” (344). Even before the end of humanity, these terms were something like Jimmy’s private property, having been edged out of common use by absurd commercial neologisms—“tensicity, fibracionous, pheromonimal” (249)—in much the same way that skunks, raccoons, pigs and wolves have been outcompeted by such vicious “neozoologicals” as pigoons, rakunks, wolvogs, and snats (snake-rat hybrids). This plastic vocabulary is as disheartening as (if less superficially terrifying than) Orwell’s Newspeak. We cannot resist feeling that the cynical, dumbed-down, made-to-order coinages of an inhumane, hedonic market-centric “culture” cannot make up for the evocative, receptive, recalcitrant vagaries of natural, spontaneously arisen locution. And if the Allee effect, a biological phenomenon in which lower population density results in lower mean individual fitness, applies to words—what then?<sup>119</sup>

Atwood implies the inevitability of wholesale environmental destruction in a society that sees language only as an adjunct to commercial and political brainwashing. As natural phenomena go, so do our words. This society without words, wilderness, simple pleasures, or rich storytelling is also (necessarily?) one without ethics or proper feeling. “Who cares, who cares” the relatively sensitive and susceptible young Jimmy thinks upon his father’s remarriage and its probable issue: “He didn’t want to have a father anyway, or be a father, or have a son or be one. He wanted to be himself, alone, unique, self-created and self-sufficient,” an island-self (176). He has more feelings for his fugitive, revolutionary mother, a seeming member of God’s Gardeners (an anti-Big Pharma, pro-small farm, pro-real food fringe group), and tries to suppress a flinch when the secret police show him footage of her execution, but even there there is little real connection. Towards his paramour, the titular Oryx, what he feels is more akin to erotic obsession than love. And yet, when pressed into guardianship of the Crakers, he does feel a sense of responsibility for them, which expresses itself most strongly in the desire to pass

down his words to them (339). This even enters into the foundation myth he knocks together for them after inheriting their care:

*Crake made the bones of the Children of Crake [humans] out of the coral on the beach, and then he made their flesh out of a mango. But the children of Oryx [nonhuman animals] had hatched out of an egg, a giant egg laid by Oryx herself. Actually, she laid two eggs: one full of animals and birds and fish, and the other full of words. But the egg full of words hatched first, and the Children of Crake had already been created by then, and they'd eaten up all the words because they were hungry, and so there were no words left over when the second egg hatched out. And that is why the animals can't talk. (96, italics original)*

But after selling them this myth, he finds he cannot educate them. For one thing, the passing down of knowledge had been Oryx's role, as Jimmy acknowledges in his cod-mythology, wherein it is woman who is mother and transmitter of language. It is true that shadowy, exotic Oryx represents nurturance, beauty, reciprocity with nature, having taught the Crakers both that "the ground is our friend... It grows our food for us" (351), and that "after a thing has been used, it must be given back to its place of origin" (363). Then, although the Crakers strike Jimmy as the perfect blank pages, he soon realizes that they do not "go in for fancy language: they [haven't] been taught evasion, euphemism, lily-gilding," and thus in speech are "plain and blunt" (348). As far as the transmission of stories is concerned, they would seem to be less papyrus than wax paper.

Yet in the end, despite Crake's efforts to engineer symbolic activity and the need for higher meaning out of these beings, Snowman returns after a longer-than-usual absence to find them chanting and drumming in a semi-circle around a "grotesque-looking figure, a scarecrow effigy" (360) made of scavenged beach trash. "We made a picture of you, to help us send out our voices to you" (361), they explain to Jimmy, even as they begin dismantling the figure and returning its constituents to the beach. Remembering Crake's words—"Watch out for art. As soon as they start doing art, we're in trouble" (361, original emphasis), Jimmy suffers a massive attack of wonder at the thought that "[n]ext they'd be inventing idols, and funerals, and grave goods, and the afterlife, and sin, and Linear B, and kings, and then slavery and war" (361). These

engineered humanoids can easily survive on the scabby, ungenerous shoreline, but when it comes down to it, even they are a subspecies of *homo fictus*, the storytelling animal.

Deemed a “very readable novel” (*New York Times*) and a “cracking read” (*Guardian*), *Oryx and Crake* demonstrates storytelling’s ability to adapt to a trashed Nature. But what is lost? Is anything? The reviews give some hints. The *Guardian*’s Natasha Walter notes the lack of “subtler imaginative power,” convincing detail and individualized heroine that Atwood achieved in her other dystopian novel, 1986’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and feels her to be sticking here to “the surface of her creations” (“Pigeons Might Fly”). Lorrie Moore, writing for the *New Yorker*, comments on the tonal “roller coaster” of the narrative voice that shuttles from “terrifying grimness, through lonely mournfulness, until, midway, a morbid silliness begins sporadically to assert itself, like someone exhausted by bad news, hysterically succumbing to giggles at a funeral,” at which point Atwood begins to “smirk and deadpan”—a mania that seems appropriate to a world in which “the sick joke and the botched experiment are offered up as rough equivalents and become, through the technical alchemy of the novel, a kind of trope for life itself” (“Bioperversity”). In his review for the *New York Times*, Sven Birkerts asserts that *Oryx and Crake*’s characters “lack the chromosome that confers deeper human credibility,” their actions driven not by psychology so much as “the logic of [Atwood’s] premise.” But this, he feels, is a problem general to science fiction, which “will never be Literature with a capital ‘L’...because it inevitably proceeds from premise rather than character. It sacrifices moral and psychological nuance in favor of more conceptual matters, and elevates scenario over sensibility” (“Present at the Re-Creation”).

I cannot pretend to weigh this argument and only mention it as something that might help a person (like me) who gets to the end of Atwood’s innovative and skillfully prepared feast and, still feeling hungry, wonders whether she has a tapeworm of sorts. To which I also say, “So it goes with molecular gastronomy,” that being the best analogy I know for a book like this, which

though ingenious, surprising, undeniably pleasing to the palette and certainly proof of its maker's skill, fails to meet the standards of the good old-fashioned, nourishment-craving animal digestion, which, in its oldest and truest part, wants food from the earth, not the lab. This is no criticism of Atwood's book, which strikes me as an apt expression of its own vision: a world of flat affect, overstimulation, and aesthetic and ethical indifference, where all water is bottled and all laughter ironic; a world without nature's reparative spaces, by which I do not exactly mean the "green world" that Northrop Frye finds at work in those comedies whose plots enact "the ritual theme of life and love over the waste land" (Frye 182), that fantastical, generic wild setting in which society-weary city-dwellers can escape social convention for just long enough to settle their affairs before returning to the city and an improved status quo; but, rather, a modified green world, where, quaint as it sounds, a person can draw breath, think, appreciate beauty, and realizing "the short time that human life has existed on earth...begin to see that some of the worries and tribulations that concern us are very minor" (Carson, *Lost Woods* 88-9).

To Carson the modern obsession with the artificial was incomprehensible. "Who would want to live in a world which is just not quite fatal?" she asked (*Silent* 12). "Have we fallen into a mesmerized state that makes us accept as inevitable that which is inferior or detrimental, as though having lost the will or the vision to demand that which is good?" (12). As she explained to the sisters of Theta Sigma Phi at their Matrix Table Dinner in Columbus, Ohio: "I believe natural beauty has a necessary place in the spiritual development of any individual or any society. I believe that whenever we substitute something man-made and artificial for a natural feature of the earth, we have retarded some part of man's spiritual growth" (qtd. in *Lear* 259).

