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ROOMS WITH THE FURTHEST VIEW:
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF DWELLING SPACE IN THE SHORT STORIES OF VIRGINIA WOOLF

REPORTED BY ALLEGRA WONG

Introduction

A dwelling space is a lived-in place where one meditates, discovers oneself, and is "constantly being created and remade by human activities."[1] It is a place to which one belongs, with which one identifies; it is a place that reveals to man "the external bonds of his existence and at the same time the depths of his freedom and reality."[2]

Although inner space is frequently identified with women or a woman in literary works by both genders,[3] Kelsey quotes Woolf, who inveighs specifically against the present state of sex-consciousness, thinking it "one of the tokens of the fully developed mind that it does *not* think specially or separately of sex."[4] Although Woolf writes of allegedly feminine qualities such as beauty, perceptivity, emotion, profusion, and an infinite capacity for suffering, these feminine qualities are the spiritual side of every human being, for the ideal state of man[5] is an androgynous (woman-manly or man-womanly) one:

> Coleridge certainly did not mean, when he said that a great mind is androgynous, that it is a mind that has any special sympathy with women; a

[1] Edward Relph, Place and Placelessness (London: Pion Limited, 1976) 12.
[2] Relph (Relph quotes Heidegger) 1.
[3] Leonora Penna Smith, "Spaces, Places, Houses, Rooms: A Feminist Perspective," Virginia Woolf- Themes Variations (Selected Papers from the Second Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf (New York: Pace University Press, 1993) 216.
[4] Mary Electa Kelsey, "Virginia Woolf and the She-condition," Virginia Woolf Critical Assessments, Volume II (Fast Sussex: Helm Information Ltd., 1994) 153.
[5] It is interesting to read George Sand's opinion on this subject: "And then for people good at anatomy there is another fact: there is only one sex. Men and women are so much the same that one can hardly understand the mass of differentiations and subtle arguments upon which all societies have been nourished in this matter." (from a letter to Gustave Flaubert written on January 1, 1867, when Sand was 63)

> mind that takes up their cause or devotes itself to their interpretation ... He meant that the androgynous mind is resonant and porous; that it transmits emotion without impediment, that it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided.[6]

Through the observation of the dwelling space as a separate entity from himself, man [7] perceives it as a protective shell, his corner of the universe, his source of self-nurturing.[8] By approaching it, watching it, entering it, he acknowledges the need for protection of individual human values and thoughts and solitude. By standing in the road outside his dwelling space, he sees where he has come from, what he is doing, where he is vulnerable, where he is strong. The passing of years and the subsequent nostalgia for these lost dwelling spaces enable man to realize that these dwelling places are compendia of memories—of ways and habits once cherished, people and lifestyles once loved and taken for granted. Dwelling places are spaces encompassing life's archetypal stages.

"Good writing is pleasure first," says Donald Hall, "bodily pleasure, for the body is poetry's door; the sound of words—throbbing in legs and arms; rich in the mouth—let us into the house. "[9]

The selected short prose pieces referred to in this article are indeed pleasures first. Words and punctuation, line length, text shape, and assonance make Woolf's language a malleable, living material. "The arrangement of her words is beautiful ... because it is a symbol, half concrete and half emotional, for the most abstract and intellectual problems of life: the problems of the relationships of man to the world outside him."[10]

Woolf's words describing intimate places, dwelling spaces, seem to swell in the mouth and satisfy as the ordinariness of everyday life is deepened through the use of concrete images. "So now I think of the fire; the steady film of yellow light upon the page of my book; the three chrysanthemums in the round glass bowl on the mantelpiece" depicts poetically the act of reading in "Mark". "She kept on looking into the glass, dipping into that dreadfully showing-up blue pool," relates the dismay nearly everyone encounters in a room when looking at himself in a mirror... the dismay over the discrepancy between the reality of the self in the mirror which will be criticized by society and the symbolism of the "mirror as a frame revealing one's imperceptible inner riches or depths,"[11] ("The New Dress"). Such images are rosetta stones that comfort the reader, permit him to identify with others, ask him to leave momentarily his own reading of the piece even and think of similarities in his own past.

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[6] Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1989) 98.

[7] A man is a member of the human race - the word is used of males except in general and indefinite applications. The definition was taken from Webster's Unabridged Third -New International Dictionary. Therefore, I have chosen to use the word 'man' simply because I have always thought of woman as 'man' when used in a general sense.

[8] Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994) 4.

[9] Donald Hall, Poetry: The Unsayable Said (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 1993) 2.

[10] Deborah Newton, Virginia Woolf (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1946) 76.

[11] Diane Filby Gillespie, The Sisters' Arts (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1988) 217.

Virginia Woolf writes of three types of dwelling spaces—rooms, books, and gardens—in "A Haunted House," "Monday or Tuesday," "Kew Gardens," "The Mark on the Wall," "The New Dress," "The Lady in the Looking-Glass," "The Legacy," "Hours in a Library" and *A Room of One's Own.*

Rooms

Woolf's rooms are "inhabited places which transcend geometrical spaces"[12] and where thinking may take risks. Her rooms are the original shell, or geometric site, furnished with paintings and books, and "then there were the bird cages, the iron hoops, the steel skates, the Queen Anne coal scuttle, the bagatelle board, the hand organ"[13] ("Mark"). Within that shell, one can suffer from "psychological inhibitions internalized from social stereotypes"[14] or one can sublimate anger and plunge into forbidden territory and "discover an unfettered identity."[15]

