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MYSTICAL COMPOSITIONS OF THE SELF: WOMEN, MODERNISM, AND EMPIRE

by

Cory Bysshé Hutchinson-Reuss

An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Doctor of
Philosophy degree in English
in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

December 2010

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Mary Lou Emery

ABSTRACT

Mystical Compositions of the Self: Women, Modernism, and Empire explores women's early 20th-century literary inscriptions of mysticism's entanglement with empire and the figure of the female at the center of each. Through an examination of selected texts by Evelyn Underhill, Eva Gore-Booth, May Sinclair, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Mary Butts, and Virginia Woolf, *Mystical Compositions* argues that the discourse of mysticism underwrites modernist aesthetic strategies and ethical questions, particularly the pressing concerns of the self's relation to gendered, religious, colonial, and socioeconomic others within the strictures of British imperialism.

Employing a combination of postcolonial, feminist, and religious studies methodologies, this dissertation begins by briefly tracing the discursive history of "mysticism" from ancient mystery religions to its late 19th- and early 20th-century "revival" in British culture, paying particular attention to the prominent use of Woman as a figure of mystical unity in modernist literature and imperial scholarship and propaganda. The project then argues that selected women writers lace their characters' lives with mystical discourses in ways that suggest the skepticism *and* hopeful longing of living within an imperial system of inequalities and interactions: mysticism can engender connection with others and can offer counter-cultural resistance to the oppressive powers of state, empire, and patriarchal family. It also comes with the potential for minimizing the consumption of the other and for losing the self during a historical moment when women are organizing to actualize their political selfhood through suffrage campaigns, World War I efforts, and non-conscription movements.

Instead of providing a taxonomy of mysticism or a singular categorical definition, the project's chapter studies present a prismatic array of the various mysticisms, the diverse

"mystical compositions of the self" that proliferate through the dynamic of modernism's ambivalent relation to empire. The dissertation then proposes that these compositions operate, to varying degrees, within a "mystical economy of the impossible," in which the willing offering of the self to others paradoxically brings about self-abundance. Ultimately, *Mystical Compositions* highlights the mutually-shaping nature of early 20th-century British mystical, modernist, and imperial discourses and considers the gifts and costs of collaborations between politics, art, corporate religion, and personal spirituality.

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
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Graduate College
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

PH.D. THESIS

This is to certify that the Ph.D. thesis of

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To Bryan and Esmé

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INTRODUCTION

Women, Mystical Death, Political (After)Life

In E.M. Forster's 1924 novel *A Passage to India*, the elderly British woman Mrs. Moore travels to Chandrapore as an open-minded Christian accompanying her potential daughter-in-law Adela Quested. By the novel's end, Forster transforms Mrs. Moore into a disembodied mystical force, the "Hindu goddess" Esmiss Esmoor, a chant on the lips of Indian nationalists.[1] Mrs. Moore's narrative arc points to the elasticity of mystical discourse and its prime place in fictions written onto the imperial map. It subversively aligns a British woman's loyalties with Indian nationalists instead of Anglo-Indian colonialists, while divesting her of corporality and life. When dead and absent, Mrs. Moore becomes her most powerful as a mystical figure that unites Hindu and Muslim Indian nationalists alike. When she dies on the return trip to England, her ghost abandons ship before it reaches the northern hemisphere, unable or unwilling to leave Indian waters. Forster's India, the location of mystical ineffability, inscrutability, and irrationality, turns body into spirit, a Christian British woman into a "Hindu goddess."

Mrs. Moore's power as a mystical figure of and catalyst for political consolidation participates in a pervasive trend of late 19th- and early 20th-century British culture. Numerous modernist literary texts as well as written and visual imperial propaganda employed Woman as the figure *par excellence* for the mystical unity of the nation or the entire imperial enterprise. This trend undoubtedly intertwines with what Callum Brown has called the "location" of "Christian piety" in femininity, in the presumed womanly virtures of purity

[1] E.M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (San Diego: Harvest, 1952). See especially 250-251.

and angelic domesticity.[2] But literary productions also depicted female figures as sites of mystico-political power and contention that were inflected with "eastern" mysticism rather than Christian discourse, or associated with pagan devotions rather than Christian piety. That the figure of Woman so frequently represented "the mystic" and the "nation" raises the questions of how actual women participated in making or breaking such correlations and what those linkages afforded imperialist and modernist projects.

Mystical Compositions of the Self: Women, Modernism, and Empire takes up these questions as it explores women's early 20th-century literary inscriptions of mysticism's entanglement with empire through the figure of the female at the center of each. Through an examination of selected texts by Evelyn Underhill, Eva Gore-Booth, May Sinclair, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Mary Butts, and Virginia Woolf, I argue that the discourse of mysticism underwrites modernist aesthetic choices and explorations of ethical questions, particularly the pressing concerns of the self's relation to gendered, religious, colonial, and socioeconomic others within the strictures of imperial nationalism. These writers locate women's mystical experiences in their nations of origin instead of a distant colony and focus primarily on women's mystical encounters during the press of daily life spent caring for children, throwing parties, working in a bookshop, or leading military forces. Like Forster, they recognize mysticism's proximity to death, specifically in the context of colonial and anti-colonial nationalist violence, and some even speculate about mystical afterlives. But their mystical female figures grapple more urgently with the potential death of the self *during life*.

One way to read the Empire's consumptive role in relationship to its colonies within the frame of mystical discourse is to suggest that its expansionist acquisition of territories,

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2 Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000*, ed. Hugh McLeod, 2nd ed., Christianity and Society in the Modern World (London and New York: Routledge, 2009). See page 195 and Chapter Four.

peoples, resources, goods, and wealth mimics the Absolute's absorption of the individual self in the consummation of traditional mystical union. In fact, the overlap between the discourses of consumption and consummation, Graham Ward attests, lends empire its "mystical core."[3] However, the imperial network also facilitated contact between members of disparate cultures, between British citizens and colonial subjects, interactions which allowed for self-questioning that could destabilize imperial ideologies. The writers in this study lace their characters' lives with mystical discourses in ways that suggest the skepticism *and* hopeful longing of living within an imperial system of unequal interactions: mysticism can open up possibilities for connection, even union, with others and can offer counter-cultural resistance to the institutionalized, oppressive powers of state, empire, and the patriarchal family. In the union of self and other, mysticism also has the potential to erase or dismiss the other's alterity and minimize the loss of the self, enacting on an interpersonal scale the elision of consummation and consumption that Ward points out. These women writers adopt mystical discourse, with all its possibilities and problems for the self, during a historical moment when women are organizing to assert and actualize their political selfhood through suffrage campaigns, World War I efforts, and non-conscription movements.

Through the political fomentation of the 20th century's earliest decades, their mystical compositions re-think the self's relationship to the history of mysticism, to the imperial nation's claims on women, and to the Enlightenment project. Mysticism as a tool of resistance to political oppression or as a mode of political transformation might accept the Enlightenment ideal that "all persons be able to be subjects of their own histories,"[4] while it

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[3] Graham Ward, *True Religion*, Blackwell Manifestos (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003). 112-113.

[4] Janet K. Ruffing, "Introduction," in *Mysticism and Social Transformation*, ed. Janet K. Ruffing (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 2001). 8.

also defies Enlightenment rationality and the integrated self. The Enlightenment notion of a self as the center of all knowledge is assumed to be male and rational, so the woman mystic who claims to possess transcendent knowledge sits in the position of the knowing subject but her "knowledge" is questioned as subjective and irrational.[5] Literary modernism troubles this position further. Fuelled by the developing field of psychology, by the study of comparative religion, and the "mystical revival" of the fin-de-siècle and early decades of the 20th century, many modernist writers turned to the internal landscapes of the self and developed new aesthetic forms to convey psycho-spiritual reality, such as the "stream of consciousness" technique, as May Sinclair influentially put it.[6] As Dennis Brown explains, modernist writers set about deconstructing the unified self and the possibility of its transcendence by experimenting with expressions of conflicted, diffused, and "fragmenting" selves. The "fragmenting" self, he adds, doesn't necessarily signify madness or despair; one can also read it as "self-plenitude" or a "balancing of disparate self-parts."[7] However, defining the modernist self primarily as the aesthetic representation of consciousness (or defining mysticism only as a state of "higher" consciousness, for that matter) easily erases the self's contact with the other or simply co-opts the other into the self's own awareness.[8]

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[5] Grace M. Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995). 333-335.

[6] The confluence of modernism and mysticism relies particularly on the contributions of Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and William James. May Sinclair, "The Novels of Dorothy Richardson," *Egoist* 5 (April 1918). 58.

[7] Dennis Brown, *The Modernist Self in Twentieth-Century English Literature* (New York: St. Martin's P, 1989). 2, 12, 13.

[8] Postmodern theorizations of the self, such as Levinas's assertion that the self is constituted through answering the call of the other, challenge understandings of the self as inner consciousness or even autonomy. As McIntosh puts it, "the very feature most central to the modern notion of the self, my individual freedom to act and interpret reality, is re-read by Levinas in terms of *vocation*; I am free insofar as I am the one who at any given moment can answer the call of my neighbour. My freedom is always a freedom-for-the-other, but it is nonetheless the identifier of my self; for *I am never more myself than when I give myself away for my neighbour in love*." Edith Wyschogrod builds on Levinas and deals with the possible loss of the other's alterity by claiming that to be "saintly," self-abandonment must always be for the other's empowerment. See Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology*, ed. Lewis Ayres and Gareth Jones, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1998). 216-217. Italics in original.

The women writers I cover in this dissertation come to occupy a range of positions regarding the self's conundrums, depending upon the kind of mysticism they craft and the political issue they engage. Some bring their characters into mystical transformation through sacrifice for or suffering with the other. Some preserve the self through a renunciation of political action, while others favor a pattern of alternating detachment and communion. These various stances unfold into discussions of ancient and modern image-making; imbrications of war, suffrage, and pacifism; witchcraft, Christianity, and formations of sacred property; modernist aesthetics of "the whole." Through the recalibrating work of modernism—its political and social concerns, its aesthetics, its overlaps with and divergences from the rhetoric and aims of a wavering empire—mysticism proliferates into multiple mysticisms and offers a spectrum of possible strategies for the self. In the hands of some of these authors, mysticism retains the religious intent of western Christian mysticism; others reshape mysticism into a secularized form of faithful devotion; others fashion a heterodox hybrid of eastern and western religious philosophies.

Modern Mysticisms and the Challenge of Definition

Amid the numerous late 19th- and early 20th- century publications on mysticism and literature, mysticism and Christianity, "eastern" mysticism, mysticism and the occult, and the reprinting of medieval mystics' autobiographical accounts, cultural surveyors in the period declared with certainty that they were witnessing a "mystical revival."[9] As one commentator noted in 1914, many of the books dealt with "other people's mysticism" instead of recording

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[9] See Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 2004). 4, 48 (and first two chapters as a whole). Alex Owen explains that the "mystical revival" included many forms of spirituality, including magic, esoteric Christian mysticism, and the study of occult philosophy. Nevertheless, mysticism can be distinguished from magic and from the occult emphasis on secrecy, study, the will, and initiation rituals, as I discuss in more depth in Chapter Three. And although Owen and others, such as Surette, acknowledge that mysticism had a place within occult experience, they do differentiate between the two and choose to focus on the occult.

the author's own mystical experience or belief.[10] Caroline Spurgeon published a study of *Mysticism in English Literature* in 1913, in which she categorizes authors from the ancient world through the 19th century according to different types of mysticism. Shelley and Keats are "Love and Beauty Mystics," for example, while Wordsworth is one of the "Nature Mystics," Donne and Tennyson qualify as "Philosophical Mystics," and Julian, Blake, and Herbert represent the "Devotional and Religious Mystics."[11] While Spurgeon's survey usefully identifies literary mysticism as a tradition, it also demonstrates the consolation of scientific-like classification. A single author, however, could ostensibly belong to more than one category, and "philosophical mysticism," for example, will morph into a very different mystical mode depending upon the author and the century.

Apparently "mysticism" caused more confusion for the average person of curiosity than for literary and religious scholars because a year later, Evelyn Underhill confronted the barrage of answers one might hear when asking what mysticism is:

> [The inquirer] will learn that mysticism is a philosophy, an illusion, a kind of religion, a disease; that it means having visions, performing conjuring tricks, leading an idle, dreamy, and selfish life, neglecting one's business, wallowing in vague spiritual emotions, and being "in tune with the infinite." He will discover that it emancipates him from all dogmas—sometimes from all morality—and at the same time that it is very superstitious. One expert tells him that it is simply "Catholic piety," another that Walt Whitman was a typical mystic; a third assures him that all mysticism comes from the East….[12]

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[10] Leslie Johnson, "Modern Mysticism: Some Prophets and Poets," *Quarterly Review* 220, no. 438 (1914). 222.

[11] Caroline F.E. Spurgeon, *Mysticism in English Literature* (Cambridge Cambridge UP, 1913). Aside from Julian of Norwich and Emily Brontë, all of her selected authors are men (including a few whom I don't mention above).

[12] Evelyn Underhill, *Practical Mysticism* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1943). 2.

As her litany makes clear, in early 20th-century British culture, "mysticism"[13] was the repository for all that is seemingly spiritual, monistic, inexplicable, irrational, magical, unknowable, unnamable, or eastern. In particular, locating mysticism in the East allows one to ignore, displace, or minimize one's own cultural history of mysticism, depositing discourses of the irrational, the inexplicable, and the ecstatic elsewhere in order to maintain an identity of British, western rationality and decorum. Mysticism must be "other." An orientalized[14] discourse about mysticism emerges from and feeds into this binary construct, a discourse about mysticism that locates it in "the spiritual East" and treats it as irrational oriental hocus-pocus, a fascinating exotic curiosity, or a font of ancient wisdom with redemptive potential for the West. Although certain mystical discourses entered British culture via empire as an exotic import, many texts in this dissertation attest to Britain's own history of mysticism, as the "revival" of the period suggests. They turn to it as a resource for political and spiritual power; they reinvigorate and reconfigure it, salvaging what they find valuable.

Scholarship in the last half of the 20th century has produced as many definitions of mysticism as did the first half, from a primarily "affective phenomenon" to a theology to a

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[13] Although I will not continue to use quotation marks to indicate that I'm exploring mysticism as a discursive category, I never intend their absence to imply an attempt to identify or define "true mysticism" or to argue whether or not individuals "actually" experience what they claim. Many writers, such as Steven Katz and Don Cupitt, debate the validity of mystical experience, emphasizing its "constructedness" and the impossibility of escaping the mediation of language. Steven T. Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (New York: Oxford UP, 1978). and Don Cupitt, *Mysticism After Modernity* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1998).

[14] When I use the term "orientalism" and its variants, I'm ostensibly drawing on Edward Said's groundbreaking work in *Orientalism*. The foundational assumption driving Said's analysis of culture and politics is that the textual in general, even the specifically literary, is informed by and in turn informs politics and its administration. The evolution of this relationship with regard to the Near East can be studied as a discourse—an archive of accumulated "knowledge" Said calls Orientalism. Orientalism is the academic study of the Orient via language, art, anthropology, etc., an epistemological binary of East/West that structures subsequent theory, description, and policy regarding the Orient, and a Western mode of authoritative interpretation and domination of the Orient. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 25th Anniversary ed. (New York: Vintage, 1994). See specifically pages 2 and 3 for a concise introduction.

kind of textuality. Typologies of mysticism, as Janet Ruffing rightly points out, fail to account for the diversity of ways mysticism expresses itself in one's life or written work.[15] To preserve the varieties of mystical expression that early 20th-century literature presents, I have refrained from imposing one narrow definition of mysticism onto the texts and from creating a taxonomy of mysticisms.[16] I have, however, concentrated my study on the gendered and imperial valences of mystical discourse that arise from mysticism's Christian history in England and the scholarly import of an orientalized, eastern counterpart.

For this project, I have in part taken inspiration as well as theoretical cues from studies of mysticism that deal with at least one of these valences. Grace Jantzen's *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (1995) offers a feminist deconstruction of Christian mysticism that focuses on the Middle Ages but ranges into the 20th century as well, exploring it as a discourse constantly under reconstruction and asking why certain versions allowed women to "count" as mystics while other versions excluded them. Richard King also examines the formation of mystical discourses, but he is more interested in its colonial context and the subsequent implications for religious studies methodology. In *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India, and the "Mystic East"* (1999), he exposes the tendency in modern

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[15] Ruffing, "Introduction." 1, 5. In her introduction, Ruffing offers a helpful overview of scholarly approaches to mysticism.

[16] I retain the term "mysticism" instead of another descriptor, such as Morris Beja's use (following Joyce) of "epiphany," for a couple of reasons: 1) To provide a flexible term to include the multiple forms these authors create. Their mysticisms often don't fit into one category, such as a moment of heightened awareness or revelation. As I explain, "mysticism" at the time was just such an elastic term. 2) To develop a *mentalité* of the period by examining the term as it was used. The writers I cover often use the word "mysticism" in their diaries and essays or were associated with "mysticism" by others, and they wrote in the context of a "revival" of older forms of mysticism that they inflected with modern understandings of religion, psychology, science, and the nation. See Morris Beja, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel* (Seattle: U of Washington P, 1971). 13-23. In his discussion of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Beja writes that Clarissa has what might be called "secular mystical experiences," but unlike the mystic, refuses to let her personality "be annihilated" (123). I agree that Woolf's inscription of mysticism is atheistic and that Clarissa refuses to lose her self absolutely in life, but 20th-century "mysticism" encompassed a variety of positions regarding the self. As I show in Chapter Four, Woolf's novel incorporates other modes of mysticism.

religious studies scholarship to inherit and unquestioningly reproduce stances toward eastern religion and philosophy that British Orientalists firmly established. Literary scholars are beginning to illuminate mysticism's role in colonial and anti-colonial writings as well. Elleke Boehmer's most recent work entitled *Empire, the National, and the Postcolonial, 1890-1920: Resistance in Interaction* (2002) includes two case studies that examine mysticism's discursive, literary function in anti-colonial nationalist strategies.

My project participates in the larger critical enterprise of these scholars in re-connecting mysticism to political structures and processes. Even if not explicitly stated, each of their attempts to establish mysticism's relationship to the political re-works the de-politicized mysticism decades of scholars have adopted from William James's studies on religious experience, to which I'll turn in a moment. The discursive repository of the exotic and the spiritual that I've suggested mysticism represents in the early 20th century exists in a complicated, long-standing, but partially obscured relationship with the universalized understanding of mysticism James proposed. My work intervenes in this critical conversation (rethinking James) that has primarily been conducted between scholars of philosophy, history, and religious studies. King's and Jantzen's projects leave ample room for literary applications, and Boehmer structures her study around cross-colony nationalisms and modernisms, in which mysticism sometimes played a part. Although plenty of scholars have addressed mysticism in chapter studies or monographs covering one author, or have devoted full-length projects to modernism's occult influences,[17] no one to my knowledge has offered a longer study that investigates modernism within the discourse of mysticism, situating it within the striations of mysticism's gendered and orientalist history.

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[17] The most notable examples being Owen, Surette, and Longenbach.

My readings of texts in which gendered and orientalist mysticisms and modernist aesthetics and socio-political rebellions mutually sculpt one another will unsettle the notion that mysticism is a discrete discourse that literature and politics import and will show that religious, secular, and literary discourses are mutually colliding, friction-making, melding, and shaping. To lay a foundation for this work, I will briefly tell the story of mysticism's "genealogy," the genealogy that James unintentionally scrambles and partially erases. This is a story that wends its way through Greek mystery religions, the Christian church in England, through Orientalists and Transcendentalists, psychologists, Theosophists, mystics, and theorists and comes full circle back to the literary. I'll begin *en medias res*: the publication moment that codified mysticism.

The Story of "Mysticism"

In the 1902 lecture "Mysticism" from *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James compiles a series of case studies he extracts from literature, religious memoirs, and journals to anatomize and examine mysticism. He defines religious experience as personal, not necessarily institutional, claiming "mystical states of consciousness" as the *core* of religious experience itself. He establishes the now virtually entrenched identifiers of mystical experience: ineffability, a "noetic quality," transience, and passivity.[18] While these characteristics can help one mark some of mysticism's boundaries, over time, they have coalesced into a monolith-making definition: mysticism equals a direct experience beyond language—a private, fleeting, subjective state of mind in which the individual acquiesces his or her will to a higher consciousness or power and receives knowledge of the unitive quality of the world.

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[18] William James, "Mysticism," in *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Random House, 1994). 413-415.

James's "definitive" scholarly composition wields a double edge. His systematic and scientific approach offers mysticism the validation of serious study and de-institutionalizes religion, making "religious experience" accessible to individuals who don't participate in organized, communal religion. Paradoxically, however, in making mysticism the universal expression of all religious experience, James relegates it to a purely private realm and severs it from any ties to social or political processes.[19] His catalogue assumes mysticism as a *sui generis* category of experience that highlights the "noetic quality" of consciousness over the sensory input of the body, the private and individual experience over public and communal practice. As I have mentioned, my project aims to open up the notion of mysticism as removed from political processes and uncover the socio-political contributors to and consequences of its various literary constructions. Specifically, my work explores mysticism's gendered representations and its complicity in and resistance to empire as crafted by women writers.

I accomplish this in part by supplementing James with Evelyn Underhill's contributions to the field of religious study. As I discuss in Chapter One, in her body of work on mysticism, Underhill agrees with James's view of mystical experience as a state of consciousness, but she also emphasizes mysticism as a way of living in the world, an everyday practice that affects one's relationships to others and to political issues. Mystical

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[19] See Roy Wallis and Steve Bruce, "Secularization: The Orthodox Model," in *Religion and Modernization: Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularization Thesis*, ed. Steve Bruce (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1992). 8-30. Callum Brown cites Steve Bruce as the staunchest "sociological exponent" of traditional secularization theory, which is "founded on gradualism, inevitability and the grinding down of Christianity and religious sensibility in general in the modernising world of Enlightenment thought, industrial work and urban living." Brown instead argues that for the hegemony of Christian culture in Britain until 1960, when it quickly collapsed when "women cancelled their mass subscription to the discursive domain of Christianity." Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000*. 211, 195. I would clarify that James's work on mysticism doesn't undermine Christianity's cultural hegemony; my point is that it removes mysticism from its historical place (albeit often tenuous) in corporate religion and classifies it the personal experience of the individual. The various literary mysticisms examined in this dissertation attest to the continued import of Christianity, not only its symbols, but its doctrines as well.

experience may begin as a state of heightened consciousness, Underhill argues, but it pours out into the individual's role as a public actor. Though her now-"classic" 1911 work *Mysticism* might have "done more to popularise the subject than any other single work,"[20] I don't wish to replace James with Underhill as "the" authority on the matter. Rather, I place Underhill in conversation with James and with her contemporaries to re-enact and re-examine a measure of the lively scholarly and literary dialogue which stretched and pulled mysticism to its capacity.

I see the broadening of parameters from James as sole authoritative voice to James, Underhill, and other women writers of the period in conversation as a process of recovery that acknowledges the seemingly contradictory discursive roles mysticism played—that it registered as both a religious and a political discourse, as aesthetic technique and religious practice. James presents a universalized version of mysticism for the 20th century, removed from its specifically Christian, gendered, or imperial connotations. He refers to a variety of writings on mysticism, including those composed by women and by men from India, but his scientific-like classification presents the information as free-floating knowledge—not knowledge mined through the work of a political, economic, and scholarly empire or forged through feminized religious practices in England. Even a truncated genealogy (such as the one I am offering here) of the discourse called mysticism that James inherits and modifies enables one to trace the family tree, so to speak, and to reveal the ways that inheritance is bound up with the history of women's struggle for spiritual authority and how it is indebted to orientalist constructions of eastern religions.

The term "mysticism" has western, religious roots, and it also preserves its earlier forms in the continued emphases on mystery, vision, and communion. The earlier term

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[20] Johnson, "Modern Mysticism: Some Prophets and Poets." 223.

"mystical" originates from the *mūstikos* of Graeco-Roman mystery cults in the early Christian period. *Mūstikos* derives from the root *mūo*, meaning "to close," likely referring to the silence and/or mysterious extra-sensory sight of the initiates. The early Christian concept of *mūstikos* developed into an intertwined tradition of the mystical hermeneutic of scripture (reading beyond the literal meaning), the liturgical mystery of the Eucharist that offers communion with the Divine, and contemplative knowledge of God.[21] My emphasis on literary texts takes up the long-embedded symbiosis between mysticism, writing, and interpretation, to which I'll return shortly.

From its inception as a linguistic marker, "mysticism" has implicitly cried "womanish" and "religiously deceived." According to Leigh Eric Schmidt, the term emerged in the mid-18th century as an Enlightenment epithet for enthusiasm and ecstasy as signs of a "false religion." Church authorities identified its opposite, "true religion," by a person's rationality and moderation. This bifurcation of religion into "true" and "false" varieties establishes fault lines according to gender as well. The emotional enthusiasm of "false religion" is supposedly a particularly feminine display of religious feeling, while "true religion" exhibits the more masculine qualities of rationality and controlled balance. Schmidt notes that 18th-century thinkers hypothesized that the origin of mystical devotion was "disappointed love" and classified mysticism as a primarily female religion based on the lamentable sublimation of sexual desire into spiritual devotion.[22] Late 18th-century

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[21] Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India, and "The Mystic East"* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999). 14-15.

[22] Leigh Eric Schmidt, "The Making of Modern 'Mysticism'," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71, no. 2 (June 2003). 277-278. Working principally from primary religious texts and encyclopedias, Schmidt offers a helpful genealogy of "mysticism" as a category of inquiry into religious experience, filling in the gap between Michel de Certeau's exploration of seventeenth-century discourse on mysticism in France and the more recent scholarship that focuses on the Anglo-American flowering of mysticism around the turn of the twentieth century.

encyclopedias in both England and the U.S. also defined "mystics" as simply one of many religious sects.[23] Therefore, "mysticism" described either an inappropriate, "false" religion deemed most natural to females or the beliefs of an easily dismissible subset of sincere but sincerely misguided souls.

The expansion of mysticism from a Christian sect or a subculture of female enthusiasm into a foundation for religious experience around the globe, with each particular religion or spiritual practice inflecting mysticism in its own way, occurred in the 1840s and 1850s. This particular incarnation of mysticism flowered in Transcendentalist New England, where individuals like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller shook it loose from its Christian, sectarian soil and replanted it as universal, abstract, and removed from social responsibility.[24] For the American Transcendentalists, mysticism stood for spirituality above and beyond the body, materialism, religious difference, and cultural boundaries. This is the construction of mysticism that James eventually adopts, classifies, and popularizes—a transhistorical, transcultural representation that masks the specific gendered and imperial dynamics through which it emerged.

Mysticism, however, does not operate in a rarefied space beyond culture, nor does it possess a universal essence that qualifies it as the foundation of all religions. The mysticism that Transcendentalists eagerly accepted as a natural gift of and from the East was a representation of Orientalists such as Sir William Jones and writers like Edwin Arnold.[25]

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[23] Ibid. 280.

[24] Ibid. 282, 286-287.

[25] Rick Fields suggests that James was also taken with Anagarika Dharmapala, who spoke on behalf of Buddhism at Chicago's World Parliament of Religions and subsequently visited James's lecture class at Harvard. See Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 1981). 126-135. Also see his chapter, "The Restless Pioneers," on Jones, Arnold, and the American Transcendentalists.

Such invention and re-invention often occurs through the weaving and crafting of a text. Richard King points out that even though popular, "lived" religious practices in India didn't center on scriptures, Orientalists, in conjunction with a brahmanical elite, privileged monistic texts and consolidated fragments and various oral interpretations into an "authoritative" Hindu canon that articulated the "essence" of Hinduism as "mysticism."[26] Orientalists also used the "mystic East" as a backdrop for arguments about the legitimacy of Christian mysticism, defending the mysticism of Meister Eckhart by constructing it as active, dynamic, and moral in contrast to the passive, static, amoral mysticism of Hinduism.[27] They feminized the colony and its mysticism. Thus, religious authorities and Orientalist scholars operated within a binary construction that deemed the mysticism of both the East and the Englishwoman as inferior or false in comparison to the masculine, rational, active "true religion" in England or "true mysticism" of the West. Given its history, this project understands mysticism as a social and discursive construction that has changed over time and is "implicitly bound up with issues of authority and gender,"[28] examining six women writers' engagements with the complex cultural inheritance that genders mysticism and the colony.

Inherited Mysticism and the Modernist Moment

Mysticism's orientalist and gendered lineages converge in the figure of Woman in early 20th-century texts and popular culture, in which the perceived unifying potential of "woman," "mysticism," and "empire" operate as powerful symbols. Twentieth-century literature by both men and women, such as Forster's novel with which I began, often

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[26] King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India, and "The Mystic East"*. 101, 119, 123.

[27] Ibid. 127.

[28] Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism*. 12.

represents Woman as a symbol that can be manipulated to inspire both colonialist and anti-colonialist nationalist devotion, racial pride and fear, and imperial fervor. Though literary representations associating women and the mystical are too numerous to catalogue here, a short list includes Ruth Wilcox from Forster's *Howards End*, Kate Leslie from D.H. Lawrence's *The Plumed Serpent*, Cathleen of W.B. Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen*, Linda Burnell of Katherine Mansfield's *Prelude*, Margaret Allington from Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier*, and Miriam Henderson from Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage* series. Considering the prevalence of modernist literary mysticisms and their female characters, I frequently place Evelyn Underhill, Eva Gore-Booth, May Sinclair, Mary Butts, Sylvia Townsend Warner, and Virginia Woolf in conversation with writers such as Ezra Pound, Rabindranath Tagore, and W.B. Yeats, contemporaries whose work with the discourses of mysticism and empire are particularly relevant.[29]

All of these modernist writers construct their literary mysticisms in dialogue with the images and rhetoric that pervaded British popular culture. During the period under consideration in this project, a "familial and peaceable" imperial vision replaced the "era of bellicose, expansionist Empire." Iconographic representations of "Mother India" or the "Empire Family" surrounding and protecting the "Motherland" feminized the nation and used woman as a unifying symbol, a mystical figure to represent and organize the body politic—and turn dissent into familial betrayal. In the chapter studies, I draw attention to

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[29] Much critical work on the occult, mysticism, orientalism, and empire has already been done with these writers. For a sampling, see Leon Surette, *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, and the Occult* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 1993).; James Longenbach, *Stone Cottage: Pound, Yeats, and Modernism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988).; Robert Kern, *Orientalism, Modernism, and the American Poem* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996).; Hirohuki Yamasaki, "Yeats and Orientalism," in *International Aspects of Irish Literature*, ed. Toshi Furomoto, et al., *Irish Literature Studies* (Gerrards Cross, UK: Colin Smythe, 1996).; Michael Roeschlein, "E.M. Forster and the Part of the Mind that Seldom Speaks: Mysticism, Mythopoeia, and Irony in *A Passage to India*," *Religion and Literature* 36, no. 1 (Spring 2004).; and Elleke Boehmer's chapter on Leonard Woolf, Yeats, and Tagore in *Empire, the National, and the Postcolonial,1890-1920: Resistance in Interaction.* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2002).

the notion of women as "Empire Builders" and to the accumulation of associations that link mysticism, women, and imperial or colonial space.[30]

Modernist literary and political images of the unified community or familial empire build off of late 19th-century platforms and programs calling for unity. For instance, members of the Theosophical Society committed themselves to the goal of "universal brotherhood" and to the study of comparative religion and the "secret wisdom of the East," the mystical knowledge they believed lay beneath all world faiths. The TS's two most prominent members were women who became icons of mysticism's power—for political work or for phenomenal, misleading performance. Helena Petrovna ("Madame") Blavatsky, co-founder of the Theosophical Society in 1875, and Annie Besant, one of Blavatsky's successors, eagerly embraced what they understood to be eastern mystical beliefs and practices. Blavatsky wrote voluminously on mysticism and helped raise up Indian leaders under her philosophies. She later brought disgrace on the TS when investigators from the Society for Psychical Research discovered that her supernatural "phenomena" were clever performances. Besant wrote prolifically as well, spoke publicly on behalf of Indian Home Rule (becoming the first president of the Indian National Congress), and explicitly partnered mysticism and politics, calling for a world empire congealed through the world religion of mysticism.[31] The Theosophical Society's popularity and the prominence of its two most

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[30] Barbara Bush, "Gender and Empire: The Twentieth Century," in *Gender and Empire*, ed. Philippa Levine, *Oxford History of the British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004). 78, 79, 81. "'The British Empire, as it is today…is a [family] affair…a new commonwealth…a great experiment in progressive civilization,' wrote one Empire propagandist in 1924" (78).

[31] Annie Besant, *A World Religion*, vol. 72, Adyar Pamphlets (Madras, India: Theosophical Publishing House, 2005).

powerful women attest to the interest (and controversy) discourses on mysticism generated in late 19th- and early 20th-century British culture and to the central place of women.[32]

Besant's 1911 call for the cooperation of mystical religion and the disparate segments of the British Empire echoes the transcultural, unifying purposes of The World Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago in 1893. The WPR gathered representatives from religions around the globe for debate, dialogue, and a sense of mission. Parliament President C.C. Bonney welcomed participants with these words: "'If this congress shall faithfully execute the duties with which it has been charged, it will become a joy of the whole earth…marking the actual beginning of a new epoch of brotherhood and peace. For when the religious faiths of the world recognize each other as brothers,…then, and not till then, will the nations of the earth yield the spirit of concord, and learn war no more.'"[33] Bonney's address of welcome and commission assumes that religious unity will yield political results—that it will join the "nations of the earth" and war will cease. Like Besant, D.T. Suzuki and Swami Vivekananda, who launched themselves onto the western scene from the 1893 platform, saw mysticism as the religious characteristic with the unifying potential, both spiritual and political, that Bonney claimed as the WPR's objective. They popularized this message through their speeches and publications.

In this atmosphere of clamoring calls for mystical unity through world religions, empire, the universal brotherhood of Theosophy, and the figure of Woman, how did women writers respond? In what ways did they adopt the concepts and aesthetics of mysticism itself in order to speak into the discourses of mysticism, empire, and the politics of gender? In

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[32] For more on the TS, see Bruce F. Campbell, *Ancient Wisdom Revived: A History of the Theosophical Movement* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1980). and Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001).

[33] J.W. Hanson, ed., *The World's Congress of Religions at the World's Columbian Exposition* (Chicago: International Publishing Co., 1894). 16.

what literary instances does unity become self-dissolving union or uniformity? What problems and possibilities does the discourse of mysticism create in these texts? To address mysticism's gifts and costs, 20th-century women writers foreground the tensions between rationality and irrationality, body and spirit, dissent and unity, and mysticism and magic. Some address the Platonic hierarchical dichotomy of male spirit or mind over female body and questions of the religious authority of female mystical, visionary experience. Others' texts shine light on the history of naming witches as "false mystics" who make up the spiritual body of Satan just as the Christian Church forms the spiritual body of Christ.[34] By plotting these long-living confrontations into the lives of a single mother, a London hostess, an Irish warrior queen, a suffragist, a witch, and a spinster, they upset and disorder the sanitized mysticism American Transcendentalists and James constructed and reconnect mysticism to the "messiness" of political culture—to wars, suffrage campaigns, and nationalist movements knee-deep in imperial (or anti-imperial) muck. With these eclectic female characters, Evelyn Underhill, Eva Gore-Booth, May Sinclair, Mary Butts, Sylvia Townsend Warner, and Virginia Woolf confront the nexus of empire, domestic political movements, mysticism, and religion that the figure of the female often represents. They draw these issues into their own modernist moment.

Critics debate when modernism's "moment" occurred and what "modernism" means. A broad periodization that stretches from 1880 to 1940 covers those who think of it more narrowly from 1880 through the "high" modernist formal experiments of the 1920s and those who also include the years leading up to WWII. Despite the tussle over historical parameters, many agree that modernism emerges in response to the systemic changes of

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[34] See Jantzen's *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* for the historical contexts of these debates, as well as Chapter Three.

modernization and includes formal innovations (which I'll address in the following section). A few differentiations prove useful here: Modernization is "an ensemble of economic, technological, and political processes premissed on change…. [M]odernity is a state or condition characterised by fundamental ambivalence, and modernism 'a heterogeneous group of collective ways of relating or reacting' to the other two. These ways of reacting are also fundamentally ambivalent: modernism famously, or notoriously, both celebrates modernity and vigorously opposes it."[35] Focusing on the experience of modernity, Marshall Berman defines modernism as the struggles of men and women to carve out meaningful places for themselves amid modernity's swirl of paradoxical forces. It's a dialectical, ever-struggling mode of being that is expansive and cuts across temporal, platial, and racial planes to unite humans through experience.[36] In this sense, Berman's take on modernism replicates the universalizing approach James took with mysticism.

My understanding of modernism aligns more agreeably with theorists who position it within the pervasive imperial system of the period. Raymond Williams, for instance, focuses on contacts made in imperial centers. He explains that late 19th- and early 20th-century cities became metropolises—cultural, social, political, and imperial centers shaped by the flux of migration between colonies and imperial metropolises and between European metropolises. These border crossings provide individuals with encounters with various languages and art forms and give rise to modernism.[37] The alterations modernization and imperialism

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[35] Patrick Williams, "'Simultaneous Uncontemporaneities': Theorising Modernism and Empire," in *Modernism and Empire*, ed. Howard J. Booth and Nigel Rigby (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 2000). 29-30.

[36] Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin, 1988).

[37] Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, ed. Tony Pinkney (London and New York: Verso, 1989). Williams acknowledges that modernist literary depictions of the city still share some qualities with their predecessors. He specifically cites the London of Wordsworth in comparison with and contradistinction to the London metropolis of the 20th century. 37-47.

collectively wrought on cities provide an important historical distinction to underscore the differences between the literary mysticism of the modernist moment and that of the past.

During the period from the 1890s to the 1920s which my dissertation covers, some of the authors allude to or even directly place themselves in the lineage of past British writers, often Romantics such as William Blake or William Wordsworth, who became known as poets of the mystical. The mysticisms of women in the modernist period aren't completely new, of course, but they are refracted and altered through a prism of early 20th century political environments and aesthetic concerns. Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway waxes mystical as she rambles through the imperial metropolis, not the London of Wordsworth. It's a metropolis throbbing with "colonials," abuzz with imperial unrest despite the ubiquitous monuments to imperial stability.[38] Theorizing early 20th-century mysticism in the context of modernism's relation to empire helps guard against creating a timeless, transcendent conception of mysticism.