This explains the wish she expresses in *A Sense of Wonder*: that everyone could have "a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life, as an unflinching antidote against the boredom and disenchantments of later years, the sterile preoccupation with things that are artificial, the alienation from the sources of our strength" (54). That she herself had this goes without saying. Even in the face of death, she found beauty as well as comfort and strength



in her doctor's comparison of "the life-death relationship to rivers flowing into the sea" (*Always* 446), an image she recalled upon the death of Dorothy's husband, Stan, in an unattributed quote she sent her grieving friend: "Life has been given and life has been taken away. Life and death are one, even as the river and sea are one. Life is eternal. Life is immortal and death is only a horizon, as the horizon is but the limit of our sight" (qtd. in *Always* 516).

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Of all our natural resources water has become the most precious. By far the greater part of the earth's surface is covered by its enveloping seas, yet in the midst of this plenty we are in want...In an age when man has forgotten his origins and is blind even to his most essential needs for survival, water along with other resources has become the victim of his indifference.

—*Silent Spring* (39)

It has been impossible, in recent months, to read or watch or listen to the news without hearing some item about water. Some of the headlines that have caught my eye: "Record Drought Changes Iconic River"; "Ecological Effects of West Virginia Spill"; "India's Food Security Threatened by Groundwater Depletion"; "Algae 'Rock Snot' Filling up Rivers"; "Aral Sea's New Low"; "Epic California Drought"; "Lionfish: Sea Creatures Behind an Alarming Invasion"; "Most Garbage in Ocean is Plastic"; "What's 'Melting' Millions of Starfish?"; "Multiple Dam Failures Aggravate Dangerous Conditions in South Carolina"; "Scientists Say a Worldwide Coral Bleaching Event is Now Underway"; "Sierra Snowpack is Much Worse than Thought: a 500-Year Low"; and, from back in January 2015, "Ocean Life Face Mass Extinction, Broad Study Says." What, one wonders, would Carson have had to say about all this?

Penelope Fitzgerald was right to identify the meeting point of land and water as a place "to stop and reflect" (*Offshore* 22), as this is just what I did a few days ago as I walked through a saltwater marsh not far from my hometown. Recent rains and high tides had worked out of the

marsh grass the usual debris: cans, plastic bottles, bottle caps, drinking straws, some candy wrappers, a flip flop, a couple tennis balls, and several of the small plastic wagon wheels, used to filter nitrogen from wastewater, that the local water treatment plant accidentally released (en masse) into Long Island Sound over four years ago. There were also two green objects, thin as twigs and as long as an iPhone 5, that stood out in this place of a hundred greens for their very unnaturalness. I first spotted one here about five years ago, though many like it had entered the “garbage chain” two years prior, when a global coffee concern began offering them as a fix for those nervous minutes between purchase and consumption, when one’s hot drink might, under the right conditions, shoot out of the “sip hole” in its lid. Known as “splash sticks,” these now familiar, not very recyclable gewgaws, an ironic yet identifiable green, have a flat bead on the bottom and a bas relief mermaid on top.

Remembering how, in the late 1950s, Carson received (with due mirth) a piece of fan mail addressed to “Dear Mermaid Carson” (*Always* 160), I got to thinking how, while this was certainly meant as a compliment to the author’s equal conversance with land and sea, most of people I have spoken to, when asked what a mermaid suggests to them, have said either “allure” or flat-out “sex.” This brought to mind the evolution of the Starbucks siren, from the 1970s logo modeled on a 16<sup>th</sup>-century Norse woodcut of a mermaid with belly, breasts, and twin tails proudly held apart in the style of a G-rated Sheela na gig, to the blandly glamorized cartoon of today, no navel, no nipples, no crotch, just a perfect hourglass figure framed by Hollywood hair. I thought of how, because of illness, Carson wore a wig during her late media appearances, and gave over much more of *Silent Spring* to the topic of human health than she had originally intended (Hazlett 703), including a discussion of estrogen’s role in certain cancers in people whose livers, compromised by chemical exposure, cease to maintain proper hormonal balance (*Silent* 235-7). I thought of a water supply laced with xenoestrogens and realized that feminizing pollutants would strike some ecofeminists as poetic justice, though to laugh at this fact would indeed be to take “the sick joke and the botched experiment...as rough equivalents” (Moore);

and thought of Carson saying, in a 1962 interview for *Life* magazine, “I’m not interested in things done by women or by men but in things done by people” (qtd. in Stoll), which seems very much in the spirit of Woolf’s “the real life is the common life.” I thought of the continuity of art, the idea that books continue one another, and the genetic grammar that struck Carson as more durable than mountains; and then of the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, a hollowed out mountain (really, a salt dome formation) in Southeastern New Mexico where the U.S. Government stores low- and midlevel waste from nuclear weapons and defense research; how the half-lives of plutonium and uranium *begin* at 24,000 years (that of depleted uranium, U-238, is 4.5 million), while, as Alan Weisman puts it, “human languages mutate so fast that they’re almost unrecognizable after 500 or 600 years,” posing the problem of how to warn future generations of this deadly cache and others like it (Weisman 266). I thought of the tag “Ars longa, vita brevis,” and then the aphorism in its entirety: “Life is short, / and art long, / opportunity fleeting, / experience perilous, / and decision difficult,” which, if you swapped out the “art” for “nature” would make for a popular Earth Day t-shirt; at which point my mind circled back to Carson, Earth Day’s patron saint. Looking around at the trees, the birds, the marsh grass, the snails, and finally the little stretch of saltwater before me, in which I have seen eels and the prehistoric shape of many a horseshoe crab, I thought, as she had, of the “curious situation that the sea, from which life first arose, should now be threatened by the activities of one form of that life.” And then, feeling the full force of her next sentence—“But the sea, though changed in a sinister way, will continue to exist; the threat is rather to life itself” (“Preface” xiii)—and satisfying myself that there was no more trash to pick up, I continued on with my walk.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Though this is Hardin's most famous example, it is not his only one. He also acknowledges pollution: "Here it is not a question of taking something out of the commons, but of putting something in—sewage, or chemical, radioactive, and heat wastes into water; noxious and dangerous fumes into the air, and distracting and unpleasant advertising signs into the line of sight. The calculations of utility are much the same as before. The rational man finds that his share of the cost of the wastes he discharges into the commons is less than the cost of purifying his wastes before releasing them. Since this is true for everyone, we are locked into a system of 'fouling our own nest,' so long as we behave only as independent, rational, free-enterprisers." This problem, the so-called Tragedy of the Commons, is, as he points out, a "no technical solution problem," that is, one that cannot be fixed by more science and/or technology, but that calls for a change in human values and behavior.

<sup>2</sup> He does poke some fun at this (one hopes) by stipulating that the river's attendant woman must be white, young, and nude in a natural way that "keep[s] its innocence" (33).

<sup>3</sup> This may be an effect of the general absence from Bachelard's study of the oceans, wherein all waters meet. As he explains, he did not see the sea until he was almost thirty, and so speaks of it mostly indirectly, with the help of poets and "schoolbook commonplaces" (8).