Rooms are spaces sometimes independent of people and sometimes reflecting them, for like Vanessa Bell (painter), Woolf sees "spaces within spaces: individuals live in rooms; rooms exist in houses; houses exist within city or landscapes."[16] They are "part of a framework of circulation—they are parts of larger areas and are focuses in a system of localisation;"[17] and although these spaces or rooms are often found in patriarchal houses, they are "alternative or private spaces free from domestic, social, and financial management duties."[18] "Concentrated and central; they are vertical and so rise from the ground and lift into our dreams, imagination,"[19] and fresh thinking. Redolent of Woolf's own bifurcated room of adolescence (with "its mundane sleeping half and its living reading half"[20]), rooms are the center of solitude and of boredom or the birthplace of thinking. Cradled within Woolf's rooms, thinking and daydreaming are sheltered, and the imagination can build walls of safety to protect fresh thought. Rooms allow for the freedom of (imagination) movement within the confines of the familiar. "From room to room they went," says the narrator in "A Haunted House"; from thought to thought, from extravagance to extravagance, from treasure (love) to treasure (life) went the couple—invisibly—in the privacy of their shell, of "their repository."[21] And only a roomful of space is required for concentrated, uninterrupted

[12] Bachelard 47.
[13] It is interesting that these aliterary items are "the ultramundane activities which help define people's lifestyles." Tuan, Topophilia 173.
[14] Ellen Hawkes Rogat, "A Form of One's Own," Virginia Woolf's Critical Assessments, Volume II (East Sussex: Helm Information Ltd., 1994) 184.
[15] Rogat 184.
[16] Gillespie 268.
[17] Relph 3.
[18] Smith 217.
[19] Bachelard 17.
[20] Smith 217.
[21] Gillespie 139.

hours during which a woman, like a man, can write a story, says Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*.

Woolf's rooms reflect her language and become a redemptive power sometimes seeking to replace suffering with understanding: "He could hear the cheap clock ticking on her mantelpiece; then a long drawn sigh... he had received his legacy ... she had told him the truth," in "The Legacy". Her rooms are a place where chance lives "shaking space easily from his wings, knowing his way, (the narrator watches) the heron pass(es) … the sky covers and uncovers, moves and remains" in "Monday or Tuesday"; where choice fluctuates and "the doors go shutting far in the distance, gently knocking like the pulse of a heart" in "A Haunted House." Her rooms are an autobiographic, nostalgic locale for word lovers,

> Thus to stand in a great bookshop crammed with books so new that their pages almost stick together, and the gilt on their backs is still fresh, has an excitement no less delightful than the old excitement of the secondhand bookstall. ("Hours in a Library")

Woolf's rooms are states of illumination. Characters' pasts are opened up and presented as layers of richness through the imagery of their furnishings. "The quiet old country room with its rugs and stone chimney pieces, its sunken bookcases and red and gold lacquer cabinets ... " in "The Lady in the Looking-Glass" paints Isabella's depth of personality, personal history, and varied interests. "Her eyes rested on the writing table behind him," indicate Sissy Miller's knowledge of her employer's habits of being in "The Legacy." Both rooms' furnishings reflect their mistresses' souls: Isabella's rugs, besides warming her room, symbolically cover the secrets in her cabinets where there "were many little drawers, and each almost certainly held letters," for "drawers (in chests and wardrobes and cabinets) bury treasures and bury the true self."[22] In the drawers, the letters turn from experience to memory and imagination. In drawers, shrouds for objects, Isabella hides herself; in her rooms, hidden from view, Isabella may change, open her grave, for "a secret is a grave",[23] and take risks with her thinking. Angela's desk is the place where she changed, the place where she made decisions in her journal to love another man, to commit suicide for that man; it is her grave, which is recognized only as a writing table, where she takes letters for her politician husband. No one outside will notice unless she wishes them to (no one does until the diaries are read). In "The Mark on the Wall," the narrator's guilt of voyaging within is revealed, for after dreaming, "one hastily worships the chest of drawers". Drawers are also knowledge and concepts classified;[24] there is no haziness with a chest of drawers, and momentarily the narrator is reassured by reality, the opposite of imagination, the opposite of her personal world.

[22] Bachelard 88.
[23] Bachelard 88.
[24] Bachelard 75.

Our dwelling places are always inhabited with loss and longing. They are never bare[25] in our minds and memories and readings. Woolf's pensive and lyrical tones arrest attention with their sense of loss,

> there will be nothing but spaces of light and dark, intersected by thick stalks, and rather higher up perhaps, rose-shaped blots of an indistinct color—dim pinks and blues—which will, as time goes on, become more definite, become—I don't know what ... ("Mark"),

and of absence, "What did I come in here for? What did I want to find?" (House). Dwelling places are permeated by the need to belong to memory, to generations past, to enable to feel again rooms we have known through story or experience. Mabel's childhood rooms "with the linoleum worn on the stair edges" are revisited in Mrs. Dalloway's party rooms along with other "delicious moments" "reading the other night in bed", "opening a letter—coming into a room—divine moments" in "The New Dress". They suggest rooms we would like to know through imagination, "like a vast nest of Chinese boxes all of wrought steel turning ceaselessly one within another"(Kew). Such symbolism articulates a longing for a city of nests, of rooms with voices crying aloud, articulates a longing for the "infinite openings promised by a complex of boxes within boxes,"[26] voices "the need to transcend the protected apertures of the bounded space of house."[27]

The sense of loss and of need is gnawing and organic; if one walks the rooms of others or the rooms of his present or past, whether in real life or in dreams and memories, absences are filled with small satisfactions. "I have enjoyed myself," Mabel said to Mrs. Dalloway as she left the party. Mrs. Dalloway does not know that Mabel has enjoyed the inner immensities opened up to her through speculation and musing during the boredom of the party held in her rooms. Likewise, in "Looking-Glass", the narrator seems to think Isabella will enjoy the inner immensities opened up to her by the letters arranged on her marble-topped table. After reading, Isabella would then hide her secrets, "tie the letters together, lock the cabinet drawer ... conceal what she did not wish to be known." For Isabella's life, unlike her room, is empty[28] and passes society's scrutiny.