Recent theorizations of empire and/or modernism, such as those found in the work of Peter van der Veer, Simon Gikandi, Patrick Williams, Elleke Boehmer, and Leela Ghandi, rely on dynamic and fluid models of space, of inter-cultural engagement, of national culture formation, of textual representation, and of identity negotiation.[39] They helpfully shift the

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[38] And, as Brown points out, the Romantic author could still imagine a transcendental self and was "at home" in language, while the modernist writer intensely questions the possibility of transcendence and senses the inadequacy of language. See Brown, *The Modernist Self in Twentieth-Century English Literature.* 4, 9. While Brown's assessment applies to Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway,* other writers in this dissertation employ modernist aesthetic techniques to compose mystical selves that do have access to transcendence; and some, like Butts, claim the magical power of language, not its limitations.

[39] See Peter van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP, 2001). Van der Veer adopts an "interactional perspective" (8) to argue that shared experience shapes national and religious culture in nineteenth-century Britain and India. Simon Gikandi, *Maps of Englishness: Writing Identity in the Culture of Colonialism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1996). Gikandi writes that the relationship between the colonized subject and the English subject is marked by both collaboration and opposition. Also see Williams, "'Simultaneous Uncontemporaneities': Theorising Modernism and Empire." 13-38. Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1995). Boehmer calls for "expanded international mapping" to replace the "'diffusionist' interpretation of

model of inquiry from a static center-periphery configuration, in which the colonies serve as the unwitting recipients of western technology, management, education, and culture, to theoretical models that recognize colonial participations and engagements. These models don't imply evenness, equity, or simple exchange; rather, they recognize uneven relations of power and influence.[40] Literary modernism emerges through the channels of empire, but it isn't simply an imperial export. Patrick Williams, for example, tries to account for the uneven eruptions of modernism in various places on the imperial map and to highlight the conflict, ambivalence, and choice on the part of the colonized. He points out the expansionist quality colonialism, capitalism, and modernity share. Put simply, the empire exports modernity, and the colonized may welcome it without welcoming the means by which the West brings it.[41]

In focusing on writers from England and Ireland, I do not intend to imply, as Raymond Williams's theory perhaps does, that modernism primarily occurred in imperial metropolises. I do intend to acknowledge, along with Williams, that modernism in European cities grew out of migrations, diversity of language and culture, and contact

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earlier twentieth-century cultural movements: a cartography of Europe as still the maker of the world's meanings, and the native as the passive recipient of its interpretations" (123-124). Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siecle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship*, ed. George Steinmetz and Julia Adams, Politics, History, and Culture (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2006). Within the context of fin-de-siècle metropolitan Britain, Ghandi explores the "multiple, secret, unacknowledged friendships and collaborations between anticolonial South Asians and marginalized anti-imperial 'westerners' enmeshed within the various subcultures of late Victorian radicalism" (10).

[40] Thus they avoid creating a lop-sided view that either erases the power dynamic between the colonizing force and the colonized country or places all power in the hands of the British. This is a prominent critique of Edward Said's *Orientalism*: while he uncovers the massive and pervasive cultural, military, economic, and political machinery by which the west takes representational control of the "Orient," the power of the West becomes overwhelming and total. The Orient remains virtually silent, passive, victimized. However, one must remember that Said is investigating a pervasive *discourse* about the Orient in which the Oriental is *represented* as passive and silent. This discourse demonstrates the European invention of the Oriental subject as the Occidental subject's other. Although Orientalism has serious political ramifications and affects the actual lives of individuals, it does not demonstrate the actuality of what "the Orient" is or what characterizes the "Oriental subject."

[41] Williams, "'Simultaneous Uncontemporaneities': Theorising Modernism and Empire." 28.

between "others." My work with mysticism, gender, and empire emerges from the idea that empire establishes a system by which culture can be borrowed, adapted, adopted, and enforced—and that Britain functions as one (albeit powerful) node among others on an imperial map. It is one point of entry among many into discourses of mysticism, modernism, and empire. With the exception of Irish writer Eva Gore-Booth, who set her plays in Ireland but lived most of her life in Manchester and London, my project limits its focus to British writers and their novels set in Britain. Where relevant, I have addressed their interactions with colonial (usually Indian) writers who visited London and/or their familiarity with publications from the colonies. Evelyn Underhill, Eva-Gore Booth, Mary Butts, and May Sinclair read widely in "eastern mystical" texts. Sinclair met Indian writer Rabindranath Tagore and wrote reviews of his work, and Underhill collaborated with him on a translation of the mystic poet Kabir. Sylvia Townsend Warner's life appears more insular regarding cross-cultural contact; she got her second-hand perceptions of the putative East not from a colonial writer, but from her own mother, who spent some of her childhood years in India. Virginia Woolf, in addition to knowing stories of her husband Leonard's time in Ceylon, discussed "eastern mysticism" and its implications for gender with writer Mulk Raj Anand in her home, as he recorded in his *Conversations in Bloomsbury.*[42]

Uneven but creative relations punctuate imperial history and mysticism's genealogy. I have taken care to situate my examination of literary mysticism in its imperial context, to take into account the ways mysticism has been thought and written through perceptions of gendered religion and through orientalist perceptions of the East. This examination proves necessary and timely because even much of the most engaging work on modernism and/or

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[42] Mulk Raj Anand, "Tea and Empathy from Virginia Woolf," in *Conversations in Bloomsbury* (New Delhi, India: Arnold-Heinemann, 1981). 94-102.

empire gives limited space to mysticism, one of the period's constitutive discourses. Boehmer's most recent book-length study, for example, examines relationships "between peripheries." In two chapters, she teases out the nuanced forms of mysticism that individuals in the colonies used to forge anti-colonial nationalism.[43] This is a welcome shift away from the focus on the "center." For a project such as mine, however, that inserts mysticism even more prominently into the field of modernism and empire, the "center" has not received undue critical attention regarding its own history of mysticism. My work intervenes in the critical conversation concerning modernism and empire by (re)assessing the role of mysticism in each and by claiming Britain's own religious history as a generative, active source of modernist mysticism, in addition to the orientalizing varieties spurred by contact with Indian writers like Tagore or Anand and their works.

Empire's Imprint: Modernism's Mystical Aesthetics and Ethics

To reiterate more concisely, the Empire established global networks—of economic trade, communications, military forces, and governance—which allowed cross-cultural exchange. As artifacts, literature, and humans themselves from other cultures poured into London and as English individuals visited or worked in the colonies, artists interacted with one another in person or at least encountered one another's work. Such border crossings led to increased awareness in British citizens of their colonial "others" and of anti-imperialist

[43] *Empire, the National, and the Postcolonial, 1890-1920: Resistance in Interaction.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002. Boehmer offers a two-chapter case study that highlights the imbrications of the political and the mystical in the nationalist project advanced by Aurobindo Ghose and Sister Nivedita (née Margaret Noble). She also examines William Butler Yeats's introduction to Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali* in order to show that both "mystical" poets wanted to generate nationalism by "reminding" Irish and Indian readers of their idyllic, culturally rich, pre-colonial pasts. Boehmer thoroughly discusses the orientalism at work in Yeats's view of India as inherently mystical, and she offers a compelling interpretation of Sister Nivedita's politicization of "mystical" Hinduism. However, in these examples, mysticism (and even orientalism in the case of Yeats) is still the tool of the colonized—or of a British citizen only after she has moved to India and converted to Hinduism.

sentiments and movements in the colonies. Thus, the historical and cultural moment of the empire's zenith produced great ambivalence about its seemingly inevitable decline and fall, engendered self-reflection and self-questioning, and impacted aesthetic features.[44]

The aesthetic experimentations and thematic concerns that have become hallmarks of modernist literature, read in light of the globalized imperial network of cross-cultural collaborations, borrowings, and appropriations, do not simply reflect an artistic desire for innovation, but instead testify to anxieties about cultural and political decline as well as the desire for artistic inclusiveness of other cultural forms. Taken as a cluster, these aesthetic markers highlight modernism's ambivalence: self-questioning, uncertainty, and irony; expressions of failure to see fully or know completely as well as moments of insight and revelation; the aesthetic of the fragment and metaphors of wholeness or "wholes";[45] attempts at an "encyclopedic" inclusiveness and synthesis;[46] multiple linguistic registers and voices; incompletion or open-endedness; shuttling back and forth between consciousnesses; spiritual and psychological realities and landscapes; narratives of degeneration and loss; a simultaneous sense of newness and of deep lineage or history; looking to a mythic, pre-colonial past; and interest in anthropology and "the primitive."

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[44] See Elleke Boehmer, *Empire, the National, and the Postcolonial, 1890-1920: Resistance in Interaction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002). 170-181. and Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1993). 186-190.

[45] Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP, 2004). 6-7. Esty looks at "imperial contraction" in the period of 1930s to 60s and late modernism's "indirect and mediated representations" of that contraction through an "anthropological turn." In the 1930s and 40s, modernists like Eliot, Woolf, and Forster, instead of defending the literary or the "redemptive agency of art," promoted the redemptive agency of Anglocentric culture, to help reclaim England's "cultural integrity and authenticity." One of the aesthetic markers of imperial dissolution and contraction is the attempt to regain the lost totality or wholeness that empire provided. I see this attempt as beginning in the 1920s, as the examinations of the following chapters will bear out (particularly the chapters on Butts and Woolf). I maintain, along with Said and Boehmer, that English modernist writers responded to the anxiety of a potentially crumbling empire before it contracted and that interaction with writers from the colonies catalyzed self-reflection and questioning in English modernists.

[46] Said, *Culture and Imperialism*. 189. Said calls the amassing of fragments from high and low culture and from other languages and cultures into an artistic "totality" or synthesis "encyclopedic form." Eliot's *The Waste-Land* stands as a prime example of this technique.

I am suggesting that modernist aesthetics and ethics belie preoccupations with completeness, comprehensibility, wholeness, vision and insight, and connection between the self and the other, and that these concerns find their complements in the discourse of mysticism. With its premise of contact and even union with radical alterity, the discourse of mysticism provides a vehicle for modernist authors to imaginatively explore their own philosophies and to respond to imperial structures that are predicated upon the hierarchical divisions between races and cultures while at the same time bring them into proximity and contact. In other words, they could work out questions of how to live humanely with others and to what degree such practical ethics require offering and/or protecting the self.

The "compositions" of this project's title allude to the various metaphors, images, structures, configurations, and movements of the self that women as characters represent and women as writers inscribe via modernism in response to empire. "Compositions" also hints at mysticism's long love affair with language—with writing the "ineffable" and with the "mystical" reading of texts. The "writerly" component of mysticism easily lends itself to my focus on literary inscriptions of mystical discourse—the characters' mystical experiences and theories, mystical themes such as unity or vision, and aesthetic structures that are similar to those mystics employed in their writing or that turn mystical concepts into aesthetic forms. In *Mysticism After Modernity*, Don Cupitt asserts that mystical experience outside of language doesn't exist: mysticism, he insists, occurs in the act of writing itself. Grace Jantzen challenges this kind of argument, noting that it arrogantly dismisses the claims of the mystics themselves and that it's simply postmodern criticism's imposition of its own sense of enlightenment—another attempt to foist "authoritative" judgments upon women mystics and determine whose version of mysticism "counts."[47]

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[47] See Cupitt, *Mysticism After Modernity*. 74. Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism*. 9.

For the women writers in this study, mysticism is neither purely ineffable experience nor solely an act of writing. Examining their own essays on mysticism and aesthetics alongside their imaginative works shows literary mysticism to be a textual construction that also engages with socially-constructed mysticism of the period and maps it into characters' lives. In the chapters that follow, some "mystical analogues" to modernist concerns and strategies that I identify are "strange contacts" and sympathies across borders—between the self and cultural, racial, religious, political, or gendered others; between humans and animals, elemental life, and/or the divine; questions of the body's importance in comparison with spiritual aspiration; the desire or ability to see and know unseen or internal "Reality"; vision, revelation, insight; images and structures of unity or wholeness that contain fragmented parts; and struggles with ineffability or the inadequacy of language resulting in paradox (the mystical inclusion of opposites). My analysis of of these "mystical analogues" in the literary texts of six women authors foregrounds the ways the discourses of modernism and mysticism mutually constitute one another in response to empire.

Women at the Crossways of Mysticism,

Modernism, and Empire

I have chosen women writers from the first three decades of the 20th century whose texts revolve around a female protagonist who grapples with mysticism within familial, national, and cultural histories shaped by empire. In focusing on women writers instead of men, I am not insinuating an essentialist, feminine definition of mysticism or suggesting that women possess an inherently mystical core that gives them special access to mysticism.[48]

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[48] In her descriptions of mystic union with Christ (which places her work on mysticism within the western Christian tradition), Luce Irigaray states that "[the discourse on mysticism] is the only place in the history of the West in which woman speaks and acts so publicly" (191). On this I agree with her. However, she proceeds to suggest that the ability or authority to speak on the subject stems from an essential, inherent claim to it—that mysticism is naturally the realm of the female and that men enter into mystical experience through women.

Also, I'm not arguing that women necessarily use mysticism in a completely different way than men do, but that an expanded look at modernism and the mystical necessarily means broadening the field to include more studies of women writers. Recent studies that have turned a critical eye to mysticism in the work of British women writers, such as Jane Garrity's *Step-Daughters of England* or Roslyn Reso Foy's *Ritual, Myth, and Mysticism in the Work of Mary Butts,* either afford mysticism limited attention and/or do not situate their authors' mysticisms in a history of the discourse.[49] I take into account the centuries-long struggle of women for religious and writerly authority that I've touched on in the previous pages, and ask what mysticism and modernism become in the moment of their 20th-century contact. The women writers I've selected compose literary mysticisms that enable their female characters to respond to political movements in which women's selves seemed to be at stake.

I have arranged the chapters in roughly chronological order, but they more accurately represent an array of snapshots that develops from the World Parliament of Religions's 1893 call to international unity and reaches into the post-war mystical-aesthetic re-formations of the 1920s. Although this period includes the "high modernist" aesthetic innovation of the 20s, my selection of authors intentionally broadens the borders of modernism with its focus on mysticism. I've chosen texts that represent the myriad of constructions authors made of mysticism at the time, including forging mysticism through

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She writes that historically, men have laid claim to scientific knowledge of which women were ignorant, but women were "the most eloquent, the richest in revelations" (192). Luce Irigaray, "La Mystérique," in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1985). 191-202.

[49] Looking at Dorothy Richardson, Townsend Warner, Butts, and Woolf, Garrity argues that modernist women, as incompletely actualized or recognized citizens—as "step-daughters"—still employ nationalist and imperialist tropes. She addresses mysticism when it emerges as a relevant influence on these writers, but mysticism isn't her focus. As her title indicates, Foy highlights the moments of mysticism and myth in Butts's work, but she doesn't connect these elements to structures, rhetoric, or events of empire. See Jane Garrity, *Step-Daughters of England: British Women Modernists and the National Imaginary* (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 2003). Roslyn Reso Foy, *Ritual, Myth, and Mysticism in the Work of Mary Butts: Between Feminism and Modernism* (Fayetteville, AR: U of Arkansas P, 2000).

high modernist experimental prose, through a blend of realism and fantasy, or through elliptical, highly allusive personal myth-making. Only the texts by Woolf and Butts exemplify a typical modernist formal experimentation, but I show that the aesthetic strategies employed by the remaining authors also engage with mystical discourses in ways that dialogue with modernist aesthetic and political tendencies. Focusing only on mysticism and aesthetic innovation would produce a different set of texts, which might include, for instance, Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* or *The Waves*, Butts's *Ashe of Rings*, Richardson's *Pilgrimage*, and Sinclair's more "modernist" novel *Mary Olivier*. Such a focus could easily obscure the ways writers engaged with both mysticism and modernist breaks with social and political tradition. Imposing a strict definition of mysticism, such as an epiphanic moment of unity, would exclude texts like Gore-Booth's *The Triumph of Maeve*, in which Maeve's mysticism includes and depends upon her decisive renunciation of political power and war. It would also neglect the socio-political aspects or fruits of mystical experience, ignoring the fact that some writers inscribed mysticism as a living, everyday practice.

I include the now-canonical Virginia Woolf, as well as May Sinclair, Sylvia Townsend Warner, and Mary Butts, women who were well-connected to modernist circles but haven't achieved the popular, cult-like status of Woolf.[50] In addition to these more recognizable names, I study Irish writer Eva Gore-Booth and Evelyn Underhill. Gore-Booth occupies an anomalous position as a writer from a colony; she lived most of her life and performed the bulk of her political work in England, but her play addresses the Irish independence

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[50] These six women didn't form a tight literary coterie, but they did have varying degrees of contact and friendship with one another. For instance, Underhill knew Gore-Booth and Sinclair and wrote introductions to and reviews of their work. Sinclair read Underhill's manuscript of *Mysticism* and also made suggestions for Butts's draft of *Ashe of Rings*. Woolf lunched with Butts, but she hardly approved of her drinking and drug use. (And Hogarth Press turned down *Ashe of Rings* for publication.) Townsend Warner and Underhill had mutual friends in Arthur and Purefoy Machen. Purefoy was Townsend Warner's aunt, and Arthur, the writer of mystical, esoteric, and supernatural works, befriended Underhill through the Golden Dawn.

movement and provides a stark counterpoint to Sinclair's novel with which it's paired. Underhill, as I've noted, is primarily remembered and studied as a promoter of mysticism and Christianity, but her inclusion in this conversation reveals some of the overlaps between literary and theological modernisms.

Each chapter explores a different "mystical composition of the self" in interaction with a particular aesthetic strategy in a specific imperial context. The chapters also interlock in dialogue around shared threads of mystical discourse. Chapter One, "Incarnational Mysticism and Evelyn Underhill's Pieta of the Self," focuses on Evelyn Underhill's 1909 novel *The Column of Dust*. Hinging Underhill between theological modernism and literary modernism, I argue that she uses the Christian concept of incarnation to construct a mysticism that values the corporeal and views other human beings as living icons of God. Underhill's incarnational, mystical iconography dialogues with modernist theories of the Image as an embodiment or presentation of an intellectual and emotional experience in an instant of time. Through her incarnational mysticism, Underhill wrests the mother icon away from Victorian ideals of womanhood and refashions it into Constance as a 20th-century mystic mother. Though she claims the mother's privileged position as perpetuator of the nation, Constance's sacrifice for her developmentally-stunted child defies the dictates of imperialist eugenics. Through the image I call a pieta of the self, Constance instead becomes an icon of bodily, mystical generosity that points to the transformative potential of mysticism and art.

In Chapter Two, "'It's All in the Picture': Unity and Aesthetic Mysticisms in *The Triumph of Maeve* and *The Tree of Heaven*," I pair Sinclair's 1917 novel *The Tree of Heaven* with Gore-Booth's play, *The Triumph of Maeve*, published first in 1905 and reprinted in truncated form in 1916. I posit that, informed by their understandings of "eastern mysticism" and the

interconnectedness of the self with all others, each author uses a particular aesthetic strategy to find occupations for mysticism and art in the context of two imperial fronts (the First World War and the 1916 Easter Rising in Ireland) and the "home front" of the women's suffrage movement. Sinclair takes the Imagist aesthetic qualities of clarity and hardness, along with the "eastern" mystical-aesthetic quality of "stillness," and shapes them into psychological states that exemplify healthy, masculinized mystical experience. She presses these aesthetic values, as well as women's mystical vision, into the service of an imperial war that offers men contact with the Absolute Self. In step with the Irish Literary Revival and its inspiration from Indian nationalist literature and mysticism, Gore-Booth looks to a pre-colonial past to imagine a national future for Ireland. In Gore-Booth's hands, however, the legendary warrior queen Maeve renounces her warring, her political sovereignty, and her wealth to choose a life of mystical contemplation. Gore-Booth builds Maeve's pacifist mysticism on the mystical-artistic empathy—an ability to imagine another's suffering so completely that one essentially becomes the other.

In the third chapter, "Primitive Magic, Sacred Property, and the Logic of Possession in *Ashe of Rings* and *Lolly Willowes*," I explore the intersections of mysticism, magic, and primitivism against the backdrop of World War I and imperial dispossession in Mary Butts's *Ashe of Rings* (1925) and Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willowes* (1926). Attending to 18th- and 19th-century applications of "sacred" to political rights, drawing on discourses of the self and property, and contextualizing the novels with primitivist scholarship of the period, I claim that Townsend Warner's and Butts's novels turn to primitive magic to secure property—objects, an entire estate, or the self—as sacred, inviolable against the acquisitive advances of imperial war or the patriarchal family. I focus on moveable objects of possession gained through imperial channels to show how the logic of possession

underwrites constructions of primitive magic and the self. Butts emphasizes magic as an enactment of the self's will on behalf of the individual and the community at large. Through the "word of power," magic becomes a mystical and political art, the adept a kind of artist-activist. I trace the subtle play between possession and belonging, autonomy and interdependence that ensues after Lolly makes a compact with Satan and becomes his sacred property.

In the final chapter, "Clarissa Dalloway and the Mystical Immanence of the Self," I explore the implications of Virginia Woolf's reframing of mystic experience in her 1925 novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. Clarissa imagines her self as both a hub that brings people together and as a mist that disperses outward horizontally and becomes part of others, both human and inanimate. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, then, mysticism isn't an experience of union or harmony with a transcendent Divine Other, but is a speculation of the self's immanence in the world and its completion in others. Building upon Edward Said's work on modernism and empire and analyzing Woolf's mystical-aesthetic philosophy of the "whole," I show that, through Clarissa, these structures and movements of the self simultaneously critique and mimic the centrality and expansiveness of empire. Like Underhill, Woolf's construction of her main character places the self at the crux of mysticism and art.

Thus, *Mystical Compositions of the Self* begins with an icon of theological mysticism and ends with an icon of atheistic mysticism, not to signal a simplified, linear narrative of secularization, rather to show how in her fiction each relies on a skeptical but curious self—a self that in each case exhibits modernist uncertainty coupled with mystical, faith-like openness. The four chapters converse with one another regarding the intimacy between mystical discourse, literary modernism, and British and colonial nationalisms, the wars and martial incursions fought in their names, the suffrage movement, politics governing women's

bodies, the communities that form within and over borders, and the sacrifices, withdrawals, contradictions, and benevolences of the self. Ultimately, they seek to shine light on the deep costs and hopefully greater possibilities that can abound in such collaborations between politics, literature, religion, and mysticism.

CHAPTER ONE
INCARNATIONAL MYSTICISM AND EVELYN UNDERHILL'S PIETA OF THE SELF

Breaking and Re-Making Madonnas

The first three decades of the 20th century that are under consideration in this dissertation have an iconoclastic reputation, perhaps emblematized by Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918), which treated icons of Victorian civil and cultural religion with a healthy dose of satire and levity. Not all icons were perched on pedestals only to be knocked down, however. Writers and visual artists erected an array of madonnas and goddesses, investing themselves in revising and reinvigorating traditional iconographic images of the Virgin. If modernists "dismantled" the Virgin, they certainly did not leave her in pieces but reassembled her, often for more broadly mystical rather than religious ends.[1]

Evelyn Underhill's novel *The Column of Dust* (1909) participates in modernism's reimagining of the mother icon, and she does so through a series of mystical icons that draws from her own theological modernism, brings together Christian doctrinal and modernist aesthetic notions of embodiment, and re-figures a prominent Christian icon into a mystical-aesthetic structure of the human self. The novel poses the question, "What ideological framework allows one to recognize the worthy icon?" Its answer is that incarnational mysticism does. As her main character Constance Tyrell increasingly accepts a mystical paradigm for viewing the world and her place in it, Underhill fashions her into an icon of mystic motherhood and alters her perception of others. This shift appears most radically in Constance's response to the bodies of others and the belief systems they represent. For an example, consider Constance's initial position as she surveys the

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[1] Valerie Robillard, "Dismantling the Virgin: Modernism and the Sacred Feminine," in *Transforming Holiness: Representations of Holiness in English and American Literary Texts*, ed. Irene Visser and Helen Wilcox, *Groningen Studies in Cultural Change* (Leuven and Paris: Peeters, 2006). 197.

procession of an unnamed European emperor through London. Her contempt for the cult of imperialism spills onto its icon as well:

> And in the midst of the pageant—its very eye—guarded and carried as a sacred relic through streets, there was a little old and wearied man, whom all Europe knew to be diseased, and whom some pitied, some despised, but none ever reverenced. The flashing and murderous swords of his bodyguard went before and behind him, as a warning to the people that this one ebbing and imperfect life should be protected, even at the sacrifice of other growing lives. The little grey man was almost swallowed up by his huge carriage, and by the imperial richness of the cloak that propped him in his place. He raised a claw-like hand to return the salutations of the people.
>
> Now here, as it seemed, was a manifest sham and absurdity; here was something, an inconsistent wreck from the savage ages, which pure and emancipated spirit could never understand. Where, indeed, could it touch eternal matters: this temporary erection of impotent dolls? Once it had passed, and the cheering had died, Constance herself thought it but foolishness; pathetic perhaps, but evidently ripe for the destroying hand of that progress which talks so much about the trowel, but always seems more ready with the sword.[2]

That the emperor is "propped" up by the "imperial richness" of his garment suggests the ideological bracing by which icons stand.[3] From Constance's point of view, empire's promises of "progress" through political planting and building (as indicated by the trowel) come down to theatrics, staged talk replaced with the more expedient sword. Such hypocritical histrionics divest imperial icons of meaning and amount to the "temporary erection of impotent dolls." The sexualized language takes aim at the specifically patriarchal nature of empire and claims that its political program results in disappointment and violence, not productive labor. Indeed, the emperor's decrepit form—his "old," "wearied," and "diseased" body—cannot accomplish much. Constance claims he is "pitied" and "despised, but never reverence[d]," interpreting the onlookers' cheers as misplaced fervor instead of

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[2] Evelyn Underhill, *The Column of Dust* (London: Methuen, 1909). 180-181.

[3] Downing and Bazargan rightly assert that when assessing images we must ask "whose images, whose history, whose interests are being served?" David B. and Susan Bazargan Downing, "Image and Ideology: Some Preliminary Histories and Polemics," in *Image and Ideology in Modern/Postmodern Discourse*, ed. David B. and Susan Bazargan Downing (Albany: State U of New York P, 1991). 16.

genuine regard. She doesn't understand why his "ebbing and imperfect" life should be protected through the sacrifice of other "growing lives." Though she won't come to accept all the imperialist discourses for which the emperor stands, through mysticism she will come to understand the value of such an "ebbing and imperfect life" when she later decides to sacrifice her own robust existence for that of her coarse, gravely ill child whose life is waning.

Mysticism plays such a crucial role in the novel in part because Underhill was drafting *The Column of Dust* while at work on the text that she would publish as *Mysticism* in 1911. In it, Underhill shifts William James's emphasis on mysticism as a transitory, passive experience. For Underhill, the expanded vision and connectedness of mystical experience should function in service of the mystic's perception and treatment of others.[4] Even though the mystic's "heart is always set upon the changeless One," he does not "neglect his duties to the many."[5] Private mystical experience doesn't operate as an end in and of itself, but it does transform the self through love. In fact, the novel's central plot involves Constance's learning this lesson: mysticism is sacrificial love for imperfect people and things. By defining mysticism this way, Underhill retains love as the mystic's orientation, but she insists upon this love functioning as a horizontal relational ethic: the mystic's love for God must also flow outward to those around her, specifically those whom society disdains. This is why

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[4] James does note that many mystics are catalyzed into action and service by their experiences, but the focus of his definition of mysticism is "mystical states of consciousness," not the "fruits" of such states. Underhill would include the fruits as part of "mysticism" itself, not as non-mystical by-products.

[5] Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*, 12th. ed. (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999). 81.

Harvey Egan, in his brief encyclopedia of various mysticisms, asserts that Underhill's variation offers mysticism as "a way of life."[6]

In acceptance of the orientalist stereotype of the passive East and the active West, Underhill identifies the active nature of the mystic life as "the true distinction between Christian and non-Christian mysticism."[7] Although her novel's main character claims no particular religion, the mystical vision she receives and the resulting actions she takes are heavily indebted to Christian conceptions of sacrifice, the body, the marginalized, and the icon. Underhill uses the concept of incarnation, rooted in and extending from the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, to revise mysticism in a way that emphasizes a value for the corporeal—in all its susceptibilities and flaws—instead of a desire for escape from the body into the spirit. As Underhill presents it, mysticism helps one locate the divine in everyday life and to recognize that humans are icons of God, a perspective that then engenders compassion and generosity towards others and towards the body-spirit unity of the human person. Thus mysticism becomes a living practice, or a way of seeing others and relating to them, not solely an individual visionary experience or the absorption of the self into the Absolute. This particular inscription of mysticism allows reverence for someone, such as an aging emperor or an ugly child, whose surface appearance alone doesn't elicit reverence. Incarnational mysticism acts as the generative and sustaining ideology for the broken form

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[6] Harvey D. Egan, "Mysticism as a Way of Life I," in *What are They Saying About Mysticism?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982). 40.

[7] Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*. 172: Underhill claims that for Western mystics, "the highest forms of Divine Union impel the self to some sort of active, rather than of passive life: and this is now recognized by the best authorities as the true distinction between Christian and non-Christian mysticism." See pages 429 and 430 for examples of such active mystics, as well as Egan's gentle rebuke of Underhill's "too sweeping criticism of Eastern mysticisms" (pp.48, 50). In *Practical Mysticism* (1914), Underhill presents the active energy of the mystic as a boon for the nation, a point I'll touch on at the end of the chapter.

that is exalted in its brokenness; it aligns the mystic with the "other"—with the poor instead of the rich, with the abject body instead of the unscathed body.

Because Underhill inextricably ties mysticism to image-making and to the embodied experience of motherhood via incarnation, it's crucial to ask what incarnational mysticism means for a mother, specifically regarding the imperial imperative for her to be productive, and what kind of mother icon incarnational mysticism produces and lauds. The iconic art she encountered in Italy as a young woman deeply impressed Underhill, and she attempted her own neo-medieval renaissance by translating medieval Mary legends.[8] "The Vigils of the Dead" and "The Lily" were published in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1905. She wrote her own tale of the Virgin, "Our Lady of the Gate," published in 1904 in *Horlick's Magazine and Home Journal for Australia, India, and the Colonies*.[9] Unlike the translations of the medieval Mary legends, Underhill's "Our Lady" calls the encounter with the Virgin into question. Father Porter, who believes he has met the Madonna in the flesh, has a mind that "leaned naturally towards the fanciful and the occult," a suggestive description that creates space for doubt. The narrative equally complicates the motivations of Father Superior, who wants to test the validity of Father Porter's claim. If he finds it to be true, so much the better, for "pilgrims are profitable."[10]

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[8] Christopher R.J. Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941): An Introduction to her Life and Writings* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975). 25. Kripal points out that in Underhill's survey of mystics appended to Mysticism, the catalogue ends with Blake, as if there are no modern mystics. I would point to Constance as Underhill's imagined new mystic. Jeffrey J. Kripal, "Eyeing the Burning Wings: Analyzing the Mystical Experience of Love in Evelyn Underhill's Mysticism (1911)," in *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 2001). 33-84. 52.

[9] Evelyn Underhill, "Two Miracles of Our Lady Saint Mary: 'The Vigils of the Dead' and 'The Lily'," *The Fortnightly Review* 84 (September 1905). 496-506. and Evelyn Underhill, "Our Lady of the Gate," *Horlick's Magazine and Home Journal for Australia, India, and the Colonies* 2 (1904). 243-247.

[10] Underhill, "Our Lady of the Gate." 244, 247.

In "Our Lady," Underhill allows the Madonna figure to unsettle the tendency to lay the power of accurate interpretation at the feet of either the mystical believer or the skeptical empiricist. *The Column of Dust* continues this exploration of the modern subject's conflict in perception and interpretation regarding spiritual matters, but Underhill intensifies the turmoil by layering the roles of mystic, skeptic, and Mary figure onto one character. Considering this novel within the cultural context of a "shared, modernist project to radically revise religious and symbolic expression,"[11] I argue that Underhill plays both religio-aesthetic iconophile and iconoclast by alternately imbuing the mother icon with life-giving, transformative power and then exposing another mother icon as a devotional art object to be bought and sold. "True," incarnational mysticism allows Constance to see the difference between the two. Through an encounter with the Holy Grail, an icon of divine love and bodily sacrifice, she becomes an icon of mystic motherhood herself. As Underhill transforms Constance into a mystic mother icon, she reshapes the ideal mother figure, loosens it from Victorian sexual mores and works against imperialist, eugenicist-leaning discourse while still emphatically retaining the notion of the mother's duty to the human race. She offers the living, laboring, imperfect figure of the mother as a worthy icon of incarnational mysticism, which will in turn inspire a practice of countercultural, sacrificial generosity to others. By contrast, the mother icon of intellectualized mysticism is marked by her fashionable appearance, which Underhill censures as a shallow, lifeless aestheticization and commodification of mysticism. Finally, I seek to show that opposing qualities of these mysticisms, embodied and dynamic versus disembodied and stylized, come to reside in tension in a modernist pieta of the self. Constance is a refashioned icon, a renewed version

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[11] Helen M. Dennis, "Pound, Women and Gender," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ezra Pound*, ed. Ira B. Nadel (Cambridge UK: Cambridge UP, 1999). 281.

of the old mystics for the twentieth century. This icon encapsulates the possibilities and problems of a mystical ethic and aesthetic and dialogues with nascent modernist theories of the image that will also inform the following chapter.

Mysticism for the Modernist

The Column of Dust functions as a mystical bildungsroman that uses magical ritual to set its main character on a path of mystical transformation that culminates in the loving sacrifice of the mystic way. Constance Tyrrel is a single mother who works in a London book shop. She hides the fact that she has a daughter (claiming instead that she is Vera's aunt) and initially keeps her interest in magic and mysticism a secret. Against her sense of intellectual dignity, she dabbles in the arcana of the *Grande Grimoire*, a book of magic rituals and incantations. Influenced by the supernatural stories that flourished in her time,[12] Underhill has Constance perform the Ritual of Conjuration one evening, and from then on she is inhabited by a spirit that initially manifests its presence as a column of dust. This "Watcher" desires to know how humans experience reality and if that experience in any way resembles the purely spiritual "Reality" in which "he" (in Underhill's language) lives.[13] The intensity of his curiosity, coupled with Constance's magical summons, sends him plummeting to Earth. The Watcher speaks into Constance's thoughts and allows her to see London and its inhabitants through "alien eyes," challenging her to question the everyday life that she takes for granted as real. The Watcher allows Underhill to explore the inner

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[12] Armstrong notes this influence and specifically cites M.R. James. See Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941): An Introduction to her Life and Writings*. 45. Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's fin-de-siècle supernatural story "The Familiar" also contained a "Watcher," but this presence was hellish. See Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, "The Familiar," in *In a Glass Darkly* (London: John Lehmann, 1947). 46-82.

[13] Armstrong describes the Watcher as a "denizen of Plotinus' world of intelligible spirit, the world of 'nous', in which a brilliant intellectual and aesthetic sensibility may be combined, on Evelyn's reading of the Alexandrian philosopher, both with an ignorance of the higher reaches of mystical unions with the One, and a certain itching desire to know how the metaphysically lower orders manage things." Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941): An Introduction to her Life and Writings*. 74.

conflict of the skeptical subject who is quite literally forced to live and deal with the presence of the supernatural. She uses the tensions between the Watcher and Constance to generate a debate about mysticism: Is mysticism's recognition of and desire for a transcendent Divine so exclusive that it devalues the corporeal and earthly, or is mystical recognition of and desire for the transcendent Divine fleshed out, so to speak, through the life of the body? In other words, is mysticism's philosophical underpinning a kind of ascetic dualism or, as I've claimed Underhill would have it, an incarnational ethic that sees the divine as both transcendent and immanent? In their often antagonistic cohabitation, Constance champions the value of the corporeal and the Watcher insists that the material world is spiritless illusion. Over the course of the plot, Constance begins to influence the Watcher, so that by the novel's end, the Spirit reveres her and recognizes the body-spirit unity that constitutes the human person.

In the bookshop, Constance meets and befriends Andrew Vince. On Constance's suggestion, he buys the *Grande Grimoire* as a birthday present for his wife Muriel. As expected, Muriel is delighted with the gift and even more intrigued when Andrew informs her that a shopgirl with some knowledge of the book helped him select the present. The possibility of finding a new addition to her set of unconventional friends thrills Muriel and prompts her to invite Constance to a gathering.

On her way to Muriel's drawing room, Constance has a moment of revelation in the street. When she sees a destitute mother and child cross in front of a beautiful tree, she recognizes the interconnectedness of all life, from the lowly to the magnificent, she sees the mother as the link in this chain of interconnection, and she is moved to generosity. Once she reaches her destination, Constance encounters a coterie of women, most of whom are interested in discussing mysticism as a subject of current intellectual fashion. None of these

women possesses understanding of mystical experience such as the one Constance had in the street; for them, mysticism resides in the mind and has little to do with everyday life or the experiences it offers.

Muriel epitomizes such fashionable mysticism of the mind and serves as the central foil to Constance. Dressed and coifed to immaculate perfection, she presents herself as a modern mother and mystic—someone who knows all the latest spiritual trends and who insists her son Felix's education include poetry, myth, and all the current renovations of ancient spiritual thought. Caught in the buzzing hive of self-proclaimed mystics, Constance speaks out against mysticism as simply an intellectual category of study and, drawing on her recent experience in the street, she sharply defines it as active, sacrificial love and associates it with the mother as bearer of life.

The pivotal moment in Constance's spiritual transformation, however, involves an occurrence even more unusual than her previous contacts with forces of magic and proponents of popular mysticism. During a vacation in the countryside, she happens upon a remote chapel where none other than the Holy Grail is preserved by its passionate devotee, Martin. In the iconic cup, both the Watcher and Constance recognize divine reality and its imperative to love.

Constance returns to her London work, chastened by her encounter with the Grail. A few months later, Martin, who is on the verge of death, arrives in the city to pass the Grail into Constance's safekeeping. She reluctantly houses the powerful object in her shabby apartment. Sobered by her new task, Constance decides that she must live a life of complete honesty, beginning with the truth of Vera's parentage. She reveals to her friends that she chose to have a child through a one-night anonymous sexual encounter—a child who is, the

narrator informs us, unrefined and difficult to love. In addition, Constance relates that she has no remorse for her actions and no interest in making her situation "respectable."

After Constance reveals the circumstances of Vera's birth, she retains only the friendship that she has forged with Mrs. Reed, a member of Muriel's set who is undeterred by Constance's defiance of sexual mores. Stirred by the Grail's presence, Constance devotes herself to caring for the daughter she previously denied, who has fallen gravely ill. Her extreme loving sacrifice brings her into conflict with her spirit-guest. Vera offends the Watcher's eugenic and aesthetic sensibilities. He views Vera's crudeness and sickness with disgust because she mars his picture of ideal beauty. He would rather see her dead than living as a burden on Constance. Through the encounters in the street and with the Grail, Constance's mysticism compels her to see the unlovely, the material, the bodily, the beautiful, and the spiritual as parts of one reality. She accepts her daughter despite the child's animalistic crudeness and despite the burden of caring for her.