<sup>4</sup> Bachelard draws heavily from Marie Bonaparte's *Edgar Poe* (1933) in arguing that "the destiny of [Poe's] water images follows very closely that of his main reverie, which is a reverie of death" (*Water* 46), namely his mother's death, which served as a pattern for the subsequent deaths of his good friend Helen, his adopted mother Frances, and his wife Virginia.

<sup>5</sup> I also disagree with his position that "the first *duty* of every revered element [...] is to serve man *directly*" (152, original emphasis), but agree that, too often, "[p]ure, clear water [...] is for the unconscious a summons to pollution" (136).

<sup>6</sup> Here seems like a good place for me to explain, if not justify, my frequent recourse to biography, with the help of Cheryll Glotfelty:

Corresponding to the feminist interest in the lives of women authors, ecocritics have studied the environmental conditions of an author's life—the influence of place on the imagination—demonstrating that where an author grew up, traveled, and wrote is pertinent to an understanding of his or her work. (xxiii)

<sup>7</sup> Whereas "the narcissist feels his gifts come from himself" (Hyde 68), the person recognizing them as bestowals is "lightened" by the realization that they "rise from pools we cannot fathom," and consequently "are not a solitary egotism and...are inexhaustible" (25). Centered on the idea that gift follows gift in a larger cycle of generosity, this gift-mindedness is of a piece with our understanding that "we are actors in natural cycles [wherein] what nature gives to us is influenced by what we give to nature" (23). This essentially ecological insight explains the natural instinct that some writers—even those working before or outside of mainstream environmentalism (Woolf, Rhys, and Fitzgerald here)—have for conservation.

<sup>8</sup> As Roger Asselineau notes in his *The Evolution of Walt Whitman*, the Unanimists found a precursor in the expansive Brooklyn bard (176).

<sup>9</sup> One of Woolf's early literary efforts, "Memoirs of a Novelist," was also in a sense aquatic. In a letter dated 7 February 1909, she told Clive Bell that she had begun it in "a dream-like state which was at any rate, unbroken," and now intended "to write straight on, and finish the book, and then, if that day ever comes, to catch if possible the first imagination and go over the beginning again with broad touches, keeping much of the original draft, and trying to deepen the atmosphere—Giving the feel of running water, and not much else" (qtd. in Lee 237).

<sup>10</sup> Woolf's sense of the oceans as one undivided body emerges subtly in *Between the Acts*, where amid the many nostalgic mentions of Pangaea, the most recent of this tectonic planet's

supercontinents, there is not a single reference to Panthalassa, the mega-ocean that surrounded it. This reflects the fact that while the continents have sundered, splitting from one large landmass into the seven we know now, the oceans have not and are still, technically, a single continuity.

<sup>11</sup> Terence happens to be reading her lines from *Comus* at this moment:

*Sabrina fair,*

*Listen where thou art sitting*

*Under the glassy, cool, transparent wave...* (qtd. in *Voyage* 375)

<sup>12</sup> We first see Septimus in Regent's Park during the Kreemo toffee scene. His wife's voice is "running up into his brain waves of sound which, concussing, broke," while all the elms around them are "rising and falling, rising and falling with all their leaves alight and the color thinning and thickening from blue to the green of a hollow wave" (*Dalloway* 22). On the way to William Bradshaw, he feels himself "high on his rock, like a drowned sailor on a rock. I leant over the edge of the boat and fell down, he thought. I went under the sea" (69). Minutes before jumping to his death, he again feels "drowned [...] and lying on a cliff with the gulls screaming over him. He would look over the edge of the sofa down into the sea" (140–1).

<sup>13</sup> It is interesting that the three things Helen promises Rachel if she will come to Santa Marina—a river, a room of her own, and opportunities to "see life"—are offered as a temporary trade for life in London.

<sup>14</sup> Originally, the manuscript read "the voice of the great seer" (*Shorter* 306, n. 3).

<sup>15</sup> Early on in *Room*, when Woolf spins her thinking-as-fishing metaphor, she talks about the little startled fish of her thought, how puny it looks laid out on the grass, but does not identify it: "I will not trouble you with that thought now, though if you look carefully you may find it for yourselves in the course of what I am going to say" (5). I have always thought the issue in question is women's chastity. One of the essay's pseudo-personas, "Mary Carmichael," recalls the name of Marie Carmichael Stopes who, in 1924, opened England's first birth control clinic in London. The narrator scoffs at that "profoundly interesting subject, the value that men set upon women's chastity and its effect upon their education..." (64). She continues, "[c]hastity had then, as it has even now, a religious importance in a woman's life, and has so wrapped itself around with nerves and instincts that to cut it free and bring it to the light of day demands courage of the rarest." The "loss of virtue" is also a factor in the death of Judith Shakespeare.

<sup>16</sup> Lunching at Oxbridge, trying to identify exactly how the tone of the postwar conversation differs from the prewar, the narrator "listen[s] with all [her] ears not entirely to what was being said, but to the murmur or current behind it" (*Room* 12). A few hours later, discussing the poverty of the female sex with Mary Seton, she is "aware of a current setting in of its own accord and carrying everything forward to an end of its own" (19). Finally, at the library, faced with a small piece of the Anglophone *Querelle des Femmes*, she finds her "simple and single question—Why are women poor?" whipped into fifty complicated questions chased hotfoot by the male "experts" until they "leapt frantically into mid-stream and were carried away" (28). The essay itself is part of the river.

<sup>17</sup> This punctuation—moving from the comma, the most fluid mark, through the greater periodicity of the semi-colon, into the realm of conjunction—strikes me as the perfect formal equivalent of a tidal river like the Thames, which increases in intermittence (and salinity) until it debouches into the watery common of the North Sea.

<sup>18</sup> Water played a role in Virginia and Leonard's own courtship. Right after he proposed, the pair went for a walk along the cliffs of Eastbourne overlooking Beachy Head and the lighthouse, and they kissed. Still deliberating more than a week later, Virginia went with Leonard to the Titanic inquest. Hermione Lee maintains that the "underwater image" of this great wreck was at play in Woolf's head for the next few weeks, while she was trying to finish *The Voyage Out* and decide

once and for all about Leonard. On the 29<sup>th</sup> of May, she made up her mind, and the engaged couple went on a trip to the river at Maidenhead, of all places (Lee 304).

<sup>19</sup> Both Clarissa Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay regret doing things for effect, rather than for the sole sake of doing them, as their husbands do. By crediting Richard Dalloway and Mr. Ramsay with more autotelic personalities, Woolf seems to be implying that this is a gendered trait.

<sup>20</sup> Farwell takes these terms from Nancy Topping Bazin's *Virginia Woolf and the Androgynous Vision*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1973.

<sup>21</sup> In this vein, Woolf speculates about the refreshment that a man fretted by the outside world would have found in the company of relatively sheltered women, "such a natural difference of opinion that the dried ideas in him would be fertilized anew" (*Room* 87). One can tap this font in oneself by cultivating the androgynous mind envisioned by Coleridge. "It is when this fusion takes place," says Woolf, using that tricky word, "that the mind is fully fertilised and uses all its faculties" (98). Sex consciousness is fatal to the artist, "for anything written with that conscious bias is doomed to death. It ceases to be fertilised" (104). This explains Beton's appraisal of the mind of fictional male (and macho) author Mr. A, as containing an "obstacle" or "impediment" "which blocked the fountain of creative energy and shored it within narrow limits" (100).