Doorways

Not all the pieces in this selection center on rooms; rather, some treat only slightly of rooms and so are doorways and windows (penetrations of light or the slender

[25] Bachelard 27.
[26] John Oakland, "Virginia Woolf's *Kew Gardens*," Virginia Woolf Critical Assessments, Volume II (East Sussex: Helm Information Ltd., 1994) 14.
[27] Yi-fu Tuan, Landscapes of Fear (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979) 206.
[28] Susan Dick, "'I Am Not Trying to Tell a Story': Three Short Fictions by Virginia Woolf'". Virginia Woolf Critical Assessments. Volume 11 (East Sussex: Helm Information Ltd., 1994) 37.

thresholds between “inner” and “outer” worlds) to books and gardens, and sometimes, other types of rooms. Each reader has the choice of going through that doorway to the room, books, garden within, or of just passing by. “But here I was actually at the door which leads into the library itself. I must have opened it, for instantly there issued, like a guardian angel barring the way with a flutter of black gown…”[29] Light and weather penetrate interiors ... "Next day the light of the October morning was falling in dusty shafts through the uncurtained windows, and the hum of traffic rose from the street" (*Room*); lighted windows cast their glows upon exterior landscape ... "I found my way back to my house by the river. Lamps were being lit and an indescribable change had come over London since the morning hour" (*Room*); but, more important, people look at views outside.

> So we talked standing at the window and looking, as so many thousands look every night, down on the domes and towers of the famous city beneath us. It was very beautiful, very mysterious in the autumn moonlight. The old stone looked very white and venerable. (*Room*)

A palimpsest is a manuscript in which earlier erased drafts sometimes can be glimpsed. Such glimpses deepen meaning and intent. Some of the passages in this selection of short pieces can be compared to palimpsests: narrators visit former dwelling places to confront memories and are interrupted, sometimes jarred, by the lingering traces of even earlier memories.

> Doesn't one always think of the past, in a garden with men and women lying under the trees? Aren't they one's past, all that remains of it, those men and women, those ghosts lying under the trees ... one's happiness, one's reality? ("Kew Gardens")

But these earlier common memories can offer a sense of immensity in one's own individual memories: "For me, a square silver shoe buckle and a dragonfly," (recollection of a love affair) says Simon. "For me, a kiss," (recollection of a childhood painting lesson) says Eleanor.

Some of Woolf’s passages are filled with light and thus imbue the prose with the qualities of still lifes and suggest rich inner immensities in the characters' lives. "[Woolf] recreates the ecstatic moments during which the external world and the self unite in a stasis that is like a still-life painting.”[30] In "A Haunted House," the light fades. "Out in the garden then? ... the trees spun darkness for a wandering beam of sun," … "the beam of the lamp falls straight from the window ... the candle burns stiff and tall" ... the eyes of the house are vigilant and watch "wild beams of moonlight cross both floor and wall," and thus the imagery of light leads to the buried treasure, "the light in the heart”

[29] Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1989) 7.
[30] Gillespie 266.

or the treasure of freedom, the inner vastness inherent to every man. In "Monday or Tuesday," the firelight darts and reddens the room, while from the depths of ivory pages black words rise, "blossom and penetrate". In "Kew Gardens," light falls on pebbles, on the snail (a shell, a primeval room of solitude and boredom where thinking begins), on a leaf. The garden is filled with irregular patches of sunlight and shade suggesting chances in life, and these chances are enhanced by the characters who walk through. These patches later symbolize the patterns of words in the text used by the speakers, the flower beds themselves, the psychic rooms within. In "Looking-Glass," the empty house was "full of such shy creatures, lights and shadows," and the sense of seasons' lights passing is felt through the mention of the drawers holding lavender or rose leaves. Isabella stands "naked in that pitiless light," an acid-like light that leaves only the truth of her misery in her pretentious public life.

Books

Books in Woolf's writings are rooms within rooms. A book is a room. It is a place one may enter to encounter others in their rooms, to discover

> what living men and women feel, what are their houses like and what clothes do they wear, what money have they and what food do they eat, what do they love and hate, what do they see of the surrounding world, and what is the dream that fills the spaces of their active lives? ("Hours In a Library")

Through books, a reader creates an emotional landscape, and eventually, the poem or the book becomes part of the "furniture of our minds."[31]

A book is a space where one may begin a psychic voyage, for reading takes readers into other spaces and states of mind.[32] Like lamps, books keep vigil, wait, light the way, suggest unvoiced desire through the angles in which they are found. "Fiction will be much the better for standing cheek by jowl with poetry and philosophy" (*Room*); "I like reading--reading books in the bulk" (*Room*); "I had come at last, in the course of this rambling, to the shelves which hold books by the living; by women and by men…" (*Room*); "The novel alone was young enough to be soft in her hands" (*Room*).