However, the mysticism that allows her to love those who appear unworthy also leads her to undo her initial critique of empire and its icon and to see them as incorporated, acceptable parts of a more meaningful whole. The Watcher convinces her that, like the Grail, the imperial leader who is being paraded through London functions as an embodied representative of an ideal. Just as the Grail is Love, the Emperor is Law.[14] The novel positions the mother as the third figure in this triumvirate of icons. Now fully activated by her mystical encounters and invested in sacrificially loving her daughter, Constance steps

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[14] Underhill was probably thinking of Dante here. In *Mysticism*, she writes of his work in the *Paradiso*: "He inherits and fuses into one that loving and artistic reading of reality which was the heart of Franciscan mysticism, and that other ordered vision of the transcendental world which the Dominicans through Aquinas poured into the stream of European thought. For the one the spiritual world was all love: for the other all law. For Dante it was both." In Constance, specifically in the novel's final image of her, Underhill attempts to bring together the ordered, transcendent plane and the love of the world. Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*. 462.

into the iconic role that she witnessed in the mother in the street: the Mother as Giver of Life. Drained of all resistance and health, tired of struggling against the Watcher's pleas to let the child slip away, Constance is convinced that either she or Vera must die. After arranging for Vera to live in Mrs. Reed's care, she passes away in the presence of the Grail, under the Watcher's reverent gaze. Both Constance and the Watcher then exit the material world, leaving the dust of earth they have learned to value.

Scenes loaded with such spiritual weight sat uneasily with some readers. In 1909, an anonymous reviewer in *Punch* offered this bewildered assessment of the novel's supernatural premise:

> …I am in doubt whether she intends the effect to be serious or farcical. There are other incidents in the book—the scenes in the mountain chapel, for example, and the death of Constance—where this impression of insincerity becomes even more distasteful. In fine, Miss Underhill, having proved that she can write engagingly enough about ordinary life (the Vince household is quite delightful), will not, I hope, mind my advising her to leave the mysteries respectfully alone.[15]

The reviewer sits uncomfortably with the possibility that Underhill mishandles "the mysteries" and is wary of her indeterminate intentions. Underhill was actually sincere about the premise of her novel and its supernatural and mystical events,[16] but the reviewer rightly perceives a satirical edge in the narrative (even though he or she misidentifies which moments are satirical). Like her novel's heroine, Underhill was a spiritual seeker, and details

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[15] Anonymous, "Review of The Column of Dust," *Punch* 137 (November 10, 1909). 342. Underhill thought the *Punch* review mean-spirited. In December of 1909, she wrote to friend and collaborator Margaret Robinson: "Wasn't *Punch's* review of the *Column (of Dust*) beastly? Quite the nastiest I've had. There have been about 40 now, representing all possible shades of opinion." Evelyn Underhill, *The Letters of Evelyn Underhill*, ed. Charles Williams (London and New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1943). 107.

[16] She was "sincere" inasmuch as she intended the novel to be realistic. In an unpublished letter to Margaret Robinson, she wrote: "'No! it's not an allegory, never thought of such a thing. It's my idea of a realistic novel!'" Quoted in Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941): An Introduction to her Life and Writings*. 85.

of her biography—her push-pull relationship with Catholicism in particular—account for the ambivalence that the reviewer finds unsettling.

Evelyn Underhill was born in 1875 in Wolverhampton to Sir Arthur Underhill and Lucy Ironmonger. Her parents weren't "practising Anglicans,"[17] and her confirmation at Christchurch, Folkstone, in 1891[18] resulted from her own inclinations, not familial influence. Underhill later noted that she "wasn't brought up to religion really—except just in the formal way."[19] The plot of her life reveals a range of spiritual investigations, shows her trying to determine in which belief and practice she could make her home. She considered herself an atheist for almost a decade, then accepted a philosophical theism, dabbled in magic through a brief membership in the Order of the Golden Dawn,[20] and reluctantly sidled up to Christianity,[21] "half of [her] wishing it were true and half resisting violently all the time." A visionary experience tipped the scales and "convinced [her] that the Catholic

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[17] Margaret Cropper, *Life of Evelyn Underhill* (New York: Harper, 1958). 3.

[18] Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941): An Introduction to her Life and Writings*. 8.

[19] Underhill, *The Letters of Evelyn Underhill*. 125.

[20] The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn was a magical order comprised of inner and outer orders that offered access to "hidden knowledge" through magical theory and practice that drew from various mystical and magical systems such as the Cabbalistic Tree of Life, astrology, alchemy, and the Tarot. See Ellic Howe, *The Magicians of the Golden Dawn: A Documentary History of a Magical Order 1887-1923* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972). We don't know exactly when Underhill joined the Golden Dawn, but she wrote to A.E. Waite while studying for lower-order exams in 1905. Armstrong suspects that she was not in the same order as Yeats (36-37). Margaret Cropper writes that "[s]ome time in these years before 1904 she joined a little company of people who were interested in occult experiments and experiences" and hypothesizes that Underhill "probably" found it "unsatisfying" (18).

[21] This list implies a false trajectory or progression, as if Underhill abandoned all interest in one strain of spirituality before moving on to the next. More accurately, she retained an interest in magic even though she came to regard it as inferior to mysticism; she continued to view Christianity through philosophical and mystical lenses. This personalized approach to religion prompts Dana Greene to write in the preface to Underhill's notebooks: "While clearly a Christian, Underhill was initially an agnostic and later a theist, and her sympathies went beyond Christianity. Her religious sense was of the broadest sort." The only view she relinquished fully was atheism. See her introduction to Evelyn Underhill, *Fragments from an Inner Life: The Notebooks of Evelyn Underhill*, ed. Dana Greene (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1993). 15.

Religion was true."[22] Omitting the details of the vision, Underhill describes her response to this experience in a 1911 letter:

> It was so tightly bound up with (Roman) Catholicism, that I had no doubt, and have had none since (this happened between 4 and 5 years ago only), that that Church was my ultimate home. […] Unfortunately I allowed myself to be persuaded to wait a year before being received; and meanwhile the Modernist storm broke, with the result that now, being myself "Modernist" on many points, I can't get in without suppressions and evasions to which I can't quite bring myself. But I can't accept Anglicanism instead: it seems an integrally different thing. So here I am, going to Mass and so on of course, but entirely deprived of sacraments.[23]

The "Modernist storm broke" in 1907, when Pope Pius X issued two encyclicals intended to halt the work and influence of Catholic thinkers who rejected the dogmatism of certain ecclesiastical traditions and advocated for biblical scholarship that took into account historical and cultural context and change. *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* defined modernism's errors and delineated the parameters of acceptable scholarship, while *Lamentabili Sane Exitu* listed and condemned 65 specific errors. [24] Underhill was giving herself a trial period before embracing Catholicism fully, a period in which she could test her beliefs and determine if she could accept the historical occurrence of supernatural events recorded in the Bible.[25] Two

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[22] Underhill, *The Letters of Evelyn Underhill*. 125.

[23] Ibid. 126.

[24] Steve Wilkens and Alan G. Padgett, *Christianity and Western Thought*, vol. 2 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity P, 2000). 284-286. For instance, error number 16 states that "the narrations of John are not properly history, but a mystical contemplation of the Gospel. The discourses contained in his Gospel are theological meditations, lacking historical truth concerning the mystery of salvation." Pope Pius X, "Lamentabili Sane: Syllabus Condemning the Errors of the Modernists," http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius10/p10lamen.htm Most of the errors prohibited in the encyclical were taken from the writings of Alfred Loisy (1857-1940) and George Tyrrell (1861-1909), two prominent figures of Catholic modernism. Each was marginalized—Loisy was excommunicated, and Tyrrell was suspended from the sacraments—for his views (Wilkens and Padgett 284, 286). Interestingly, the main character of the novel shares, with a slightly altered spelling, the latter reformer's surname. This appears to be no coincidence. Underhill at least read Tyrrell and considered his work important in 1907 when she wrote to Margaret Robinson. In a list of recommended reading that includes Julian of Norwich and Augustine, Underhill suggests that she also read *The Modern Mystic's Way* by Tyrrell. See Underhill, *The Letters of Evelyn Underhill*. 64.

[25] She questioned Father Robert Hugh Benson on this: "'As I understand the matter, before one can become a Catholic, and for me Catholicism is the only possible organized faith, one must get into the state of mind which

years later in *The Column of Dust*, Underhill chose to ground her mysticism in incarnation, the most central Christian example of the spiritual breaking into the material world, a decision that reveals the direction in which her thought was moving. At the time of the papal decrees, she couldn't join the church without intellectual dishonesty. Another cause for hesitation came in the form of her husband's resistance. In the same year as the encyclicals, Underhill married longtime friend Herbert Stuart Moore. Moore didn't share her passionate pursuit of religion, and he was also leery that his wife's confessor might come to have more influence than he in their relationship.[26]

The convergence of these circumstances positioned Underhill in the interstices of the Catholic body, attending Mass while deprived of full communion. Although she could not give intellectual assent to all of its proclamations, she felt a deep affinity for Catholicism's mystic qualities: "I no more like the tone and temper of contemporary Romanism than you do," she wrote to Mrs. Meyrick Heath, "…but with all her muddles, she *has* kept her mysteries intact. There I can touch—see—feel Reality: and—speaking for myself only—nowhere else."[27] It is this conflicted relationship, this insider/outsider status, this love of Christian-inflected mysticism and mistrust of dogma that informs the tenor of *The Column of Dust*.

As it turned out, fully belonging to a faith community became more important than holding out until the day Underhill felt she could claim Catholicism. By 1922, she called herself an Anglican. She was growing more at ease with a historical interpretation of

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ignores all the results of the study of Comparative religions, and accepts, for instance the Ascension, in as literal and concrete a spirit as the Spanish Armada. Is this really so?'" Quoted in Cropper, *Life of Evelyn Underhill*. 29.

[26] Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941): An Introduction to her Life and Writings*. 18, 30.

[27] Underhill, *The Letters of Evelyn Underhill*. 126. She came to a similar conclusion about the pope. She met Pius X in 1910 and reflected that "whatever muddles he may make intellectually or politically, spiritually he is equal to his position. I do not think anyone who had been in his atmosphere could doubt it" (116).

Christian scriptures than a solely mystical view of their events, and she was more convinced that mystical experience needed the institution of the church for testing and support.[28] The publication of *Mysticism* in 1911, followed by numerous other works on the mystic life, the writings of medieval Christian mystics, books on prayer, worship, and spiritual practice, not to mention previous novels and poetry on supernatural themes, established Underhill as a "major figure in the contemporary religious scene."[29] She dedicated herself to writing, lecturing, reviewing, and offering spiritual direction. In 1921, she became the first woman chosen by Oxford College as an outside lecturer.[30] She served as Religious Editor for the *Spectator* for four years, beginning in 1928.[31] In 1924, she drew up a Report on the Nature and Purpose of God for the Conference on Politics, Economics, and Christianity and also conducted her first spiritual retreat, which she continued to do throughout most of her remaining years until her death in 1941.[32]

These later years of her life bonded Underhill's reputation to organized Christianity. In fact, scholars have focused on her publications on mysticism and her devotional works, which make up the bulk of her written corpus, and have given substantially less critical

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[28] Cropper, *Life of Evelyn Underhill.* 93, 128. This was due in large part to the guidance of Baron Friedrich von Hügel (1852-1925). Von Hügel was an influential but deliberately more peripheral Catholic modernist who became a much-respected and cherished spiritual advisor to Underhill until his death in 1925. He and Underhill began a written correspondence after Von Hügel wrote a response to *Mysticism* (1911). His "remedy" for Underhill's "pure mysticism" was to "lead her to accept her creaturely status, to accept that the economy of redemption like everything else of beauty or importance in human life [sic] is adjusted to the human scale and does not require man to jump out of his own skin. She was required therefore to see Christ not merely as an icon or epitome of man's psycho-mystical apotheosis but actually to seek and find him, his sacraments, his body, the church, as a living reality, source of nourishment, spur to practical charity." Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941): An Introduction to her Life and Writings*. 224.

[29] Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941): An Introduction to her Life and Writings*. 157.

[30] Cropper, *Life of Evelyn Underhill.* 63.

[31] Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941): An Introduction to her Life and Writings*. 256.

[32] Cropper, *Life of Evelyn Underhill.* 113. Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941): An Introduction to her Life and Writings*. 290.

attention to her fiction or poetry.[33] Several unpublished dissertations examine Underhill's religious writings, numerous biographical sketches have made their way into religious reference books, and three longer biographies exist. One critical biography and two dissertations take up her novels, stories, and poems within a larger project of reintroducing and over-viewing her body of work, so they don't attend extensively to *The Column of Dust*. These authors tend to read the novels primarily for indications of Underhill's evolving religious ideas, but none of them considers the wider political context for or implications of those ideas as they operate in her fiction. Christopher Armstrong's foundational *Evelyn Underhill: An Introduction to Her Life and Writings* (1975) offers the most engaging reading of *Column*, identifying the theme of incarnation and claiming the "figure of a redeeming mother both a hieroglyph of divine maternal love and an apparent reconciliation of these two worlds of spiritual and mundane experience."[34] Sister Mary Xavier Kirby's dissertation *The Writings of Evelyn Underhill: A Critical Analysis* (1965) also analyzes *Column of Dust's* theme of "interweaving two worlds," concluding that the novel functions as homiletic literature.[35] In her dissertation *The Mystic and the Church in the Writings of Evelyn Underhill* (1979), Regina Bechtle briefly points to all three of the novels as introductions to Underhill's increasingly incarnational and reconciliatory theology and how it altered her relationship to the Church.[36]

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[33] See Greene (ed.), *Evelyn Underhill: Modern Guide to the Ancient Quest for the Holy*, for a bibliography of works by and about Underhill.

[34] Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941): An Introduction to her Life and Writings*. 90-91.

[35] Sister Mary Xavier Kirby, "The Writings of Evelyn Underhill: A Critical Analysis" (U of Pennsylvania, 1965). 103, 110. I wouldn't go so far as to call the novel "homiletic," but I do think that one can say Constance acquires a mystical hermeneutic to be applied to her life experience and that Underhill intends the reader, by extension, to pick up this ability to "read" living icons as well.

[36] Regina Marie Bechtle, "The Mystic and the Church in the Writings of Evelyn Underhill" (Fordham University, 1979). 118.

In the years surrounding the writing of *The Column of Dust* and *Mysticism*, Underhill's association with the church was filled with more tension and her ideas about mysticism were less communal than they would be in her later life. That tension sets the novel on shaky ground and allows for the unsettledness the *Punch* reviewer feared was "insincerity." This chapter examines the dynamics of that core ambivalence, which shapes a Christian mysticism that functions primarily outside the church yet relies on Christian iconography and crafts Constance as a conflicted modern subject who is a mix of ideal and unsanctioned mother. More pointedly, it fuels the novel's iconophilia and iconoclasm with regard to the mother image, and in doing so, raises valuable questions about image-making and inserts Underhill's voice into early 20th-century discussions about the modernist aesthetic of the image. Though they inevitably discuss incarnation's growing importance for Underhill, critics such as those I mention above have left these facets of Underhill's work unacknowledged and unexplored. It is to this matrix of incarnation, icons, mysticism, and aesthetics that I'd now like to turn.

The Divine Image(d)

"Image" is the English translation of the Greek *eikon*, meaning a "likeness" or "imitation."[37] In its long and complex history, the image takes many forms—graphic images such as pictures or statues, optical images like mirrors, perceptual images such as sense data or appearances, the mental images of dreams and memories, and verbal images in metaphor and description.[38] Although I frequently use "image," I retain the use of "icon" because it houses the artistic sense of "image" as well as the theological implications, both of which operate in the novel. Underhill draws attention to various kinds of images, some on the

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[37] Downing, "Image and Ideology: Some Preliminary Histories and Polemics." 3.

[38] For a chart of this "family of images," see W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1986). 10.

level of narrative, through plot, setting, and character, and some on the level of reader engagement with the text. Perhaps more accurately, the novel's images have a kind of double resonance, simultaneously functioning as visual and verbal images. For example, Constance witnesses concrete visual objects such as the Shining Tree, the mother, and the Grail as icons. The reader ostensibly encounters these same images as verbal images. At other times, Underhill's verbal images point beyond the text and allude to pictorial images of Christian iconography.

W.J.T. Mitchell's work in *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* shows that we need not set pictorial and verbal representation at complete odds; in fact, the notion of an image relies upon the close connection between picture and word. One can trace a historical narrative of the image as a material object that represents something pictorially, but Mitchell also offers the alternative narrative that understands "image" as "an abstract, general, spiritual 'likeness'" or "a matter of spiritual similarity." Originating in the creation of humans in the "image and likeness" of God, this definition of the image "can be understood as a series of predicates listing similarities and differences."[39] Therefore, it functions as a description in which humans share certain spiritual similarities with the deity: in other words, the image is a matter of words.

Theorists of the image often return to the Byzantine Iconoclastic Controversy in the eighth century, when religious theories of image-making were fleshed out in a thorough, systematic manner, as a historical moment that has continued to reverberate and remain relevant in the critical discussion of images.[40] I refer to Underhill's mode of oscillating satire

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[39] Ibid. 31, 34.

[40] As W.J.T. Mitchell notes in his important work *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, "the critical study of the icon begins with the idea that human beings are created 'in the image and likeness' of their creator and culminates, rather less grandly, in the modern science of 'image-making' in advertising and propaganda" (2).

and reverence regarding images as her "iconoclasm" and "iconophilia" to signal those reverberations: the novel stages a 20th-century version of the controversy as it imbues some images with great transformative power, both spiritual and political, while it ridicules other images as idols and seeks to topple them from their undeserving pedestals. The aspect of the controversy most germane for my current purpose is the importance of the Incarnation to the iconophiles' doctrine of images because the concept of incarnation operates as the fundament of the novel's mysticism and enters the novel into a dialogue with nascent modernist poetics of the image. Although radically different in many respects, writers in both historical moments, the eighth and the 20th centuries, were concerned with the possibility of the image, both pictorial and verbal, as a kind of embodiment of the subject it represented. I'd like first to offer a reading of a passage that demonstrates how Underhill uses the concept of incarnation to shape mysticism as a hermeneutic for reading the world and its living icons.

When Constance spies a beautiful, resplendent tree on her way to Muriel's social gathering, she knows that its "transcendental splendour"[41] is a window into divine, cosmic reality. This constitutes mysticism as a sudden moment of awareness, when the world opens up into a universe and the ordinary appears immense, everlasting, and glorious. My point here, however, is not solely to classify Constance's experience as mystical, but to examine the images Underhill adopts as integral to this experience.

As a poor woman walks between Constance and the tree, peddling violets while clutching her dirty child, the Watcher tries to teach Constance to discriminate between images. For him, aesthetically pleasing forms have more value than unattractive ones. Therefore, he instructs Constance to forget the woman because she is pitiful and base and

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[41] Underhill, *The Column of Dust*. 80.

demands instead that she look only to the beautiful tree as the symbol of reality. Constance feels torn between these seemingly incompatible pictures, yet her own inner voice tells her to "cling to the human" no matter how vile it seems.[42] She tells the Watcher that the "Shining Tree" and the debased mother and child cannot be separated because the same "divine fire" quickens their forms:

> The woman had grown to the likeness of the Shining Tree; she too was radiant, eternal, and sublime. The spirit of life ran like a divine fire in her veins, and was given to the infant at her breast. She had become a majestic link in the process of creation; an auxiliary of the angels. A fresh door was thrown open upon reality, whereby it was seen that even the prisoners in the dungeon still wore the insignia of kings…. The woman and child, seen against [the tree], were an image of all life.[43]

This passage establishes a few key ideas that Underhill wants to foreground: the transfiguration of the lowly image into a glorified one through mystic vision, incarnational mysticism's value for the material world, and the role of the mother as the embodiment and giver of life. Note the language of change: the mother and child "*became*" representative of something more than themselves; the woman "*had grown* into the likeness" of the tree; she had "*become* a majestic link." The woman and her child are not fundamentally different beings in an instant; they appear changed because Constance has chosen not to divert her attention from "the human." Her new mystic vision recognizes their "divine fire." This transformation in vision functions as a kind of hermeneutical shift that enables Constance to select and correctly interpret living images, identifying their spiritual likeness to the divine.

For Underhill, transformative spiritual work takes place most thoroughly through embodiment, as a foundational concept and as a tangible result. The Incarnation enables the mystic vision that results in compassion for the physical world and for others. She

[42] Ibid. 79.

[43] Ibid. 80-81.

counseled her friend Margaret Robinson through a fear of "getting entangled in the material world" in April of 1907: "When you are *really sure* that every bush is 'aflame with God' you will no longer feel contempt for the triviality of the bush." She added that seeing "the Divine" through the material world "received its final sanction in the Incarnation of Christ."[44] We can understand the underlying importance of incarnation in this letter and the renovating power that Underhill attributes to the images in the Shining Tree passage as one way of theorizing the repeatedly contested role of icons, their relationship to the material world, and their appropriate place in religious life and art. The Incarnation banishes any notion that the material world is absent of the divine and therefore inconsequential because, since the Incarnation, the divine has a body. The iconophiles made a similar argument regarding the necessity and value of Christian iconography.

In the eighth-century Eastern Roman Empire, icons were the sources of conflict between a string of emperors and the Christian church.[45] The Byzantine Iconoclastic Controversy began between 724 and 726 when Emperor Leo III instituted measures against the making and reverencing of religious icons, and it ended with the restoration of religious images in 843.[46] Although the iconoclastic emperors and the iconophilic religious leaders

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[44] ———, *The Letters of Evelyn Underhill*. 57.

[45] According to Ladner, particularly in Christianity's "most vital and popular forms," monasticism and image worship." He adds that "the place of monasticism and image worship among the people may have led the iconoclastic emperors and their advisers, and also part of the higher clergy, to the opinion that a ritualism suspect of idolatry, and a religious quietism were endangering not only the spiritual welfare, but at the same time also the military strength of the empire…." Gerhart B. Ladner, "The Concept of the Image in the Greek Fathers and the Byzantine Iconoclastic Controversy," in *Images and Ideas in the Middle Ages: Selected Studies in History and Art* (Rome: Edizioni Di Storia E Letteratura, 1983). 55.

[46] Ibid. 35, 36. The following emperors were the main proponents of iconoclasm: "Leo III (717-741) and his son Constantine V (741-775), and then, after the iconophile intermezzo of Irene's reign (780-802) and the temporary rehabilitation of the holy images by the second council of Nicaea in 787, again Leo V (813-820), Michael II (820-829) and Theophilus (829-842)." Also see Kenneth Setton, "Imperial Images," in *Christian Attitude Towards the Emperor in the Fourth Century*, *Studies in History, Economics and Public Law* (New York: Columbia UP, 1941). 196-211.

shared a Christian worldview[47] and accepted the practice of paying homage to icons of the emperor, they were at odds about the appropriateness of visibly representing Christ and his heavenly kingdom, for reasons both religious and political. Iconoclasts charged that iconophilia was synonymous with idolatry, which Old Testament law clearly forbade. Perhaps more fundamentally, they argued that God could not be circumscribed in art. [48]

The iconophiles argued that the making of religious images and their use in worship was necessary and worthy based on two key scriptural events: the creation of humans and the incarnation of Christ. In the creation myth of Genesis, God makes humans in the "image and likeness" of the godhead. For the iconophiles, this likeness ascribes value to humanity and condones human participation in the divine act of image-making.[49] Humans, though subject to the decaying effects of time, are imprinted with the incorruptible divine image. We see this notion echoed in the prisoner metaphor Underhill adopts to explain Constance's expanded vision of the poor mother. Prisoners still bear the mark of royalty, though they exist in a far-from-palatial dungeon. Captive spaces and lowly conditions certainly exist, but they do not completely circumscribe human identity. The ultimate image for the iconophiles, however, was Jesus, the incarnate Logos, the living image that for Underhill "sanctioned" the material world. They reasoned that because humans need a visible image of God in the person of Jesus, it is also necessary to have visible images of him

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[47] In fact, the emperors considered themselves quite authoritative on religious matters and operated under the notion that they were the vicarious godheads of the earthly equivalent of a heavenly government/kingdom. See Ladner, "The Concept of the Image in the Greek Fathers and the Byzantine Iconoclastic Controversy." 56. Obviously one reason why they took issue with the power religious icons seemed to give the church.

[48] Ibid. 44, 47.

[49] Ibid. 64.

and his heavenly kingdom to help worshippers enter into contact with the divine realm. This contact is achieved through the powerful nature of the icon.[50]

According to the iconophiles, images share a kind of identity or kinship with the thing they represent—they import the presence of the represented.[51] To clarify that they weren't claiming that the artistic materials themselves were divine, the iconophiles asserted that the images share another kind of identity with the divine realm. They argued that images partake of Christ's hypostasis—the essence of his person in which human and divine natures united. Mysteriously, like Christ, images simultaneously engage in the earthly and heavenly worlds.[52] Contact with icons makes the invisible visible and ushers the worshipper into the presence of the sacred, transforming her. This is what happens to Constance. Her contact with the mother, illuminated by the light of the Shining Tree, initiates her transformation into a mystic-mother icon herself. By examining these icons, Underhill addresses issues of image, representation, and mystic-aesthetic experience that became central to some of modernism's now-canonized writers.

Underhill penned her novel during the same period that T.E. Hulme and Ezra Pound were theorizing the image for modernist poetry. The Poets' Club Hulme formed in 1908 and Pound joined the following year served as the think tank for the poetic movement

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[50] See George Galavaris, *The Icon in the Life of the Church*, ed. L.P. van den Bosch Th. P. van Baaren, L. Leertouwer, F. Leemhuis, Iconography of Religions (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1981). 4. "The icon participates in the holiness of the represented. Through the icon the beholder becomes a participant of divine life, a concept based on the doctrine of the image of God which was put into man at the time of Creation. For man was made in the image and likeness of God (Gen. I: 26, 27; V: 1) which has been interpreted by the Fathers as man, created by God in the image of God, is called upon to acquire the Divine likeness and fulfill the final purpose of the Creation, its deification. Therefore, there is a relation between the icon and the image of God which man carries within himself, the concept of the image becoming the central point in the process of creation."

[51] Ibid. 3. This was also true for imperial icons—the image of the emperor was the emperor.

[52] Ladner, "The Concept of the Image in the Greek Fathers and the Byzantine Iconoclastic Controversy." 62-64

that would become known as Imagism, identified by T.S. Eliot as "'the starting-point of modern poetry.'"[53] In his 1912 volume *Ripostes*, Pound included Hulme's complete poetical works, which consisted of five brief poems. Pound's prefatory remarks named *Les Imagistes* as the "descendents of the forgotten school of 1909," otherwise known as Hulme's "'School of Images.'"[54] The March, 1913, edition of *Poetry* included Pound's and F.S. Flint's "A Few Dont's by an Imagiste," in which they enumerated the group's tenets:

> 1. Direct treatment of the 'thing,' whether subjective or objective.
> 2. To use absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation.
> 3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome.
> 4. The 'doctrine of the Image'—not for publication.[55]

According to these guidelines, the Imagist is to cast aside ornamentation and abstraction, artificial diction,[56] and traditional meter and rhyme. The Imagists were after direct presentation, not re-presentation—to use concrete descriptions in such a way that they "outdo in vividness and immediacy" the images that come from objects themselves.[57] The attempt to use language so transparently that it is no longer a veil of mediation speaks to the Image's "quasi-mystical significance."[58] Although they proceed differently, both mystic writers and Imagist poets aim to wield language so it somehow enacts or embodies

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[53] Quoted in George Bornstein, "Pound and the Making of Modernism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ezra Pound*, ed. Ira B. Nadel (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1999). 28. More accurately, modern poetry in English. One might easily take issue with Eliot's assessment, which sweeps aside the influences of the French symbolists or even Yeats, for example.

[54] Ezra Pound, *Ripostes of Ezra Pound whereto are Appended the Complete Poetical Works of T.E. Hulme with Prefatory Note* (London: Stephen Swift and Co., 1912). 59.

[55] ———, "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste," *Poetry* I, no. 6 (March 1913). 200.

[56] See Frazer, who points out that 18th century writers shared this inclination toward concrete language. Ray Frazer, "The Origin of the Term 'Image'," *ELH* 27, no. 2 (June 1960). 149-161.

[57] Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*. 25. Also see Frazer, who shows that Imagism's call for such language can be traced back to the seventeenth century.

[58] Hugh Witemeyer, "Early Poetry 1908-1920," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ezra Pound*, ed. Ira B. Nadel (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1999). 48.

experience and allows the reader access to it.[59] In such endeavors, the *artist or mystic* becomes the mediator between the reader and whatever experiences the writing attempts to present.

Though they make such an unlikely pairing, both Underhill and Pound elevated the artist's role. Pound conceived of artists as literary nobility whose visionary capabilities gave them insights unavailable to others except through the productions of the artists. (Hence the secrecy surrounding the "doctrine of the image," which presumably only the artistic elect could understand and therefore needed to protect from the unenlightened.)[60] Though she thought that the mystic lived more fully and extensively in Reality than the artist could, Underhill, like Pound, believed that the artist had privileged access, acting as "the mediator between his brethren and the divine, for art is the link between appearance and reality."[61] She also articulated mystical visions in artistic terms, writing that an imaginative vision is a "visualized poem."[62] As if they're exploring the same constellation from different stars, Underhill translates mysticism into aesthetic terms, while Pound reveals that his aesthetics have mystical functions. The transcendental function of the image and its visual-verbal nature becomes clearer in Pound's writing on the "verbal icon."[63]

With his 1913 prose poem "Ikon," Pound "unveiled" the previously unpublished, secret "doctrine of the Image" that made up the fourth Imagist tenet.[64] In "Ikon," Pound

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[59] The differences to which I refer are significant. Mystics often attest to the ineffability of their experiences, yet they still attempt to grant access to them through writing. Unlike the Imagists, mystics take recourse to metaphor, symbol, and excess of language. Imagists and mystics take opposite paths in their writing to reach similar ends. See Michael Sells's notion of the "meaning event," a linguistic approximation of mystical experience that's created in mystical texts through the pattern of kataphasis and apophasis. Michael A. Sells, "Introduction: Unsaying," in *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1994). 7-8.

[60] Longenbach, *Stone Cottage: Pound, Yeats, and Modernism*. 88.

[61] Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*. 75.

[62] Ibid. 286.

[63] This is Mitchell's phrase. See *Iconology*, 25.

[64] Longenbach, *Stone Cottage: Pound, Yeats, and Modernism*. 31.

writes that "it is in art the highest business to create the beautiful image" that will furnish the mind with a "noble surrounding" and will provide the proper accompaniment into an afterlife:

> And if—as some say, the soul survives the body; if our consciousness is not an intermittent melody of strings that relapse between whiles into silence, then more than ever should we put forth the images of beauty, that going out into tenantless spaces we have with us all that is need-ful—an abundance of sounds and patterns to entertain us in that long dreaming; to strew our path to Valhalla: to give rich gifts by the way.[65]

Pound's if/then speculation imagines the mystical, transcendental possibilities of art. In response to these possibilities, the natural outpouring or even *noblesse oblige* of an artistic elite should be beautiful, noble images. The verbal icon is an everlasting thing of beauty that accompanies one from the life of the body to the "long dreaming" of the soul.

The "ikon" according to the "doctrine of the image" is synesthetic, with "patterns" that echo Pound's definition of an "Image" as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. […] It is the presentation of such a 'complex' instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art."[66] Without the same Christian subject matter or connotations, the mystical experience of transcendence that Pound claims the Image should offer sounds remarkably similar to the transporting power the iconophiles claimed for the icon and that Underhill depicts through the icons Constance encounters.

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[65] Ezra Pound, "Ikon," *Cerebralist* I (December 1913). 43. Hyphenation at line break in original.

[66] Reprinted in ———, "A Retrospect," in *Literary Essays*, ed. T.S. Eliot (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1954). 4.

Noticeably, Pound's only descriptive criterion for the powerful image is "beautiful," a standard which he doesn't explain. Underhill doesn't set out to define beauty explicitly, either, but their common discourse on the mystical aspects of the icon and its visual-verbal valences highlights the role of beauty and brings it up for examination. Underhill did not oppose beauty; in fact, she considered it to be a reflection of the divine, especially when it characterized a work of art.[67] However, I would argue that the novel's discourse of incarnational mysticism tends to favor the icon that doesn't meet the common set of physical, hygienic, and socio-economic standards for "beautiful": youthful, healthy, well-kept, fashionable, serene, economically comfortable, and behaviorally "appropriate" or dignified. The icons that present the power of the divine are grounded in the transitory, marred, earthly world that is nonetheless infused with the divine life.

The Shining Tree passage illustrates this claim. Although Constance and the mother in the street are intimately linked to the "radiant, eternal, and sublime," Underhill doesn't divorce them from their human imperfections and weaknesses. For example, Underhill's description of the mother in the street presents her as a version of the Mother of God as "Source of Life"[68] from traditional Christian iconography. Like all good icons, the mother occupies a privileged position between heaven and earth, functioning as a "majestic link in the process of creation" and an embodied touchstone to a more expansive reality. But this mother icon is also poor and dynamic, in the act of feeding her child and selling violets. Gerardus van der Leeuw writes that the hallmarks of traditional icons are stasis and lack of "reality" or "naturalness": "The icons are pure fixation; the freezing of representation in

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[67] Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*. 20, 21.

[68] Galavaris, *The Icon in the Life of the Church*. 6.

their making is a purely holy action."[69] Although she is endowed with the power of a traditional icon, this mother is not a frozen, stylized work of art: she is a living icon.

This view profoundly affects how one regards those without status, power, or attractiveness. Underhill emphatically insists that mystic vision result in loving action. As a result of her mystic vision of the poor woman, Constance commits an "insane" act of generosity by giving the woman sixpence. This simple act loosens the Watcher's "reins" over her mind and gives incarnational mysticism a foothold.[70] Such behavior on Constance's part mimics the willing, more radical humility and generosity of Jesus's incarnation. She is growing in "spiritual likeness" through action. This moment in the novel enacts Underhill's reminder to Margaret Robinson that Jesus's incarnation "sanctioned the material world" and determines how one views all of its inhabitants.

Martin later implicitly affirms the mystical correctness of her "insane" behavior when he tells Constance that "true reality" looks backwards to others: "'The world has come to that point in its perversion of reality, at which one can hardly be natural unless one is insane.'"[71] The novel strongly suggests that incarnational mysticism, in positioning the mystic in empathetic solidarity with the poor, lowly, and the marginalized, can restore and in fact requires a generosity of perception and relation to "others." This generosity then moves the mystic to action that further qualifies as countercultural: it moves mysticism out of the drawing room and into the street.

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[69] Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Sacred and Profane Beauty: The Holy in Art*, trans. David E. Green (Nashville and New York: Abingdon Press, 1963). 167, 173, 175.

[70] Underhill, *The Column of Dust*. 81.

[71] Ibid. 153.

Madonna of the Drawing-Room: Icon of Fashionable, Marketable Mysticism

The spatial references of the chapter title, "The Street and the Drawing-Room" indicate the practice versus theory dichotomy Underhill employs. One puts incarnational mysticism into practice in the street—in physical places where social classes can mingle in the same quarters, and more generally in any encounter that does not insulate one from poverty and illness. Muriel Vince's drawing-room functions as a fashionable, sheltered space for middle class women to discuss mysticism in the abstract. The narrator calls the scene a "comedy,"[72] and its comedic moments are barbed with satire. In this setting, Underhill roundly critiques theoretical mysticism and Muriel, its mother icon, associating them both with fashionable fad and commodity culture.

The drawing-room is a scene of simulation and artifice, capable of dissolving at any moment. We witness the women "feeding hungrily upon the illusions which caused them to mistake coloured glass for divine fire." Phoebe Foster, a close friend of Muriel, claims that a "'mystic is one who lives in reality instead of in appearance.'"[73] This definition aptly encapsulates what happened for Constance as she saw beyond the appearance of the poor woman, but the narrator's satirical lens reveals that Foster only knows this as a maxim. She and the other self-identified mystics aren't equipped to recognize the "real thing" in life; in the haven of the drawing-room, they wonder at "coloured glass." The narration thereby underscores the contrast between Constance's mystic perception and the misperception of the drawing-room denizens. They mistake surface beauty as a sign of mystic life, while Constance has learned that the impoverished image actually pulses with divine light. Marked

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[72] Ibid. 81.

[73] Ibid. 91, 87.

by experience, Constance stands apart from this crowd of self-proclaimed mystics who rely on theoretical knowledge.

In the "inner nest of illusion," theoretical mysticism functions as a commodity, as a form of knowledge with cultural and social purchase power. Muriel sees mysticism as the latest and most fascinating subject for the educated modern mind to reinvestigate through psychology. She's on the committee of the Psycho-Deistic League and is interested in mysticism and in magical artifacts within the context of "historical psychology." Constance's familiarity with mysticism, magic, and ancient forms of spirituality surprises and fascinates Muriel because she doesn't expect a working woman to keep informed of current intellectual trends. She quickly sees Constance as a "new acquisition" and a potential "asset" with which she can gain more spiritual credibility and social standing.[74] To test the security of the investment, she and her regular guests try to categorize Constance because she's mannered and intelligent but works in a shop. They try to decode her indeterminate status, to figure out if she's an acceptable lady on top of being an intelligent woman with unorthodox spiritual views.

In the conversation that takes place, the characters try to determine what defines a true mystic and a true woman. Once again, the narrative elides "mystic" with "woman" and "mother," and now the emphasis on incarnation becomes a more literal emphasis on the maternal body. Most of the women at Muriel's gathering agree that mystical understanding becomes clear when the mental processes supersede bodily pleasures, that "'intuition…is greater than knowledge. And especially a *woman's* intuition, unhindered by the love of carnal

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[74] Ibid. 87, 98, 52, 83.

things.'"[75] Constance, on the other hand, "loved her body, honoured it deliberately as the medium of all great experience."[76] The novel sides with mysticism that includes appreciation for the body. Such a move works against the sexist implications of the mystic experience in which the "female" body must be overcome and superseded by the "male" mind or spirit. Constance castigates all whom she believes have overly intellectualized mysticism and life. Undoubtedly drawing upon the mystic vision she has just had in the street, she equates the mystic with the mother and defends and privileges the creative, mothering role a woman can play: "'But she *is* life!...She has it! You, who watch and classify—do you think that *you* live?'"[77] Though she is a fairly well-read woman who has attempted to categorize her experiences, Constance insists that those who only "classify" do not live life to the fullest; they study it. Those who simply study mysticism do not grasp its purpose—to enact divine reality on earth by caring for all living things, including the unlovely.