<sup>22</sup> Woolf makes a fuller case for the destructiveness of ego, all the way up the chain from personal to national, in *Three Guineas*.

<sup>23</sup> "[Women] are not even now as concerned about the health of their fame as men are, and, speaking generally, will pass a tombstone without feeling an irresistible desire to cut their names on it, as Alf, Bert or Chas. must do in obedience to their instinct, which murmurs if it sees a fine woman go by, or even a dog, *Se chien est à moi*" (*Room* 50).

<sup>24</sup> In "Virginia Woolf and Unanimism," Allen McLaurin points out the parallel between Woolf's work and that of Jules Romains and the Unanimists, tracing her "feeling for the 'group'" (115) (also noticed by E.M. Forster and Conrad Aiken as well as several French reviewers [116]) to her close involvement with the Bloomsbury Group, amongst whom "group mind" was popular (115).

<sup>25</sup> Peter Ackroyd ponders this paradox in his "biography" of the Thames, in his discussion of the non-tidal portion of the river—all 4,500 million gallons of it—between Lechlade and Teddington: "It is new water, perpetually circulated, perpetually purified, perpetually replenished. But another curious statistical fact will cast a strange light on this 'newness.' One drop of water, fallen in the Cotswolds, will have been drunk by eight different people before it reaches the sea. It is taken out, purified, and then reintroduced into the river. It can never be quite the same as it was yesterday, or last month, or a hundred million years ago. Or can it? It is the secret of its eternal renewal" (18).

<sup>26</sup> Beer contends that "[r]hythmic organization is far less referential than that of plot and may be seen as part of the movement towards impersonality in [Woolf's] work" (65). In "A Letter to a Young Poet," Woolf writes of "the most profound and primitive of instincts, the instinct of rhythm," advising her addressee to "let your rhythmical sense wind itself in and out among men and women, omnibuses, sparrows—whatever comes along the street—until it has strung them together in one harmonious whole" (qtd. in Beer 73). So impersonality and the unanimistic—or at least the holistic—connect up in rhythm.

<sup>27</sup> What is *not* shared between the characters—the literary aspirations, which are the sole property of this novel's males—is particularly significant given the characters' monovocalism. It is not a question of talent but of tradition and the resulting sense of entitlement that explains why in Shakespeare's era, and many since, women wrote nothing while "every other man, it seemed, was capable of song or sonnet" (*Room* 41).

<sup>28</sup> "An Unwritten Novel" is Woolf's version of Edgar Allen Poe's "The Man of the Crowd." It ends on a beach.

<sup>29</sup> This quote comes from *Comus*, the poem Terence is reading to Rachel when her headache, first sign of her thalassic illness, comes on.

<sup>30</sup> Beer writes that when conceptualizing her final novel, Woolf wanted to avoid “call[ing] in all the cosmic immensities,” instead hoping to create a work with “a centre: all lit discussed in connection with real little incongruous living humour; & anything that comes into my head; but ‘I’ rejected: ‘We’ substituted” (qtd. 48).

<sup>31</sup> Trying to sum up their differences, Mrs. Swithin’s brother Bart muses that his sister “belonged to the unifiers; he to the separatists” (118). And upon catching her in a reverie, William Dodge and Isa Oliver guess that she is “off...on a circular tour of the imagination—one-making. Sheep, cows, grass, trees, ourselves—all are one...all is harmony, could we hear it” (175).

<sup>32</sup> “Miss La Trobe takes the typical unanimist role of animator of the group” (McLaurin 118).

<sup>33</sup> “Outwardly she was swarthy, sturdy and thick set; strode about the fields in a smock frock; sometimes with a cigarette in her mouth; often with a whip in her hand; and used rather strong language—perhaps, then, she wasn’t altogether a lady?” (*Between* 58).

<sup>34</sup> It is worth noting that when Peter Walsh confronts Clarissa, at Bourton, on the question of their future together, there is between them a broken fountain, “the spout...dribbling water incessantly” (*Dalloway* 64) that emblemizes what Clarissa already knows: that were they to marry, he would dissolve her in his life, aspiring to make them, to repeat Mrs. Ramsay’s words, “like waters poured into one jar, inextricably the same, one with the object adored” (*Lighthouse* 51).

<sup>35</sup> The first note is longer and tries to make a case for suicide while assuring Leonard that he in no way could have changed her mind. In Hermione Lee’s words, it is a “generous, careful, precise letter, which [...] is not the letter of an irrational or mad person, but of a person in despair, with no sense of a future, and suffering from a terrible fear of the possibility of a breakdown with no possibility of recovery. The writing of this letter, and the act it presaged, though an act *in extremis*, was rational deliberate, and courageous” (744). The second, “actual” note skimps on justification, almost as though the suicide is a *fait accompli*, and cuts right to the reassurances: “I want to tell you that you have given me complete happiness. No one could have done more than you have done. Please believe that...” (Woolf, *Letters* 6: 486). It is, on the whole, a choppy, sadder, and more telling piece of writing, explaining Woolf’s act by its very inarticulacy.

<sup>36</sup> The proper Street Haunter, on the other hand, takes to the pavement specifically to *dissolve* this “shell-like covering” and become “a central oyster of perceptiveness” (*Essays* 4: 481).

<sup>37</sup> The houseboat’s intimate association with that fundamental substance, water, alone makes it a good home for people of two minds, since, as Bachelard argues, “profound and lasting ambivalences” are always bound up in fundamental substances. “This psychological property is so constant that we can set forth its opposite as a primordial law of the imagination: *a matter to which the imagination cannot give a dual existence cannot play the psychological role of fundamental matter*. Matter that does not provide the opportunity for a psychological ambivalence cannot find a poetic *double* which allows endless transpositions. For the material element to engage the whole soul, there must be a *dual participation* of desire and fear, a participation of good and evil, a peaceful participation of black and white” (*Water*, 11-12, emphasis original).

<sup>38</sup> According to Kubitschek, *Wide Sargasso Sea* contrasts two ways of navigating the patriarchal slough: assimilation and marginality; specifically, Antoinette’s self-destructive attempt to assimilate to the Colonial mainstream and Christophine’s successful preservation of her marginality (and integrity). She argues that the normal tendency to take Antoinette as the book’s heroine makes this yet another woman-as-victim story, and ignores the marginalist precedent Rhys set in writing about such a “minor” character as Brontë’s Bertha in the first place. Indeed, this story reads very differently when the reader refuses to marginalize Christophine, à la Rochester (“So much for you, Pheena” [143]). For Kubitschek, the Sargasso is an emblem of this marginality. Yet I think that as a coastless sea—that is, a sea bounded not by land but by

currents—it is a paradigm for that which transcends the sea/coast, center/margin, self/other duality altogether.

<sup>39</sup> Yet even at Granbois, Antoinette's place, it is Rochester who has a private room with a bolt on the door—"A refuge" (74), he thinks—replete with writing desk, writing materials, and a small Romantic library (Byron, Scott, De Quincey's *Confessions of an Opium Eater*).

<sup>40</sup> This tallies with Rhys's depiction of her own childhood visits to Morgan's Rest, the model for Granbois. It was here that she "began to feel [she] loved the land and to know that [she] would never forget it": "It was alive, I was sure of it.... I wanted to identify myself with it, to lose myself in it. (But it turned away, indifferent, and that broke my heart.)" (*Smile* 66).