In the warm and worn nests of books, it is safe to take apart and reconstruct old beliefs and notions. Emotion or the lack of it is the business only of the occupant of the nest, for the nest implies simplicity[33] and is absent of society's inquisitions. The occupant is suspended beyond judgment, for the book, like a dwelling space, gives permission to explore, voyage, redefine. "Fallen the book ... now voyaging" in "Monday or Tuesday" defines a book as a nest ever-spreading, incorporating sound and smell, collecting details, accumulating thoughts and reactions, and finally deepening. The

[31] Gillespie quotes Mary Lyon 300.
[32] Bachelard 25.
[33] Bachelard 98.

book frees its reader to leave the reading space and voyage. In "Kew Gardens," again, a sense of voyage, through text, from the dwelling space of the garden is demonstrated by "words with short wings for their heavy body of meaning." Mabel, in "The New Dress," thinks of reading Borrow or Scott when she feels stunted and filled with the tumult of memory in Mrs. Dalloway's rooms. After reliving memories, due to the suffocation of the party and of those rooms, Mabel resolves she will go to the "London Library tomorrow ... find some wonderful, astonishing book, quite by chance, ... by an American no one had heard of." Isabella's letters in "Looking-Glass" may be likened to books, and in "The Legacy," Angela's fifteen diary volumes are indeed accounts of physical voyages away from complacency and housewifery; they are rooms of intimacy.

Another inhabitant of intimate space, the reader, is a traveler, as suggested by Woolf in "Hours in a Library":

> Ignorant of the daily news, though versed in the catalogues of the secondhand booksellers, in whose dark premises he spends the hours of sunlight ... the true reader is essentially young ... he is open minded and communicative, to whom reading is more of the nature of brisk exercise in the open air than of sheltered study; he trudges the high road.

He demolishes society's imposed boundaries between imagined and lived lives; he walks from his mind into the world, for minds, in Woolf's fiction, are "lighted rooms with furniture, dim rooms animated by ambiguous shapes as well as landscapes with mountains, valleys, sliding rivers, deep pools, and cloudy skies."[34]

Gardens

Woolf's gardens are a place between inner immensities and outer immensities. They are restricted and restricting spaces, a compromise between reality and imagination. Yet they are a space to wonder about other spaces, to encounter the vastness of roads and cities and universe, to comprehend the vastness or immensity within.

> Immensity is within ourselves. It is attached to a sort of expansion of being that life curbs and caution arrests, but which starts again when we are alone. As soon as we become motionless, we are elsewhere; we are dreaming in a world that is immense. Indeed, immensity is the movement of motionless man.[35]

A garden is created for beauty, repose, and for cultivating flowers, food, and feelings of contentment and anticipation. It has a boundary (wall, fence, hedge), and it has a focus (trees, shrubs, flowers, vegetables). It may have lawn, vines, and rocks. It is

[34] Gillespie 301.
[35] Bachelard 184.

a landscape reflecting the interior or the mind of man. By standing inside the concrete and relative safety of a garden space, one views the vastness of the city and the universe; in the same moment, one is made aware of the psychological immensity within.[36] A garden is a transition from the solitude of the room to the social and political existences in the world. It is a passageway in which people temporarily, but perhaps comfortably, gather.

A garden is often the antithesis of the geometry of the city. The hierarchical order of man in the city is usually erased in the garden and replaced with a complete informality of nature. The garden is not designed to give a visitor a number of privileged views.[37] Seeing is an aesthetic and intellectual activity that puts a distance between the object and the observer; therefore, the ideal garden is designed to involve, to encompass the visitor who, as he walks along a winding trail, is exposed to a controlled number of shifting scenes. The ideal garden is in "the shape of a square, is created on flat ground, and has sections for fragrant herbs as well as flowers. A fountain is placed in the middle," Tuan quotes Crescentius.[38] Crescentius did not distinguish between gardens suitable for humble people and those appropriate for noblemen and kings.

Yet some gardens seem to be for the privileged with their showy views of distant horizons marked by paths, other trees, and ponds. When a garden seeks to glorify man and his expertise (ornate fountains, avenues of trees), it loses its immediacy as a source of contemplation in a natural landscape and as a "background for commonplace human activities"[39] with a "controlled number of aesthetic experiences."[40]

Woolf's gardens are mostly an extension of her rooms and books. Afloat in the immensity of themselves, her characters are nevertheless attracted to the universe beyond. "All strongly terrestrial beings are subject to the attractions of an aereal world."[41] Woolf's flowers, rarely seen in isolation, are used to complement her characters' dimensions. Woolf's flowers are "metaphors and similes for people and for their moments of intense perception ... they are indices of their natural cycles or states of mind."[42] In "Kew Gardens," flowers are presented through their shapes and colors, and thus appeal to man through his earliest symbols and are redolent of his primeval and natural state. The initial flower bed is oval-shaped (womb-shaped), and its erotic stalk imagery ("stalks rise with tongue-shaped leaves") suggests the garden is a place of fertility. The flowers are red, blue, and yellow. The colors, red and yellow advance, reach out, stimulate the nervous system and suggest warmth. Red signifies life, blood, energy, and joy. Red also signifies calamity, warfare, interment shrouds. Red is blood and spilled blood: life and death. Blue recedes and suggests coolness. Blue is lighter and suggests purity and timelessness. The heaviness of red and the lightness of blue suggest

[36] Bachelard 186.
[37] Tuan, Topophilia 138.
[38] Ibid 139.
[39] Ibid 145.
[40] Ibid 145.
[41] Bachelard 190.
[42] Gillespie 242.