We might rightly accuse Underhill of anti-intellectualism here, though it wouldn't be a completely accurate description of a woman who devoted much of her life to scholarly study and writing. However consuming her own intellectual questions were regarding mysticism and religion, she was determined to defend mysticism from being couched as purely passive or as a solely intellectual pursuit, writing that "true mysticism is active and practical, not passive and theoretical. It is an organic life-process, a something which the whole self does; not something as to which its intellect holds an opinion."[78] Underhill

[75] Ibid. 85. This is a twist on the classical Platonic mind/body binary, substituting women's intuition for the traditionally masculine category of "mind." Ascetic mysticism, present in a mild form here, interprets this duality as the need to subordinate the body to the mind in order to escape the woeful trappings of the corporeal, which hinder the individual from attaining spiritual enlightenment.

[76] Ibid. 42.

[77] Ibid. 85.

[78] ———, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*. 81.

loosens the rigid binary that her main character so adamantly espouses by underscoring the hermeneutical aspect of mystic experience. In the Shining Tree scene, mystical living becomes for Constance a new mode of apprehending and "reading" the icons in the world.

Constance's comments to the intellectual mystics also reveal that in her intentions to embody mysticism and to value lived, bodily experience, Underhill privileges and limits maternal bodily experience to bearing children. Underhill's characterization of the mystic's body as a mother's body trades in stereotypes of the female body in order to iterate the importance of corporeality. For example, later in the novel, Andrew compares the figure of Constance in front of him with his image of Muriel: "She stood up before him, deep-bosomed, the perfect maternal type; and he thought of Muriel, eager, nervous, narrow-hipped."[79] Muriel's inadequate maternity is in part signified by her thin figure, while Constance is voluptuous and therefore "maternal." Although Muriel is literally a mother, she exhibits little genuine warmth or loving physicality that characterizes the kind of life that the novel claims a mother and mystic should exude. To Andrew, Muriel's body paradoxically reveals the disembodied quality of her mothering; to the narrator and to Constance, Muriel's fashionable body reveals the nature of her mysticism. It lies on the surface as part of her self-presentation.

Because Muriel uses mysticism as a façade, Underhill reserves her most cynical and comically derisive judgments for her from the moment she introduces her: "Mrs. Vince—who would have resembled a Dominican nun dressed by Liberty had it not been for the masses of healthy-looking yellow hair which she wore, with becoming austerity, in a coronal plait—sat upon one of the cushions, and spoke with her accustomed earnestness about

[79] ———, *The Column of Dust.* 255.

nothing in particular."[80] Muriel's attempts to look the part of a spiritual authority almost succeed but for the telling beauty of her coif, "arranged with a laborious and becoming simplicity.[81] Her talk is of spiritual intensity and integrity, but her efforts are in her outward person—to cultivate the persona of the obviously mystic, spiritually-informed woman and avant-garde hostess. Muriel is all appearance, form and little or no substance. Muriel's body is meant to be the carefully constructed sign of social and mystical relevance, a form of currency and current-ness, the mystical mother as fashion trend. She is on display—and for sale.

Underhill associates the icon without warmth and sincerity (but perfectly beautiful and posed) with aestheticization and commodification. In the novel's economy of images, the untarnished and highly polished figure of Muriel, for all of her mystic and occult interests, is no more than a trinket. Constance, though fascinated and enthralled by Muriel's beauty, dismisses her ideas and trivializes her worth when she thinks that Muriel is "like a pretty novelty suddenly exhibited in the shop-window of life."[82] Despite not realizing the full implications of her observations, Mrs. Wetherbee's complaint echoes Constance's assessment:

> [Muriel is] "too much like a Madonna in a drawing-room to please me…. As for poor Andrew, he is just in the position of a St. Joseph in these nice little pictures you get at High Church shops. I can't think how they do them—only eighteenpence in real oak frames. Well, that's what he makes me think of: Standing up behind, in a very uncomfortable position, whilst Muriel is admired."[83]

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[80] Ibid. 48.

[81] Ibid. 82.

[82] Ibid. 70.

[83] Ibid. 85.

Mrs. Wetherbee's ostensible concern is that Muriel has overshadowed her husband. To her mind, mysticism has an emasculating effect that places women in positions of greater importance than men. More important for our immediate purposes, however, is that she compares the Vinces to an inexpensive, replicated "little picture." They're a simulacrum of the Holy Family. Though Muriel serves as mystic-mother icon to her adoring devotees, Underhill reveals that she is actually trivial; the worship she receives is unwarranted, and those who would bow at her feet are deceived. The novel argues that only the true mystic can be the true mother; therefore, Muriel is an ersatz Mary. She is a copy, produced through popularized ideas about the psychology of religion, and the mysticism that she purports is a lifeless statue of the dynamic, "real thing" that Underhill wants readers to recognize in Constance.

The "unconventional" students of mysticism in Muriel's drawing-room are actually replicas as well: "'All young people like to call themselves mystics nowadays,'" Mrs. Wetherbee says. Andrew points out to Constance that "'these women, don't you know, are all alike.'"[84] They think themselves distinctive, but that self-perception is one more illusion; they're mass-produced mystics. Constance's induction into incarnational mysticism sets her apart. Underhill wants to remove this mysticism and its practitioners from the marketplace in order to rarify and privilege them as "true."

The Holy Grail: Cup of Christ, Body of the Mother (Country)

Constance's process of becoming a mystic mother includes rejecting theoretical mysticism, its aestheticized mother icon, and their dubious association with the marketplace. She must instead accept the messiness of earthly life and find holiness in it. This process is

[84] Ibid. 87, 92.

catalyzed through her contact with a powerful icon from the past, the Holy Grail. In the "Graal," she "f[inds] her lost maternity, her selfless love."[85] Although she doesn't send Constance on an actual quest for the Grail, Underhill makes use of the cup's layered iconic status as the cup from which Jesus drank at the Last Supper (so as a symbol of the Eucharist), as the key to mystical understanding, and as symbol of the nation. The Arthurian romances had become "an allegory of the triumphs of Victorian Britain,"[86] and in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, particularly during the Boer War and the Great War, the quest for the Grail became "an acceptable metaphor for patriotic self-sacrifice and the pursuit of empire."[87] Underhill maintains the element of self-sacrifice but makes some significant alterations to the Grail's symbolic power by writing Constance into the knightly brotherhood of the Grail and thus into the national narrative. Constance, the mystic-mother, inherits the Grail, and with it, the keeping of the nation. This role draws on imperialist discourses of the day that privileged the mother's role, yet it also runs counter to the eugenicist strands of those discourses. Incarnational mysticism alters the purpose of the narrative, ascribing value to the imperfect and unhealthy body as opposed to privileging the healthy, whole, eugenic body. With Constance's acceptance of the Grail, Underhill inducts her heroine into the knightly tradition of transformation and sacrifice. However, unlike nationalist appropriations of the legend, Underhill's Grail folds Constance into the tradition of incarnational, mystic love for the other, in which the sacrificial body doesn't produce

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[85] Ibid. 276.

[86] Richard Barber, *The Holy Grail: Imagination and Belief* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2004). 271.

[87] Christine Poulson, *The Quest for the Grail: Arthurian Legend in British Art 1840-1920* (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 1999). 242. Later, the grail as an object of occult power became an object of Nazi/fascist fascination. Underhill is writing counter to that extreme imperialist, eugenicist trend.

generations of eugenic offspring to build a more powerful empire, but instead becomes the icon of intimate generosity and the sacramental worth of the human person.

When Constance first encounters the Grail and wrestles with the actual existence of such a legendary object, she cries out in confusion, "'I don't understand one bit! It is like hearing the Middle Ages through a gramophone.'"[88] Constance's comment articulates the anachronistic strangeness that the 21st-century reader likely experiences as well, but the famous cup held a key place in the cultural imagination of early 20th-century Europeans and Americans and made frequent appearances in the art of Underhill's day. At the Paris World Exposition of 1900, Edward Burne-Jones created tapestries depicting scenes from the Grail legend, and Anton Seder exhibited his art object *The Grail* as an intricate gold and bejeweled centerpiece.[89] The Grail also continued to figure prominently in writings of the period, offering, as Tzvetan Todorov suggests, the quest for meaning and "the possibility of narrative."[90] A.E. Waite, member of the Golden Dawn who later led a splinter group called Fellowship of the Rosy Cross, wrote *The Hidden Church of the Holy Graal* (1909), in which he maintained that the Grail was part of a secret tradition handed down outside the Christian Church. Underhill's friend Arthur Machen, to whom she dedicated *The Column of Dust*, penned the 1913 novel *The Secret Glory,* in which a young man inherits the Grail from his father. T.S. Eliot claimed that Jessie Weston's study *From Ritual to Romance* (1920), which links the lance and cup of the Grail legends to ancient fertility rites, informed his thinking in *The Waste Land* (1922).[91] Mary Butts's novel *Armed with Madness* followed in 1928, in which a

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[88] Underhill, *The Column of Dust*. 154.

[89] Barber, *The Holy Grail: Imagination and Belief*. 289.

[90] Tzvetan Todorov, "The Quest of Narrative," in *The Poetics of Prose* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1977). 139. His complete phrase is more emphatic, claiming that "the Grail is nothing but the possibility of narrative."

circle of friends discover a cup at the bottom of a well while trying to solve their cottage's water shortage problem. The cup turns out to have grail-like restorative properties: after they retrieve it with a fishing spear (an obvious nod to Weston's imagery), rain pours down for an hour and one of their ailing friends suddenly recovers from his illness. The legend surrounding the Grail was alive and well.[92]

In fact, not only did the legend thrive in creative productions of the century's early decades, but seekers still quested, in a sense, after the physical Grail as well. In 1906, the Grail was "found" at the "Bride's Well" in Glastonbury, on the site of an old abbey. Archdeacon Wilberforce presented the glass bowl to the world as the Holy Grail on July 20, 1907. Until rival grail discoveries were made, the first being only a few months later, the event at Glastonbury caused quite a stir, eliciting a mixture of curiosity and hesitation from the likes of Mark Twain, A.E. Waite, and Annie Besant, who each examined the acclaimed piece.[93]

The continued popularity of the Grail is perhaps not surprising when one recognizes how malleable yet persistently powerful a symbol it had become. Richard Barber explains that in the early 20th century, "the Grail becomes a mirror, reflecting the preoccupations of the individual writer and their intellectual milieu. It drifts free of its Christian connotations

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[91] According to Barber, Weston and other later interpreters saw the wasteland as essential to decoding the grail legends, although the wasteland was only important in the later romances (245). "Weston takes it as crucial evidence for the Grail's origin in the ritual of death and rebirth through which the land was revived each year. The procession of the Grail is therefore reinterpreted as symbolic of that fertility, with cup and spear representing female and male sexuality. It is an interpretation which has haunted twentieth-century literature to a degree quite disproportionate to its basis in fact; and the other side of Jessie Weston's scholarship, her immense and detailed knowledge of the text and her recognition that he final version of the legend owed as much, if not more, to Christianity as to the pagan past, has been overlaid by the powerful images which she unleashed" (249). Barber, *The Holy Grail: Imagination and Belief.*

[92] For more examples from painting and fiction in which the grail figures prominently, see Poulson, *The Quest for the Grail: Arthurian Legend in British Art 1840-1920*. and Raymond H. Thompson, "The Grail in Modern Fiction: Sacred Symbol in a Secular Age," in *The Grail: A Casebook*, ed. Dhira B. Mahoney, *Arthurian Characters and Themes* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000). 545-560.

[93] Barber, *The Holy Grail: Imagination and Belief.* 298.

for all but a handful of writers; the general consensus declares that the old symbols need to be reinterpreted, whether in Jungian, pagan or philosophical terms." Some, like Waite, esteemed the Grail for its esoteric value, appropriating it for various occult traditions; through the lens of anthropology, Weston and others believed it was tied to pagan fertility rites. Such "folkloric" approaches attempted to locate an "ur-grail" that would unify the multiplicity of legends and interpretations that had accumulated over the centuries.[94] We can see this search for one coherent theory today in Dan Brown's extremely popular and controversial *The Da Vinci Code* (2003). Perhaps predictably, Underhill staked a claim for a mystical reading of the legend. In *Mysticism's* chapter on the metaphors and symbols frequently used by mystic writers, she explains that "the pilgrimage idea, the outgoing quest, appears in mystical literature under two different aspects. One is the search for the 'Hidden Treasure which desires to be found.' Such is the 'quest of the Grail' when regarded in its mystic aspect as an allegory of the adventures of the soul."[95]

In *The Column of Dust*, published only two years after the "discovery" at Glastonbury, the "Graal" is cherished, protected, and secreted in an isolated country church by Martin, one in a long line of devotees who have apparently guarded the ancient cup for centuries. Following Waite's lead, Underhill positions the Grail clearly outside of any established and operational church's purview, quietly standing in an empty church structure no longer frequented by parishioners.[96] And the one it beckons, the one who finds it without seeking, isn't the conventionally religious sort.

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[94] Ibid. 290, 248-9.

[95] Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*. 129. In fact, *Mysticism's* earlier title was *The Quest of the Absolute*. See Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941): An Introduction to her Life and Writings*. 108.

[96] Barber, *The Holy Grail: Imagination and Belief*. 297: "This insistence on the limitations of rational thought and on the value of personal mystical experience untrammeled by the bonds of ritual and doctrine was to be one of the main influences on Grail literature in England in the early twentieth century."

As she enters the chapel, Constance is overcome by worship and unknowingly prostrates herself before "'the transcendent link with reality…the Holy Graal'":[97]

> But on the simple altar there was a curious metal case; of silver, inlaid with plaited patterns, angels, and mysterious animals, whose wings were made of enamels, gems, and gold. The doors of it stood open, so that one looked within, as into a little shrine. Inside, there was a rough glass cup, without a base, and with one clumsy handle. A kitchen teacup might have provided its model; but not the strange sheen of purple, black, and gold which ran through the glass.[98]

Placed on an altar and housed in a decorative shrine, the Grail is obviously positioned as a sacred object. Unlike the depiction of Muriel and her family as a trinket that can be sold and bought, this icon must be passed on as a treasured gift. Like the mother icon in the street, the Grail functions as a "link," an embodied intersection of the transcendent and the grounded. Though its variegated sheen is extraordinary, this icon is not aesthetically perfect or whole; its imperfect form, its "rough" appearance and "clumsy" construction, reflects the sacrifice it represents and compels. But this sacrifice will not play out on the grand stage of the battlefield; it will take place in a single woman's home. The cup's resemblance to a kitchen teacup suggests the ordinariness of its form and underscores the Grail's original use in religious ritual (a meal in commemoration of Passover and then at the communion table of the Eucharist) with a homely, domestic quality. Underhill entrusts the Grail to a woman, and through this contact, we come to see that she identifies the mystic-mother with Jesus' sacrifice and promise of life. The cup is the pivotal icon in the novel's structure of images, the link to the divine reality of sacrificial love and the impetus for such love in Constance's life.

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[97] Underhill, *The Column of Dust*. 141.

[98] Ibid. 139.

Through Constance's encounter with the Grail and its guardian, Underhill further redefines the mystical power of iconicity through the earthiness of incarnation and continues Constance's education in how to read images. Still trying to comprehend the place of divine reality in earthly reality, Constance wonders aloud to Martin: "'Surely the real, the divine—what one longs for, what one needs—is a reading of reality that shall be radiant, permanent, serene: that shall offer a promise of deathless and beautiful things?'"[99] Traditional icons offer just such a "reading of reality" as "radiant, permanent, serene." Like Muriel, their placid surfaces suggest perfection, but the narrative returns Constance and the reader to a living, broken image. She must not remain "squeamish" as Martin calls her; she must face the messiness of imperfection, sickness, and death that exists in the natural world instead of escaping into the "radiant, permanent, and serene." Turning her gaze to the material world will refine her understanding of mysticism and thus of the reality it reveals. Martin reminds her that all of life is "splendid" and "holy" and tells her to learn to love. He concludes his brief lesson by saying that Life "'is a difficult mistress; she offers no self-evident syllogism to the pupils that she loves. She has but one formula, and that a paradox. It is the paradox of creation—the folly of the Cross.'" His words "reminded her of the Shining Tree, and the more actual image of creative pain which had crossed it."[100] As the images of the Shining Tree, the poor mother, the Grail, and the Cross accumulate, the narrative exposes the "intimate connection between the mystery of death and mysticism,"[101] reveals that Constance's path into mysticism is also a path into sacrifice and life through death.

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[99] Ibid. 164.

[100] Ibid. 157. 164, 165.

[101] Christopher Nugent, *Mysticism, Death, and Dying*, ed. David Appelbaum, SUNY Series in Western Esoteric Traditions (Albany: State U of New York P, 1994). 10.

Later in the year, the deathly ill Martin arrives in London, insisting that Constance take charge of the Grail. Although she's reluctant to accept responsibility for an object "whose legend her intelligence refused," she does take it. Underhill again reminds us of her heroine's modernity, of the skepticism and ambivalence that accompany her curiosity and receptivity. Contemplation of the Grail begins to fold Constance into the mystic tradition,[102] and "she beg[ins] to understand something of the mood of those old mystics, who imaged in the Flaming Chalice the utmost secret of their love."[103] Borrowing a phrase from mystic writer Richard Rolle,[104] the narrator calls honesty the "mistress of novices."[105] Constance is now the novice mystic who decides that in order to truly worship life she must be completely honest. With this decision come the images of Constance as mystic mother, likened to both Mary and Jesus, though outside of the community and authority of any organized Christian church.

The first of such connections appears when Constance confesses the truth of Vera's parentage to Muriel. When Muriel subjects her to an ecstatic speech about Christmas—"'a fatherless Birth! Seen in light of our modern concepts, it might well be the typical Feast of Womanhood!'"—Constance momentarily hopes that Muriel will understand, if not applaud her situation.[106] Her hope reveals that Constance herself considers her situation at least

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[102] Each chapter's epigraph is an excerpt from a writer in the mystical or magical traditions. One might surmise that Underhill constructed her novel as a quasi-mystical education for her readers in addition to the more experiential education that Constance receives.

[103] Underhill, *The Column of Dust.* 226, 242.

[104] Richard Rolle of Hampole (c.1300-1349), mystic writer, "wandering preacher," and "recluse." Underhill writes that "his interest was not philosophy, but spiritual life; and especially his own experience of it. […] His works greatly influenced succeeding English mystics." ———, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness.* 466.

[105] ———, *The Column of Dust.* 244.

[106] Ibid. 249.

loosely comparable to that of Mary. Of course, Muriel doesn't respond so heartily when she learns that this "fatherless" birth is no abstraction. The extent of her sham is revealed:

> In her attitude towards both sin and religion, she had always exhibited that breadth of mind which is the prerogative of well-read inexperience. Now she remembered, for the first time after ten years of this intellectual freedom, that her father had been an archdeacon of the Established Church…. She was thinking hard: trying to square her natural feelings of propriety with her official theories of life. They refused to adjust themselves.[107]

The contrast is complete. Muriel is actually a "Victorian," the narrator calls her, in modernist clothing. She relies on "well-read inexperience"; Constance is gaining lived experience. Muriel is the child of the Established Church;[108] Constance is the heiress of the mystic tradition. Muriel is an upper class version of Mary, safely ensconced in domestic tranquility, frozen and lifeless, perfect and serene as a wooden icon. Constance is the shop girl, Mary as 20th-century single mother, imperfect but full of life. Muriel has mothered Felix; she has found her happiness. Constance has mothered forth Vera, the difficult "'price of truth.'"[109]

Vera's serious illness creates the forge for Constance's mystic motherhood. The novel's discourse of incarnation (and specifically the sacrificial choice Constance makes to actively love her unlovable child) counteracts discourses that de-value the dysgenic body, and it revises the image of the ideal mother as the reproducer of empire, even while privileging the mother's role. Underhill wrote *The Column of Dust* in a period during which a powerful ideology of motherhood was developing in response to fears of imperial instability, spurred by high infant mortality rates, fears of physical deterioration, poor performance in the Boer

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[107] Ibid. 251.

[108] In light of Underhill's own spiritual "homelessness" and her preference for the Catholic Church, one might read the novel's competing icons as representing a struggle between Anglicanism and Catholicism in which the former is a secondhand or shadow of the latter.

[109] Underhill, *The Column of Dust.* 260.

Wars, and competition with other imperialist powers. The all-consuming question, "Can the empire be maintained?" led to an increased focus on the mother's responsibility, fostering the notion that mothers bore the privileged burden of securing the healthy future of the British Empire. Anna Davin writes that this discourse about motherhood

> was firmly rooted of course in nineteenth-century assumptions about women, domesticity and individualism. Motherhood was to be given new dignity: it was the duty and destiny of women to be the "mothers of the race," but also their great reward.[110]

The image of the knowledgeable, dutiful, fertile mother and her hale offspring offered reassurance that the Mother Country was healthy and (re)productive as well.

The novel actively participates in the language of aggrandized maternal responsibility. In a heated conversation with Andrew Vince, Constance rants: "'What do I care who my child's father may be? What does he do in it? Starts the machinery which ends in birth. His part is over then, and *I'm* left in charge of the race.'"[111] Constance speaks in the common parlance of the time, in which "race" often functioned on multiple linguistic registers as "human race," "culture," "skin color," and "nation." Discourses concerned with race often expressed worry about "degeneration" or "contamination" through migration, contact, and procreation between races—perceived threats that spurred the eugenics movement.[112] Emerging in the late 19th century with the work of Francis Galton, eugenics was the "new science of human breeding" that purported to "supplement natural selection" by curbing or ending the reproduction of undesirable traits and encouraging and increasing the

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110 Anna Davin, "Imperialism and Motherhood," *History Workshop* 5 (Spring 1978). 13.

111 Underhill, *The Column of Dust*. 259.

112 Michael Whitworth, "The Fabric of Society: Nation and Identity," in *Virginia Woolf*, *Authors in Context* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005). 68, 69, and 70.

reproduction of healthy ones.[113] The novel directly counters such eugenicist aims, but it also insists on the temporary, utilitarian nature of fatherhood,[114] and emphasizes the lifelong, divine importance of mothers and mothering.

The impetus behind much of the loaded rhetoric of early 20th-century motherhood was the idea that a healthy, growing, sustainable population would perpetrate a stable nation and a similar empire. J.L. Garvin, editor of *The Outlook*, explicitly states the connection between population and imperial competition in his 1905 essay on "The Maintenance of Empire." He argues that the empire's stability "would be best based upon the power of a white population, proportionate in numbers, vigour, and cohesion to the vast territories which the British democracies in the Mother Country and the Colonies control." Garvin reports that of the "three great countries competing for trade and sea-power," the United States, Germany, and "the Mother Country," Britain's population occupies an unacceptable third place.[115]

Following the ending of the Boer War in 1902, urgent concern over the state of the population, both its numbers and the physical well-being of those numbers, prompted a two-pronged defense intended to buttress the empire: the state and mothers. If individual mothers did not do an acceptable job, then the state would step into its mothering role. In a

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113 Donald J. Childs, "T.S. Eliot and Evelyn Underhill: An Early Mystical Influence," *Durham University Journal* 80, no. 1 (December 1987). 1, 3. Childs also points out that "the Roman Catholic church was another prominent opponent of eugenics, opposing the eugenist's discrimination between human weeds and human flowers with the argument that all life is equally sacred" (7).

114 The narrative depicts the absence, ineffectiveness, marginalization, or death of even its respectable male characters. Mr. Reed, Helen Reed's husband, dies, effectively opening the way for Helen to spend her time working at the bookshop and later mothering Vera after Constance dies. Andrew Vince is an ineffectual father who loses his friendship with Constance because of his patronizing pity. Andrew's son Felix is a benign, artistic boy whom Underhill effectively drops at the novel's midpoint. Martin plays a crucial role in Constance's spiritual maturation, but he dies as well after he passes the Grail to Constance for safekeeping.

115 J.L. Garvin, "The Maintenance of Empire: A Study of the Economic Basis of Political Power," in *The Empire and the Century*, ed. C.S. Goldman (London: John Murray, 1905). 72, 73.

1905 article in *The Contemporary Review*, T. J. Macnamara, long-time member of the London School Board, proposes a variety of social programs to counteract the "Physical Deterioration" of working class children. The state should act as "foster-mother" in lieu of the working class mothers, whose ignorance and ineptitude Macnamara cites as reasons for children's inadequate food, clothing, housing, and even their deaths. These 1.5 million at-risk children should receive supplemental care from state programs because they are "the right sort of material about wherewith to make Empire, if we will only insist that it must not be allowed to run to waste."[116] He believes his proposals constitute "first-class Imperialism," insisting that "Empire cannot be built on rickety and flat-chested citizens." While we cannot determine whether or not Macnamara harbors genuine concern for Britain's low-income families, he emphatically attempts to protect his ideas from charges of "rank Socialism"[117] and must justify his proposed aid for the poor as a means to an end—to bolster the imperial economy. As Michael Whitworth notes, "social investigators had been documenting the poor health and living conditions of the British working classes for some years, but only when many of the men who volunteered for military service were rejected as being physically unfit did the issue become politically important."[118] An imperial ideology such as Macnamara's ultimately views the bodies of working-class children and mothers as the raw material of empire, as laborers who must be kept productive.

While Macnamara isn't advocating for more extreme eugenic measures, such as sterilization of "undesirables," the language of the body as raw material for the future of a healthy empire is a sort of "soft" eugenics, a politically utilitarian view of wellness in which

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[116] T.J. Macnamara, "In Corpore Sano," *The Contemporary Review* 87 (February 1905). 240-241.

[117] Ibid. 248.

[118] Whitworth, "The Fabric of Society: Nation and Identity." 32-33.

health becomes a physical means to a nationalist end. Fear of passing an empire on to "rickety and flat-chested citizens" spawned a surge of programs, conferences, laws, and literature that pointed to the mother as the original source of remedy. Mothers were the (re)producers of population; their ability to raise healthy boys and future mothers was crucial. Therefore, numerous societies organized, all geared at least in part towards educating and monitoring mothers, to train young women into their assumed roles: the Institute of Hygiene (1903); the Infants' Health Society (1904); the National League for Physical Education and Improvement (1905); the National League for Health, Maternity and Child Welfare (1905); the Food Education Society (1908); the Eugenics Education Society (1908); and the Women's League of Service for Motherhood (1910). These organizations provided "mothercraft" training for young women, handed out pamphlets, set up schools, and made home visits. The literature assumed that the babies in question were male—the future administrators, officers, soldiers, and politicians of empire[119]—the "right sort of material" Macnamara recognized as the hope for a healthy imperial future.

Vera's life doesn't furnish the "right sort of material." Constance's daughter "present[s] no promise of future womanhood,"[120] meaning that Vera will not grow up to become a wife and mother herself. Therefore, even in becoming a mother, a role which she has learned to cherish, Constance hasn't fulfilled her national duty. Furthermore, the details of Constance's life flout the middle-class mores that served as the foundations for ideal motherhood. These social codes stipulated that a woman should marry first, become a mother second, and be the sole caretaker of the child.[121] By these standards, Constance

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[119] Davin, "Imperialism and Motherhood." 12, 26.

[120] Underhill, *The Column of Dust.* 28.

[121] Davin, "Imperialism and Motherhood." 53.

certainly wouldn't count as the ideal mother: she conceived Vera through an intentionally anonymous sexual encounter; she's unmarried; and she leaves her daughter in someone else's care while she goes to work. However, she does count as an ideal mother in Underhill's redefinition.

Constance qualifies as an ideal mother because her mysticism, ironically, inducts her into the "fraternity" of Grail and the "folly" of divine, sacrificial love:

> This was a mother's business: the moment of encounter, perhaps, for which that mother had been made. Constance, at this hour, forgot all else. […] Love—divine love—the selfless passion for imperfect things, came on her…. To give oneself for the unworthy: that, in this world of infinite gradations, was the only thing worth doing. Was it not the very pivot of creation; the Secret of the Graal? Mysteriously, she found herself initiated into its fraternity: sharing, from far off, in that ecstasy of pain…. She understood now why all knightliness, all honour—the pure quest of perfection—had ever centred in the Graal. She seized, adored and acknowledged it as the only thing that mattered: the folly, the quixotry, the humanity of the cross.[122]

The selfless passion for imperfect things"[123] is the hinge that connects the actions of motherhood, the "Secret of the Graal," and the "quixotry…of the cross." The willing forfeit of the self for the care of another, for one who cannot earn such love, is simultaneously motherly, chivalrous, and Christ-like. Again, such love is seen as "folly" by most people; the narrator consistently describes incarnational mysticism—equated with divine love—as countercultural and seemingly unrealistic in the extreme. If the Grail has been the icon of national progress and imperial triumph, Underhill tries to re-empower it as the icon of

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122 Underhill, *The Column of Dust*. 275.

123 Also see ———, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*. 85: "The business and method of Mysticism is Love. Here is one of the distinctive notes of true mysticism; marking it off from every other kind of transcendental theory and practice…. It is the eager, outgoing activity whose driving power is generous love, not the absorbent, indrawing activity which strives only for new knowledge, that is fruitful in the spiritual as well as in the physical world. …[T]he word Love as applied to the mystics is to be understood in its deepest, fullest sense, as the ultimate expression of the self's most vital tendencies, not as the superficial affection or emotion often dignified by this name. Mystic Love is a total dedication of the will…. […] It is a condition of humble access, a life-movement of the self: more direct in its methods, more valid in its results—even in the hands of the least lettered of its adepts—than the most piercing intellectual vision of the greatest philosophic mind. Again and again the mystics insist upon this."

mystic sacrifice and love for the sake of the unworthy other. This is what makes Constance into an icon or likeness of Jesus and what, as Underhill knew from the formulation of medieval mystics, made Jesus into a mother.[124]

The bond between Constance and Mary/Jesus is further strengthened on Christmas morning, as her apartment recalls the humble birthplace of Jesus: "Yet even here, in this unlikely corner, upon this shabby stage, the Crib was set, the birth of love was honoured…. It [the cup] was companioned by that antique symbol of incarnate divinity: a weary, selfless mother wholly concentrated on the well-being of her child."[125] The mother is the female figure of Jesus, the exemplar of sacrificial love and of divinity come to earth. Constance's desire to incarnate, to live out such love, is evidenced in her "insane act" of generosity to the poor woman near the Shining Tree, her longing to suffer alongside Mrs. Reed when Mr. Reed dies, and most centrally, her care of Vera that leads to her willing death.

The Pieta of the Self

Constance's death offers the penultimate image of her as mother and mystic. Her dying process releases the Watcher from her body and enables him to view her as an object of worship, worthy of reverence: "Now, he abased himself before her: before the spirit of a tired and broken outcast, whom even earth had held to be impure."[126] She is the broken form, the outcast figure who is exalted. Underhill intends this paradoxical elevation through debasement to recall Jesus's transfiguration through death, life achieved via the path of

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[124] Maud Bernett McInerney, "'In the Meydens Womb': Julian of Norwich and the Poetics of Enclosure," in *Medieval Mothering*, ed. John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996). 167, 171: In some medieval mystical texts, the writer identifies Jesus as Mother through pain, likening his bodily sacrifice on the cross to the physical pain of giving birth. For a brief example of Underhill's awareness of the medieval mystical figuring of Jesus as Mother (though in this instance not through death but through incarnation), see her quote from Julian of Norwich. Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*. 119.

[125] Underhill, *The Column of Dust*. 276,

[126] Ibid. 303.

abjection. This is also Constance's "more splendid victory,"[127] a moment in which we find another intimate communion of images:

> Even in her act of departure she must, it seemed, carry out the redemptive duties of her race. As Dante, giving into the eyes of Beatrice, there saw reflected the Light Divine: so the Watcher, gazing into the soul of his friend at this crucial moment of transcendent victory and earthly loss, was permitted to see the transfigured Spirit—the inmost inhabitant—where it sat, like a Mater Dolorosa, holding upon its knees the slain self by whose death it was redeemed.[128]

As an authorial choice, Constance's death may have "an air of convenience about it,"[129] a critique which speaks to the difficulty of maintaining the icon-in-life and the easier resolution of the narrative with iconicity in death. It seems as though Underhill trades the living icon for the immobile, lifeless one, making Constance into a devotional art object like Muriel. Constance is no longer the mystic-mother icon in action. The crucial exception is that Constance, unlike Muriel and her wooden likeness, isn't ensnared in the web of commodity culture. Instead of gazing at the figures on display in the "shop-window of life," readers witness an intimate, personal moment. It is also noteworthy that Constance's status as icon isn't achieved only in death: she has, after all, been the icon of "incarnate divinity" in life.

Ultimately, the significance of this image lies in which icon Underhill selects as her point of reference. Her iconographic revision attempts to display the complexity of the mystical view of the human person and is her final effort to emphasize the importance of the body. In a reenactment of one of Christian iconography's most recognized subjects, Constance plays the parts of both Mary and Jesus. In this pieta of the self, Constance's spirit

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[127] Ibid. 290.

[128] Ibid. 302.

[129] Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941): An Introduction to her Life and Writings*. 48. He adds, "After all, for Constance to die was too easy. Most of us have to *live* with our Veras as Evelyn certainly did with hers."

is the sorrowful, suffering mother, holding her own lifeless body and "clinging to the human" as Constance's conscience once instructed her to do. Instead of a picture of two humans, one living and one dead, one completely human and one God-in-flesh, Underhill's pieta depicts the human self's hypostasis, its simultaneous share in the divine and human natures, as well as the intimate relationship between body and spirit, death and life. Characteristically mystical in its "coincidence of opposites,"[130] the pieta of the self holds in tension life and death, body and spirit, victory and loss, transcendence and earth-boundedness.

Through the intimate mutuality of "opposites" in her revised pieta, Underhill can once again suggest mysticism's value for the body. Constance's spirit, now in visible form, doesn't express relief or joy to be "free" from its corporeal partner, even though it can now enter the "Heart of Being."[131] Underhill doesn't iconize Constance's death because her mystical education has garnered spiritual transcendence (although she does gain that), but because her death is for another. "Pieta" means both "piety" and "pity" or "compassion,"[132] and Constance-as-pieta suggests the appropriateness or even the sacramental nature of looking on one's own body and the bodies of others with compassion, realizing their value and lamenting their suffering or loss. In the pieta of the self, the novel's ethic of incarnation reaches its apotheosis as an ethic of radical generosity ("insane" in Underhill's language). Constance's body has performed the "redemptive" function; it has presumably secured the continuation of Vera's life, redeemed its own spirit, and demonstrated to the purely spiritual

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[130] Taking the idea from the 15th-century bishop and mystic Nicholas of Cusa, Christopher Nugent explains that the "coincidence of opposites" is a "mystical logic" that "respects *both* ontological unity ('coincidence') *and* empirical plurality ('opposites' even)." See pages 18 and 19 in Nugent, *Mysticism, Death, and Dying.* As Nugent puts it, "paradox is the idiom of mysticism" (2).

[131] Underhill, *The Column of Dust.* 304.

[132] Robillard, "Dismantling the Virgin: Modernism and the Sacred Feminine." 183.

Watcher the value of the human person. For Underhill, in some sense Constance's body *is* Jesus's body, willingly sacrificed to establish communion between divine and human and to offer life to others.

With the sacrificial gift of the body, the text not only references the crucifixion of Jesus but also returns to the doctrine of the Incarnation, the divine Word spoken as a human body. Mark McIntosh explains that "the full divine presence and meaning can only be known by sharing in this particular form of self-donated bodiliness…because it was precisely in those terms that God *chose* to communicate the divine meaning."[133] Constance "loved her body, honoured it deliberately as the medium of all great experience."[134] By relying so heavily on incarnation, Underhill also represents the body as a "medium of communication,"[135] a visible word or "visualized poem." For the Watcher, Constance as pieta constitutes a mystical vision or revelation of the sacred value of humanness and corporeality. She is akin to Pound's Ikon, a mystical-aesthetic structure trembling in the mysterious tension of its own hypostasis. The human being is the work of art, a noble Image that suddenly releases the Watcher from the constraints of time and space and accompanies him beyond the physical world. For the reader, Constance's body in the arms of her spirit is meant to be a verbal image that presents the power of incarnational mysticism—an icon of divine compassion and generosity of and for the body that, as

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[133] McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology*. 79. Italics in original.

[134] Underhill, *The Column of Dust*. 42.

[135] McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology*. 79. Here McIntosh refers specifically to a medieval understanding of bodiliness and the desire of medieval mystics to participate in the passion of Jesus. Underhill steeped herself in the medieval Christian mystics, and their mystical theology permeates her creative work.

Underhill wrote of the Incarnation, reveals a "divine, suffering, self-sacrificing Personality" as the "sacred heart of a living, striving universe."[136]

Through her particular inscription of mysticism as incarnational, Underhill focuses on humans, even the physically and materially impoverished, as living icons that import the presence of the divinity whose image they bear. She makes new the ancient iconophiles' arguments by applying them to a single mother and presenting humans as literary icons of religious import. In her evaluation of mystic-mother icons, she dismisses (perhaps rather ungenerously) those lacking the experience of incarnational mysticism as part of a passing intellectual fashion, associates them with mysticism that functions mainly as social and intellectual currency. "True" mysticism, the novel argues, subscribes to an ethic of radical generosity. Underhill's inscription of mysticism is foundationally and profoundly Christian, and in its turn to the Grail as an immensely powerful religious icon, neo-medieval; yet this mysticism conflicts with organized Christianity and with religious and social mores regarding sexuality, marriage, and parenting. Through incarnational mysticism, the novel acknowledges the importance of the body—it faces the impoverished body, the sexually transgressive body, the laboring, sacrificial body—and elevates them. Underhill relies on stereotypes of the female body and essentializes womanhood as motherhood, while at the same time her mystical discourse spurns eugenic discriminations and works against the notion of the body as the perpetuator of empire.

In *The Column of Dust*, Underhill's mysticism complements nationalist obsessions with motherhood but ultimately eludes nationalist service because of its commitment to active love of the seemingly "unworthy" other. As imperial competition escalated into World War One five years later, Underhill re-focused the sacrificial, embodied, other-centered elements

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[136] Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*. 118.

of her mysticism to validate its relevance, even necessity, in times of military conflict. Mysticism became a form of "true patriotism," a method of spiritually preparing oneself to be a contributing citizen in wartime:

> It is therefore the function of a practical mysticism to increase, not diminish, the total efficiency, the wisdom and steadfastness, of those who try to practise it. It will help them to enter, more completely than ever before, into the life of the group to which they belong. It will teach them to see the world in a truer proportion, discerning eternal beauty beyond and beneath apparent ruthlessness.[137]

In the following chapter, Eva Gore-Booth and May Sinclair take up many of the issues that Underhill lays down in her 1909 work: sacrifice, mysticism confronted with the abject body and death, empathy for the other, Imagism's mystical bent, and the role of female icons. As these two writers grapple with the losses of life in the Irish Easter Rising and World War I, they come to strikingly different conclusions regarding the ethics of "discerning eternal beauty beyond and beneath apparent ruthlessness" and how one should respond to mystical, aestheticized experiences of war.