<sup>41</sup> As Rochester sets out to meet this man, Daniel, he knows what he is going to hear and wants to hear it. He wants a very good reason for hating Antoinette and knows that Daniel will provide it.

<sup>42</sup> To Rochester the sea is not straightforward; not long after arriving on Antoinette's island, he describes it as "[creeping] stealthily forwards and backwards" (66).

<sup>43</sup> Earlier, Rochester feels differently: "It was a beautiful place—wild, untouched, above all untouched, with an alien, disturbing, secret loveliness. And it kept its secret. I'd find myself thinking, 'What I see is nothing—I want what it *hides*—that is not nothing'" (87).

<sup>44</sup> In addition to "Bertha," he rechristens her Marionette, Marionetta, like a true ventriloquist.

<sup>45</sup> Around this time, Rhys scribbled in a note in her so-called Black Exercise Book: "...I existed no longer...I was the wind the trees the sea the warm earth & I left behind a prison a horrible dream of prison ... —Do you see now oh then it was just a dream of prison...." (qtd. in Plante 61).

<sup>46</sup> Angier points out that while Rhys's heroine always lives in cheap hotels, other characters have homes and houses—the Heidlers in *Quartet*, Julia's family in *Mackenzie*, Walter in *Voyage of the Dark* (407). In *Good Morning, Midnight*, on the other hand, "[n]o homes are entered; the metropolis is reduced to a few cafes, boardinghouses, and hotels" (Naipaul). Whereas Rhys's other women "have come close to a solid world through their English lovers" (Angier 407), Sasha seems not to have had such a man, or at least never says as much.

<sup>47</sup> In this scene, Sasha bears an uncanny resemblance to the character in the late, untitled fragment of Woolf's that I quoted towards the end of my previous chapter:

The woman who lives in this room has the look of someone without any consecutive (?) part. She has no settled relations with her kind. She is like a piece of seaweed that floats this way, then that way. For the fish who float into this cave are always passing through...She inhabits a fluctuating water world...constantly tossed up and down like a piece of sea weed. She has no continuity. The rush of water is always floating her up and down. (qtd. in Lee 742)

<sup>48</sup> Jane is at home neither at Gateshead (her Aunt Reed's) nor Lowood. Even after a few months at Thornfield, when she has fallen in love with Rochester, she still cannot see his home, which had originally struck her as a sort of "Bluebeard's castle" (*Jane Eyre* 93), as her home, and is shocked and thrilled to hear him refer to it as such. Soon thereafter, she must leave Thornfield, and finds temporary refuge with the Rivers family. It is not until she becomes schoolmistress of Morton that Jane "at last find[s] a home of her own" in the little white-washed cottage that comes with the job (315). And even this is not quite the real thing in her mind, as she lives there without the love she so desperately needs. It is not until she learns of her inheritance and her relation to the Riverses (341) that she finally finds a true home (she even decorates it) in their residence, Moor House.

<sup>49</sup> In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, strong colors signify female power. Both Cora and Christophine have bright-colored counterpanes, and it is when Antoinette is feeling safest in the convent that she cross-stitches her brilliant sampler of silk flowers, "green, blue and purple," with her name stitched underneath in the "fire red" that is the color of her favorite dress (53). (In *Good Morning, Midnight* Sasha invests in a dress whose "red, green, blue, purple sleeves" give it



tutelary power in her eyes [28].) These hues match those of the Caribbean landscape—its deep vegetal greens, its aqueous blues, its flowers of every color, the variegated pebbles of the bathing pool at Granbois—and suggests a link between female agency and the landscape.

<sup>50</sup> Antoinette expresses a similar sentiment in the resentment she feels towards the smiling nuns as she prepares to leave the convent: “They are safe. How can they know what it can be like *outside?*” (59)

<sup>51</sup> Jean’s great-grandfather bought Geneva Plantation in 1824 and prospered for ten years, at which point slavery was abolished. In 1844, distressed by rumors that slavery was to be reinstated, the estate’s laborers rioted and burned down the house—an event that served, in part, as the basis for the burning of Coulibri.

<sup>52</sup> In 1914 he had joined the French Foreign Legion without having gotten official Dutch permission to serve in a foreign army and lost his Dutch citizenship as a result.

<sup>53</sup> The success of Rhys’s trip back to Dominica seems to have owed something to the home/not-home dichotomy. Whereas she had grown up on the Caribbean side of the island, the estate she and Leslie rented during their visit was on the flatter, and to Jean less beautiful, side: “I was at home and not at home,” she said (qtd. in Angier 354).

<sup>54</sup> Rhys also wrote “I really would give my left hand, or an eye say for a year of peace [for writing]” (*Letters* 106), thereby recalling Rochester’s fate and suggesting a subconscious willingness to identify with her greatest male villain, who suffers these very losses for his offenses.

<sup>55</sup> If *A Room of One’s Own* is, as I believe, a paean to non-interruption, then Woolf would never have countenanced the lodgings Rhys took in the town of Bude expressly for novel-finishing purposes, which offered nothing *but* interruptions. While it was “so lovely waking up to the sea and sky instead of horrible houses” (qtd. in Angier 469), there were the tourists, the prying neighbors, and finally the mind-numbing cold of an unwinterized holiday bungalow. Their last address in Bude was located directly on a tourist path. It was not “a garret or an attic or anything nice like that” (qtd. in Angier 475) but a former tearoom upon whose door and windows people still knocked hopefully. Jean considered hanging a sign: ‘*No matches, No cigarettes, No teas, No sandwiches, No water. Don’t know where anybody lives, Don’t know anything. Now B----R OFF*’ (ibid.). When the weather cooled and the tourists left and quiet descended, Rhys was able to write, but then then Max got sick.

<sup>56</sup> One of Rhys’s working titles for *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

<sup>57</sup> For non-ichthyologists who cannot grasp the strangeness of catadromy, the words of eel scientist Mike Miller might help: “Salmon [which are anadromous] can imprint on a river system. They are born in the river system, they go out in the ocean, and they come back to the same river—it’s not that bloody hard to do. In the case of the eel, you’re born in the open ocean. You can’t see anything around you except blue water. It’s just blue water until they come to the coastal areas, where they first enter estuaries and streams at random. And then, ten to thirty years later when they leave the river, they have to swim all the way out the same place in the ocean again. And how do they do that?” (qtd. in Prosek 3)

<sup>58</sup> Eels even provide an angle on the sexually mediated differences in (and difficulties of) homing, as male eels generally remain in estuaries while the females push further up into their chosen rivers and, so, are the ones to deal with such dangers as hydroelectric dams, river diversions, river pollution, and eel weirs.

<sup>59</sup> This identification is particularly obvious in her next book, *Offshore*, which depicts a small group of houseboat dwellers in 1960s Chelsea, most of whom follow, when circumstances demand, the in-harbor convention of calling one another after their boats.

<sup>60</sup> Fitzgerald admitted in reference to “Hardborough” the advantage that authors have in the matter of “calling names.” This is evident in these oikonyms, as well as in the name of Violet Gamart, Fitzgerald’s great villain. ‘Violet’ captures the character’s high-frequency vibration and

something of the effect of her “dark bright” eyes, while suggesting her method: indirect force which falls just short—say, one consonant short—of the Violent. (“It appears to me that you may be confusing force and power,” says Mr. Brundish of Violet to a momentarily sanguine Florence [*Bookshop* 82].) An Internet search for ‘Gamart’ turns up Gammarth, a small fishing village in Tunisia that began to morph into an upscale resort after that country gained its independence from France in 1956. Violet, if she gets her way, will lead Hardborough in the same direction.