appearance and disappearance, or the fragility and evanescence of life.[43] Somewhat ironically, against this primeval backdrop, different levels of modern society and their prevailing rules of decorum are encountered and "fused into an organic whole,"[44] and cause the image of garden in this story to turn and become most room-like. Passersby are dressed and self-contained and well-mannered as though the garden has walls surrounding it; people converse (although they may not always listen attentively); they take tea at cloth-covered tables. In this outside dwelling space, inhabitants follow society's forms proscribed for interiors. The snail brings the garden image, its messages of retreat and reflection, and its senses of achievement and purpose and "link to human interludes"[45] indoors in "Mark." Thus "Mark" is the reverse of "Kew Gardens"; it is an interior tale which has an exterior (garden and beyond) quality to it due to its musings on politics, history, and botany, and "the slow, delicious ooze of sap; the song of birds ... the cold feet of insects".

In "A Haunted House," the garden is reflected in the house's windowpanes: "the window panes reflected apples, reflected roses, all the leaves were green in the glass." By using garden motif, by reflecting apples (which may be interpreted as a "symbolic representation of the Fall and man's redemption"[46]), roses (indicative of "divine love"[47]), leaves green in the glass (green meaning rebirth and growth[48]), the house's haunting qualities[49] are established as those of wisdom, purity, timelessness. For a time, one of the house's inhabitants had left the other, had gone beyond the garden, had seen "the stars turned in the Southern sky." But as a limb of his dwelling space, he had returned. In "Monday or Tuesday", the world is whirled through: streets, mountains, noise are seen and heard by the narrator (through the use of the image of a heron) from her dwelling space; yet "lazy and indifferent the heron returns." Compared with seeing, hearing is unfocused; therefore, Woolf's color imagery is emphasized. Beneath the distant whiteness, is a mountain, "the sun gold on its slopes." This passage is reminiscent of sacred gardens that were planned so visitors would face the east "and the doctrine of the resurrected Christ."[50] At midday, the dome is red, and the room is red. In sacred gardens, red flowers were abundant and symbolized life, joy, blood, spilled blood, and interment. In "Looking-Glass," the garden path is reflected in the mirror along with the hall itself and so leads Isabella away from the secrets of herself tied up in her cabinets. Isabella picks flowers in her garden, she snips sprays of traveler's-joy, and rehearses dinner party conversation. But she does not leave the garden; rather she picks more flowers and returns to the house and her letters (although these prove to be bills) and her secrets and memories of emotionally richer, and perhaps happier, times. "She came so gradually that she did not seem to derange the pattern in the glass, but only to

[43] Tuan, Topophilia (my color ideas taken from Tuan's summary of color psychology) 13-29.
[44] Oakland 8.
[45] Oakland 9.
[46] Tuan Topophilia 145.
[47] Ibid 145.
[48] Ibid 26. "Green is derived from Germanic root gro which probably meant to grow," states Tuan.
[49] Tuan, Fear 124-5. Tuan states that ghosts and haunted places can be pathetic as well as frightening / evil.
[50] Tuan, Topophilia. 148.

bring some new element which gently moved and altered the other objects as if asking them, courteously, to make room for her. And the letters ... and the flowers ... and the garden path opened out so she might be received." She is dressed in gray-green and thus symbolizes wisdom, death, and rebirth as well as fertility, potential, and timelessness.[51] Isabella has looked into the most secret regions of her own being from the garden. A concordance of world immensity with intimate depth of being,[52] has been realized by Isabella.

Summary

"Good writing is the unsayable said," says Donald Hall.[53]

In these selected prose pieces of Virginia Woolf, the unsayable is said. A sense of loss, a sense of immensity confronts, perhaps disturbs, but ultimately reassures. Through the use of dwelling space as a metaphor, Woolf captures the static physical setting, the activities and the meanings of place.[54] Through people in rooms—or variations of rooms—voicing their longings, restlessnesses, and memories, Woolf turns a page of inert text into a living presence, an inner immensity.

[51] Ibid 25-26. Tuan states dark colors symbolize wisdom as well as death; light colors symbolize timelessness as well as mourning.
[52] Bachelard 196.
[53] Hall 9.
[54] Relph 47.

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AFTER THE DARKEST HOUR:
HOW SUFFERING BEGINS THE JOURNEY TO WISDOM

by Kathleen A. Brehony

Henry Holt and Company LLC
ISBN: 0-8050-6435-4

Review by Tamara Vishkina

Perhaps Lev Tolstoy erred when he said that every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. Kathleen A. Brehony's new book *After the Darkest Hour* offers the differing view that behind all suffering and misfortune looms one common cause—the sense of loneliness and separation. She compassionately and softly reminds us that in every individual resides an ability to emerge transformed out of any mishap and to count our blessings in the darkest times. We know how to make the best out of the experience without lingering too much in its gloomy shadow. We know how to savor each and every moment.

Using examples from history, religion, philosophy, and her practical experience as psychotherapist, Ms. Kathleen Brehony posits that a great deal of our anguish is our self-imposed roles as victims. Unless that is clearly seen, it is impossible to change our response to an unfortunate event. Striking examples of human resistance to circumstance, remarkable episodes from her own life, peppered with myths and words of thinkers of all ages and traditions hold the same message for us: the limits we set for ourselves can be transcended. Our lives can be seen in a different light. The search for meaning in our suffering brings transformation and growth through pain. It inevitably boils down to questioning our identities and purpose, the meaning of life, and our relationship with God.