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[137] ———, *Practical Mysticism.* x, xi.

CHAPTER TWO
"IT'S ALL IN THE PICTURE": UNITY AND AESTHETIC MYSTICISMS IN *THE TRIUMPH OF MAEVE* AND *THE TREE OF HEAVEN*

Unity's Call

To strum up national support in order to achieve military victory, war propaganda inevitably demands one thing from citizens: unity. In 1914, in Britain, Germany, Italy, France, leaders at odds (even with the other's nation) each issued the call for national unity, for setting aside party differences, societal conflicts, and colonial fissures. For British citizens and colonial subjects, "the call of the Empire—'Your King and Country calls you'"—powerfully persuaded many suffragists to prioritize the war effort over women's rights, postponed Irish Home Rule, and rallied recruits from Britain's colonies. Illustrated volumes like *India and the War* (1915), replete with pictures of Indian regiments in native uniforms, were published to attest to the Empire's unity with images and narratives of beneficent rule and cross-cultural cooperation.[1]

Traditional mystical discourse, with its tendency to prioritize spiritual reality over physical reality, easily appears to be an untenable position in a time of war. Art faces similar dilemmas. The resounding call to national unity pressed writers like Eva Gore-Booth and May Sinclair, who invested intellectual and creative energy in both art and mysticism, to consider the proper roles of both. In their wartime texts, Gore-Booth and Sinclair rely on the mystical discourse of the unity of all human selves and offer strikingly divergent pictures of the gendered roles mysticism and art play in times of nationalist violence.

Each author uses a particular aesthetic strategy to claim purpose for mystical unity and artistic vision within the nexus of three fronts: the imperial fronts of the First World

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[1] Harold D. Lasswell, *Propaganda Technique in the World War* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, and Co., 1938). 55-56.

War and the 1916 Easter Rising in Ireland, as well as the domestic front of the increasingly militant "battle" for women's suffrage. Eva Gore-Booth's play, *The Triumph of Maeve*, was published first in 1905 and reprinted in a truncated form called *The Death of Fionavar from The Triumph of Maeve* in 1916. Attending to Gore-Booth's writing on non-resistance in conjunction with the 1916 version of the play, I situate her within the Irish Literary Revival and the modernist, anti-colonialist turn to the pre-colonial past to imagine a future for Ireland. However, she uses a figure from Irish sovereignty myth not as a call to arms but as a plea for empathy and peaceful non-resistance. In Gore-Booth's hands, the legendary warrior queen Maeve—an embodiment of Ireland—renounces her warring, her political sovereignty, and her wealth to choose a life of mystical contemplation.

Her pacifism grows directly out of Gore-Booth's belief in the mystical unity of humans with each other and with the divine. Highlighting the mystical ethic of non-resistance, unity, and compassion common to the teachings of Buddha and Jesus, Gore-Booth invests Maeve's daughter Fionavar with mystical artistic vision—an ability to imagine another's suffering so completely that one becomes the other and suffers as well. Such imagination prevents one from ever doing violence to another. Transformed through witnessing such "imaginative pity" in her daughter, Maeve makes the difficult choice that Gore-Booth admires: peace over political power won through violence.

Sinclair's 1917 novel *The Tree of Heaven*, read in dialogue with her writings on philosophy and aesthetics, reveals her project to modernize or "make new" both mysticism and aesthetics. Through a combination of philosophical Idealism, "eastern" non-duality and "stillness," and Imagist aesthetic theory, Sinclair attempts to cure the uncontrolled ecstasy of women's mystical experience and render mysticism as a sane, masculinized, orientalized experience. She presses the tradition of women's mystical vision into the service of a

nationalist, imperial war that usurps suffragist goals and offers men mystical-aesthetic vision of their unity with the Absolute Self, which replaces God. Through their self-sacrifice, the men enter into the new mystical economy of war, in which their bodies purchase redemption for the world and they receive mystical-aesthetic vitality and consolation. I want to begin with a woman's entrance into the fray of mysticism and violence—that of Eva Gore-Booth.

Eva Gore-Booth and the Work of Peaceful Rebellion

It's easy to create a false dichotomy if one surveys the life of Eva Gore-Booth in conjunction with that of her famous sister, Constance de Markievicz.[2] Perhaps because of her pacifism and mysticism, Gore-Booth is a ready-made target for accusations of hazy otherworldliness or misguided objectives—a woman "dreaming of some vague utopia," as Yeats memorialized her in his poem "In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Constance Markievicz."[3] In comparison with Constance, she can appear untouched and untainted by the grime of battle, while her sister courageously fought in the Easter Rising and was imprisoned for her participation.[4] R.M. Fox, who includes Gore-Booth in his biographical anthology of *Rebel Irishwomen* and praises her "militant pacifism," corrects the tendency to read Gore-Booth's pacifism as passivity, particularly in contrast with her sister's revolutionary action:

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[2] Frederick Lapisardi, the editor of the collected plays, laments that "it is neither fitting nor just that Eva Gore-Booth should be remembered simply as a support player to Constance's starring role. She was an active pacifist in a militant age, she was a dedicated feminist before it was fashionable, she was a sincere Christian mystic, and she was the author of at least nineteen published volumes of poetry, prose, and drama. Yet today she is all but forgotten…." (iii). Frederick S. Lapisardi, ed., *The Plays of Eva Gore-Booth* (San Francisco: Mellen, 1991).

[3] W.B. Yeats, "In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markievicz," in *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner Paperback Poetry, 1989). 233-234.

[4] Constance was known as a painter and actress. She was playing Maeve in Edward Martyn's *Maeve: A Psychological Drama in Two Act*s in 1908. After reading two Irish papers that were lying around backstage, she joined Sinn Fein and the Inghinidhe na hEireann, a patriotic women's group founded by Maud Gonne in 1900. A year later, she founded the Fianna na hEireann, a militant boys' group that became the Volunteers. Gifford Lewis, *Eva Gore-Booth and Esther Roper: A Biography* (London: Pandora, 1988). 135.

> [Eva Gore-Booth] was no pacifist in the sense that a suet dumpling is passive. She became a pacifist because of that fine, keen sensitiveness to human wrongs which made her sister, Countess Markievicz, become a leader in the 1916 Irish Rebellion and face a death sentence for her part in that struggle. The gap dividing the sisters is much smaller than many realize, though they seem at opposite poles. Both were rebels against all that they regarded as mean and unworthy. Their passionate selfless sincerity drove them in different directions.[5]

Yet at the end of his appraisal, Fox cannot help but add that Gore-Booth "was too finely-tempered to take much part in the rough-and-tumble of political life,"[6] prompting one to wonder just what counts as participation in his estimation.

Eva Gore-Booth directly engaged with political life. She spent the majority of her adult life organizing, advocating, speaking, and writing on behalf of working class and impoverished women. Her intense concerns over inequality grew out of reform movements gathering steam in late 19th-century Ireland. She was born in 1870 into a privileged Anglo-Irish family in County Sligo, one of five children.[7] In 1896, she traveled to Italy to recuperate from an illness that physicians assumed was consumption. There she met Esther Roper, the daughter of a factory hand-turned-minister and missionary, who was visiting the warmer climate for the same reason.[8] In Esther, Eva found a kindred spirit, a young woman who shared her concerns over inequality and poverty. Gore-Booth decided to move to Manchester with Roper to live and work, and they partnered together for the rest of their

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5 R.M. Fox, "Eva Gore-Booth," in *Rebel Irishwomen* (Dublin and Cork: Talbot Press Limited, 1935). 43-44.

6 Ibid. 46.

7 Lewis, *Eva Gore-Booth and Esther Roper: A Biography*. 10.

8 Ibid. 1, 24. Esther Roper was born at Lindow, Chorley, Cheshire, on August 4, 1868. Her father, Reverend Edward Roper, grew up in a Manchester slum and gained upward mobility through his work in a Yoruba mission in what is now Nigeria. He married Annie Craig, whose father was an Irish immigrant in Manchester. Esther's father died when she was nine, and she was educated through the Church Missionary Society, for which the reverend had worked (28-31). She was among the first group of women to "present themselves for degrees at Victoria University, Manchester" (49).

lives. When Eva died in 1926 of cancer of the bowel, her will named Esther as executrix and sole inheritor. When Esther died in 1938, the two women were buried in the same grave.[9]

Gore-Booth and Roper threw themselves into a life of community organizing and advocacy that's almost exhausting to recount. Although they were involved in an array of causes, their primary commitments were peace and suffrage, particularly in conjunction with improvements for working class women. According to biographer Gifford Lewis, Esther Roper was "greatly respected as the mainstay of the women's suffrage movement in Manchester in the 1890s with her mission to unionise women industrial workers. This was an entirely new and revolutionary aim in the suffrage movement whose leaders and organisers had tended to come from Liberal and moneyed classes and to operate in that sphere only."[10] Gore-Booth clearly shared Roper's understanding of suffrage as a class issue. In "Women and the Suffrage: A Reply," she argues that working women need the vote in order to defend their right to work and to help determine the conditions under which they do so.[11]

Both women funneled their energies into local organizing and took on prominent leadership roles. Roper became Secretary for the Manchester National Society for Women's Suffrage in 1893.[12] Gore-Booth joined the executive committee of the North of England

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[9] Ibid. 175, 69, 100, 181. Although they were lifetime companions and were buried in the same grave (which bore an inscription from Sappho), Lewis insists that Gore-Booth and Roper were not a lesbian couple: "there obviously was a socially-acceptable route through companionate love—it was mystic, soulful and not physical" (100). For a reading of Gore-Booth's poetry in the context of a lesbian relationship with Roper, see Emma Donoghue, "'How Could I Fear and Hold Thee by the Hand': The Poetry of Eva Gore-Booth," in *Sex, Nation, and Dissent in Irish Writing*, ed. Eibhear Walshe (Cork: Cork UP, 1997). 16-42.

[10] Lewis, *Eva Gore-Booth and Esther Roper: A Biography*. 28.

[11] Eva Gore-Booth, "Women and the Suffrage: A Reply," *The Living Age* 259, no. 3354 (1908). 134.

[12] Lewis, *Eva Gore-Booth and Esther Roper: A Biography*. 84.

Society for Women's Suffrage and the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies.[13] She and Roper worked at the University Settlement, a community of co-eds who moved into working class neighborhoods. Gore-Booth prepared girls at the Settlement for Shakespeare performances,[14] and Lapisardi speculates that they likely performed some of the Irish playwright's works as well.[15] In 1900, Gore-Booth became Co-Secretary with Sarah Dickenson of the Manchester and Salford Women's Trade Union Council, an organization which spawned over 40 women's trade unions or branches in 25 years.[16] In 1903, along with Sarah Reddish and Sarah Dickenson, Roper and Gore-Booth founded the Lancashire and Cheshire Women Textile and Other Workers' Representation Committee for the enfranchisement of working class women.[17] They also worked to protect the jobs of barmaids, pit-brow workers, and "others occupied in work thought unsuited to the 'feminine ideal.'" In two of her most public displays, Gore-Booth delivered speeches as part of the unsuccessful 1906 deputation to the Liberal Prime Minister Campbell-Bannerman and at the NUWSS rally at Trafalgar Square.[18]

The goals of suffrage and non-violence soon came to a crossroads for Gore-Booth and other political activists. The British suffrage movement (in)famously splintered over the question of aggression, both whether to adopt more forceful protest measures and whether to support the war. Gore-Booth was among those who rejected violence in any form, putting her in conflict with Christabel Pankhurst. Pankhurst had joined Eva's Poetry Circle

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[13] Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England*. 190.

[14] Lewis, *Eva Gore-Booth and Esther Roper: A Biography*. 64.

[15] Lapisardi, ed., *The Plays of Eva Gore-Booth*. viii.

[16] Lewis, *Eva Gore-Booth and Esther Roper: A Biography*. 69, 71.

[17] Ibid. 84-89; Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England*. 190.

[18] Lewis, *Eva Gore-Booth and Esther Roper: A Biography*. 72, 105, 115.

at the University Settlement and served her "political apprenticeship" with Eva and Esther, but Gore-Booth and Pankhurst split ways as the latter's tactics became increasingly aggressive and violent. Lewis speculates that Pankhurst "may have been irritated beyond endurance by Eva's gentle gradualist technique and her peacefulness, never rousing to anger."[19]

The constellation of Gore-Booth's political affiliations, as well as her dissension from the militant quarter of the suffrage movement, disclose the complicated interweaving of personal and national sovereignty, war, and peace movements. The demand for national unity regarding the war pitted non-resistance against suffrage and punished dissent. Anti-German sentiments ran high, and Lewis records that the "peace women and conscientious objectors…were shamefully and violently treated."[20] In Sinclair's novel, characters imagine pacifism as a kind of insanity. In legal reality, the British government treated refusal to participate in the war as a form of treason by abstention. After the war, it stripped conscientious objectors of the right to vote for five years and rewarded women's war efforts with enfranchisement. National sovereignty for anti-colonialists was also sacrificed: British Parliament postponed Irish Home Rule due to the war in 1914, but resistance boiled over two years later with the Irish Easter Rising, and the Anglo-Irish War erupted in 1919 after the World War was over.[21]

Gore-Booth never wavered in her pacifism and would not sacrifice it in the name of militant suffrage or militant Irish anti-colonialist nationalism, causes about which she cared

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[19] Ibid. 94, 98.

[20] Ibid. 166.

[21] Sandra M. and Susan Gubar Gilbert, "Soldier's Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women, and the Great War," in *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1988). 258-323. See also Chapter Two, "Home Rule: The Colonies of the New Woman," 47-82.

deeply. She and Roper joined the British peace movement, serving as members of the British organizing committee for the Women's International Congress to be held at The Hague in 1915. During the last two years of the First World War, they spent their time visiting Constance in prison and attending trials to advocate for conscientious objectors as part of their work for the No-Conscription Fellowship. They also got involved in the League for the Abolition of Capital Punishment, with Gore-Booth writing letters on behalf of her sister and of Irish nationalist Roger Casement. [22]

By 1920, the past two decades of labor had left them "physically run ragged," and the previously tireless pair "never returned to full lives in active politics." Eva never completely regained her health and passed away six years later. Evelyn Underhill, whom Gore-Booth befriended later in life after moving to London, composed an obituary in which she remembered her politically active friend as a "'true mystic.'" Gore-Booth, like Underhill, earnestly pursued mystical communities, read about mysticism, and wrote on the subject as well. When she first moved to Manchester from Ireland, "the more eccentric" Unitarian ministers attracted her. She later read Jacob Boehme, studied Gnosticism, and explored Eastern mysticism.[23] She officially joined the Hampstead Theosophical Society in 1919 and was afterward a life-long member. The TS provided a "sympathetic audience" for Gore-Booth's writings on mysticism, but it didn't define all of her beliefs. She accepted the theosophical teachings that suited her and adopted what Dixon labels "an unorthodox Christian esotericism." [24] She brings this heterodox sensibility to her writing, a willingness to

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[22] Lewis, *Eva Gore-Booth and Esther Roper: A Biography*. 166, 163,154. Constance's sentence was commuted to life imprisonment, but Casement was hanged. See Michael H. Begnal, "Eva Gore-Booth on Behalf of Roger Casement: An Unpublished Appeal," *Eire-Ireland* 6, no. 1 (1971). 11-16.

[23] Lewis, *Eva Gore-Booth and Esther Roper: A Biography*. 149, 152, 175, 66, 151, 152.

[24] Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England.* 190, 191.

collate imagery from various religious, mystical, and magical traditions and to pacify a warrior in the would-be pantheon of Irish nationalism.

Part of my aim in analyzing Gore-Booth's play is to show that her commitments to pacifism and suffrage had a mystical foundation. Both she and Sinclair espoused political positions that were the logical culminations of their mysticisms and cannot be understood fully within a paradigm that severs politics and spirituality. Joy Dixon rightly asserts that Gore-Booth's intentions undid the dichotomy of mystical/political and "blurred the boundaries between public and private and between secular and sacred. She preached a gospel of universal love, which she claimed, made sense of both her feminism and her uncompromising pacifism."[25] Her mystical yet politically-engaged worldview has rendered Gore-Booth a complicated or even confusing figure to assess critically, whether in biography or literary study. Though scholars rarely attend to Gore-Booth creative texts, critical recovery and interpretation of her work is beginning to tease out the nuances of her mystico-political philosophies. Cathy Leeney's appraisal neatly draws together the various political and artistic strands of Gore-Booth's life:

> Constance has bequeathed to us images of the militant woman, pistol in hand, that are deeply unsettling and that defy stereotypes. Eva was arguably even more radical, since she put issues of women's values and experience before any national interests. In England she was a pacifist suffragist when women's vote had become a prize in exchange for women's support for the 1914-18 war effort. Eva Gore-Booth's imaginative independence marks her out. Her creativity ranged far, and the breadth of her understanding may be seen in the freedom with which she re-figured the mythic tales of her Sligo childhood, of Niamh and Cuchulain, of Deirdre, and of Maeve and Fionavar.[26]

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[25] Ibid. 191.

[26] Cathy Leeney, "Interchapter I: 1900-1939," in *Women in Irish Drama: A Century of Authorship and Representation*, ed. Melissa Sihra (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). 25.

Into the nexus of the First European War, the Irish Rising, and the continuing struggle for women's political equality, Gore-Booth inserts Maeve, a character whose mystical pacifism sheds light on the communally-engaged nature of her own.

Reviving and Revising Irish Myth

Gore-Booth wrote *The Triumph of Maeve* in 1902. Subtitled "A Romance," Longmans, Green, and Co. published it in 1905 along with *The Three Resurrections*, a volume of poetry. With the first two acts and the first scene of the third act cut, Erskine MacDonald published the play as *The Death of Fionavar from The Triumph of Maeve* in 1916. In the 1916 version, Gore-Booth dispenses with the subtitle and the acts, and she instead names the play's scenes: Scene of the Vision of Pity, Scene of the Death of Fionavar, and Scene of the Triumph of Maeve.[27] Frederick Lapisardi, who edited her collected plays, notes that the 1916 version drew attention because Constance, who was in prison for her part in the Easter Rising, illustrated it.[28]

Gore-Booth takes Maeve, the legendary warrior queen, as her main character. Maeve attempts to conquer the mystical land of Tier-nan-ogue but is unsuccessful because one must abandon force and coercion to enter it. The death of her daughter Fionavar catalyzes Maeve's transformation. After hearing of her mother's success in a battle against Cú Chulainn, Fionovar rushes out joyfully to celebrate. Instead, she sees the bloody reality of

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[27] Lapisardi, ed., *The Plays of Eva Gore-Booth*. 22.

[28] Ibid. x. *The New York Times* (10 Sept. 1916) review ("Irish Rebel Illustrates Nonresistance Play: Countess Markievicz, in Jail for Life for Her Part in Dublin Uprising, Makes Mystic Drawings for Sister's Poetic Drama") focused on Constance's role and minimized Eva's. Lapisardi surmises that the Fionavar edition "was produced as a piece of artwork uniting the two sisters, both in talent and in thought, complete in itself, and that it was never intended for the stage at all" (24).

what "victory" means and dies of pity for those who have been killed. Fionovar falls as the first "victim" of the "new god of pity" who is also a "god of war" bringing suffering.[29]

Gore-Booth sets her play in Ireland's ancient past in order to offer the vision of a sacrificial, peaceful future as the present choice for her contemporaries in 1905 and, more pointedly, in 1916. Maeve "finds her own soul" and the way to mystical peace only after she lays down her arms and walks away from her position of political power, leaving her male consorts in chaos to fight and kill over her crown. Unlike Sinclair's main female character, whose mystical vision of the future supports war with redemptive rhetoric, the women in Gore-Booth's play come to equate mysticism and pacifism, which the author denotes as Maeve's ultimate "triumph."

In this chapter, I situate Gore-Booth within the Irish Literary Revival, a movement from the "Celtic Twilight" of the 1880s through the 1930s, in which writers like W.B. Yeats, Lady Augusta Gregory, Edward Martyn, J.M. Synge, Sean O'Casey, and AE (George Russell), galvanized the growth of a new generation of Irish literature. The recovery of legendary folk figures such as Maeve, Cú Chulainn, and Fergus was one of the Revival's major components. By recapturing a pre-colonial past in which Irish kings and queens enjoyed sovereignty, by resurrecting, gathering, and reclaiming Irish tales, heroes, and folk wisdom, the revivalists hoped to cultivate a distinct national identity based on a national literature.[30]

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[29] Eva Gore-Booth, "The Triumph of Maeve," in *The Plays of Eva Gore-Booth*, ed. Frederick S. Lapisardi (San Francisco: Mellen, 1991). 68, 78. Since the 1905 version contains the shorter 1916 version, Lapisardi doesn't include each play on its own. My citations, therefore, refer to the play's 1905 title, although my analysis focuses on the three scenes that comprise the 1916 play.

[30] Homi Bhabha theorizes that nations are narrations—constructions of continuity with a deep past that nevertheless belie the hybrid interactions and ambivalences from which they arise: "Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye. Such an image of the nation—or narration—might seem impossibly romantic and excessively metaphorical, but it is from those traditions of political thought and literary language that the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea in the

From the beginning, anti-colonialist nationalism helped fuel the literature of the Revival. Yeats, for example, received mentoring and some financial backing from Irish nationalist John O'Leary. Richard Fallis argues that O'Leary's views on the interplay between nationalism and literature were formative to the tenor of the movement, especially on Yeats's own early opinions. O'Leary believed that a nation must have a national literature in order to define itself, though this literature should not simply be overt political propaganda, which would render it mediocre art. Instead, writers should create "a literature so essentially Irish, so reflective of the national imagination, that it would prepare the country spiritually for the coming day of political liberation."[31] To that end, O'Leary put Yeats in contact with writers and folklorists, and the young poet published two anthologies, *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888) and *Representative Irish Tales* (1891). Lady Augusta Gregory, who used her contacts to help finance and found the Irish National Theatre along with Yeats, was also an avid collector of Irish tales. Yeats accompanied her as she visited rural cottagers to collect folklore in local dialect, which she later compiled into *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland* (1920).[32]

It's also important to point out the colonial cross-pollination and orientalist perceptions that shaped the movement. As Elleke Boehmer points out, the imperial system created a nexus or interface that allowed for cultural exchange, for contact with the other

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west. An idea whose cultural compulsion lies in the impossible unity of the nation as a symbolic force." See Homi K. Bhabha, "Introduction: Narrating the Nation," in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London and New York: Routledge, 1990). 1.

[31] Richard Fallis, *The Irish Renaissance* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1977). 6.

[32] Ulick O'Connor, *Celtic Dawn: A Portrait of the Irish Literary Renaissance* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984). 71, 138. Yeats contributed sections titled "Witches and Wizards and Irish Folk Lore" and "Swedenborg, Mediums and the Desolate Places," as well as notes to the volume.

that could engender self-reflection and self-questioning.[33] Many writers conceived of the Irish Revival as an anti-colonial counterpart to Indian literary nationalism. They imagined themselves as part of a cross-colonial community of resistance to colonial rule, as two cultures who shared a deep history of and abiding affinity for mystical lore. Much inspiration for the Irish Revival came from contact with Indian thinkers and writers, whose ideas individuals like Yeats absorbed and then refracted in his own writing. The Dublin Theosophical Society introduced Yeats to Indian philosophy, and his fellow Revivalist and poet AE versed himself in any translated Indian literature he could acquire, particularly the Upanishads and the Vedas. As one example, in the mid-1880s, Yeats invited Indian Theosophist Mohini Chatterjee to Dublin to lecture on Indian philosophy. Chatterjee's belief in reincarnation fascinated Yeats[34] and became the subject of poems such as "To Mohini Chatterjee" and "A Dialogue of Self and Soul."

The poetry of Rabindranath Tagore, however, seemed to Yeats the promise of literature's power to unify a people into a nation. Yeats met Tagore at William Rothenstein's in June, 1912, where the Indian poet gave a reading to a group that included Ezra Pound, Alice Meynell, and May Sinclair. Yeats aided Tagore with his English translations and wrote the introduction to *Gitanjali*, issued in 1912 by the India Society. Yeats looked to *Gitanjali* as an exemplum of a poet's ability to sing the songs of an entire people, as a template for an anti-colonial, mystical form of cultural nationalism. His romanticized vision of India bears implications for old romantic Ireland. In the introduction, he rhapsodizes that the poems "display in their thought a world I have dreamed of all my life long. The work of a supreme

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[33] Boehmer, *Empire, the National, and the Postcolonial, 1890-1920: Resistance in Interaction.* See specifically her chapter on Leonard Woolf, Yeats, and Tagore. 172-181.

[34] See Sushil Kumar Jain, "Indian Elements in the Poetry of Yeats: On Chatterji and Tagore," *Comparative Literature Studies* 7 (1970). 82-96.

culture, they yet appear as much the growth of the common soil as the grass and the rushes. A tradition, where poetry and religion are the same thing, has passed through the centuries…." Disregarding (or ignorant of) civil divisions and unrest as well as the heterogeneity of Bengal's people, Yeats discovers his longing for spiritual communion, unity, and common cultural inheritance among the Irish in the "unbroken" "civilization of Bengal" that still holds together the "common mind which…runs through all." In the west, this unified mind is "broken into a dozen minds that know nothing of each other."[35]

Yeats reads the entirety of Bengal through *Gitanjali*, reads it as the dream self—the more ancient, pure, mystical, uncanny, orientalized other—of Ireland. It is the Ireland of the imagined past and the desired future: "A whole people, a whole civilization, immeasureably strange to us, seems to have been taken up into this imagination; and yet we are not moved because of its strangeness, but because we have met our own image…our voice as in a dream."[36] Other Irish writers also saw similarities between India and Ireland. On listening to Yeats read from *Gitanjali*, writer James Cousins later commented that "'we knew then why Jubainville, the French scholar, found parallels between the old Celtic religion and the religion of India, and why an Irish Goddess was cured of a legendary illness…by drinking the milk of two cows that two Irish Gods had brought from India…. We were one in spirit, we pioneers of the new Irish movement in poetry, and the poet from India.'"[37] Through the lens of Yeats, its most celebrated figure, we get a picture of the Irish Literary Revival as a movement that drew light and heat from political nationalism and its heroes, the recovery of Irish mythology and folklore, and orientalist-inflected Theosophy. Ironically facilitated by

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[35] W.B. Yeats, "Introduction," in *Gitanjali* (New York: Scribner, 1997). 10.

[36] Ibid. 11.

[37] Quoted in Jain, "Indian Elements in the Poetry of Yeats: On Chatterji and Tagore." 94.

the imperial system, interaction with Indian philosophers and poets brought Irish Revivalists in contact with religious philosophy and cultural, anti-colonial nationalism from the East that seemed to match their own.

Gore-Booth's contemporaries recognized her affinities with other young Irish writers of the movement. Her friend AE included Gore-Booth in his 1904 anthology of Irish writers, called *New Songs,* which also included poems by Padraic Colum, Thomas Keohler, Alice Milligan, Susan Mitchell, Seamus O'Sullivan, George Roberts, and Ella Young. Jack Yeats drew the frontispiece.[38] In 1895, his son had written to Olivia Shakespear, saying "I'm always ransacking Ireland for people to set at writing Irish things. [Eva Gore-Booth] does not know that she is the last victim—but is deep in some books of Irish legends I sent her & might take fire."[39] Historians of the Revival still tend to overlook her, however, and even Gore-Booth scholars fail to see the links between her work with Irish mythological past and a broader literary modernism. Lapisardi, for instance, laments that "[s]he missed the Modernist boat, and drifted off into some Tennysonian fog." He apologetically instructs the reader to think of her language as "verbal costume" and adds that "[h]er *ideas* relate most clearly to the twentieth century, but the *action* of these plays takes place in the past."[40] However, her use of the mythic past to comment on the nation's present and envision its future is a aesthetic move that places her in the company of modernists like Pound, H.D., and Joyce and identifies her as a participant in her contemporary Irish literary and political context. Her fellow Revivalists looked to Ireland's mythological, pre-colonial past in order to establish a national literary culture, a cultural nationalism to foster the struggle for political

[38] Lewis, *Eva Gore-Booth and Esther Roper: A Biography.* 135.

[39] Quoted in Lapisardi, ed., *The Plays of Eva Gore-Booth.* iii. Yeats thought Eva possessed some literary talent but needed "like all Irish literary people, a proper respect for craftsmanship…."

[40] Ibid. v-vi.

sovereignty—as O'Leary said, to "prepare the country spiritually for the coming day of political liberation." Later in the chapter, I will discuss Gore-Booth's own literary renovations of reincarnation and the mystical unity of the "common mind which…runs through all," but presently I want to focus on the crucial way she diverges from other Irish writers in her adoption of myth.

In her interpretive remarks published with the 1916 version of *Maeve*, Gore-Booth admits that she has been "accused of taking liberties with an ancient myth"[41] (which is presumably the reason for her interpretive commentary that follows). And she did take liberties: she turned a warrior queen into a mystic pacifist in a time when Irish nationalists sought fighters. Maeve (or Medb), the warrior Queen of Connacht, is one of the primary characters of *The Táin Bó Cúailnge* (*The Cattle Raid of Cooley*). *The Táin* is the longest tale from the Ulster Cycle, a series comprised of approximately 80 stories that revolve around the Ulaid, a prehistoric people from the north of Ireland (from whom Ulster derives its name). Jealous that her husband Ailill has a prize bull, the White-Horned, while she has none, Maeve leads a raid to steal the Brown Bull of Cooley. Cú Chulainn emerges as the hero who successfully defends Ulster from Maeve and her forces. The two bulls die fighting one another, restoring peace between the two provinces.[42]

Gore-Booth transformed Maeve according to her own pacifist leanings in 1905, but the timing of the play's re-release in 1916 and the addition of her explications position the text as a complex commentary on the Irish movement for political sovereignty. Situated within a movement of Irish literary revival with anti-colonial nationalist ends, and aided by

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[41] Eva Gore-Booth, "Appendix B: Materials from *The Death of Fionavar*," in *The Plays of Eva Gore-Booth*, ed. Frederick Lapisardi (San Francisco: Mellen, 1991). 219.

[42] *The Táin*, trans. Ciaran Carson (New York: Viking, 2007). xi.

Constance's political celebrity and her illustrations, the play sympathizes with the cause of the Irish "rebels." However these affiliations valorize those who fought for Irish independence, Gore-Booth's politics turn on the idea of sovereignty at the expense of non-violence. At the play's close, the battling Maeve shuns her role as military and political commander:

> [Maeve's] interest in the mystical world wakes up again…. [She] casts away her kingdom and all her many possessions and ambitions, and goes away by herself to meditate and live austerely under the hazel boughs in an island on the Shannon. Thus, *without force or sovereignty*, in loneliness and poverty, she finds the way into faery land, the way into her own soul.[43]

Hers is a new myth, one that models a different vision for Ireland. Through her revised Maeve, the play claims that ethical, non-violent means must be prioritized over ends, even political sovereignty.

That the legendary figure she chooses for her heroine descends from Irish sovereignty myths enforces the extent of Gore-Booth's revision of legend and her assessment of the appropriate means by which to achieve sovereignty. According to Proinsias MacCana,

> [i]n Irish tradition it would be hard to exaggerate the importance of this idea of the land and its sovereignty conceived in the form of a woman. From the beginning of history and before, until the final dissolution of the Irish social order in the seventeenth century, traditional orthodox thought was dominated by this image of the *puella senilis*, the woman who is literally as old as the hills yet endlessly restored to youth through union with her rightful mate. She outlives not only men but also tribes and peoples.[44]

MacCana identifies Medhbh (Maeve) as a more humanized version of the ancient goddess figure who, because she "represent[s] both the abstract sovereignty and the physical

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[43] Gore-Booth, "Appendix B: Materials from *The Death of Fionavar*." 220, 221, italics mine.

[44] Proinsias MacCana, "Women in Irish Mythology," *Crane Bag* 4, no. 1 (1980). 7.

substance of his kingdom" sacralizes and legitimizes Irish kings by mating with them.[45] He adds that the "very name, Medhbh, literally 'she who intoxicates', identifies her explicitly as the goddess who presents the draught of sovereignty to one king and husband 'in the shadow of another.'"[46] The legendary Maeve character retains the goddess's imperative to choose a king with whom to mate each time she (and therefore Ireland) is in need of restoration and rejuvenation.

The power and presence of this figure is closely tied to the history of colonization. As Elizabeth Butler Cullingford explains, when Ireland had no recognized king, "the idea of miraculous renewal became increasingly improbable…. By the eighteenth century [the] figure of sovereignty seems to have dropped out of sight."[47] Yeats and Lady Gregory resurrected the old hag figure in the 1902 play *Cathleen ni Houlihan.*[48] This time, however, the ancient woman doesn't mate with kings to restore sovereignty: she requires the sacrificial blood of soldiers. Set in 1798, the year that Wolf Tone led a rebellion against the English, the Gillane family encounters an impoverished, elderly woman passing by their cottage. As she tells the eerie, melancholic story of the lovers she has lost throughout centuries and the land that has been taken from her, it becomes clear to the viewing or reading audience that she is the "Poor Old Woman" of popular songs, the embodiment of Ireland. She seeks the

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[45] Ibid. 7, 9, 10.

[46] Ibid. 9. Medhbh Lethdherg of Leinster mated with nine kings of Ireland. "This same deity is better known as Medhbh of Cruachain…but in this instance the divine authority is translated into superficially human terms and the imperious goddess becomes an unscrupulous and masterful virago who dominates her husband, king Ailill, and cuckolds him with the supernaturally virile Ferghus."

[47] Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, "'Thinking of Her...as...Ireland': Yeats, Pearse, and Heaney," *Textual Practice* 4, no. 1 (1990). 5.

[48] While Yeats typically spoke as if the play were entirely his own creation, the notebook drafts and revisions of the play strongly suggest that Gregory contributed much to its composition, though the initial vision for the play came from Yeats. See C.L. Innes, *Woman and Nation in Irish Literature and Society, 1880-1935* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1993). 44-46.

sacrifice of men who will help her regain her "beautiful fields" and put "the strangers out of [her] house." These men will likely die but will be "remembered," "alive," "speaking," and "heard" forever as Irish lore—the art of storytelling through narratives, poems, and songs—quickens, embodies, and makes audible the dead. As she leaves the Gillane cottage, the old, weary woman appears as "a young girl" who has "the walk of a queen."[49] The play doesn't depict the bloody, unsuccessful rebellion itself, but concludes with a rally to arms and the hopeful image of an Ireland restored.[50]

C.L. Innes notes that writers of the Irish Revival often used the passive, sorrowing figure of Deirdre to represent a feminized colonial Ireland in need of defense and liberation. They gave less attention to militant female figures like Maeve and instead adopted male warriors like Cú Chulainn.[51] Yet a figure like Yeats's and Gregory's Cathleen ni Houlihan assumes "the more militant guise of a mother goddess summoning her faithful sons to rise up against the infidel invader so that through the sacrificial shedding of their blood, she

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[49] W.B. Yeats, "Cathleen ni Houlihan," in *The Collected Plays of W.B. Yeats* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1935). 85, 84, 86, 88.

[50] The play stirred up nationalist fervor in its viewers as well. Irish writer Stephen Gwynn remembered that "the effect of *Cathleen ni Houlihan* on me was that I went home asking myself if such plays should be produced unless one was prepared for people to go out and shoot and be shot." See note 372, page 514 in *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*. Ed. Richard J. Finneran. Revised 2nd ed. New York: Scribner Paperback Poetry, 1989. The Cathleen figure of Yeats's earlier play *The Countess Cathleen* (written in 1892; performed first in 1899; performed at the Abbey Theatre in 1911) depicts the religiously devout countess in her youthful, fair form, and she becomes the sacrificial figure. She sells her soul in order to buy back the souls of starving Irish peasants who have desperately sold theirs. Because of her pure intentions, she is rewarded with paradise instead of damnation when she dies at the play's end. The peasants who surround her appear in a visionary space as if on a mountainside, surrounding by an army of angels ready to do battle. ———, *The Countess Cathleen* (LaVergne, TN: Dodo Press, 2009).

[51] Innes, *Woman and Nation in Irish Literature and Society, 1880-1935*. 33-34. Rejecting the overt sexuality and ethical unscrupulousness of the legendary Maeve figure, Edward Martyn's Maeve is the dreamy and atmospheric Queen of Tiernanogue. His editor notes that Martyn's Land of Youth and its queen represent the invisible realm of intellect and aesthetics. See William J. Feeney, "Introduction," in *Maeve: A Psychological Drama in Two Acts by Edward Martyn and The Last Feast of the Fianna: A Dramatic Legend by Alice MIlligan*, ed. William J. Feeney, *Irish Drama Series* (Chicago: De Paul University, 1967). 6. Although Gore-Booth's Maeve becomes more engulfed in a mystical dream-like state at times, she isn't simply a de-clawed warrior or an airy representative of Tiernanogue. Her choice reflects Gore-Booth's pacifism, and Gore-Booth represents renunciation of political power as a political choice.

might be miraculously redeemed from colonial violation and become free and pure again."[52] Gore-Booth's Maeve enters into the literary-historical picture as the militant mother-goddess of tradition until mystical empathy transforms her. What does it mean that Ireland as militant mother lays down her arms? For Gore-Booth, it signals nothing less than the inauguration of a new spiritual era, which she depicts through a heterodox collage of images that blends magical druidic symbols, elements of spiritualism, and Irish legend, and nonetheless centers on the crucifixion. Through this assembly, Gore-Booth recasts the triumph of war, ultimately redefining Irish figures like Maeve and transforming her own literary tradition.

The Sword of Pity and Peace

The "Scene of the Vision of Pity" begins with a rush as Maeve bursts into the tent, which is decorated with "magical symbols, triangles and other mathematical figures,"[53] and demands that the Druidess predict the battle's outcome. The entire set becomes a liminal space as the woman looks into the stream, the fluid border between two worlds.[54] Under the power of the sea god Mannanan, the elderly, powerful woman predicts victory for Maeve's company, but she also sees "a vision of woe" in the dark waters. Portents of foreboding to accompany the vision, rendering the scene séance-like: the tent goes dark; a cold hand touches Maeve; the air chills. The stage directions indicate that "there is a flash of lightning. For a moment glimmering faces are seen as of a host of spirits rushing though the tent. There is a slight earthquake shock," and "there rushes a shining spear made of living and fluid particles of light. There is a hissing sound as of red-hot iron plunged into water,

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[52] Richard Kearney, "Myth and Motherland," in *Ireland's Field Day* (London: Hutchinson, 1985). 77.