<sup>61</sup> It turns out that Florence’s poltergeist has something of a water spirit about it, being, “together with the damp and an unsolved question about the drains” (17), one of the reasons the Old House has sat empty for seven years.

<sup>62</sup> Of course, even with water eating at it from above and below, her house, built to withstand water, that great coastal reality, will survive. Thanks to traditional construction methods, it has survived 500 years of storm and surge, while the new oceanfront houses, built without reference to coastal processes, crumble even before they have been moved into. This touches on another of this book’s themes: the divide between local, vernacular knowledge and institutional knowledge. We see this in Mrs. Gipping’s refusal to include her recipe for marrow wine in the Women’s Institute’s cookbook; and also in the exclusion of one of Hardborough’s local wild edibles from the botany book that Florence stocks.

<sup>63</sup> Florence’s first response is a sense of relief that the underemployed Mr. Gipping has gotten some work. Like Antoinette, she is capable of thinking of someone else’s trouble even amidst her own.

<sup>64</sup> She published a biography of Burne-Jones in 1975.

<sup>65</sup> This decaying cottage, “half gone back to moss and earth” (170), is located where the hazel and aspen trees meet the “true forest” of the birches. Yet, if it is *of* the woods, it is also a house touched by water, its storeroom being as “damp as if it had been beneath the sea” (170) and its bathhouse, lined with local riverstones. In this hybridity, it recalls Granbois.

<sup>66</sup> Her father, Edmund George Valpy, was a poet and satirist and served as editor of *Punch* from 1932-1949; her uncle Dilwyn was a classicist turned cryptographer who received the CMG for his wartime work on the Enigma code; her uncle Wilfred was an Anglican clergyman and theologian; and her uncle Ronald was a Roman Catholic theologian and author of detective stories.

<sup>67</sup> Eels are part of the lost river story, too. In *Eels*, James Prosek mentions the Susquehanna, a river formerly “thick with freshwater mussels” that served as both an important part of the food web and crucial water-filterers (roughly two billion gallons per mile per day in the Delaware system), that is now virtually bereft of them. Researchers eventually determined that the larvae of freshwater mussels distribute themselves in rivers by attaching to host organisms, and that when these host organisms disappear, the mussels go with them. “It happens that the most common species of mussel, *Elliptio complanata*, prefers to attach itself to a particular species of fish known for migrating the entire length of the river system—the freshwater eel” (258). As Prosek explains, a series of large hydroelectric dams built in the lower reaches of the Susquehanna in the early 1900s has prevented eels from populating the upper reaches of the river. Without these snaky fish, the freshwater mussel has no host distribution system and, consequently, has disappeared. A 1999 report reckoned that there were 11 million fewer eels in the Susquehanna basin than in the 1920s. Considering that they once accounted for 25% of the total fish biomass of East Coast rivers and Streams (259), their plummeting numbers qualify as a major disruption of the food web, to say nothing of what lower mussel populations mean for water quality.

<sup>68</sup> I have tried, without success, to discover how Fitzgerald arrived at her figure of twenty-seven lost rivers. According to Tom Bolton (author *London’s Lost Rivers: A Walker’s Guide*), the Thames has twenty-one tributaries within Greater London—and that is just counting the main branches. Once you start counting tributaries, and the tributaries of tributaries, “the total moves

beyond numbers into the realms of conjecture” (“Hidden History”). My own quick research turned up, in no particular order, thirty-seven watercourses: the Lea, the Falcon, the Fleet, the Tyburn, the Westbourne, the Effra, the Brent, the Crane, the Darent, Mutton Brook, Pool River, the Ching, the Moselle, the Quaggy, Silk Stream, the Walbrook, the Wandle, the Peck, the Neckinger, Earl’s Sluice, Black Ditch, Tyburn Brook, Counter’s Creek, Stamford Brook, the Rom, Falconbrook, the Graveney, Hackney Brook, New River, Dead River, Beverly Brook, the Roding, Bow Backs, the Ember, the Hogsmill, the Cray, and the Ravensbourne. I give this list mainly because it proves Fitzgerald’s proposition that “cataloguing easily becomes poetry” (*Afterlife* 349), especially where water is concerned.

<sup>69</sup> The Westbourne is one of the four lost rivers—along with the the Tyburn, the Fleet, and the Brent—that had their source on Hampstead Heath, where Fitzgerald lived with her family for a few happy childhood years. In addition to these, she would also have been aware of the city’s many springs and wells, as her family’s address in Hampstead had been No. 34 Well Walk. The well was still there in her childhood, but disconnected from the chalybeate waters that had been so fashionable in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. To read Fitzgerald’s essay “Well Walk”—with its mention of these buried waters and Keats’s ghost (he had lived, with his dying brother Tom, at the now demolished No. 46, and is said to haunt the neighborhood)—and then *The Bookshop*, with the Old House’s bricked up well (sighing in the floor) and its poltergeist, is to get the distinct feeling that for Fitzgerald tamed, tapped waters connoted spiritual restlessness.

<sup>70</sup> See Juliette Jowitz’s “River Rescue: Project Launched to Breathe Life into Waterways Buried Under London Concrete and Brick” and “London’s Buried Rivers Rise Again.”

<sup>71</sup> As Fitzgerald says, Emily Brontë, “passionate child of storm and cloud” (*Mew* 95), was the sort of patron saint in whom Mew, a strongly divided nature herself, believed she could see “a reconciliation of opposites”: the dutiful, bread-baking parsonage daughter and the wild, noble spiritual outcast (94).

<sup>72</sup> Paradoxically, while Big Dams do curtail normal flooding, they increase the likelihood of catastrophic floods.

<sup>73</sup> Compare this take on sources, rivers, and history with that articulated by Bachelard in *Water and Dreams*: “Despite its thousand faces, the river takes on a single destiny; its source takes both the responsibility and the credit for the river’s entire course. The strength comes from the source. The imagination barely takes tributaries into consideration. It wants geography to be the history of a king” (151-2).

<sup>74</sup> Hailing from California, Rebecca Solnit is another low-rainfall writer. Though her *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* never acknowledges Didion or any of her books, it is, in its treatment of western landscape and aesthetics, California history and family stories, very much a granddaughter text to Didion’s 2004 *Where I Was From*.

<sup>75</sup> McMurtry speculates that highly endangered (“nearly extinct”) as storytellers are, the Dairy Queen—informal, local, common—is “at least the right tide pool in which to observe the few that remained” (15).

<sup>76</sup> This is a serious problem with many large dams: their multiple purposes—irrigation, power production, flood control, recreation—are mutually conflicting. As Arundhati Roy explains in “The Greater Common Good,” “Irrigation uses up the water you need to produce power. Flood control requires you to keep the reservoir empty during the monsoon months to deal with an anticipated surfeit of water. And if there’s no surfeit, you’re left with an empty dam. And this defeats the purpose of irrigation, which is to store the monsoon water. It’s like the riddle of trying to ford a river with a fox, a chicken, and a bag of grain” (*Cost* 34).

<sup>77</sup> The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation was established by the federal government in 1902 to study and implement water development projects in the western states.