The distinction between authentic and neurotic suffering, according to Carl Jung's classification, and "mastering the art of suffering," may lead out of masochistic self-pity and circular reasoning to awakening. Such a decision is always conscious and requires willingness and self-determination. This inner strength is worth achieving, for it offers universal triumph over personal tragedy.

Ms. Brehony lets us make the first step from our illusory belief that life is fair toward seeing negative emotions in the true light acceptance can afford. She persuades the reader that even in our greatest suffering we are not alone. Although she urges us to rely heavily on family values and support or belonging/identification with a certain

group (which is by definition a way to further separation) her reasoning might be helpful for a reader facing a dire situation. However, the utter loneliness, when fully experienced, may become an end to alienation and be a starting point to our discovery of knowing ourselves as a part of "all that is."

She teaches us how listen to our suffering and learn from it. Although, the sentiment that "suffering finds its truest meaning when it's shared" may be too much of a blow to our egos, when we bathe in our grievance, we are deafened to another voice altogether.

We want life to be "predictable, clear and secure," but we impose our own narrow understanding and conditions on what "secure" means. We resist all changes (even desirable change may be seen as disturbing, as Ms. Brehony evidences), assuming that they bring loss, and equating loss with suffering. We identify our happiness with an external event or person and childishly plunge into tantrums when change occurs. On the other hand, our reality is defined by self-images built by the unconscious, which, as Ms. Brehony emphasizes, "draws conclusions from false premises just as effortlessly as it does from those that are true." This wrong self-evaluation is a cause of additional suffering for many people.

Ms. Brehony harnesses a medieval alchemists' metaphor of melting lead of sorrow into gold of self-realization, which is deemed a "divine spark within us, inner core, or higher Self, the knowledge that we are part of greater reality," but she accentuates that "it is journey itself that is destination." She compares the path out of grief to a found "new normal state" with The Hero's Journey, an archetype mythical story, which in essence is the transformation of the self. Whatever the journey of the Hero is, he comes home changed. We all repeat the same road when we embark on our spiritual quest after experiencing moments of grievance, but on our way we learn only when we are able to let go of what is and embrace the new.

The late Roman philosopher Boethius in his interpretation of the "Wheel of Life" suggested that we should "stay close to the center" where the "things don't change as the wheel spins." Not that a magic formula on how to reach this center is found in this or any other book, but the journey inward is worth starting even before it is triggered by our darkest hours, and the book itself could be a solid rung on the ladder of self-growth. Among her practical suggestions, Ms. Brehony points out, "Believe that you can change." I would venture to set these words on a billboard along every busy highway.

THE HILL BACHELORS

by William Trevor

United States:
Viking, 2000
ISBN 0-670-89373-0

Canada:
Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2000
ISBN 0-676-97329-9

Review by Clarissa Aykroyd

T*he Hill Bachelors* is an exemplary collection of short stories exploring the events that make the lives of ordinary people remarkable. The style is quiet and unadorned, without any unnecessary flashiness, false dialogue, or improbable happenings to break the spell. At the same time, the words put vivid pictures into the reader's mind. The greatest testament to William Trevor's skill may be that he never intrudes into his own stories. They simply exist, without seeming to need an author.

Most of the stories are set in Mr. Trevor's native Ireland. An exception is "Le Visiteur," which takes place in France. It is an unusual story about a powerful but fleeting connection made between two people whose eyes meet across the room in a restaurant. But in the majority of the stories, two outstanding themes are the pain of Ireland's history and the determination of the Irish to survive. One of the finest stories, "The Mourning," tells the story of a young man who is drawn into working for the IRA by a series of seemingly unremarkable events. In "Low Sunday, 1950," a brother and sister reflect on how the Easter 1916 revolution changed their lives forever. "Of the Cloth" explores the vulnerability of Ireland's Protestant and Catholic churches. "The Virgin's Gift" takes readers to medieval Ireland, where a monk is caught between visions of the Virgin Mary and his desire for a normal life.

Other stories explore the emotions of strongly delineated and believable characters: a con woman who finds herself regretting a missed opportunity for love with one of her victims, a professor who learns that his obituary has appeared in four newspapers, a young man who accepts his unwanted inheritance because it is his destiny. In most of the stories, Mr. Trevor handles multiple points of view with ease. The dominant quality of his storytelling is compassion: he presents even the most

unsympathetic characters as they are, without being judgmental or condescending. *The Hill Bachelors* is the best possible example of how a good storyteller can create unforgettable tales and characters in the space of just a few pages.

LOUIS:
A LIFE OF ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON
by Philip Callow

Ivan R. Dee, 2001
ISBN: 1-5663-343-5

Review by Elizabeth Routen

Robert Louis Stevenson led a life to rival any of his characters' adventures. He is, in short, the stuff of legends: a sickly child grew into a sickly man who travelled six thousand miles across an ocean and a continent to answer one telegram from the woman he loved. Philip Callow's *Louis: A Life of Robert Louis Stevenson* is a commendable exploration of a wordsmith whose life cannot adequately be captured in words. Where other biographers pander, lecture, exaggerate or understate, Mr. Callow is content with an intimate recitation of fact and fiction. *Louis* is a definitive guide to the myth and mystery behind Robert Louis Stevenson.