[53] Gore-Booth, "The Triumph of Maeve." 64.

[54] *The Táin*. xviii.

and the spear vanishes."[55] The voices of the spirits, which Gore-Booth identifies as "the presence of the ancient warlike gods of Ireland,"[56] briefly confer and exclaim with trepidation that "'A God of War,/A new and terrible god'" has arrived "'like a sword.'"[57]

Ioldana's sword, invested with a "strange savage life of its own," simultaneously represents the fluid, potent power of ancient Ireland and the advent of the new god. The likening of divine advent to the slashing of a sword alludes to Jesus' words, "I come not to bring peace, but a sword,"[58] an enigmatic statement for one who also identified himself as a peacemaker. The sword, however, indicates that he will be a divisive figure who unsettles political, religious, and even familial systems, not through violence or political coup, but through intentional non-resistance and active love. Gore-Booth adopts this interpretation of the sword to identify the counter-cultural nature of mystical pacifism, a choice that paradoxically causes suffering and provokes anger in others, as Maeve's final decision does.

The scene's culminating sensory collage more clearly identifies the new god as Jesus, specifically the suffering Jesus at the moment of crucifixion. Amid another earthquake and increasing darkness, a circle of light grows. Within it, three crosses and a "panic-stricken multitude" come into focus, followed by complete darkness, confusion, and the gradual reappearance of light.[59]

For Gore-Booth, this vision depicts history's pivotal moment, the future into which the Druidess gazes and the past to which the audience looks. It heralds the arrival of a new era, as Gore-Booth explains:

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[55] ———, "The Triumph of Maeve." 65, 67.

[56] ———, "Appendix B: Materials from *The Death of Fionavar*." 220.

[57] ———, "The Triumph of Maeve." 68.

[58] Ibid. 220. The biblical quote is from Matthew 10:34 (New International Version).

[59] Ibid. 68.

> The meaning I got out of the story of Maeve is a symbol of the world-old struggle in the human mind between the forces of dominance and pity, of peace and war. The time has come in the history of the human soul, when a newly developed and passionate sense of unity undermines the ancient ideals of savage heroism and world-power. Thus the reign of the old warlike gods is rashly broken into and threatened by the fascination of a new idea. The birth of imagination, the new god of pity, is symbolized in the outside world by the crucifixion of Christ.[60]

Though Gore-Booth identifies Christ's crucifixion as the emblem of a new idea and a new god, she also understands her contemporary moment as one invested in mystical unity with the potential to subvert "ancient ideals" of "savage heroism and world-power" to which nations still cling. The new god threatens the reign of the old, but Gore-Booth doesn't do away with ancient warring figures like Maeve—she has Maeve let go of domination, a relinquishment that comes hand-in-hand with suffering. In Chapter One, I examined Underhill's pieta, an iconic image of pity or compassion. Gore-Booth also holds up this quality as a mystical ideal. To have compassion for, to suffer with, is the opposite of domination, and for Gore-Booth as for Underhill, Christ's suffering is the perfect symbol for that compassion. Through imagination and compassion or pity, Gore-Booth insists, one might take on another's suffering to the point of becoming the other.

Fionavar is the "first victim" of the new god of war and pity, the character who epitomizes such mystical compassion and catalyzes Maeve's transformation. In the "Scene of the Death of Fionavar," a messenger arrives, relaying to the impatiently waiting Fionavar that "'the battle is over…and Cuculain [has flown] before the Queen.'" Wishing she "'had seen/The triumph of Maeve!'"[61] and unable to wait for her mother's return, Fionavar rushes out to the battlefield and just misses Maeve's messenger who has returned to check on her.

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60 ———, "Appendix B: Materials from *The Death of Fionavar*." 219.

61 ———, "The Triumph of Maeve." 70.

Despite her attempts at protection, Maeve soon returns to discover that her daughter died on the battlefield. With this ironic flourish, Gore-Booth claims that war damages everyone, even those who don't participate in battle.[62] Perhaps more ironically, Fionavar dies not from the sword, but from pity. A warrior tells Maeve how the girl, "'knowing naught of battle, or sights that appal [sic]/The strongest soul unused to the ways of war,'" died: "'Men say the great heart of the Princess broke/For pity of the dead lying on the grass/After the battle.'"[63] Gore-Booth's pacifist writings during WWI and her later religious writings shed light on Fionavar's unusual death.

Becoming the Other: The Imaginative, Mystical Basis of Non-Resistance

Like her fellow Irish Revivalists, Gore-Booth saw mystical commonality in the contact between "eastern" and "western" religious thought. In a 1915 paper for the Conference upon the Pacifist Philosophy of Life, Gore-Booth spoke on "Religious Aspects of Non-Resistance." Prefaced in its pamphlet form by a poem from Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali*, in which the speaker prays that his country may "awake" into a "heaven of freedom," Gore-Booth's paper argues against the "crimes" nations do in the name of "Liberty," that best of intentions.[64] Non-resistance is the only political position that doesn't end in crimes against others, a position founded on the "essential belief of mystics of all ages"—the "unity of all nature."[65] She cites Buddhism and Christianity as the two religious

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[62] Jennifer Kamerer, "Reappraisal of a Dream: An Evaluation of the Plays of Eva Gore-Booth" (California University of Pennsylania, 1989). Kamerer's thesis discusses the elements of irony and hubris that link Gore-Booth's plays with those of the ancient Greeks.

[63] Gore-Booth, "The Triumph of Maeve." 78.

[64] Eva Gore-Booth, *Religious Aspects of Non-Resistance*, vol. 3, Peace and Freedom Pamphlets (London: League of Peace and Freedom, 1915). 7.

[65] Ibid. 13-14.

traditions that base themselves on this mystical tenet and the subsequent need to refrain from harming others, even enemies. Looking to the teachings of the Buddha, Gore-Booth foregrounds the doctrine of reincarnation, which suggests that present actions done to others determine future ones received and vice versa. Like the mythic personages of Ireland, the reincarnating self lives age to age, and, more importantly to my reading of the play, in past, present, and future lives, it can interlock with others. Gore-Booth understands reincarnation as a "doctrine of the justice and mercy of the Universe…founded on a deep conviction of the unity, of the goodwill, the slow inevitable evolution, and what one might call the interchangeable sensitiveness, of all things human and divine." Gore-Booth's belief in the mystical unity of all life allows her to undergird her pacifism with a belief in reincarnation and the centrality of Christ. As Gifford Lewis explains, "Having accepted the change-of-self chain of exchange involved in reincarnation down the ages, Eva took a further step in believing that it was possible in one's daily life, by imaginative pity, to become another person by loving them; and here she came back to the personality of Christ, whom she understood to embody this perfect love."[66]

To the notion of unity and non-resistance articulated through Buddhism, Gore-Booth explains that Christ added "his conception both of the nature of God and the divine nature of human life"—that both are identified by impartial kindness and goodwill to all, whether evil or good, just or unjust. Humans must operate out of this "deepest principle of [their] minds" and stay true to this aspect of themselves regardless of circumstances. Gore-Booth acknowledges that this flies in the face of the "old instinctive defensive standard of the nations, 'Love your friends and hate your enemies.'"[67] It also "seems far removed from

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[66] Lewis, *Eva Gore-Booth and Esther Roper: A Biography*. 150.

[67] Gore-Booth, *Religious Aspects of Non-Resistance*. 13-15.

what we know of the stormy fighting gods of the Celtic, Teutonic or Scandinavian nations."[68] And so Maeve, as she moves toward that Irish country of Tiernanogue, abandons the "stormy fighting" that Gore-Booth associates with the Celts and travels via mystical ethics that Gore-Booth identifies with Buddhism and Christianity. She doesn't overlay her Irish warrior queen with a purely orientalized mystical pacifism; she tempers Irish legend with a blend of "eastern" and "middle eastern" religions that have been funneled through Europe. *The Triumph of Maeve*, then, doesn't get caught up in a celebration of idealized native Irishness.[69] It critiques the war-like tendencies that legendary Irish figures epitomized.

Gore-Booth's later writing on the Gospel of John clarifies the logic of this ethic that Fionavar experiences so suddenly and completely when she sees the abjection and carnage of the battlefield:

> "'True Christian Love is something much more than goodwill, or even affection. Its mental side, the truth that is love, is what we call imagination. It is the power of projecting oneself into other people's lives so that one feels their sufferings as one's own. Where there is imagination there can be no cruelty or unkindness. It is not that the imaginative person thinks it wrong to make another suffer, [sic] it is that when another suffers he suffers himself. A soldier in times of war, with a little imagination, is a miserable being. A soldier, with a universal imagination, would not be able to kill another person of any nationality whatever…'"[70]

Gore-Booth synthesizes creative capability (imagination) and relational understanding (pity) into her own theory of mystical human relating—an ethic of empathy whose logical end is pacifism. The realms of the artist and mystic once again converge on a political plain. In

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[68] Ibid. 10.

[69] See "Yeats and Decolonization" in Said, *Culture and Imperialism*. Said discusses the pitfalls of a nationalism that moves into nativism and Yeats's place as a poet of decolonization who fell into the "emotional self-indulgence of celebrating one's own identity" (229) and later, into reactionary politics.

[70] Quoted in Lewis, *Eva Gore-Booth and Esther Roper: A Biography*. 154. Gore-Booth refers specifically to John 17:20-23 in this passage.

Gore-Booth's view, that evolutionary science has uncovered the unity of "physical life" lends credence and concreteness to "what many people look upon as a mystical Eastern dream, that sense of unity which is the inspiration of all art, whether it is expressed in the subtle relations of the vibrations of colour and form, or the mysterious movements and affinities of rhythmical sound, or the strange new values and sympathies and identities involved in poetic imagery."[71] She doesn't explain or lend formal names to these "strange new values" that could easily refer to Imagism, but she clearly ties the value for unity to aesthetic creation and innovation, a notion which I'll explore in more detail in Chapter Four. It's an ideal that art and non-resistance share, an ideal she names as essentially mystical and religious.

Beyond "Any Golden Goal of Empire": Mystical Pacifism and Political Sovereignty

In addition to Fionavar's mystical empathy, the artist figure Nera—the harpist-poet who left the life of the sword to sing stories of Tirnanogue—bears responsibility for urging Maeve to choose mystical pacifism. Through Nera's influence on Maeve, Gore-Booth foregrounds mystical pacifism's perceived threat to political sovereignty. Nera consistently beckons Maeve to turn away from her warrior life and towards the mystical contemplation and peace of Tirnanogue, the Land of Youth that Gore-Booth more specifically describes as "the country of the mind, which can only be entered by a pilgrim who has cast aside anger and power and worldly possessions."[72]

After Fionavar's death, Maeve returns to the Great Hall at Rath Cruhane, where a feast has been prepared for her victorious homecoming. The warriors gossip about Maeve's change, suspecting that she lives "'as if a spell/Ha[s] fallen upon her.'" They speculate that

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[71] Gore-Booth, *Religious Aspects of Non-Resistance*. 9.

[72] ———, "Appendix B: Materials from *The Death of Fionavar*." 219.

she could be grieving the loss of Fionavar or bound in a "'Druid trance/That dulls her sense and wraps her soul away./For her lips murmur many a strange word….'" Whatever the case, they sing of "the hour of the Triumph of Maeve" and expect the victorious queen to reward them with the spoils of war.[73] Maeve angers them by not showing favoritism and instead dividing the loot equally among everyone present. She shows little interest in her position as queen or in her followers' clamors for their rightful shares.

The conflict between mystical pacifism and political power then plays out in a series of cases that are brought before Maeve for her judgment. Nera's brother Conal asks her to settle a land dispute. The queen, with impatience, grants Conal the lands, saying that Nera is a "'dreamer'" and "'has no need of land'" because he "'has much treasure in his soul.'" A warrior wants vengeance because his wife ran away with another man, but Maeve will not indulge him. She tells him: "'Love is not thine,/Or joy my gift to give or to withdraw./No law can help thee to hold fast these things.'"[74] Fionavar's imaginative pity has effected a paradigm shift for Maeve, who now operates under the belief that some things are beyond the control of political rule and law. Land, the possession so crucial to Irish livelihood and so central to Anglo-Irish colonial conflicts through the centuries, has become less important than spiritual wealth.

Mystical pacifism locates guiding principles for ethical conduct outside the traditional sites of political office, legal court, and even cultural tradition. Gore-Booth recognized this relocation as provocative and surmised that reacting parties would lay the blame on mystical artists and mystical pacifists. Fergus, for example, reacts to Maeve's judgments by questioning her ability to rule. Nera, on the other hand, sings "The Well of Wisdom," in

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[73] ———, "The Triumph of Maeve." 82, 84.

[74] Ibid. 86, 87.

which he claims that the Queen will find wisdom in nature, not in "the judgment hall" or the "warring seas." The crowd thinks Nera has "'bewitched the Queen/With words.'" To them, his song equals "'treason and red murder,'" "'contempt poured on the throne/And sovereign power of Connaught.'"[75] In the warriors' minds, the poet is a dangerous figure who leads one away from political power and clarity and fogs the mind with spiritual concerns and the "dream" of peace. The threat that mystical non-resistance poses to political sovereignty could not be clearer, and Gore-Booth knew she was addressing an audience for whom this affront was painfully acute. In her comments attached to the 1916 play, Gore-Booth acknowledged that "the idea of non-resistance" strikes "terror and antipathy" into "most people": "…gods and men alike shrink back from the coming of a new and terrible god, the god of war. The gentleness that is bringing new suffering in its train, the pity that is the sword that Christ said He came to bring into the world."[76]

The characters respond to Maeve's new worldview with anger and violence. A fight breaks out between Conal and Nera, in which Conal injures his brother. Sickened and depressed by the violent display, Maeve throws off her crown and royal robes and places the blood-stained primroses (Nera's now-soiled gift) in her hair:

> "Oh, lie thou there, thou crown of life and fate,
> Now is my heart for ever and ever free
> As the free starts beyond the ivory gate.
> For the last time these rags of royalty
> Cumber the soul; now will I find the way
> To Tirnanogue—the way to my own soul
> The way to the world's heart beyond night or day
> Or love or hate or any golden goal
> Of Empire; the inexorable doors
> Yield to the passionate rhythms of the wise.
> My feet are on the elemental floors,

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[75] Ibid. 89.

[76] ———, "Appendix B: Materials from *The Death of Fionavar*." 220.

> The fierce aethereal fires dazzle mine eyes.
> I did not save thee, Nera, yet will I go
> With thee— "[77]

Maeve renounces her kingdom and her position of power, opting for a crown of blood-stained primroses instead of the "rags of royalty." Tirnanogue, that "country of the mind," offers the way into one's "true self," as opposed to the "false self" that thrives on external power. Gore-Booth here positions it as a mystical, mythical "beyond" that is nonetheless within—an internal landscape that transcends the earth's daily rhythms, the intense emotions, and imperial ambitions. Maeve leaves to find it "like one in a dream."[78] Nera says that he'll meet her there, but a warrior stabs him and fighting ensues, with warriors scrapping for Maeve's crown and sword.

Gore-Booth pointedly addresses the fears that mystical non-resistance elicits in people, particularly the fear of losing the power of political self-rule. She drives her point home by lacing "triumph" with irony and then redefining it in terms of mystical, pacifist priorities. Fionavar's last words are, "'Is this the triumph of Maeve?'" and at the close of the Scene of the Death of Fionavar, Maeve realizes that her military victory is "'a grievous triumph.'"[79] Maeve's ultimate triumph lies in her renunciation of sovereignty attained and maintained through military violence.

Unlike the 1905 version of the play, *The Death of Fionavar* includes a prefatory poem that addresses "Poets, Utopians, bravest of the brave,/[…] Dreamers turned fighters but to find a grave." Taking up the often misunderstood and easily misconstrued position of "protesting the war but supporting the troops," Gore-Booth firmly but gently chides her

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[77] ———, "The Triumph of Maeve." 92.

[78] Ibid. 94.

[79] Ibid. 79.

fellow Irish who resorted to violence. The final lines of the poem distill the authorial wish at the heart of the play: "Would you had dreamed the gentler dream of Maeve…./Peace be with you, and love for evermore."[80] The play clearly depicts the follies and costs of violence; however, particularly in the political context of the Irish nationalist movement, the central disappointment of Gore-Booth's play is that it does nothing to soothe the tensions between mystical pacifism and political sovereignty. The characters choose one at the expense of the other. Unlike Gore-Booth herself, Maeve does not make the equally difficult choice of living a life that combines political engagement with mystical pacifism; she disengages completely from political life to make her way "into her own soul." One might claim that Maeve, rather than Gore-Booth, more accurately fits Yeats's description of one who dreams of "some vague utopia." And yet the play clearly positions mystical pacifism as a choice that has political ramifications—not as the inability to act but as the refusal to engage on the same terms as those who champion violence, plunder, and sheer political force. Set in contrast with Fionavar's imaginative pity and Maeve's mystical pacifism, Gore-Booth depicts the squabbling warriors as a warning of nationalism's extremes: anti-colonial nationalism that resorts to violence may no longer be able to distinguish itself from the violent colonialist forces it rails against.

May Sinclair and the Vortex of War

Gore-Booth's play undercuts the triumphant rhetoric of war. Placing it in dialogue with Sinclair's novel *The Tree of Heaven* (1917) foregrounds the malleability of mystical discourse—its divergent political implications, its philosophical and aesthetic valences. Sinclair's best-selling novel traces the lives of the four Harrison children—Dorothy, Nicholas, Michael, and John—as they are drawn into World War I. By the end of the third

[80] ———, "Appendix B: Materials from *The Death of Fionavar*." 218.

and final segment, the distinctly un-ironic "Victory" section, Dorothy's fiancé, many of Michael's friends, Nicholas, and Michael himself have all died in battle, and the youngest Harrison son is leaving home with anticipations of glory.

Though the novel gleans its title from the tree that stands on the Harrison property, perhaps the most striking metaphor in the novel is the vortex (the title of the novel's middle part), which Sinclair uses to identify any collective movement that has the power to absorb the individual self. Critics have successfully identified the vortex's relationship to Vorticism, the self-named artistic movement promoted by Wyndham Lewis through his short-lived publication *Blast* (1914-15). This group intersected with Sinclair personally through her contact with poet Ezra Pound, who signed the Vorticist manifesto and contributed to Lewis's publication. For this group of male writers, sculptors, and various visual artists, the vortex represented a rushing together of past and future into the present moment—vital, alive, and vigorous. They considered their art the revolutionary art of the individual, waging war on effete, ineffectual, imitative art tied to the past or the future. A few of their forceful (yet more tempered) descriptions from the pages of *Blast* include Henri Gaudier-Brzeska's declaration that "will and consciousness are our VORTEX,"[81] and Pound's descriptions: "The vortex is the point of maximum energy.[82] […] VORTICISM is art before it has spread itself into a state of flacidity [sic], of elaboration, of secondary applications."[83] Sinclair loosely models the group of young, self-proclaimed radical artists that Michael joins on the

[81] Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, "Vortex," *Blast*, no. 1 (June 20, 1914). 158.

[82] Ezra Pound, "Vortex," *Blast* 1 (June 20, 1914). 153.

[83] Ibid. 154.

Vorticists and other famous fellow-artists, providing fictionalized renditions of Pound, Gaudier-Brzeska, Lewis, and Yeats.[84]

To understand Sinclair's revisions of mysticism in the novel, the energy of the vortex bears less importance than the psychological posture of those who live in a state of paradoxical participation/resistance—of "detachment"—which affords them mystical experience. To that end, the subplots I'm most interested in are those of the two Harrison children who attempt to participate in vortices without being consumed by them. I've structured my analysis of the novel accordingly into two reinforcing halves. First, I'll explore Dorothy's resistance to the vortex of women's suffrage, and secondly, I'll examine the mystical-aesthetic fruits of Michael's restraint from completely surrendering to the vortex of modern art. By shaping Dorothy's and Michael's psychological states through the ideals of the Imagist aesthetic and the "stillness" of "eastern" poetry, Sinclair creates an orientalized, aestheticized mysticism that is "sane" and gives the artist a role in wartime—to acknowledge and convey the spiritual remunerations of war. Similarly to Gore-Booth, the philosophical backing for Sinclair's mysticism is the unity of all humans, but in the process of making mysticism and aesthetics new, Sinclair subsumes women's mystical vision, women's suffrage, and anti-colonial nationalism into the imperial war project. She looks to the war as a masculinizing, curative context for mysticism's feminine ills and celebrates the contact with the Absolute Self that war affords men.

Suzanne Raitt has traced the Vorticist influence on Sinclair's representation of ecstatic experience available to men in war, and Laura Stempel Mumford has shown that *The Tree of Heaven* posits war as a true community as opposed to the collective vortex of

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[84] Hrisey D. Zegger, *May Sinclair* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976). 91-92.

feminism.[85] Certainly Sinclair tries to valorize the war and turn its participants into saviors, but this objective goes hand in hand with her goal of recuperating mysticism. This latter goal has not yet received sustained critical attention. In doing so, I find evidence of the mystical underpinnings of modernist aesthetics and the psycho-aesthetic properties of mystical experience.

Make Them New: "Sane" Mysticism and "Direct Treatment of the 'Thing'"

Although modern critics have identified the vortex's ostensible origins in Vorticism, a few reviewers at the time of the novel's publication recognized its affinities with Imagism. In his February, 1918, review of *The Tree of Heaven*, Lawrence Gilman notes that "clearness and hardness" are "dear" to Sinclair, citing 11 textual moments in which she uses these qualities as descriptors. He draws the conclusion that "Miss Sinclair is obviously, these days, a spiritual Imagist, adoring clearness and hardness, clean surfaces and definite edges."[86] Sinclair also approached the spiritual or mystical through the field of psychology; she does hone in on the mystical aspects of aesthetic theory, but she wants to use that theory as a rubric for diagnosing and prescribing the psychological state of mystical experience. I'll

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[85] Laura Stempel Mumford, "May Sinclair's *The Tree of Heaven*: The Vortex of Feminism, the Community of War," in *Arms and the Woman: War, Gender, and Literary Representations*, ed. Helen M. Cooper, Adrienne Auslander Munich, and Susan Merrill Squier (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1989). 168-183. "Throughout the novel Sinclair uses the image of a 'vortex' to contrast false and dangerous attempts at community with the liberating form provided by war, as she describes the historical events that signaled the beginning of organized feminism's fifty-year hiatus (169).

[86] Lawrence Gilman, "The Book of the Month: May Sinclair's New War Novel," *North American Review* 207 (February 1918). 284. In the same month, a review by F.H. in *The New Republic* also calls Sinclair's art "clean and hard" but doesn't explicitly name these qualities as Imagist. See F.H., "The Rendezvous with Death," *New Republic* 14 (February 2, 1918). 28. Zegger notes Gilman's review and briefly mentions that "the influence of imagist principles is evident in individual scenes which are rendered by means of a collection of related images." He, like most readers of Sinclair, spends more time discussing the imagistic qualities of *Mary Olivier*. My point is not that Sinclair applied the imagist technique to *The Tree of Heaven* by concentrating on images instead of narrative, but that she rendered Imagist ideals into psychological states. See Zegger, *May Sinclair*. 93.

discuss this later in the chapter by looking at her review of Rabindranath Tagore's poetry and the way she pairs its mystic qualities with those of Imagism.

Sinclair came into contact with Imagism, and subsequently Vorticism, through Ezra Pound, to whom she began lending monetary support when he arrived in London in 1908.[87] I offered an account of Pound's involvement with the Imagists in Chapter One, but the group's tenets, which Pound enumerated in the March, 1913, edition of *Poetry* under "A Few Dont's by an Imagiste," are worth repeating here because they bear upon Sinclair's work:

> 1. Direct treatment of the 'thing,' whether subjective or objective.
> 2. To use absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation.
> 3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome.
> 4. The 'doctrine of the Image'—not for publication.[88]

Sinclair wrote in support of the Imagists, providing them the endorsement of an established author. Her poem "After the Retreat" was also published in the "special Imagist issue" of the *Egoist* on May 1, 1915. A month later, Sinclair published "Two Notes" in the same little magazine, one on H.D. and one on Imagism, taking it as her task to explain, praise, and defend both. Her explanation of Imagism focuses on the traits defined in Pounds first two "dont's." In this apologetic, she begins to articulate the mantra of "clear, hard, sane, and still" that she will repeat throughout *The Tree of Heaven*: "Haven't we had enough of passion and of the sentiment that passed for passion all through the nineteenth century?" she writes. […] And isn't it almost time to remind us that there is a beauty of restraint and stillness and

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[87] Suzanne Raitt, *May Sinclair: A Modern Victorian* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000). 183.

[88] Quoted in F.S. Flint, "The History of Imagism," *Egoist* II, no. 5 (May 1, 1915). 71. Flint comments: "Since then [since the 1914 *Des Imagistes: an Anthology*] Mr. Ezra Pound has become a 'Vorticist,' with a contradiction, for, when addressing the readers of *The New Age* he has made Imagism to mean pictures as Wyndham Lewis understands them; writing later for *T.P.'s Weekly*, he made it pictures as William Morris understood them." According to Flint, Pound's Vorticism is simply Imagism for the visual arts.

flawless clarity?"[89] Sinclair's choice of these adjectives clearly resonates with the Imagist principles of direct treatment and a strict commitment to *le mot juste*.

As noted above, Sinclair repeatedly uses these descriptors for two characters in her novel: Dorothy maintains the "clearness and hardness of her soul," and Michael remains "clear and hard" as well.[90] With his "'live verse,'" Michael tries to capture "clear hard Reality" and to avoid "collaps[ing] into the soft heap of contemporary rottenness."[91] His poetic objectives echo the correctives that Imagists tried to implement as well as Pound's sentiments about the bulk of modern poetry. Sinclair takes the Imagist aesthetic and turns it into a psychological state that enables her characters to resist vortices and to experience mystical contact with reality. In fact, as I'll show later, mystical contact with reality is exactly what she thought the Imagists were trying to achieve. Sinclair explores mysticism through the individual character's paradoxical participation in and detachment from collective movements. Curiously, it is through Dorothy Harrison's participation in the fictional Women's Franchise Union that Sinclair rewards sane, proper behavior with the privilege of mystical vision in contrast with the "insane ecstasy" of the collective body of suffragettes. She uses imagist aesthetic values to recuperate mysticism—to masculinize it and bring its ecstasy under control.

Dorothy Harrison attends a meeting of the Women's Franchise Union, run by the Blackadder sisters (ominously-named fictional counterparts of the Pankhursts). Although she believes in the cause of women's suffrage, Dorothy refuses to have the terms of her participation dictated. She writes suffragist literature without submitting to the authority of

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[89] May Sinclair, "Two Notes," *Egoist* II, no. 6 (June 1, 1915). 88.

[90] ———, *The Tree of Heaven* (New York The Macmillan Company, 1917). 226. "His fair, handsome face was set clear and hard. His yellow hair, with its hard edges, fitted his head like a cap of solid, polished metal."

[91] Ibid. 184, 185.

group's leaders and the sway of the crowd: "For Dorothy was afraid of the Feminist Vortex…. She was afraid of the herded women. […] She loathed the gestures and the movements of the collective soul…. She would not be carried away by it; she would keep the clearness and hardness of her soul."[92] The individual must stand apart from the "herd," which Sinclair goes on to associate with uncontrollable ecstasy, frightening energy, and untamed impropriety. Sinclair's representations of the collective suffragists participate in the late 19th- and early 20th-century trend of gendering mass culture as feminine while privileging the realm of "high culture" as male. As Andreas Huyssen points out, "in the age of nascent socialism *and* the first major women's movement in Europe, the masses knocking at the gate were also women, knocking at the gate of a male-dominated culture." Common images of "the raging mob as hysterical" and other representations of overweening, oozing life in the city, reveal that fear of the masses in this period "is always also a fear of woman, a fear of nature out of control, a fear of the unconscious, of sexuality, of the loss of identity and of stable ego boundaries in the mass."[93] The suffragists en masse represent these threats to Dorothy, and she seeks safety in psychological space of sane, masculine, individual mysticism.

Dorothy spends a month in Holloway Gaol after somewhat reluctantly participating in a women's suffrage march on the House of Commons in 1911. As she recounts to Frank Drayton when he comes to collect her on the morning of her release, she was on the verge

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[92] Ibid. 124.

[93] Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1986). 47, 52. Huyssen also cites Gustave Le Bon's influential study *The Crowd* (1895), which described the feminine characteristics of the masses. Huyssen argues that the modernist artist attempts to protect himself from being devoured by mass culture by reinforcing "the boundaries between genuine art and inauthentic mass culture" (53). Of course, Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* proves an interesting counterpoint as a novel in which the observations of the mass population walking through London, reacting to the bells, whistles, and airplanes of modern city life, form the collective consciousness of the narrative.

of leaving the demonstration because of her dislike for "'doing things in a beastly body,'"[94] when women started falling and the situation became somewhat dangerous. She stayed to aid the other marchers and was arrested with them. She assures Frank that during her arrest she "'didn't make one sound" and "'was perfectly lady-like and perfectly dignified.'"[95] In fact, during her "adventure," she was "'not insanely happy like some of the other women, but quietly, comfily happy.'"[96] Her presence at the suffrage demonstration lands her in prison, but her "lady-like" decorum and silence, her suitable and proper happiness, clear the space for the mystical vision that comes to her in prison.

Opponents of the suffrage movement argued a doctrine of separate spheres that condemned the public work and protests of its participants as unladylike and unnatural. They labeled suffragists as sexually unfulfilled if unmarried, neurotic, out of control, hysterical. The medical profession provided backing for these attacks. For example, in December 1908, physiologists wrote letters to *The Times* "ascribing suffragette conduct at public meetings to an outburst…akin to the dancing mania of the Middle Ages." Contributor T. Claye Shaw likened the phenomenon to "'the explosive fury of epileptics.'"[97] Sinclair adopts this perspective in order to disapprove of what she sees as aggressive and violent suffrage tactics and to subdue and contain mystic expression. Her inscription of the crowd as feminine threat includes a transference of the neuroses of medieval mystics onto the suffragettes.

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[94] Sinclair, *The Tree of Heaven*. 217.

[95] Ibid. 218.

[96] Ibid. 218.

[97] Brian Harrison, *Separate Spheres: The Opposition to Women's Suffrage in Britain* (New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers, 1978). 67.

The parallels become more evident when, on the evening of her release from prison, Dorothy attends the Banquet of the Prisoners, where throngs of people sing the "Marching Song of the Militant Women."[98] Dorothy tries to resist the "insane ecstasy and the tumult of the herd soul."[99] In particular, she's "fascinated and horrified" by her three unmarried aunts who have given themselves up fully to the song: "Aunt Emmeline sang shrill and loud; her body rocked slightly to the rhythm of a fantastic march. […] Her head was thrown back; and on her face there was a look of ecstasy, of a holy rapture, exalted, half savage, not quite sane."[100] This image recalls the painful ecstasy of medieval Christian mystics, such as Saint Teresa, whose pierced heart and ecstatic swoon Bernini famously sculpted, or, even more aptly, Margery Kempe, who caused public horror and embarrassment as her contemplation of Christ's crucifixion convulsed her body with sobs and a priest removed her from the church.[101] Emmeline's (and the suffragette collective's) ecstasy is "not quite sane" because it is bodily, noisy, uncontained, and public. It is not sufficiently "modern."

The preferred female experience of mysticism is a sane, private, individual, quiet ecstasy, not the out of control, ravenous excitement of the suffragettes en masse. This fear of mysticism as uncontrollable ecstasy and psychological disease is clear in Sinclair's essay "The New Mysticism" and sounds reminiscent of 18th-century condemnations of mysticism as a female, hysterical malady that flouted the rules of English decorum. In "The Making of Modern 'Mysticism,'" Leigh Eric Schmidt reports that in the mid-eighteenth century, the

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[98] Sinclair, *The Tree of Heaven*. 224.

[99] Ibid. 227.

[100] Ibid. 225.

[101] This incident occurred at St. Margaret's Church in Lynne, and it was only one of many similar visions, bodily experiences of Christ or Mary's sufferings, and outbursts of uncontrolled weeping that marked Kempe's life and earned her quite a reputation. See Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. W. Butler-Bowdon (New York: Devin-Adair Company, 1944). 126-129.

term "mysticism" served as an Enlightenment epithet for enthusiasm and ecstasy as signs of a "false religion." Masculine rationality and moderation were the signs of "true religion." Some hypothesized that the origin of mystical devotion was "disappointed love" and classified mysticism as a primarily female religion based on the lamentable sublimation of sexual desire into spiritual devotion.[102] Late in the novel, Sinclair takes on accusations that a soldier's war ecstasy is a form of "sex madness," but she does nothing to counter the same indictment in her depiction of women's ecstasy.[103]

In "The New Mysticism," published the same year as *The Tree of Heaven* and part of a larger work called *A Defence of Idealism*, Sinclair offers the "modern psychologist['s]" diagnosis of mysticism: Its "revival in the 20th century is precisely what you might expect in an age in which neurosis is the prevailing malady. […] And the sting of his observations will be in their truth."[104] According to Sinclair, the problem with Christian mysticism springs from its roots in a dualist Christian worldview that separates the human and bodily from the divine and spiritual. Under the restraints of dualism, the mystic cannot fulfill her longing to reach God while she lives in a body. This causes frustration and "spiritual torment"—a "restlessness" Sinclair contrasts with "eastern stillness."[105] She writes that most western mystics of the past, unlike eastern ones, didn't know how to "sublimate their libidos" but instead plunged into dangerous states by suppressing physical desire.[106] In these mystic

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[102] Schmidt, "The Making of Modern 'Mysticism'." 278.

[103] Michael sends Nicky another writer's poem that suspects war ecstasy is a form of "sex-madness," "submerged savagery bobbing up to the top—a hidden lust for killing." Nicky insists it's the possibility of being killed, not doing the killing, that brings the ecstasy (368).

[104] May Sinclair, "The New Mysticism," in *A Defence of Idealism: Some Questions and Conclusions* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1917). 251, 252.

[105] Ibid. 278.

[106] Ibid. 270.

states, the libido, "although transferred from a human and bodily object to a divine and spiritual one, is not transformed" or sublimated.[107] For Sinclair, "the Christian Mystics seem…seldom to have achieved a perfect and a safe detachment." Detachment is "the state of mystic dissociation from normal consciousness," potentially "a very dangerous state" because psychological dissociation can be connected to suppressions, obsessions, complexes, and fragmented personalities.[108] In *The Tree of Heaven*, male mystic experiences of war depict the pinnacle of healthy detachment from chaos even as the individual participates in it. In this state of mystical consciousness, the individual realizes his connection to the Absolute Self and finds tranquility in it.

Sinclair's aim isn't to dismiss mysticism altogether, then, but to recuperate it.[109] Much like Evelyn Underhill, with whom she was friends and whose work *Mysticism* she quotes, Sinclair was looking for a mysticism suitable for the psychoanalytically informed 20th-century subject. She wanted mysticism to offer the vitality and reassurance of contact with Reality—an experience of ecstasy that wasn't an escape from the restlessness of unfulfilled desire and wasn't an annihilation of the self. This "new mysticism" will not be "sickly," "morbid," or "hysterical," Sinclair predicts. Instead, it will be "a robust and joyous Mysticism, reconciled to the world."[110] To make her own mysticism, and to offer a remedy

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[107] Sinclair, "The New Mysticism," 257.

[108] Sinclair, "The New Mysticism," 268, 269.

[109] In addition to acknowledging mysticism's potential dangers and offering some remedies, Sinclair denounces current trends, such as séances, spiritualism, and theosophy, as invalid forms of mystical experience. See Sinclair, "The New Mysticism." 263-265. However, by the mid-1920s, Sinclair regularly attended spiritualist sessions run by Catherine Dawson Scott. Although she was worried that her mind had played a trick on her, Sinclair summoned her brother Frank, who had died in India in 1889. Sinclair wrote the introduction to Dawson Scott's *From Four who are Dead* in 1926. See Raitt, *May Sinclair: A Modern Victorian*. 134.

[110] Sinclair, "The New Mysticism," 289, 274.

for the neurotic tendencies frequently displayed by Christian mystics, she looked to poetry, to "the East," and to the First World War.

Taking these avenues to forge a "sane" mysticism or "healthy detachment" comes with some costs and raises some questions. For one, how can mysticism be "reconciled to the world" if it's not reconciled to the body? Sinclair's new and improved mysticism seems to question the value of the body, both literal and figurative. In the novel, it's apparent that relinquishing control of the body as Emmeline does or allowing it to become part of a collective body are inappropriate, undesirable forms of mystical expression. The narration belies uneasiness with any female mystical experience that flouts rules of public behavior for women. Ultimately, the loss of the body is less mourned than the potential loss of the individual soul, which reinforces the dualism that Sinclair wants to avoid. In her attempts to make mysticism sane, Sinclair adopts the binaries of man/mind, woman/body and imposes gendered codes of social behavior and appropriate bodily expression on her female characters. Much like "little Mamma" in her 1919 novel *Mary Olivier*, the narrative's "civilizing" rhetoric takes on an imperial posture in relationship to the unruly women whose behaviors it would monitor and chastise.

In response to the living, threatening, collective body, Dorothy longs for her "whitewashed prison-cell, for its hardness, its nakedness, its quiet, its visionary peace,"[111] and when she safely resists the pull of the vortex generated by the women, she "save[s] her soul;

[111] Elaine Showalter expands Dorothy's longing in this passage into women's desire for safety and uniqueness: "Inside that cell, women could preserve the illusion of specialness, of being different. Outside it, they encountered the complexity of being merely human. It is no wonder that they sometimes yearned to go back." See page 239 in Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1977). What counts Dorothy as special, however, is her ability to resist the suffrage vortex, to remain clear, hard, and sane—which she accomplishes while encountering others. At the banquet, Michael stands apart from the crowd as clear, hard, and sane as well.

it [stands] firm again; she [is] clear and hard and sane."[112] With its "hardness" and "nakedness," the masculinized space of the cell engenders the quiet, proper ecstasy of Dorothy's mystic vision. Again echoing Imagist aesthetic values, Dorothy's "clear and hard and sane" self distinguishes her from—in fact saves her from becoming—one of the "herd" of ecstatic, shrieking women. The novel presents them as a symptom of mysticism gone wrong, of neurotic, messy ecstasy that isn't under control of the sane (read "masculine") mind.[113]

From Suffragist's Vision to Soldiers' Bodies: Mystical Idealism and the Sacrificial Ethic

Though Sinclair aligns the suffragettes en masse with the unhealthier aspects of historical Christian mysticism, she doesn't dispense with the tradition altogether. She draws on the history of cloisteredness—the nun in her cell, the solitary mystic with her vision—when Dorothy tells Frank of her time in prison. Dorothy explains: "'…I was absolutely happy in that cell. It was a sort of deep-down unexcited happiness. I'm not a bit religious, but I *know* how the nuns feel in *their* cells when they've given up everything and shut themselves up with God. The cell was like a convent cell…. There ought to have been a crucifix on the wall….'"[114] Unlike the "insane" happiness of the female crowd, Dorothy's likens her individual happiness to the quiet, religious satisfaction of a cloistered nun. That "there ought to have been" the outward symbols of religious devotion in the cell reinforces

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[112] Sinclair, *The Tree of Heaven.* 225.