<sup>78</sup> Janis Stout rightly points out that *Run River* is a tale of vacuity, but vacuity fully rendered. The emptinesses “are not narrative emptinesses but emptinesses in the communications of the characters as they are depicted” (151).

<sup>79</sup> In “Circular Time: A study of Narrative Technique in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*,” Madhu Benoit very competently seizes on the hydro-logical aspects of the novel’s complex temporal structure: “The past is always in the present, and the present is always shaping the future. This fluid backwards and forwards movement deconstructs chronological temporal sequences. No longer anchored in a static time frame, temporal signifiers float loosely on a Lacanian stream of sliding signifieds as the reader gropes her/his way through the narrative’s circular rather than linear progression” (77).

<sup>80</sup> And yet, like Roy herself, the twins learn plenty from this river. “Here they learned to Wait. To Watch. To think thoughts and not voice them” (194)—in other words, the very skills of prewriting.

<sup>81</sup> Roy’s novel is, amongst other things, a story of the colonized coming to terms with the hegemonic language, and provides a parallel between the disciplining of India’s waters and its wealth of dialects. In 1960s Kerala, the ideal was still for the meanders of Hindi and Malayalam and all the state’s tribal and non-tribal dialects to be “rationalized” into the broad, deep channel of British English.

<sup>82</sup> Not surprisingly this is Roy’s own ethic, hence her disgust with governments whose “very survival depends on immediate, extractive short-term gain” (*Democracy 2*), i.e. on an approach that not only violates the type of long-term logic that is Earth’s only hope, but that is relentlessly unidirectional, i.e. “extractive.” Roy is like the Kathakali man in wanting to give back to that which feeds her art. Having received the gifts of a river as a child, she is determined to requite it as an adult. This takes the form of scathingly articulate anti-dam activism, which is essentially an effort to give the river a voice that governments might hear. It does not matter that her debt is to the Meenachal and her activism for the Narmada. For “the war for the Narmada Valley is not just some exotic tribal war or a remote rural war or even an exclusively Indian war. It’s a war for the rivers and the mountains and the forests of the world” (*Cost 43*). In other words, any river is every river—a profoundly hydro-logical and hydrologic insight.

<sup>83</sup> This one epicene detail is a factor in Velutha’s brutal treatment at the hands of the police, who upon noticing the nailcolor wave his hands about coquettishly. “What’s this?” asks one cop in a high falsetto, “AC-DC?” (*God 294*).

<sup>84</sup> McCully discusses how in many parts of the world, rivers, respected as “sustainers of life and fertility,” are referred to as ‘mothers.’ Take, for instance, the Thai word for river, *mae nan*, literally ‘water mother’ (9-10).

<sup>85</sup> This latter trial is thoroughly covered in DAM/AGE.

<sup>86</sup> In “Claiming Place in Wor(l)ds: Linda Hogan’s *Solar Storms*,” Laura Virginia Castor discusses the “striking resemblances” between the geography and events of Hogan’s novel and Hydro-Quebec’s massive, controversial installation at James Bay (157-8).

<sup>87</sup> Silvia Schultermanndl refers to this as Hogan’s “cosmogyny” (69).

<sup>88</sup> During their trip, as Dora slips more and more readily into stories of the past, Angel recognizes that this “woman going home was going backward in her memory as well, in that way a single life travels a closed circle” (167). She has already noticed that she herself is “traveling backward in time toward [her]self at the same time [she is] journey[ing] forward” (64). This bidirectional movement is characteristic of any cycle, wherein forward progress eventually lands one back at the beginning.

<sup>89</sup> According to Allen, it is the oral tradition that has provided contemporary native poets and writers with most of their “significance and authenticity,” giving them an inexhaustible source of “theme, symbol, structure, and motivating impulse as well as...the philosophic bias that animates [their] work” (*Hoop 53*).

<sup>90</sup> “She, the corn, is called our grandmother. She’s the woman who rubbed her palms against her body and the seeds fell out of her skin. That is, they fall from her body until her sons discovered her secrets. Before she left the world, she told them how to plant. She said, plant the beans and corn together, plant their little sister, squash, between them. This, from an oral tradition, came to be rediscovered hundreds of years later, almost too late, by agriculturalists in their research on how to maintain the richness of farm soil” (Hogan, *Dwellings*, 79).

<sup>91</sup> “In American Indian traditions, healers are often called interpreters because they are the ones who are able to hear the world and passing [sic] their wisdom on” (*Dwellings* 73).

<sup>92</sup> Bachelard makes an even more direct connection between water and human speech. He argues that “the voices of water are hardly metaphoric at all; that the language of the waters is a direct poetic reality; that streams and rivers *provide the sound* for mute country landscapes, and do it with a strange fidelity; that murmuring rivers teach birds and men to sing, speak, recount; and that there is, in short, a continuity between the speech of water and the speech of man” (*Water* 15, original emphasis).

<sup>93</sup> Allen argues that by entrancing and hypnotizing, these “ritual traditions,” like certain literary devices (including the repetition so favored by Hogan), “create a state of consciousness best described as ‘oceanic,’ rising above the individual and the mundane, and becoming “literally one with the universe [by accessing] the consciousness that characterizes most orders of being” (*Hoop* 63–3).

<sup>94</sup> Not long after arriving at Adam’s Rib, Angel realizes that she is there “to put together all the pieces of history, of my life, and my mother’s, to make something whole” (86).

<sup>95</sup> In her discussion of the Pueblo Indians, Leslie Marmon Silko talks about how specific places and landmarks serve as “bookmarks” for histories, survival strategies, and even abstract concepts. Then there are the “medicine stories” and “medicine songs” that treat topographical features as psychological correlatives, so that terrors and drives can be pulled into awareness and dealt with narratively and/or ritually as part of the collective experience. Part of these stories’ value lies in their assurance that no person, however troubled, will “be separated or apart from the clan, no matter what might happen” (1013), i.e., in their affirmation of the oceanic nature of tribal experience.

<sup>96</sup> Due to the changes downstream at the dam site, the Se Nay’s swollen waters are furious and seemingly unpassable by canoe. Dora-Rouge secretly negotiates with the river to postpone her own much wished-for death in return for their safe passage.

<sup>97</sup> So the tears of Angel’s people resemble the “sudden and universal” cloudburst in Woolf’s *Between the Acts*—the “Tears. Tears. Tears” that pour down “like all the people in the world weeping” (180)—or the rainstorm in Hogan’s poem, “Flood: The sheltering Tree,” wherein “Land takes back the forgotten name of rain / and speaks it” (*Medicines* 85). In Donelle Dreese’s analysis, “[t]his rain is the tears of [Hogan’s] people washing the wound so they can see again ‘the beautiful unwinding field / and remember [their] lives / from before the time of science, / before [they] fell from history” (*Medicines* 85, qtd. Dreese 18).

<sup>98</sup> A small band of dissenting women, including Ruth and her mother, Aurora, stand on shore and try to sing the whales away, only to have their voices drowned out by the motorboats and newscopters that accompany the spectacle, for this tribal misstep is spectacularized by the mainstream media in complete opposition to the covert dam-building.

<sup>99</sup> Whereas A’atsika elders have “gauged and counted and made certain the[ir] waters weren’t overfished” (126), the area’s factory fishing operations have taken no such precautions.