Stevenson both defies and defines the literary prototype of an undependable, self-destructive black sheep. His was a life of vagrancy that many writers undertake when books grow tedious and inadequate. He was self-destructive in the sense that he did not choose domestic tranquility, even when the travel and the late nights and, no doubt, the hundreds of cigars, did nothing but harm to his weakened lungs. After he swore off religion in his youth, he was something of a pariah to his reverent family. But as a man—still a casual agnostic—he held Christian services for native workers at his final home in Samoa. He loved his native Scotland to a fault, ever consumed by the English injustice served to the Covenanters years before his birth in 1850. But he changed the spelling of his name to the French "Louis" from the traditional "Lewis" out of a spontaneous admiration for continental affectations. Mr. Callow's depiction sees through the results of what may be a hundred different causes, all peculiar to Stevenson's time and temperament, and refuses to place the author in an uncomfortably generic box.

Stevenson transcended the stereotypes. He was loved, at times fanatically, and he compensated his family and his fans with unceasing loyalty to them and a quiet devotion to his work that belied both his physical state and his wanderlust. Mr. Callow lets Louis issue the best description of his personality: "Past eccentric-obscure and oh we never mention it—present industrious, respectable and fatuously contented. ... Curses some. Temper unstable. ... Has been an invalid for ten years but can boldly

claim you can't tell it on him. Given to explaining the Universe—Scotch, sir, Scotch," and his philosophy ("There is no duty we so much underrate as the duty of being happy. By being happy we sow anonymous benefits upon the world, which remain unknown even to ourselves ...).

Stevenson has been gone for more than 100 years. But his stories linger and through them something of him. Revered in his time for adventure tales including *Kidnapped* and *Treasure Island*, Louis saw one of his best works, *The Amateur Emigrant*, edited into oblivion because his faithful recounting of the lives of America's newest children did not sit well in prudish English parlors. His words are active; his books transcend the simple fairy tales some detractors would have us expect. There is a reality in work like *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* that resonated in the troubled receding century and that rings true today. He is the prophetic H. G. Wells of his genre—human nature.

So it is not surprising that Stevenson, the man, insists on contradictions in his life and work. Thin, unearthly pale and inexplicably ill, he yearned both for a schooner's decks to force a refinement of the ocean's inexpressibility and for Scottish earth to inflict memories of nightmarish winds—a common symbol in his work—on his dreams. He married a prescient enfant terrible who was both an inspiration and a torturous master. By the end of Mr. Callow's fine testimonial, my, we *know* this enervating bundle of genius and anguish. We would like to tell him not to despair. There is no justice in his suffering. "My skill deserts me," Stevenson wrote shortly before his death from a brain aneurysm in 1894, "It was a very little dose of inspiration and a pretty trick of style, long lost, improved by the most heroic industry." One questions if this man of remarkable will somehow willed his own demise—if his lost spirit, his lost capacity to produce, killed the spark evident in his many captivating photographs. Mr. Callow is mull. So this is the riddle RLS left for us: Is it better to live with the knowledge you will not be again what once you were, or to be gone in an instant before the world can catch its breath and sigh disapprovingly and wonder where your merit went?

It is not up to his audience to offer his excuses or make his case. Stevenson inflicts dreams on even the unwilling, the stubborn and callous. He asks nothing in return. What could we possibly offer? He is beyond laughter and tears—beyond us both in time and in a simple ability to take the essence of childhood and weave it into stories for men. Perhaps that was left behind in the simplicity of the Victorian era, which was not so much simple as smothered. To his credit, Mr. Callow understands that fact. He knows when silence is the best exclamation. His is a close biography, a tight narrative of the life of an author who has done more to validate real-life Peter Pans than any other writer. Mr. Callow proves himself to be a formidable biographer, one who does not let his personal agenda, if indeed he has one, interfere with an objective portrayal of his subject. He is to be praised most highly as an invisible biographer who chooses carefully when it is prudent to step to the forefront of his readers' minds and when to let the tale of a magical mind work its magic. Mr. Callow is in control of this book; his work is a refreshing departure from those who, after no doubt careful and

scientific analysis, discover that their preoccupations and ideas (or revisions of accepted ideas) are more important than historical fact.

Philip Callow's *Louis* is what it claims to be. We cannot ask more of a biographer than truth. When a book like *Louis* offers a rare glimpse into a spirit, the surprise is enough to earn laud for its author. But even more rarely, a book forces questions of its readers. Where are our heroes? Are they still heroic when their character in its flabby and undisciplined state is exposed? Mr. Callow answers for Stevenson and leaves us to answer for the lives that malinger. Damn his audacity but bless his accomplishment. *Louis* is a sieve for thought and reflection that Robert Louis Stevenson, the master himself, would not fail to appreciate.

THE COURTSHIP OF MARÍA RIVERA PEÑA

by Daniel A. Olivas

Silver Lake Publishing 2000
ISBN: 1-931095-10-8 (Electronic edition)
ISBN: 1-931095-11-6 (Trade Paperback edition)

Review by Christina Gosnell

Daniel Olivas' book has been growing for some time. The seed was planted long before he ever began to write; probably before his hands were even formed to hold a pen. As I'm sure he has learned, no matter what the reason for putting the pen to the page, it is never an easy task.

The Courtship of María Rivera Peña offers the reader a glimpse of a budding love, the beginning of a family's heritage that traveled through the years, finally to make its impression upon the page of one of its members. Mr. Olivas offers the reader the opportunity to see his *Beto*, his grandfather, walk the tightrope for the woman he loves, Maria. As readers, we are relieved when she loves him back and the courtship begins.