[113] Another example of the "masculinity" of Dorothy's mind, as well as the masculine valences of imagist clarity and hardness: Frances Harrison, Dorothy's mother, "wanted to see herself in the bodies of her sons and in the mind of her daughter. But Dorothy had her father's mind. You couldn't move it. […] Frances foresaw that this persistence…might, in time, become annoying in a daughter. […] She seemed to be saying already, in her clearness and hardness, 'What I am I am, and you can't change me.'" Ibid. 21, 22, 23.

[114] Ibid. 219.

her vision's participation in the history of mystical visions. Like Underhill, Sinclair grants mystical vision to a non-religious character. Though she was reluctant to participate, Dorothy was nonetheless imprisoned for a political act, and her vision has political implications in the novel:

> "I sort of saw the redeemed of the Lord. They were men, as well as women, Frank. And they were all free. They were all free because they were redeemed. And the funny thing was that you were part of it. You were mixed up in the whole queer, tremendous business. Everything was ended. And everything was begun; so that I knew you understood even when you didn't understand. It was really as if I'd got you tight, somehow; and I knew you couldn't go, even when you'd gone."[115]

In her attempt to articulate her mystic vision, Dorothy shuttles back and forth between contradictions, circling around the content of the vision with language that never concretely describes it. "Everything" was both ended and begun; Frank understood and didn't understand. Dorothy "knew [he] couldn't go," even though he had gone.[116] The sane, quiet, proper mystical happiness that enables Dorothy's vision will come with a cost. Most clearly, British imperialist nationalism will trump the women's suffrage movement and the Irish nationalist movement. Dorothy and her brothers will dismiss the rights and freedoms of particular people as lesser or irrelevant in the name of national unity during wartime.

One might expect a vision of freedom that occurs on the heels of a suffrage march to have something to do with women getting the vote.[117] However, the vision ultimately serves to valorize the war as redemptive, to idolize the soldiers as saviors, and to diminish

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[115] Ibid. 221.

[116] We later learn that Frank's going yet not going refers to his future going to war and dying. He leaves Dorothy (who has become his fiancée and has given up her plans to drive an ambulance in Belgium so he won't worry about her), but she has still "got him tight" in spirit.

[117] For instance, see page 304 in Gilbert, "Soldier's Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women, and the Great War." "In less detail but just as dramatically, Dorothy Harrison, one of the protagonists of Sinclair's *The Tree of Heaven*, has a mysterious epiphany when she is imprisoned as part of the prewar suffrage battle, an epiphany that turns out to be a proleptic vision of how women will get the vote in 'some big, tremendous way that'll make all this fighting and fussing seem the rottenest game.'"

the importance of the suffrage battle in comparison. After her friends, her fiancé, and two of her three brothers have died in the war, Dorothy interprets the "tremendous business" of her vision as the war: "'It's as if I'd seen that [Frank] and Lawrence and Nicky and Michael and all of them would die in it to save the whole world. Like Christ, only that they really *did* die and the whole world *was* saved.'"[118] The war has taken on a traditionally religious function. The would-be suffragette becomes the nun locked into a cell alone with God, and feminine mystical vision serves to identify and interpret soldiers as saviors whose redemptive function is greater than Christ's and more all-encompassing than the aims of the suffragettes. Although she recoils from the violence of the suffragettes, Dorothy's vision validates the violence of the war by claiming it as redemptive. After the Banquet of the Prisoners, the aggressiveness of the WFU's tactics escalates, and by 1913, Dorothy writes for the Social Reform Union instead. Like Sinclair herself, Dorothy plans to volunteer with a medical unit in Belgium, although, unlike Sinclair, she receives training as an ambulance driver. Upon her fiancé's request, she relinquishes her plans and stays in Britain so he won't have to worry for her safety while he's fighting. Female mystical experience gives way to male mystical experience available in war, and the larger nationalist war project replaces women's suffrage work.

Sinclair saw self-sacrifice as an ethical act that individuals undertake for the betterment of the whole. Her "new mysticism," part of her assertion of Idealism, helps account for her privileging of male mystic war experience over women's ecstasy and the war over the suffrage movement. In 1902, she told the Irish writer Katharine Hinkson, 'as I have no faith…I've had to make my own mysticism, & perhaps it's a queer thing.'"[119]

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[118] Sinclair, *The Tree of Heaven.* 405.

[119] Raitt, *May Sinclair: A Modern Victorian.* 86.

Sinclair had abandoned her mother's Christianity because, though she tried, she could not make it satisfy her skepticism. It didn't stand up to rigorous philosophical scrutiny and questioning. Sinclair worried that without religion, one would have no rational basis for ethics. She found her satisfaction in philosophical Idealism, which afforded her the possibility of ethics without the mediations of religion.[120]

In "The Ethical and Religious Import of Idealism" (1893), she argues that "man's knowledge of nature implies the presence of a Self in him that transcends nature, and cannot belong to him as a link in the chain of natural causes. As thinking subject, man is absolutely one with the eternal subject which holds the universe together in the grasp of thought."[121] Self-consciousness unites the individual self with the "eternal" or "metaphysical" or "Absolute" Self, and this unity with the Self also connects human individuals to one another. "Man's" life "is so inseparably bound together with other lives that his every thought and action must of necessity touch his fellows as nearly as himself. No development and no culture of the individual is complete that does not take into consideration his relations to his brother-men. They are more than his brothers or his fellows—they are HE."[122] Like Gore-Booth, Sinclair posits a mystical unity in diversity between the human and divine and between all humans, even citing the Upanishads as one articulation of the eternal subject or

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[120] Ibid. See especially Chapter Two for an account of Sinclair's philosophical, ethical, and theological struggle during this period of her life. After the publication of *A Defence of Idealism*, Sinclair proudly became a member of the Aristotelian Society for the Systematic Study of Philosophy, and in 1923 she was the only woman asked to contribute to a collection of writings by living philosphers (42 n.1). Raitt claims that this period was "a crucial stage in her negotiation of modernity," that her "commitment to reason over revelation marked her as a thoroughly modern woman" (43). Claiming "the modern," however, often includes holding in tension revelation and reason, mystical belief and skeptical inquiry, as I hope this dissertation shows.

[121] May Sinclair, "The Ethical and Religious Import of Idealism," *The New World: A Quarterly Review of Religion, Ethics, and Theology* 2, no. 8 (1893). 698.

[122] Ibid. 702.

self (terms Sinclair uses interchangeably). She radically diverges from Gore-Booth in her interpretation of what such unity demands, though.

Unity with the metaphysical or eternal Self is the only possibility that can "justify the ethical necessity of self-sacrifice" in a culture that prizes the "sanctity of the individual subject" and that person's right to the best life possible. The "deep mystery" of human personality is the "union of the universal and individual"—and therefore, one who sacrifices the individual self for the greater good of those other selves to whom she is bound in unity, experiences the paradox of losing life to find it.[123] For Sinclair, ethical development requires self-sacrifice, and the self-sacrifice of ego-centered humans can only be explained by their connection to an eternal Self that unites all. In the novel, Dorothy sacrifices the goals of suffrage in order to support the war effort—the men whose sacrifices outweigh all others in effecting not just the common good—but nothing less than spiritual redemption for the world.

Thus Sinclair's belief in mystical unity within diversity and the sacrificial ethical demands it requires helps clarify Dorothy Harrison's fraught relationship to the suffrage movement and even some of Sinclair's own ambivalence about women's suffrage. Though she and Violet Hunt stood on a street corner in Kensington with a collection box in 1908 and she wrote essays in support of the suffrage movement, Sinclair wanted to maintain her own self-possession and exhibited an individualistic fear of the *populus*. Raitt states that Sinclair "wanted to find a way to support the suffrage movement without becoming too involved in the life of the streets and of the prisons." [124] She joined the Women's Freedom

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[123] Ibid. 701, 702. Although Sinclair doesn't reference the source, this phrase "losing one's life to find it" is a version of Jesus' words in Matthew 10:39, part of the same passage that Gore-Booth references with her "sword of pity."

[124] Raitt, *May Sinclair: A Modern Victorian*. 110, 109. Also see Sinclair's "Message" in *Votes for Women* 1 (March 1908) with Elizabeth Robins and "How It Strikes a Mere Novelist." *Votes for Women* 2 (24 March 1908).

League in 1908, but her membership lapsed in a year. She did participate in a suffrage march on June 18, 1910, walking with the Women Writers Unit.[125] According to Raitt, Sinclair was concerned that the vote might actually impinge on her freedom as an unmarried woman who made her living by writing. She thought as people sought her support she would be distracted from getting work done. She became "more cautious in her support" as militancy and violence increased, and her active involvement waned around 1912.[126]

Sinclair's support for the war, on the other hand, exhibited fervor instead of ambivalence.[127] Britain joined World War I in August, 1914. On September 18, 1914, Sinclair was one of 25 writers who signed an "Authors' Declaration" in *The Times*, stating that Britain had to support the war as a matter of honor.[128] Three of her nephews enlisted; two died in 1915, and one, a POW, died of pneumonia in 1918 after being sent home because of illness.[129] Sinclair told Katherine Hinkson in 1917 "that 'pacifism is the one awful temptation we have to steel ourselves against. To me it's the worst conceivable treachery to the men who've fought & died since 1914, & to their wives & mothers & children. It's real pity & real tenderness to fight on & save the world.'"[130] Sinclair's emotionally-loaded, dramatic rhetoric indicts pacifism as a form of spiritual treason.

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[125] Ibid. 110, 111.

[126] Ibid. 111, 112.

[127] Zegger speculates that Sinclair may have "grown critical" of *The Tree of Heaven* later when she became less enthusiastic about the war and its failure to "inaugurat[e] a new era of selfless cooperation among all classes of English society." He writes that this hope didn't last for long after the armistice, as indicated by her post-war novels. See Zegger, *May Sinclair*. 94.

[128] Raitt, *May Sinclair: A Modern Victorian*.150. In addition to Sinclair, the women who signed were Jane Ellen Harrison, Flora Annie Steel, and Mary (Mrs. Humphrey) Ward.

[129] Ibid. 165.

[130] Quoted in Ibid. 165. See also May Sinclair, *A Journal of Impressions in Belgium* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1915). 40. Upon witnessing wounded Belgians in a hospital ward, she describes the moment as transcendent, feels adoration for them instead of pity, and feels herself absolved by their sacrifices.

Reversing Gore-Booth's use of the term, she argues that "pity" motivates one to fight, not to abstain from it. Gore-Booth warned against the "best intentions" as rationalizations for war. Fionavar suffers and dies from imaginative pity when she views the slaughters of the battlefield, and Maeve protects her self by renouncing society's proclivities for violence and possessiveness. Setting aside the suffrage movement and its work on behalf of the population of British women, Sinclair moves on to the good of "the whole." She rhetorically positions an entire "world" in need of rescue, and in her creative endeavors, she "steels" her characters against the treachery of pacifism with a properly mystical frame of mind.

Modernist Poetics for the Mystical Mind

A week after the Authors' Declaration appeared in print, Sinclair went to the Belgian front as a correspondent for an ambulance unit.[131] She recorded her experiences and published them as *A Journal of Impressions in Belgium* in 1915.[132] In the introductory material, she reassures her readers that, instead of dulling the memory, the "slight lapse of time" between each experience and the writing of it "crystallized it and made it sharp and clean."[133] This is yet another trace of the Imagist aesthetic in Sinclair's thinking and writing.

Sinclair, the "spiritual Imagist," as the reviewer dubbed her, links Imagist aesthetics to mystical experience. Pound defined an "Image" as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. […] It is the presentation of such a 'complex' instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of

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[131] Raitt, *May Sinclair: A Modern Victorian*. 147.

[132] See Suzanne Raitt, "'Contagious Ecstasy': May Sinclair's War Journals," in *Women's Fiction and the Great War*, ed. Suzanne Raitt and Trudi Tate (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997). 65-84

[133] Sinclair, *A Journal of Impressions in Belgium*. Page "2" of the un-paginated introduction.

the greatest works of art."[134] By Pound's estimation, the Image is experienced as a transcendent moment, unbounded by temporal and spatial constraints or barriers between subject and object. Sinclair's description of the aims of the Imagist sound remarkably mystical as well. In "Two Notes," she writes:

> The Image is not a substitute; it does not stand for anything but itself. Presentation not Representation is the watchword of the school. The Image, I take it, is Form. But it is not pure form. It is form *and* substance. […] What the Imagists are "out for" is direct naked contact with reality. You must get closer and closer. Imagery must go. Symbolism must go. There must be nothing between you and your object. […] The fusion is complete.[135]

The Image offers presence, not re-presence, and a "fusion" of the writer and her object of description. Thus, art can be contact with, the form and substance of, reality itself, not merely a re-presentation of it. Sinclair identified this quality as the achievement of Dorothy Richardson's technique—that her novels directly presented consciousness itself—Miriam Henderson's "consciousness going on and on" without filter. Sinclair-as-critic had a hand in articulating and interpreting the mystical significance of modernist technique, identifying mystics and modernist writers as those who "plunge" into Reality.[136]

The First World War helped her crystallize her aesthetic, psychological, and philosophical inscription of mysticism. "Direct naked contact with reality," contact with the eternal Self that unites all human selves through consciousness, can occur in religious, artistic, and martial modes:

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[134] Pound, "A Retrospect."He explains that he uses "the term 'complex' rather in the technical sense employed by the newer psychologists, such as Hart, though we might not agree absolutely in our application." Raitt points out Sinclair's attraction to the psychological aspect of the Image. Also, Pound's description of the experience of the Image sounds similar to Clive Bell's description of the kind of transcendent experience significant form should provide for the viewer. See Clive Bell, "The Aesthetic Hypothesis," in *Art* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1931).

[135] Sinclair, "Two Notes." 88.

[136] ———, "The Novels of Dorothy Richardson." 57, 58. and Sinclair, "The New Mysticism." 241.

> Not only all religious experience is full of it, but every poet, every painter, every musician knows the shock of contact with reality. The vision of absolute beauty while it lasts is actually a laying hold on eternal life. […] And there is an even higher state of certainty than these. Almost every other hero knows it; the exquisite and incredible assurance, the positively ecstatic vision of Reality that comes to him when he faces death for the first time. There is no certainty that life can give that surpasses or even comes anywhere near it. And the world has been full of *these* mystics, *these* visionaries, since August, 1914.[137]

War shifts mystic vision to its ultimate seers—primarily the male soldiers who face death. And this vision, this "contact with reality," incorporates the artist's vision of the beautiful and the saint's vision of immortality.

Moments in *A Journal of Impressions in Belgium* reveal Sinclair's synthesis of aesthetic perception, mystical experience, and war, recording the closest she felt that she, as a woman, could get to the mystic experience so readily available to soldiers:

> We go along a straight, flat highway of grey stones, through flat, green fields and between thin lines of trees—tall and slender and delicate trees. There are no hedges. Only here and there a row of poplars or pollard willows is flung out as a screen against the open sky. This country is formed for the every expression of peace. […]It is all unspeakably beautiful and it comes to me with the natural, inevitable shock and ecstasy of beauty. I am going straight into the horror of war. For all I know it may be anywhere, here, behind this sentry; or there, beyond that line of willows. I don't know. I don't care. I cannot realize it. All that I can see or feel at the moment is this beauty. I look and look, so that I may remember it.
>
> Is it possible that I am enjoying myself?
>
> I dare not tell Mrs. Torrence. I dare not tell any of the others.[138]

In this excerpt, Sinclair obviously feels somewhat ashamed of experiencing the "shock and ecstasy of beauty" when she "should" feel sobered at the prospect of driving into the "horror of war." The male characters in her novel, however, feel no such compunction.

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[137] Sinclair, "The New Mysticism." 269.

[138] ———, *A Journal of Impressions in Belgium*. 10-11.

Aware of possible critiques of their mystical take on war, Michael and Nicky Harrison defend their experiences as one part of the truth about war.

For Sinclair, "stillness," like clarity and hardness, is an aesthetic quality as well as mystical state of consciousness. As Suzanne Raitt points out, the "transcendental immobility" Michael experiences as part of his "solitary mysticism" emerges in part from a Vorticist aesthetic.[139] The pages of the Vorticist publication *Blast* attest to their similarity: "The Vorticist is at his maximum point of energy when stillest. The Vorticist is not the Slave of Commotion, but it's [sic] Master."[140] In this stillness within movement, the soldier attains and asserts artistic-mystical vision. However, considering the overlaps Sinclair makes between mysticism and aesthetics, as well as her interest in "modernizing" both, I believe the "stillness" under discussion more closely and significantly ties to Sinclair's understanding of "eastern" mysticism.

Like Yeats, Sinclair heard Rabindranath Tagore read his poetry at William Rothenstein's and she effusively penned his praises. In her 1913 review of *Gitanjali*, Sinclair's encomium leads her into a comparison between eastern and western mystics. Western Christian mystics are at war with physical desires, struggling in vain to shed them so they can breach the gulf between themselves and the "Transcendental Being."[141] As a result, "restlessness" seeps out in their writings through their "violent rapture," "deeper tragedy," and "emotionalism."[142] Mystics such as Tagore who write from eastern traditions instead

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[139] For a discussion of the influence of Vorticist ideas about visual representation and movement on the novel's description of war mysticism, see Raitt, *May Sinclair: A Modern Victorian*. 174-176.

[140] "Our Vortex," *Blast* 1 (June 20, 1914). 148. The Vorticist "stillness" sounds more like will and mastery than peaceful detachment or transcendence—more concerned with power.

[141] May Sinclair, "The Gitanjali or Song Offerings of Rabindra Nath Tagore," *North American Review* 197 (May 1913). 661.

[142] Ibid. 667.

enjoy a stillness: "I know nothing so pervasive as the glamour of this Eastern stillness," Sinclair opines, "nothing that evokes so irresistibly, so inevitably the sense of the Unseen."[143] Four years later, the still-enamored Sinclair, like Yeats, essentializes Indians as natural-born mystics: "the Indian takes to the Absolute like a duck to water" and can spiritually attain by age 16 what a westerner can't attain until 60, when the physical passions naturally subside.[144]

Stillness belies a state of mystic consciousness that is detached from, but nonetheless appreciates, the "seen" world—that is at peace with it. Perhaps more importantly, it signals a self, that, because detached from the world and not swallowed up in it, can more readily engage with the Absolute. Sinclair saw this ability as inherent to Indians and more broadly, but no less essentially, located in the East. Therefore in 1917 she writes, "It is to the East that we must turn to find the highest and the purest form of Mysticism."[145]

For the review of Tagore's poetry, Sinclair drew on her familiarity with the writings of both eastern and western mystics and with the Upanishads. New translations of the Upanishads by Robert Ernest Hume and Max Müller appeared in 1877 and 1879 (the first English translation having been published in 1832). In the fall of 1881, Sinclair had left home to attend Cheltenham Ladies' College and came under the leadership of Dorothea Beale, who ignited her interest in ancient Hindu literature. Sinclair's poem "Nakiketas," from *Nakiketas and Other Poems* (1886), takes as its source a legend from the Katha-Upanishad, the third section of the Vedas.[146] Sinclair had not only read these eastern texts; she felt protective of them. In "The New Mysticism," her main complaint against the Theosophical

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[143] Ibid. 665, 667.

[144] Sinclair, "The New Mysticism." 272.

[145] Ibid. 272.

[146] Raitt, *May Sinclair: A Modern Victorian*. 24 and 31.

Society is that she disapproves of the way its leaders handle the "Sacred Books of the East."[147] And in her article entitled "Symbolism and Sublimation," she acknowledges that Carl Jung's treatment of the Upanishads as "primitive" religious material "offend[s]" her.[148] Sinclair thought that the mysticism of these texts, as well as the "pure high mysticism" of *Gitanjali*,[149] the apotheosis of mystical thought and art. They offered the remedy for Christian dualism's tendency to turn mysticism into mental illness.

Though she concedes that many writings of medieval Christian mystics are records of the neurotic, unhealthily detached mind and the unsublimated libido, Sinclair insists that they shouldn't be judged solely with the "literalism of the pathologist." In these writings, one finds "the beginning of a naïf art, and where art is there is sublimation."[150] The common language for mysticism and aesthetics that Sinclair establishes through qualities like stillness, clarity, and hardness shows up in her descriptions of Tagore's craft as well. In 1913, she writes that Tagore's "phrase, his rhythm, is infallibly the most perfect, the most crystalline medium of his symbol, his symbol the most crystalline and perfect medium of his thought. The result is an incomparable unity of rhythm and language, of language and idea."[151] In 1915, as previously noted, she praises some of the same qualities in the Imagists'

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[147] Sinclair, "The New Mysticism." 265.

[148] "I do not mind—in fact I greatly admire his treatment of the myths themselves and of all the primitive religions, rituals, and mysteries. […] I do not resent his psycho-analysis of saints and poets (there are some of the Catholic mystics and a whole colony of modern bards whom I would cheerfully hand over myself to him to do what he likes with). I do not mind his running amok among my Early Vedas. But when he lays violent hands upon the Upanishads, then—well, then I simply cannot bear it; and if he were not a scholar and psychologist I should call his behaviour unscholarly and unpsychological. For he is dealing here not altogether with 'primitive' raw material, but with material already highly sublimated…." May Sinclair, "Symbolism and Sublimation II," *Medical Press and Circular* 153 (16 August 1916). 143.

[149] Sinclair, "The New Mysticism." 274. She also agrees with the statement Tagore made on his visit to England, that the East is to spiritualize the West.

[150] Ibid. 286.

[151] ———, "The Gitanjali or Song Offerings of Rabindra Nath Tagore." 662-663.

new approach to poetry that she extols in Tagore's: "And isn't it almost time to remind us that there is a beauty of restraint and stillness and flawless clarity?"[152] By shaping her characters' psychological states through these qualities, Sinclair creates an orientalized, aestheticized mystical experience that gives the artist a role in wartime—to acknowledge and convey the "spiritual compensation for physical torture."

Political Conversion, Spiritual Compensation

Though in her philosophical pursuits Sinclair rejected Christian theology, she found its language of conversion, redemption, and sacrifice indispensible for her conceptions of the war's value. The character Michael Harrison exemplifies the "religious" strains of changing political positions and of war-induced fervor. Like Dorothy, he has a sharp, clear mind that can resist the chaotic pull of vortices. He pens experimental poetry but internally resists the intolerant unanimity of thought that has begun to plague the group of young artists who fancy themselves revolutionaries who will wipe away the artistic gods of the past. He is also the singular Harrison who has consistently opposed British imperial power and instead supported Irish Home Rule. While his brother Nicky eagerly designs a "moveable fortress" (a prototype for the tank) and quickly enlists, Michael refuses to fight and continues to write poetry, to the disapproval of his family. In a letter written to Michael from the war front, Nicky consents to his brother's accusation that "War takes [him] like religion," but reminds Michael that conversion is a possibility even for the most stubborn holdouts, writing, "So if you're going to be converted let's hope you'll be converted quick [sic]."[153] Michael's resistance guarantees that he is the war's most prized "convert" when he finally decides to enlist.

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[152] ———, "Two Notes." 88.

[153] ———, *The Tree of Heaven*. 365.

His conversion moment occurs soon after witnessing a group of Highlanders going off to war with looks of "stern ecstasy" on their faces. The bagpipes that accompany their departure make "one mournful, savage, sacred cry," and Michael's "soul [rises] up above the music, and [is] made splendid and holy."[154] The Highlanders, like the group of suffragettes, exhibit a kind of ecstasy and the scene is both "savage" and "sacred." Unlike the suffragettes, however, the Highlanders do not represent a dangerous vortex because their purpose is sacrificial and noble, for the good of everyone. Seeing these one-time opponents of the English now willingly go to fight with them, Michael does an ideological about-face:

> For the first time since August, nineteen-fourteen, he found himself thinking, in perfect freedom and with perfect lucidity, about the War. He had really known, half the time, that it was the greatest War of Independence that had ever been. As for his old hatred of the British Empire, he had seen long ago that there was no such thing, in the continental sense of Empire; there was a unique thing, the rule, more good than bad, of an imperial people. […] Now that he could look at it by himself he saw how the War might take hold of you like a religion. It was the Great War of Redemption. And redemption meant simply thousands and millions of men in troop-ships and troop-trains coming from the ends of the world to buy the freedom of the world with their bodies. […] He wondered how at this moment any sane man could be a Pacifist.[155]

Sinclair marks Michael's new support for the war with the Imagistic values of lucidity and sanity, making room for a new mystical-aesthetic perception in her artist-soldier. He re-thinks the British Empire as an "imperial people" instead of as a mechanistic system of conquest and oppression. He conceives of empire as a community gathered together in the cause of "independence" and "redemption"—a combination of political and religious freedoms "bought" with male bodies. Michael enters into the mystical economy of war, in which blood sacrifice yields immeasurable spiritual reward.

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[154] Ibid. 375. In *Mary Olivier*, Sinclair continues her fascination with the "holiness" and "sacredness" of selves at greater length.

[155] Ibid. 377.

The emphasis on the mystical-aesthetic experience of and outcomes of war in *The Tree of Heaven* results in the representation of war as "a perversely bodiless affair."[156] Like Dorothy in her convent-like cell, quiet and separate from the flailing bodies of suffragists, Michael's mystical war experience focuses on perception, on a vision that excludes the ghastly bodies that war makes. Sinclair anticipated this criticism, for she allows Michael to address the inevitable accusation. In a letter to his recently widowed sister-in-law, Veronica, he writes:

> Of course we shall be accused of glorifying War and telling lies about it. Well—there's a Frenchman who has told the truth, piling up all the horrors, faithfully, remorselessly, magnificently. But he seems to think people oughtn't to write about this War at all unless they show up the infamy of it, as a deterrent, so that no Government can ever start another one. It's a sort of literary 'frightfulness.' […] He's got his truth all right. As Morrie would say: "That's War." But a peaceful earthquake can do much the same thing. And if our truth—what we've seen—isn't War, at any rate it's what we've got out of it, it's our "glory," our spiritual compensation for the physical torture, and there would be a sort of infamy in trying to take it from us.[157]

As Sinclair would have it, Michael, Nicky, and any others who admit they've received "spiritual compensation for the physical torture" of battle, simply acknowledge the full range of war reality—a psycho-spiritual truth that accompanies the truth of what happens to one's body.[158] This compensation consists of the mystical experience that results from facing death. Nicky writes that one is "bang up against reality," that "the sense of it's exquisite,"[159] and that to be first out of the trench is "absolute happiness" and "simply heaven."[160]

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[156] Raitt, "'Contagious Ecstasy': May Sinclair's War Journals." 67.

[157] Sinclair, *The Tree of Heaven*. 396, 397. Zegger identifies the Frenchman as Henri Barbusse, who included war's brutalities in his book *Under Fire*. See Zegger, *May Sinclair*. 90.

[158] This is similar to what Sinclair claims for herself on the first page of the Introduction to A Journal of Impressions. Instead of solely factual reportage, "for many of these impressions [she] can claim only a psychological accuracy…."

[159] Sinclair, *The Tree of Heaven*. 369.

[160] Ibid. 368.

Michael calls it an "exquisite moment," as well as "the point of contact with reality" when "you lay hold on eternal life, and you know it."[161]

Though at the time she felt a bit chagrined for deriving aesthetic pleasure from the Belgian landscape while its citizens were fighting and dying in the war, Sinclair's writing similar mystical-aesthetic pleasures into the war narrative "reflects a transference to men of the liberation she herself experienced when she worked in Belgium with the Munro Corps."[162] Again, her entries in *A Journal of Impressions in Belgium* bear this comparison out. Traveling between Bruges and Ghent, the corps of which Sinclair is a part enters dangerous territory:

> A curious excitement comes to you. I suppose it is excitement, though it doesn't feel like it. […] Your heart beats quietly, steadily, but with a little creeping, mounting thrill in the beat. The sensation is distinctly pleasurable. […] It is only a little thrill, so far (for you don't really believe that there is any danger), but you can imagine the thing growing, growing steadily, till it becomes ecstasy. Not that you imagine anything at the moment. At the moment you are no longer an observing, reflecting being; you have ceased to be aware of yourself; you exist only in that quiet steady thrill that is so unlike any excitement that you have ever known.[163]

The "curious excitement" and "quiet steady thrill" of Sinclair's growing ecstasy becomes a full-blown mystical experience of Absolute Reality in the novel. In a letter to his sister-in-law, Michael writes:

> [The mystic experience of war] *is* absolutely real. I mean it has to do with absolute reality. With God. It hasn't anything to do with having courage, or not having courage; it's another state of mind altogether…. It isn't excitement…. It's all curiously quiet and steady…. Your body and its nerves aren't in it at all. Your body may be moving violently, with other bodies moving violently round it; but *you're* still.[164]

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[161] Ibid. 396.

[162] Gilbert, "Soldier's Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women, and the Great War." 298.

[163] Sinclair, *A Journal of Impressions in Belgium*. 12-13

[164] ———, *The Tree of Heaven*. 395. Italics in the original text.

In addition to mirroring the curious, quiet, steady thrill of Sinclair's experience, Michael's description recalls Dorothy's mystic happiness, her quiet peace in the "nun's cell" of her prison room and in the middle of the howling body of suffragettes. The inner self remains still and anchored in the midst of its own bodily movement and the movement around it. The emphasis on "*you're*" reinforces Sinclair's claim from "The Religious and Ethical Import of Idealism": the self resides primarily in consciousness, not in the body. In the realm of consciousness, it participates in the eternal Self (or the Absolute Reality). It retains its position of control and separateness that characterizes Sinclair's notion of the detachment that's essential for healthy mysticism.

In the novel, Nicky articulates awareness of the self's simultaneous individuality and unity with the eternal Self in the language of artistic perception. One might become increasingly accustomed to seeing the brutalities of war, but "it's all in the picture, and you're in the picture too. There's a sort of horrible harmony."[165] Only viewing the war landscape as a "picture" allows the soldier to perceive a "horrible harmony" in its parts, the aesthetic whole which includes the individual. Therefore, war offers a vision of Absolute Reality—an ability to see one's self within the picture of the larger Self. This is what Sinclair hoped and predicted for the mysticism of the future, that it would exchange "God the Father for God the Absolute Self."[166]

Ironically, conceiving of the Absolute in one's own image, so to speak, and claiming war as the most potent conduit for realizing this conception, can place Sinclair's Idealistic, aesthetic mysticism in a field with artists whose politics she opposed. Considering the bombastic aesthetic politics of the Futurist Marinetti, Walter Benjamin writes that Fascism

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[165] Ibid. 366.

[166] ———, "The New Mysticism." 289.

> expects war to supply the artistic gratification of a sense perception that has been changed by technology. This is evidently the consummation of '*l'art pour l'art*.' Mankind, which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art.[167]

Sinclair has crafted an aesthetic war mysticism in which a soldier can experience the *possibility* of his "own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order," not because of self-alienation (which she would argue is the unhealthy detachment of neurotic mystics), but because of the self's healthy detachment—its ability to see itself in the larger picture of the Absolute Self that unites all selves. Only a fine line can distinguish Sinclair's construction of aesthetic war mysticism from Benjamin's diagnosis of the "consummation" of art for its own sake.

Perhaps that line is simply Sinclair's own insistence, for she repeatedly makes her case through Michael's conversion. He resisted entering the war for so long because his "religion" is "Beauty as the supreme form of Life." He asks how one dedicated to making and preserving beauty could "consent to take part in this bloody business?"[168] But Sinclair offers the artist a comparable experience to "the shock and ecstasy of beauty" she felt in Belgium and the "sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art" that Pound attributes to the power of the Image. After becoming a soldier, Michael sees how it "all hangs together;" he realizes that danger is not "the only point of contact with reality. You get the same ecstasy, the same shock of recognition, and

[167] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968).241.

[168] Sinclair, *The Tree of Heaven*. 329.

the same utter satisfaction when you see a beautiful thing."[169] The novel suggests that the nation needs the artist to create the possibility of mystical, transcendent experience through art itself and to bring that vision into the experience of violence and suffering—to transmute war experience into aesthetic, mystical experience and to then relate it to others. In one of his letters, Nicky confirms this need. If Michael entered the war, Nicky imagines, "he'd write a poem about [the mystical experience of it] that would make you sit up. It's a sin that I should be getting all this splendid stuff when I can't do anything with it."[170]

After the War

In short, Sinclair "did something with it" and hoped the war would revive British literature and a national life that she regarded as deadened to mystical contact with Reality. In an unpublished paper titled "Influence of the War on 'Life and Literature,'" she makes this longing clear:

> Most of us…were ceasing to live with any intensity…and to feel with any strength and sincerity. Yet we were all quite sincerely 'out for' reality without recognising it when we saw it and without any suspicion of its spiritual nature. And Reality—naked, shining, intense Reality—more and not less of it, is, I believe, what we are going to get after the War.[171]

After the war, British writers were still preoccupied with mysticism. Like Gore-Booth, Mary Butts and Sylvia Townsend Warner's fictions look to the ancient past and magically-powerful female figures for its source. However, instead of a vision of the Absolute Self or the imaginative unity of self and other, they instead reflect the generational rifts, authoritarianism, chaos, and power struggles that the war fed on and generated. They pick up on the fascinating link between sovereignty and mystical states exemplified in Maeve's

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[169] Ibid. 397.

[170] Ibid. 368.

[171] Quoted in Raitt, "'Contagious Ecstasy': May Sinclair's War Journals." 68.

renunciation of political power and property and Dorothy's determination to have controlled, "sane" mystical experience: they're grounded in the logic of possession, which is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE
PRIMITIVE MAGIC, SACRED PROPERTY, AND THE LOGIC OF POSSESSION IN *ASHE OF RINGS* AND *LOLLY WILLOWES*

Inheritances and Dispossessions

Until 1925 with the passing of the Administration of Estates Act, the common law of primogeniture barred women from inheriting land unless they had no brothers.[1] That same year, Mary Butts published *Ashe of Rings*, and in 1926 Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willowes* appeared. Similarly to *Orlando* (1928), in which Virginia Woolf used fantasy and myth-making to imaginatively restore the Knole estate to Vita Sackville-West, these authors also wrote women's relationship to property through the fanciful and magical. In both novels, the central female character uses "primitive" magic to claim some form of property for herself years after the death of her father and her subsequent displacement from the family home.

These narratives of physical and familial displacement of women in England can be set against a broader historical backdrop of colonial displacement and dispossession. As Said reflected, "the actual geographical possession of land is what empire in the final analysis is all about."[2] Though Van Ashe and Lolly Willowes come from privileged English families, the narratives align them with dispossessed, colonized subjects through the discourses of property and the practice of primitive magic. The discourse that constructed native peoples as savage and the British colonizers as civilized justified the dispossession of native populations: they didn't know how to use the land properly, to develop it and use its resources, so the argument went. This perception of "colonial land as waste awaiting development and its inhabitants as backward and lazy" resulted from a long history of

[1] Garrity, *Step-Daughters of England: British Women Modernists and the National Imaginary*. 27.

[2] Said, *Culture and Imperialism*. 78.

English property theory that declared laboring on land (making it productive) causes it to acquire value and justifies the individual property rights of the one who labors (or who claims "ownership" rights to those who labor).[3]

In these two novels of the mid-20s, I find that the confluence of discourses on primitivism and property rights inflects representations of magic (what some called primitive mysticism) and the self. Scholarly work on these authors often attends to the presence of "the natural" and "the primitive," and to the link between nature, nation, and woman. Butts's text in particular prompts critics to discuss her concern, as was E.M. Forster's in *Howards End*, for the spiritual inheritance of England.[4] Critics have pointed to the costs of these associations and preoccupations—the isolation from community for Lolly and the construction of Englishness built on exclusion of the racial and national other for Butts's characters. While my analysis surely demands attention to these elements, the main kernel of my argument lies elsewhere, in the discourse of possession that informs Butts's and Townsend Warner's strategies for the restoration of their characters' selves. To counter the inheritance of modernity's industrialization, imperialist dispossessions, political disenfranchisements, and wars that produce the self's spiritual malaise, Butts and Townsend Warner graft Lolly and Van into a different lineage, a pagan, magical legacy.[5] Lolly's and

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[3] Cole Harris, "How Did Colonialism Dispossess? Comments from an Edge of Empire," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 94, no. 1 (2004). See 171-174.

[4] See Garrity, *Step-Daughters of England: British Women Modernists and the National Imaginary*.; Andrew Radford, "Defending Nature's Holy Shrine: Mary Butts, Englishness, and the Persephone Myth," *Journal of Modern Literature* 29, no. 3 (Spring 2006).; Patrick Wright, "Coming Back to the Shores of Albion: The Secret England of Mary Butts (1890-1937)," in *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (London: Verso, 1985).

[5] In *The Tradition of Return*, Jeffrey M. Perl argues that modernism and modernist scholarship "accept what he calls an A-B-A historical paradigm." The B phase represents Christianity, while A represents modernism and paganism. Quoted in Surette, *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, and the Occult*. 50, 51. Both novels associate Christianity with the early 20th-century culminations of modernization that I've listed above.

Van's narratives express longing for a primitive, original, essential strategy—a recuperative harvesting of ancient magic to counter the mechanized blight of the modern self.[6] In their attempts to rescue Van and Lolly from modernity's psycho-spiritual burdens, Butts and Townsend Warner turn to another strand of modernity's inheritance—the philosophy of sacred property. My reading of primitive magic and property reveals that, in these texts, to have freedom, autonomy, and life is to own one's self.

Attending to 18th- and 19th-century applications of "sacred" to political rights and property, drawing on discourses of the self and property, and contextualizing the novels with primitivist scholarship of the period, I aim to show that Townsend Warner's and Butts's texts turn to primitive magic and attempt to secure property—objects, an entire estate, and/or the self—as sacred. My analysis focuses more closely on moveable objects of possession, instead of land, to show how the logic of possession underwrites the construction of primitive magic and the self in these novels. In *Ashe of Rings*, expanding attention from solely the land to objects of possession unsettles the discourse on nature as the seat of pure Englishness. While the focus on the natural remains in *Lolly Willowes*, looking to objects of possession exposes the complex discourse of Lolly's self as property and illuminates the subtle play between possession and belonging, isolated autonomy and community.