<sup>100</sup> For instance, when the waters leave Dark River, they flood the other side of the globe (*Whale* 128).

<sup>101</sup> A novel about correcting imbalance could not very well punish a character as right-minded and right-acting as Ruth, who does get her fishing boat back—absolutely spotless and with a

perfect antique pearl on its bunk, illustrating how a gift given in the right spirit returns to the giver, multiplied.

<sup>102</sup> Unfortunately, after the World Bank withdrew, the Indian government decided to fund the massive hydro-scheme itself, so work on the project's largest dam, the Sardar Sarovar, continues. In June 2014, India's Supreme Court gave the Gujarat government clearance to raise the Sardar Sarovar's height from 121.92 meters (already considerably higher than its original height of 80 meters) to 138.68.

<sup>103</sup> From [www.americanrivers.org](http://www.americanrivers.org): "The exact number of dams is not known. There are approximately 75,000 dams in the US Army Corps of Engineers' (Corps) National Inventory of Dams (NID), which is the most comprehensive inventory of dams nationwide. However, this inventory only covers dams that meet minimum height and impoundment requirements, so an unknown number of small dams are not included in the inventory. Of the 79,000 dams in the database, approximately 66,000 are located on rivers (the remainder impound water off-river)."

<sup>104</sup> The Elwha Dam began operating in 1914; the Glines Canyon Dam, thirteen years later.

<sup>105</sup> In this annual ritual, "the head and bones of the first salmon of the year were carefully arrayed on a cedar mat and set adrift on the Elwha, which would carry the body back out to sea. The people hoped this initial fish would then tell its fellows how honorably it had been treated, so they, too, would return to their birth river" (Tucker).

<sup>106</sup> In her article, "On the Elwha, a New Life When the Dam Breaks," Abigail Tucker emphasizes the parallel courses, toward ruin, of both the Elwha River and the language and culture of its watershed. She even quotes Elwha elder, Adeline Smith, who remembers with dismay her parents' frequent repetition of the tribal stories (an effort to "embed them"), and her own tendency to let these words "rush past her like water." These stories are now mostly forgotten.

<sup>107</sup> Carson had read parts of Woolf's diaries and been "amused and delighted" to discover that VW shared her own prepublication jitters (*Always* 130).

<sup>108</sup> The similarities do not end there. *Under the Sea-Wind* is the first of Carson's water books and *Room* is, as I've argued, a powerful hydrotex. *Three Guineas*, on the other hand, is nearly waterless, and *Silent Spring*, Carson's most land-based work.

<sup>109</sup> Carson worried considerably about the personal/impersonal balance of her writings. As she wrote to Dorothy Freeman, "I am by no means certain that I want to be 'comfortable and intimate' in print—perhaps in the long run I should be happier with a degree of formality, or perhaps dignity is the word" (*Always* 107). She felt she "ought to write facts without being so harrowingly subjective about them!" (19). In "Women and Fiction," Woolf looked forward to the time when "[t]he novel [would] cease to be the dumping ground for the personal emotions"—a sentence that makes for headshaking reading at this point in time, when the taste for hyperpersonalism, a relentless self-interest that seems to exclude both true self-knowledge and a command of the 'dry facts' that used to pass for knowledge, grows alongside our general willingness to treat nature as a dumping ground. Humbert Humbert would have called this our "solipsizing" of the world, while Martin Amis has referred to it (at least, the littering aspect) as "the toiletization" of it.

<sup>110</sup> The concept of a "water ethic" that went beyond management or stewardship to take "[t]he health of our waters [as] the principal measure of how we live on the land" was that of Luna Leopold, first chief hydrologist at the United States Geological Survey and son of conservationist Aldo Leopold.

<sup>111</sup> An ecotone is a transition area between two biomes (ecological communities with distinct climate and flora), where these two communities meet and integrate.

<sup>112</sup> "Of Man and the Stream of Time" was the title of a talk she gave at Scripps College in 1962.

<sup>113</sup> By George Gaylord Simpson, Colin S. Pittendrigh and Lewis H. Tiffany.

<sup>114</sup> Biotic control manages a pest population not with chemicals but the strategic use of ecological principles, such as the introduction of a natural enemy or a pathogen into the environment.

<sup>115</sup> A partial list, in no particular order: Darwin's *Beagle Diary*; Augusta Foote Arnold's *The Sea Beach at Ebb Tide* (1903); H. M. Tomlinson's *The Sea and the Jungle* (1912), *Tidemarks* (1924), *Out of Soundings* (1931), and *The Face of the Earth* (1950); Richard Jefferies's *England: Nature Essays* (1937); Henry Beston's *The Outermost House: A Year of Life on the Great Beach of Cape Cod* (1928) and *The St. Lawrence* (1942); Edwin Way Teale's *North with the Spring* (1951); Louis Halle's *Spring in Washington* (1947); Maurice Burton's *Margins of the Sea* (1954); Hans Pettersson's *Ocean Floor* (1954); C. M. Yonge's *The Sea Shore* (1949); Wyman Richardson's *The House on Nauset Marsh* (1955); Fairfield Osborn's *The Limits of the Earth* (1953); A. C. Spector's *The Book of the Sea* (1954); James Dugan's *Man Under the Sea* (1956); Gavin Maxwell's *Ring of Bright Water* (1961); James Hardin's *Nature and Man's Fate* (1959); Alan Moorehead's *The Blue Nile* (1962). Anne Morrow Lindbergh's *Gift from the Sea* (1955) was very much on her radar, since it came out around the same time as *The Edge of the Sea* and consistently outsold it. Carson appreciated Lindbergh's thoughts about "gladly accepting growth and change in things that are dear to me" (*Always* 120) and was glad that if her own book could not reach number one on the bestseller lists, *Gift From the Sea*, and "not something sensational and trashy," occupied the spot (137).

<sup>116</sup> This is not to say that the writing just "came" to Carson. On the contrary, she worked painstakingly, always conscious of her slowness. As she explained to Dorothy, "The self-discipline of a writer includes the patience and perseverance to write and rewrite until the result comes at least fairly close to his ideal" (*Always* 113). When she speaks of the "so deliberate, so unhurried, so inexorable...ways of nature" (*Sea Around Us* 90), one can make out the wistfulness of the exacting artist condemned to work within (remunerative) human timescales.

<sup>117</sup> Brian Boyd's *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction* (2009) offers a comprehensive account of the evolutionary origins of art and storytelling. Jonathan Gottschall's *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make us Human* (2013) is a breezier look at our susceptibility to story, while Lisa Cron's *Wired for Story* (2012) brings new insights into how our brains perceive and process narrative into the "How to Write" genre.

<sup>118</sup> Though not as famous as its Pacific cousin, the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, the North Atlantic Garbage Patch (first documented in 1972) stretches over roughly sixteen degrees of latitude, the most densely polluted parts of which contain 520,000 bits of trash (mostly plastic) per square mile, all small enough to be consumed by small animals and, thus, to reach very high concentrations in high-level predators. All five of the oceanic gyres—the Indian, North Atlantic, North Pacific, South Atlantic and South Pacific--contain vast trash fields.

<sup>119</sup> Though words are clearly *not* organisms, it makes sense that the smaller the population of circulating words, the smaller the number of neologisms, and the lower the quality of these new coinages, e.g. *tensicity*, *fibracionous*, *pheromonimal*.

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