This is a love story in its truest sense. The bones of the story are love, courtship and the intertwining of hearts and spirits. But it is also a story of struggle and completion for both the characters and the author. He needed to tell this story for himself and his family. Through looking at the lives of those before us, we learn much about ourselves; there were reasons this story had to be told.

To summarize this book would mean speaking just a few words about a love story that is obviously grand. But let us give it its greatest praise: This is a love story with great magnitude and texture, a story that is the nucleus of this family.

It is commendable and even inspiring when any love story is brought to the page—not all love stories can live on white pages; the translation from thought to paper is sometimes arduous. Unfortunately, this one seemed to lose something in its journey between the author's mind and the paper.

While it's easy to see Mr. Olivas' attachment to this story, to these memories, to the love of these characters, he makes it impossible for the readers to feel it themselves. For any book to be "good", it must appeal to the emotions of its readers, it must pull at the heartstrings and make us care about the lives of its characters and their journeys.

Every reader loves a love story, but there are reasons why: The reader wants to feel the love of the characters jump from the page. *The Courtship of María Rivera Peña* is at times lackluster, dim, and difficult to read. The reader must strain to pull any kind of emotion from this story, though it should be illuminated upon the pages and presented

freely. Clearly, this novella wasn't given the room to breathe its own beauty; a story like this deserves to be told, but it asks its writer to step aside and let it be heard.

Simply looking at the cover photo of Maria and Beto on their wedding day gives the reader an attachment to these young lovers. Yet the words speaking for that photo have an obligation to measure up to its beauty, and *The Courtship of María Rivera Peña* doesn't say enough about this insinuated love. With some stories, the reader is better left to imagine such love than to see it structured with ill-placed adjectives and so separated from the eloquent details that give it its shine and immortality.

This novel is invaluable in its own right. Mr. Olivas is a writer who believed in it enough to tell it, and many readers can be enriched by his noble effort. But Mr. Olivas inadvertently starched the edges of this story, stiffening the softness of a passion obviously true, and consequently obscured the brilliance of all love stories: the love.

THE COAST OF GOOD INTENTIONS

by Michael Byers

Houghton Mifflin Company (1998)
ISBN: 0-395-89170-1

Review by Kim Chinquee

Michael Byers' stunning debut collection, *The Coast of Good Intentions*, is alarmingly picturesque, flirting at times with the Carveresque. But Mr. Byers work transforms the bleak into endearing possibility; short sentences blossom into flowing, metaphorical language that takes the reader to the Pacific Northwest, a territory Carver did not leave unexplored.

Mr. Byers' compassion for his characters—young, middle-aged and old—renders them attractive; generosity is apparent throughout, saturating the collection with heartwarming appeal. The protagonists are geneticists, teachers, video game consultants, computer programmers, assistant directors, students, ferry workers, retirees. With or without close friendships and/or marriage, many are alone. The solitary life plays a big part in this work. And although all the stories take place in the Pacific Northwest, each setting is distinct, be it in Seattle, a cranberry bog, a kite festival, a hospital, or an A-frame high up in on a mountain overlooking Roslyn. For Mr. Byers, the range of possibilities seems to be endless.

"Settled on the Cranberry Coast," the first story of the collection, demonstrates a retired teacher's new-found love for an old high school crush, Rosie, and his growing affection for her six-year-old granddaughter, Hannah. "Shipmates Down Under," which is anthologized in *The Best American Short Stories of 1997*, renders the dynamics between Alvin, a geneticist, and his family as they anticipate a trip to Alvin's homeland in Australia. The relationship between Alvin and his son, Ted, is charming and dear, and the hardships and hope between Alvin and his wife, Harriet, are painstakingly real as she attempts to provide a balance between her career and family. In "In Spain, One Thousand and Three," Martin Tuttleman grieves over his deceased wife, Evelyn, struggles with his sexual urges, which seem to dominate him, and shamefully recalls his past sexual excursions. "A Fair Trade" follows the life of from two months after the death of her father, who was killed in the Pacific during WWII when she was 14, to nearly four decades later through success and failure in both her personal and professional lives. Andie's love-hate relationship with her aunt, Maggie, is quietly and carefully portrayed, and one can see faint hope in Andie's aloneness, which she

earnestly cherishes. Reflecting on her life in adulthood, "It turned out to be a life she loved. She became, and she knew it, self-regarding. She would rather imagine people than be with them, but she was fairly sure this had always been true … it seemed to her she had always been a solitary girl."

In "Blue River, Blue Sun," Joseph mourns his divorce, while his ex-wife, May, finds a new lover, a psychologist who works in the same office as she. Joseph moves into his dead father's empty home, "telling himself he was killing two birds with one stone." Paula Hubberton, his department secretary, who is experiencing divorce as her husband, Rick, is having an affair, approaches Joseph at work. They plan a date and ride out to the river, where they lose their inhibitions, sensing hope in their futures instead of mourning for their pasts. "In the Kingdom of Prester John" is an interesting look into Tom's life. His uncle, Ron, disappears into craziness and Tom wonders about his own state of mind, as this trait of mental instability has been passed down from former generations. In "Dirigibles," after a visit by a former fellow ferry worker, Howard and Louise seem happier somehow, content in their retired lives, despite Louise's multiple sclerosis.

All of these stories are marvelous and tender. The writing is beautiful and at times alarming. *The Coast of Good Intentions'* metaphors and imagery provide rich landscapes into which one is repeatedly absorbed. As Charles Baxter states, "Byers's stories are wise, beautiful, and necessary." This is powerful. *The Coast of Good Intentions* is a gorgeous, fascinating debut from a consistently talented author.

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