How the main characters think about possession results from the particular engagement with magic each author has constructed and the kind of self it requires and sustains. Both rely on binaries that pit the rural, natural, and magically life-giving against the urban, mechanical, and materially deadening. They understand magic as an idealized

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[6] Surette addresses this view of the past and its opposite, the tendency to read the ancient past through an evolutionary lens that identifies the ancient as a savage and crude. See Ibid. 56.

primitive religion, but they add their own emphases and variations. For Lolly Willowes, witchcraft is inextricable from "the natural," a primitive power that withstands the forces of nation, empire, state religion, and the patriarchal family. Lolly relinquishes her family traditions of property accumulation and of remembering ancestors through imperial souvenirs and enters instead into witchcraft's "satanic" economy. Through her contract with Satan, Lolly reclaims her natural self and garners protection for it, rendering her Satan's sacred property. Maintaining the rigid boundaries of her sacred self leads Lolly to reject any familial, social, or national roles that might be demanded of her. Instead of trying to determine an absolute status for Lolly as either autonomous or owned, my reading aims to open up the possibility and limits of possession-as-belonging in order to explain the contested nature of Lolly's position.

In *Ashe of Rings*, Van Ashe returns to her family's estate to reclaim her rightful place and to secure her inheritance from the machinations of Judy, a young woman who practices black witchcraft in order to win Rings for herself. Proprietorship and propriety entwine as the novel differentiates between Van's life-giving, properly "English" primitive magic and Judy's death-seeking, "un-English" primitive magic. Unlike Lolly, Van draws on her magical heritage to secure the sacredness of family property, in the forms of exotic objects, the house, and the land itself. Like the Willoweses, the Ashe family narrates its collective identity through objects collected via imperial channels. Though her primitive magic is also connected to the natural landscape of Rings, Van's role of rescuer and guardian emphasizes magic as an enactment of the self's will on behalf of the individual and the community at large. Through the "word of power," the magic becomes a spiritual and political art, the adept a kind of artist-activist.

Before moving into the novels themselves, it's necessary to address the question, "Why include magic in a project that purports to be about mysticism, and why, nested within the category of magic, tackle the subject of witchcraft?" Magic and mysticism both attempt to grant their practitioners access to a transcendent reality, but the desires for this access and means by which it is attained differ. To lay some groundwork for the chapter, I would like to sketch briefly some overlapping and divergent traits of magic and mysticism, to introduce magic's ties with mysticism through primitivism, and then to use the historical tensions between magic and Christianity as well as primitivism's preoccupation with the sacred to introduce the concept of sacred property.

Primitive Magic, Mysticism, and Sacred Property

The categories of mysticism and magic overlap so frequently that it's hard to tease them apart, even though many early 20th-century individuals attempted to do so, including some of the primary authors covered in this dissertation. May Sinclair, Evelyn Underhill, Ezra Pound (who accepted occult gnosis but scoffed at "Yeats's ghosts"), Mary Butts, and others advocated for certain kinds of occult, magical, mystical experience, claiming some to be more reputable, believable, or true than others. To current readers, certain forms of occult magic still remain more palatable than others, which is why Leon Surette, in his seminal work on the occult's influence on modernism, focuses on the more "bookish," philosophic and literary, strands of magic, as opposed to séances, palmistry, astral projection, witches' Sabbaths, and the like. Surette explains that, while occultists include mystics and founders of world religions within their fold, it is the "possibility of illumination through initiation [that] distinguishes the occult from mysticism." Adepts pass magical ritual and gnosis down through initiations and texts accessible only to the enlightened.[7] Mysticism

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[7] Ibid. 13, 14.

requires no ritual initiation and demands no secrecy. Underhill puts the difference in terms of desire: "magic wants to get, mysticism wants to give…." The mystic longs to join the self, through love, "to the one eternal and ultimate Object of love," while the magus longs for "supersensible knowledge."[8]

Even though they distinguish between forms of magic and mysticism, early 20th-century writers as well as their late 20th-century counterparts agree that magic and mysticism share a "primitive ancestor" in mystery religions. Underhill and Surette each explain that modern magic "is the last descendant of a long line of teaching—the whole teaching, in fact, of the mysteries of Egypt and Greece—which offered to initiate man into a certain secret knowledge and understanding of things."[9] Grace Jantzen identifies mysticism's same roots: "The mystics or mystical ones were those who had devoted themselves to the mystery religions and had been initiated into their secret rituals."[10] Applying an evolutionary perspective to the history of magic and mysticism, May Sinclair claims that the "humble origin" of modern mysticism is "primitive and savage Magic" used for fertility purposes. For Sinclair, the longing to have more life is the thread that leads from one evolutionary stage to another: magic becomes mystery when the strategy for fertility is union with a god.[11] Drawing from Jane Harrison's *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, she explains that "[i]t is in the Greater Mysteries of Eleusis, in the Sacred Marriage and the Sacred Birth that the conception of fertility broadens and deepens, and that the Life-Force appears as the

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[8] Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*. 70. On the same page, she also writes that mysticism and magic "represent as a matter of fact the opposite poles of the same thing: the transcendental consciousness of humanity. Between them lie the great religions, which might be described under this metaphor as representing the ordinarily habitable regions of that consciousness."

[9] The quote here is Underhill's. Ibid. 152. For the same historical moment of magic's origins, see Surette, *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, and the Occult*. 13, 14.

[10] Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism*. 27.

[11] Sinclair, "The New Mysticism." 243.

stupendous and the divine thing it is." Sacred Marriage began as a fertility rite and "ends in the adoration of Life itself; and becomes itself a *rite de passage* from the Lesser Mystery of the body to the Greater Mysteries of the soul."[12] Sinclair's reliance on Harrison points to the role of 19th- and 20th-century primitivist scholarship in helping establish the "familial" connection between magic and mysticism.

Both Townsend Warner and Butts read from the slew of anthropological, sociological, and archaeological work published on primitive religion from 1890-1925 and inscribed magic and witchcraft as such in their fiction. Townsend Warner enthusiastically read Egyptologist Margaret Murray's *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921), while Butts steeped herself in James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890-1915), Jane Ellen Harrison's *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1903) and *Themis* (1912), as well as numerous occult works.[13] One of the primary concerns of such early 20th-century studies of primitive and contemporary religion was the role of "the sacred."[14] The classic definition that has remained with religious studies scholars is French sociologist Emile Durkheim's. In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912), he traces religion as a social formation in primitive and modern cultures and identifies the division between sacred and profane as the primary trait of religion. Durkheim explains that a group of people can deem anything as sacred to them—a person, a rite, a stone, a snake—and claims that "the sacred thing is *par excellence*

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[12] Ibid. 244.

[13] Butts was an autodidact of occult literature, and she read new works in psychology as well. In the spring and summer of 1919, she read the French 19th-century magician Eliphas Levi's history of magic, *Dogme et ritual de haute magic* (1861), Jung, Freud, and the Irish poet AE (George Russell). In 1920, she made a Bibliography of Magical Books, which included Henry Kramer and James Sprenger's 1489 *Malleus Maleficarum* (which Rodker republished in 1928). That year she also made a list of Literature of the 4th Dimension, which included "anything in Dostoevsky" (including his novel *The Possessed*) and Yeats's 1918 autobiography *Per Amica Silentiae Lunae*. See Nathalie Blondel, *Mary Butts: Scenes from the Life* (Kingston, New York: McPherson and Company, 1998). 63, 76-77.

[14] Other examples include R.R. Marett's *The Threshold of Religion* (1909); Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* (1917); Nathan Soderblom's *Holiness (General and Primitive)* (1913) and *The Origins of Religion* (1914).

that which the profane should not touch, and cannot touch with impunity."[15] Although Durkheim's definition of *sacred* as prohibited, protected, or untouchable confines itself to religious practice, the history of the English use of *sacred* in its adjectival form exposes the conjunction of *sacred* and a concept not exclusively religious: *property*.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* records the usage of *sacred* as "of things, places, of persons and their offices, etc.: Set apart for or dedicated to some religious purpose, and hence entitled to veneration or religious respect; made holy by association with a god or other object of worship; consecrated, hallowed." This use of *sacred* ostensibly describes the provenance of religion. As it turns out, *sacred* has a history of double usage that blurs the borders of "religious" and "secular." It can also denote "secured by religious sentiment, reverence, sense of justice, or the like, against violation, infringement, or encroachment" or, similarly, "of a person (hence of his office): Having a religiously secured immunity from violence or attachment; sacrosanct, inviolable."[16] The examples offered for this latter sense of the word demonstrate the importance of *sacred* in the "secular" political realm: they include "the rights of man were sacred in his view" (1781), "maintaining what in the new vocabulary of modern democracy is named the sacred right of insurrection" (1793), and "he

[15] Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (New York: The Free Press, 1915). 55. Although scholars have since criticized Durkheim's insistence that the sacred and profane are mutually exclusive categories, Durkheim did note that the profane can be made sacred through transformative rites and processes. Critics have also grown increasingly uncomfortable with the notion of "the sacred," which assumes an a priori transcendent category. Paden defends Durkheim against this charge by pointing to Durkheim's almost exclusive use of the adjectival form. Durkheim described objects that were "made" or "considered" sacred by people; he didn't claim them as part of an essential category of the sacred. See William E. Paden, "Before 'the Sacred' Became Theological: Rereading the Durkheimian Legacy," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 3, no. 1 (1991). Following Durkheim, in a subsection of *Themis* called "Sanctity is pre-theological," Jane Harrison wrote that "a thing is regarded as sacred, and out of that sanctity, given certain conditions, emerges a *daimon* and ultimately a god." See page 63 in Jane Ellen Harrison, *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1912).

[16] "Sacred," in *Oxford English Dictionary*. Online. Accessed November 23, 2009.

assured them that their property would be held sacred" (1849).[17] These examples emerge quite notably during the period of the American and French Revolutions and reflect expansion of the protective power of sacralization to *rights* (of man and of insurrection) and to *property ownership*, the rights of the individual claim that also makes the property itself sacred.[18] To attack, damage, or steal one's property is to inflict the same harm on the owner's self.

The history of witchcraft illustrates the divide between sacred and profane and the zealous treatment of private property as sacred. Under the umbrella of the occult,[19] the broad designation magic and the narrower category of witchcraft, which traditionally implies magic performed in service of Satan, share a history of conflict with the Christian church. Occultists write their own history as one of suppression and persecution in relationship to ecclesiastical authority, and knowledge of this fraught history makes its way into the novels through Van and Lolly's conflicts with the Christian members of their families. Practitioners of magic often view organized religion as a profanation of occult gnosis,[20] whereas those outside of magical circles consider witchcraft rites to be profanations of Christian rituals. Such attempts to delineate and define, to outline and preserve and fortify the borders of a system of beliefs and practices, participate in the notion of maintaining the "sacred" as "unscathed," protected from the mockery and debasement of profanation. Both Townsend Warner and Butts upend the notion of magic as a form of profanation. In *Ashe of Rings*,

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[17] From William Cowper's *Charity*, Bishop Samuel Horseley's *Sermons*, and Thomas Babington, Lord Macaulay's *The History of England from the Accession of James II*, respectively.

[18] See Michel Despland, "The Sacred: The French Evidence," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 3, no. 1 (1991). and Carol E. Burnside, "The Left Hand of the Sacred," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 3, no. 1 (1991).

[19] I've chosen to use "magic" instead of "occult" because it's the term used in the novels, and because, unlike Surette, my chapter does deal with the less intellectualized strains of magic, such as witches' Sabbaths.

[20] Surette, *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, and the Occult*. 15, 28.

Melitta, Van's Christian mother who is highly uncomfortable with the Ashe magical legacy, profanes the magical sanctuary of Rings by having an affair there. By endowing him with sacralizing, protective power, in *Lolly Willowes* Townsend Warner attempts to undo the notion that Satan and his minions are the great profaners.

The prosecution of witchcraft also sheds light on the torturous, intimate relationship between mysticism, magic, and Christianity. On the European continent, an accused "witch" was often labeled "false mystic" or "heretic" in opposition to the "true mystic" who worshiped God and was faithful to the Church. Grace Jantzen notes that "witches were perceived to be the mirror image of true mystics." As the Church was the mystical body of Christ, heretics, witches, or "false mystics" made up the mystical body of Satan.[21] More commonly in England, witchcraft was instead "punished as an anti-social crime; the charge was always *maleficium*—evil-doing."[22] These charges of evil-doing frequently concerned property, the implications of which prove significant to my work in this chapter, as I argue that even as Butts and Townsend Warner use primitive magic to question or oppose powerful British institutions, such as state religion or imperial war, the very same primitive magic helps their characters reclaim land, objects, or the self as sacred property.

Therefore, the centrality of the logic of possession in these texts complicates their inscriptions of primitivism. In *Primitive Passions*, Marianna Torgovnick notes that the primitivist inclination towards deep connection with the natural world and all living things challenges normative western values such as hierarchy, the autonomous self, and property

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[21] Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism*. 269 and 246. Also see Mircea Eliade, *Occultism, Witchcraft, and Cultural Fashions: Essays in Comparative Religions* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1976). "Some Observations on Witchcraft," 73: "…now it is a well-known fact, that, from the eighth century on, popular sorcery and superstition were progressively equated with witchcraft, and witchcraft with heresy."

[22] Carolyn Matalene, "Women as Witches," *International Journal of Women's Studies* 1, no. 8 (1978). 578.

ownership.[23] In *Ashe of Rings* and *Lolly Willowes*, primitive magic has survived the passage into modernity, but it has been inflected with modern understandings of private property, the same discourses I mentioned earlier that were used to dispossess the "primitives" in other cultures. The primitivism Townsend Warner constructs for Lolly values material simplicity over property accumulation, but it relentlessly adheres to the notion of the autonomous self even though that self is only made possible through a kind of sacred property agreement with Satan. Van Ashe, the character whose story I'll address first, summons her primitive magic to protect her family property and beat back the malevolent, consuming tides of war.

Reclaiming the *Temenos* of a "Profoundly English Life": *Ashe of Rings*

Mary Butts penned the first version of *Ashe of Rings* during the years 1916-19. The initial five chapters were serialized in *The Little Review* in 1921, but the "little magazine" couldn't afford to publish the remainder of the novel. Butts couldn't find a publisher until 1925, when *Ashe of Rings* was picked up by Contact Editions in Paris, by A.C. Boni in the U.S. in 1926, and by Wishart & Co. in England in 1933.[24] With its modernist allusiveness, elliptical style, and idiosyncratic associations, all critics, divided as they were as to its merits, agreed that the book was challenging.[25] The novel primarily concerns itself with the reinstatement of Vanna Elizabeth Ashe, or Van, to her rightful place as magical heir of the Rings estate. The narrative divides into three parts, the first set in 1892 when Van's father, Anthony Ashe, returns to England from "the East." Intent on providing an heir for Rings,

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[23] Marianna Torgovnick, *Primitive Passions: Men, Women, and the Quest for Ecstasy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997). 15.

[24] Blondel, *Mary Butts: Scenes from the Life.* 36, 145.

[25] Ibid. 147.

Anthony selects the lovely and naïve Muriel Butler for a bride, renaming her Melitta, which means "bee," "honey," or "honey-sweet" and has roots in classical myth.[26]

Like the rest of Butts's work, *Ashe of Rings* is replete with mythological and occult allusions and resonances. Anthony has hoped for a wife and child he can educate in the magical rituals that have been passed down from generation to generation of Ashes (whose very name recalls the World Ash tree of Norse mythology[27]), but his new Christian bride recoils from pagan practices, and their divided world views set up familial rifts. Anthony and Evans the tutor take charge of Van's education, isolating Melitta from her daughter. Anthony dies not long after Melitta has an affair with Morice Amburton, who owns a neighboring estate. Melitta marries Amburton and soon gives birth to Valentine Ashe, a boy everyone assumes is Amburton's son. As she grows up and resists Melitta's attempts to make her into a proper young lady, Van's relationship with her mother grows increasingly conflicted.[28]

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[26] According to myth, the infant Zeus was nourished by bees. For additional significances of bees, honey, and the name Melissa (a version of Melitta), see Arthur Bernard Cook, "The Bee in Greek Mythology," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 15 (1895), http://www.jstor.org/stable/624058. In her journal, Butts wrote notes for Ashe under the title "Mystica Vannum Iacchos," the winnowing fan or van of Bacchus from which Van gets her name. See Mary Butts, *The Journals of Mary Butts*, ed. Nathalie Blondel (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2002). 84, 91 and Jane Ellen Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, Reprint of 3rd edition ed. (New York: Arno Press, 1975). 517-534.

[27] Mary Butts, *The Crystal Cabinet: My Childhood at Salterns* (London: Methuen and Co., 1937). See page 50. Around age 10, Butts reads *The Lays of Ancient Rome* and thinks it's a "most mysterious and Interesting Thing. […] But I was standing at the opening of a mysterious door. One of the doors into the Garden of Eden, as I dimly guessed. Looking across and threshold into a garden, where I saw, not trees as it said in the poem, but the Tree. The Golden Bough growing, the Tree of Knowledge, not yet of good and of evil, but of pure knowledge; and already I saw man, not Heaven, forbidding me its fruit. The Tree that was Yggdrasil, the Hesperidean, the Irminsul. In whose bough I was to pass, like Odin, many nights. With Adonis and Atys and Osiris, the reward of the vigil, the key to the book called *The Golden Bough*." The eponymous "tree of heaven" from Sinclair's novel is, according to Mr. Harrison, just a plain ash tree, though Dorothy's mother insists that it makes their home like Paradise.

[28] See Mary Hamer, "Mary Butts, Mothers, and War," in *Women's Fiction and the Great War*, ed. Suzanne Raitt and Trudi Tate (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997). Hamer analyzes the problem of the "bad mother" in Butts's fiction. In *Ashe of Rings,* Butts "shows her readers a woman robbed of her daughter, she gestures helplessly towards the ruthless division between women on which patriarchal authority supports itself, and yet at the same time she represents the mother's loss as a just one" (235).

The novel's next section finds Van in London in 1917, living on the little money she makes by taking acting roles. She has befriended Serge, a young Russian émigré painter who is in hiding as a conscientious objector, one of numerous fictional renditions of causes and relationships from Butts's own life. As a young woman Butts invested herself (as Eva Gore-Booth did) in work on behalf of conscientious objectors and the economically disadvantaged. In 1914, she graduated from the London School of Economics with a Social Science Certificate, the equivalent of a modern diploma in Social Work, and then started working in the East End on the Children's Care Committee.[29] Two years later, she worked for the National Council against Conscription, which was set up in 1915. In 1916, it broadened into the National Council for Civil Liberties.

Despite the fact that she had been living with her lover Eleanor Rogers for two years, she was also falling in love with John Rodker, a conscientious objector who was in hiding. After a year or so of turmoil, during which Eleanor threatened to inform the police of Rodker's whereabouts, Butts left Rogers for Rodker, whom she married in 1918. Although they wouldn't divorce until 1927, she left Rodker for Cecil Maitland in 1920 and paid a friend to look after Camilla, the child she had with Rodker, from 1921 onward.[30] In the 20s, Butts lived a bohemian life in England and France, full of partying, studying magic, and working on her writing. By the 1930s, her political sympathies had radically altered to embrace authorities she once actively defied, one example being that she wore a black armband to mourn the passing of George V in 1936. Her biographer Blondel explains that Butts's "support for the monarchy was surely prompted by her fear of Communism."[31]

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[29] Blondel, *Mary Butts: Scenes from the Life*. 30.

[30] Ibid. 2-6; 51; 90; 174. Camilla Elizabeth Rodker was born 7 November, 1920.

[31] Ibid. 393.

During the composition period for the highly autobiographical *Ashe of Rings*, however, Butts transferred her anti-war, anti-imperialist politics onto Van, who resolutely opposes certain manifestations of British imperialist power, such as participation in the First World War and the quashing of the Irish Uprising for independence. Van also exhibits an anti-authoritarian streak in her dislike of Melitta's attempts to police her behavior and her active attempts to thwart the police from locating Serge. The young, impoverished émigré is torn between his attraction to Van, whose beneficent magic functions as a force of life and thus anti-war energy, and his attraction to Judy, a struggling journalist whose dark, controlling magic represents the vicious, maddening forces of war. After being attacked by Judy, who bites him and then sucks his blood from her sleeve in order to "evoke an evil spirit," Serge leaves London with Van and travels to Rings. The third section of the novel takes place there, with Van reuniting with Valentine (who is actually Anthony's son) and attempting to convince Serge to accept Rings's life-giving, healing powers.

The conflict continues as Judy comes to the countryside and schemes to win Rings for herself. She enlists Morice's nephew Peter Amburton, a shell-shocked soldier, to help her. In the novel's climactic scene, she commands Peter to rape Van on the Rings. Van thwarts the crime by lying down on an altar-like stone and offering herself to the protection of Rings. When he can't find Van, who has magically become indistinguishable from the stone and moonlight, the terrified and confused Peter refuses to comply with Judy's demands any longer.

When Van, Val, and Serge inform Melitta of the attack and of Judy's desire to have Rings, the estranged mother doesn't believe them; she instead absurdly blames Van for being out unchaperoned at night. When Melitta goes to the Amburton estate to discuss the matter with Judy, however, she glimpses Judy's contorted face in a mirror and suddenly knows the

young woman is capable of evil. Convinced Van's story must be true, Melitta experiences a sudden turn in her allegiances. She feels contrition for the gulf between her and her daughter and returns to her children to be restored to the Ashe family. She even allows Van to show her how to perform a ritual act to reverse one of Judy's curses. Judy accepts temporary defeat and leaves for London. The family is restored and evil is kept at bay, but Van hasn't been able to heal Serge completely: she and the young painter whose will is weakened both know the likelihood that he'll eventually seek Judy out again. For the time being, Rings is safe, Van has warded off war and its forces of anti-life, and, as Butts noted in her journal, "the white magic has won again."[32]

In the 1933 Afterword, Butts addressed this tidy, restorative ending to a story that, in reality, would've ended bleakly:

> One sees now what it is—a fairy story, a War-fairy-tale, occasioned by the way life was presented to the imaginative children of my generation. […] While, because it is a fairy-story, it had to end happily, with the reconciliation of 'lost princesses and insufferable kings'. Yet one sees now that this would not necessarily have been the true end; that, as things are, there would have been far less chance of peace for the Ashe-children; nor would the mother have so easily accepted the magical leading, or her dead husband's will. […] One can think of any number of grim alternatives."[33]

Butts didn't have to imagine the alternatives. As I've mentioned, much of the novel's plot mimics her own autobiography—Van's investment in magic, her opposition to the Great War and the Anglo-Irish War, her affinity with her deceased father, her antagonistic relationship with her mother, the competition for her brother's allegiance. By May 1921, Butts wondered if *Ashe of Rings* was in fact "all prophecy," with Serge as "a ghost for Cecil"

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[32] Butts, *The Journals of Mary Butts*. See page 63, entry for 23 Oct. 1916: "In the novel—the girl's series of transitions, rites de passage—but the ecstacy [sic] won't come off—not to last. Anyhow the white magic has won again."

[33] Mary Butts, *Ashe of Rings* (Kingston, New York: McPherson and Company, 1998; reprint, *Ashe of Rings and Other Writings*). 232.

Maitland, her second husband, and Van as a prescient vision of herself. She cryptically followed up this speculation with, "That would mean money,"[34] most likely dreaming of the possibility that were her fortune to follow Van's, she might come into financial stability. But unlike Van, Butts never rescued her family's estate at Salterns or received what she thought to be her share. An inheritance to match her fictional heroine's was already out of the question in 1921 because in 1920 Mary's mother, recently widowed for a second time, had started to sell off parts of the land at Salterns. Three years later the house itself was sold and its contents auctioned.[35] Butts equated Salterns's dissolution to a kind of rape, writing that its "body" had been "violated" and "put to the uses men from cities do to such places as these." The "profoundly English life" she had known there was lost.[36]

Her intense response to the loss of her family's land and the encroachment of the city into the countryside has led critics to focus on Butts's connection of the Ashes, particularly Van and her magic, with the earth and with "the natural." They read Van as a regenerative Persephone figure who represents female wholeness and whose ties to nature and nation preserve English purity from outside pollutants.[37] Readers derive these interpretations mainly from Butts's Taverner novels but rightly find stirrings of them in *Ashe of Rings*. My reading of the novel focuses instead on the ways that primitive magic and myth are inextricable from the self's relationship to possessions and to its identity within a lineage, biological or magical. Butts's narrative, drafted from 1916-19 and revised in 1921, responds

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[34] Butts, *The Journals of Mary Butts*. See page 183, entry for 18 May, 1921.

[35] Blondel, *Mary Butts: Scenes from the Life*. 86.

[36] Butts, *The Crystal Cabinet: My Childhood at Salterns*. 19, 21.

[37] The Taverner novels are *Armed with Madness* (1928) and *Death of Felicity Taverner* (1932). In addition to the sources I've cited earlier in the chapter, I should mention Roslyn Reso Foy's book-length treatment of mysticism and magic in Butts's novels. While Foy explicates many of the novel's allusions to mysticism and magic ritual, she doesn't address their political implications (empire, Englishness, property) aside from their use as anti-war tools. See Foy, *Ritual, Myth, and Mysticism in the Work of Mary Butts: Between Feminism and Modernism*.

to the devastation of the First World War and the impossibility of inheritance with a turn to magic and mysticism, to ancient Greek and Norse mythologies, and to the happy endings that fulfill the longings for societal rejuvenation, familial and proprietary restoration, and for personal power. A brief account of the Butts estate will help explain the significance of its fictional counterpart in *Ashe of Rings*.

In 1863, Captain Frederick John Butts bought Salterns, a house situated in Dorset on 21 acres of surrounding land that reached south to the Isle of Purbeck and north to a set of prehistoric concentric earthworks called Badbury Rings. He married Mary Jane Briggs in 1888 and began a family two years later when Mary Franeis[38] Butts was born at Salterns on 13 December. Anthony Bacon Drury Butts (Tony) followed in 1901. The Captain died in 1905, and in 1907 Mrs. Butts married her husband's old friend Francis Frederick Musgrove Colville-Hyde, who in turn died in 1919.[39]

In the autobiographical account of her childhood at Salterns, *The Crystal Cabinet*, Butts declared of her family, "from our ancestors we had inherited, not land, but possessions and the love of them."[40] Much of the conflict between Mary Butts and her mother grew out of the elder Mary's management of those possessions. Mary Butts's great-grandfather Tom Butts had been a patron of William Blake, and the Butts family counted 34 Blake watercolors, engravings and his engraving cabinet, portraits, and sketches among their most cherished treasures.[41] In 1906, Mary Colville-Hyde sold the Blake collection, minus a few miniature portraits, to pay for the death-duties on the estate, an act which later appalled her

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[38] Butts had an unusual middle name, often misprinted as Francis.

[39] Blondel, *Mary Butts: Scenes from the Life*. 13, 15, 17, 18.

[40] Butts, *The Crystal Cabinet: My Childhood at Salterns*. 16.

[41] Ibid. 16. "The Crystal Cabinet" is also the title of a Blake poem, and Butts's daughter Camilla Bagg had her mother's gravestone inscribed with a line from it—"I strove to seize the inmost form"—30 years after her mother's death in 1937. See Blondel, p.422.

daughter. However, Butts admitted that "to a woman in her position, the solution was an obvious one. But it was a solution which sacrificed the future to the present."[42] The "murder" of the beauty housed in her father's books was even more devastating to the younger Mary. A week after Frederick Butts's death, her mother decided to burn the books she thought indecent, claiming, "'I don't mind how valuable they are.'" According to Mary Butts, her mother didn't have a "strong" and "trained intelligence" to "see through" the "pruderies of her training." Looking back on the period of her father's death and her mother's remarriage, Butts recorded her belief that "a period of illiteracy descended on Salterns. [The arrival of new books] ceased, and with them a life, and with a life an age, and with an age a spirit."[43]

Though Mary had been released from her mother's guardianship in 1911 and then began receiving an allowance her father had established, she would always depend on her mother financially. Even as late as 1936, Butts struggled with her financial relationship to her family. That year, Mary Colville-Hyde drew up a settlement that left money from the selling of a Holbein painting first to Tony, then his children, and then to Mary after their deaths. Biographer Nathalie Blondel notes that Butts "saw the whole matter as a rerun of the loss of Salterns, and she tried to get her mother to change the terms." When her mother didn't change her mind, Mary experienced the decision as her "virtual dis-inheritance."[44]

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[42] Ibid. 164: "For at that time, only a few years after the publication of Ellis and Yeats, the work of Blake was beginning to be known; all my life I can remember people calling at Salterns and asking to be allowed to see it. Thus the Blakes represented a security which at all costs should have been held out, a maturing investment. This my mother did not understand, …accepting for the whole collection a price that represented only a part of their value."

[43] Ibid. 110, 68.

[44] Blondel, *Mary Butts: Scenes from the Life.* 25, 406.

Butts attributed her survival of these losses—of her father, her home, familial inheritance and relational harmony—to an experience she had on Badbury Rings as a young woman, a compound of magical landscape and the spiritual constitution of a family and nation: "Something held. Something in my blood and training that came out of the very stuff of England, the fabric out of which her soul is made. The knowledge I share with my father, that he gave and elucidated in me."[45] Badbury Rings became *the* site of spiritual significance for Butts, and she based the Rings of her novel on them. In the novel, Rings is "'a place of more than animal life, real by itself, without any reference to [humans].'"[46]

The first description of Rings in the novel emphasizes that the estate is an enclave. Where the obstreperous sea beats the rocky cliffs of the shore, Rings "ended and the world began."[47] Farther back on the property is the natural feature from which the estate gets its name. "The first Ring raised its thirty feet of turf. A ribbon of chalk path ran along its crest, a loop a mile round. Inside was a second wall and within that a third." A barrow and mud-filled pond sit on the plateau above the rings, behind them lies a grove, and next to that a wood. "It had been calculated that, allowing for all projections, the house would fit exactly into the inmost ring."[48] The earth has shaped itself into a protective tower of turf rings inside and atop one another, and the centuries-old Ashe house was designed under the impression that it belonged to the Rings, that it could nestle within the inner ring. For centuries the Ashes and their home have drawn from the power of the circular landmark.

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[45] Butts, *The Crystal Cabinet: My Childhood at Salterns*. 273-4.

[46] ———, *Ashe of Rings*.169.

[47] Ibid.5.

[48] Ibid.6.

Their protective resistance, their mystery and their set-apartness, make the Badbury Rings and their fictional counterparts innately sacred sites to Butts and to the Ashes. Both in the novel and in *The Crystal Cabinet*, Butts describes Rings as a *temenos* or sacred space that traditionally surrounds a temple or altar. Though modern people missed their significance, "Roman Britain would have been quite definite enough about the Rings, and one had learned enough about them, from Eleusis and other places, that here was a *temenos*, and a place for initiation… [into] a correspondence, a translation…between the seen and the unseen."[49] In looking to Roman Britain and to Eleusis, Butts shares the modernist tendency to shape and interpret the present by overlaying it with the events and beliefs of the ancient past; therefore, characters in *Ashe of Rings* recognize antiquity as a primary feature of the sacred. Members of the Ashe family see themselves as the indigenous guardians of this ancient site that that they believe has housed, protected, and sustained them with its power. When Anthony Ashe finds Melitta and Amburton conducting their love affair on Rings, he tells them, "'Leave this place. Any other part of my grounds are at your disposal [sic]. […] Only leave the temenos of my race.'"[50] The Ashes consider Rings the hallowed seat of ancient magic, pure Englishness, and whiteness, as Anthony's invocation of "race" indicates. Van's return to Rings in Part II of the novel begins her mission to reclaim her rightful place as "true Ashe," the protector of Rings as a sacred site and beneficiary of its power.

While Van most certainly lives to protect the ancient earthworks of Rings and her family gleans its identity through the natural site, my reading of the novel suggests that looking at Ashe property—its realty *and* its goods—clues us into the fact that the family's magical identity isn't derived solely from the English landscape. The narrator gives much

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[49] ———, *The Crystal Cabinet: My Childhood at Salterns*. 276.

[50] ———, *Ashe of Rings*. 39.

attention to the house and the objects within it. Artifice, in the form of collected exotic objects, overlays the novel's preoccupation with "the natural." This ornamentation implicates the Ashes in imperial consumption and unsettles any assertion of pure, earthy Englishness. Van draws on her inheritance of primitive magic to protect the sacred property of Rings and to ensure the sacred, inviolable status of family objects as well. In doing so, she strives to preserve her self as well as the world from destructive forces of possession.

Seeing the World with "Collector's Eyes": Exotic Objects and the Décor of the Self

Through the family's possession of magical objects, Butts fashions magic as a kind of interior decorating—an orientalized décor of exotic objects carefully arranged and revered by the Ashes as their own personal collection. For the Ashes, the self is intimately connected to the Rings and is also externally on display through the collection of objects inside the house. I have mentioned that Butts wrote *Ashe of Rings* in part as an aesthetic reworking and re-imagining of her own familial history and that possessions play a prominent role in shaping family identity. In *The Crystal Cabinet*, Butts writes that her home, Salterns, was "a place where there was dark paneling and noble furniture, lovely toys of ivory and tortoiseshell and enamel, mysterious paintings and china from the East and from the early exquisite days of the English potters."[51] In this compressed description of the house, Butts highlights nobility, mystery, and the combination of eastern china and "early" English pottery, in keeping with her preference for the exotic and the antique.

When Mary's mother remarried Frederick Colville-Hyde, he brought to the family trove three possessions that the Butts "collector's eyes" deemed treasures: an 18th-century clock made by a famous French clockmaker, a cabinet of Chinese lacquer decorated with

[51] ———, *The Crystal Cabinet: My Childhood at Salterns*. 23.

ivory and shell figures and brass-hinged with dragons, and two dark red mahogany boxes bound in brass that belonged to his great-grandfather, Colonel Wildman (to whom Byron sold Newstead Abbey before leaving for Greece).[52] Butts endows her Ashes with "collector's eyes" for the ancient and exotic, but for her fictive family she could write an ending in which they keep their collection and their reinvigorated magical identity. Drawing from Susan Stewart's semiotics of the collection in her work *On Longing*, I want to look at two aspects of the collection and their significance for understanding Butts's intersections of magic, sacred property, and the self—the collection as imperialist consumption and as the décor of the self.

The wave-battered cliffs do not actually separate Rings from "the rest of the world" as the introductory descriptions of the novel suggest. The estate is not a cordoned-off enclave of pure, rustic Englishness. Imperial work—or at least work done in the East through British imperialist access—helped establish the house's magical status. Butts belies the family's complicity in imperialist acquisitiveness with the telling image of the ship. Van tells Serge to "'think of Rings as a ship, full rigged, full of treasure, every sail set, plunging over the back of the world.'"[53] Rings is in fact a storehouse of cultural treasures from around the world—an image of ongoing, active piracy. Stewart writes that, "in acquiring objects, the collector replaces production with consumption: objects are naturalized into the landscape of the collection itself."[54] The Ashes offer a picture of the British subject as cultural pirate rationalized into curator and devotee of valuable objects.

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[52] Ibid. 183.

[53] ———, *Ashe of Rings*. 95.

[54] Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1984). 156.

The house at Rings functions as the Ashes' personal museum of magical objects, but in this case, Butts naturalizes the foreign objects by exoticizing the domestic. Magic becomes orientalized, housed in objects from the Far East that seem to belong to the English country estate because it, too, bears a magical appearance. Though she makes much of the Ashe estate's long Anglo-Saxon history, Butts exoticizes the house and its owner from the moment she introduces them. The novel opens with Anthony Ashe's homecoming from his three-year stint in "the East."[55] Ashe himself is "a handsome daimon inside a chinese ball,"[56] and the house an iconic Chinese figure: "Rings lay in a cup of turf. …[T]he house crouched like a dragon on a saucer of jade."[57] Butts also describes the countryside as jade, a color which indicates the verdant green of the natural surroundings and simultaneously signals the exotic origins of the imported stone.[58] Her figurative language relies on orientalist perceptions of "Chinese" as "ancient and magical" in order to suggest that Ashe, the house, its contents, and the land on which it crouches might have magical properties: their exotic exteriors must indicate their interior magical essences.

In other words, Butts uses eastern objects as quick signals, props that attest to the family's magical pedigree. The family also owns a Chinese Lar, a god of indoors,[59] and the house contains a "chinese room" that Van recommends to Serge:

> "Sit in the chinese room at Rings. The men with round bellies sit on lacquer cabinets and smile. There are paintings on the wall a thousand years old, and

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[55] Butts, *Ashe of Rings*. 7.

[56] Ibid. 9. Butts does not capitalize "chinese."

[57] Ibid. 5.

[58] Jade comes primarily from China and New Zealand, but it can also be imported from Australia, Russia, and Canada. The other Ashes noticeably possess jade objects that simultaneously naturalize and exoticize them. Anthony's ring is jade, Van wears jade earrings, and Val gives his jade cigarette case to Serge. Blondel notes that jade was Butts's "signature," appearing in many of her works and worn by Butts herself.

[59] Butts, *Ashe of Rings*. 30.

> a set of jade chessmen. There is a high gallery, that [sic] runs from the tower. Dusty, Serge, bare timbered floor, with a few old chairs between the windows. Tarnished gilt, so old, painted by the sun."[60]

This glimpse into the home reveals the collection as "a form of art as play, a form involving the reframing of objects within a world of attention and manipulation of context."[61] The Ashes have amassed furniture, what are presumably Buddha figurines, paintings, and jade chess pieces and have devoted an entire room to their display under the category "Chinese." They have also denoted these possessions as worthy of veneration and have created a powerful assembly by housing them in one room. Though their original uses may have been for recreation, storage, or aesthetic appreciation, they are now functioning as religio-aesthetic objects because of their cultural origins and antiquity. Operating as spiritual director and docent, Van believes sitting in this room will aid in Serge's healing, that the beauty and longevity of the room's objects have restorative properties. This is one of Butts' remedies for the ailments of the modern self: resting in the presence of the antique.

The Ashes believe that they function similarly to the possessions in the Chinese room. Van thinks her magical identity endows her with life-enhancing power. The reflexive relationship between the objects and their owners exposes the formative ties between the self and possessions. Of the private collection, Stewart writes that

> [o]rnament, décor, and ultimately decorum define the boundaries of private space by emptying that space of any relevance other than that of the subject. [...This filling in of the immediate environment] is a matter of ornamentation and presentation in which the interior is both a model and a projection of self-fashioning. [...] Each sign is placed in relation to a chain of signifiers whose ultimate referent is not the interior of the room—in itself an empty essence—but the interior of the self.[62]

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[60] Ibid. 95-6.

[61] Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection.* 151.

[62] Ibid., 157, 158.

The collected objects are the visible furniture of the Ashe self—the magical self aestheticized into a collection of magical objects. The Ashes so ardently identify themselves with exotic antiques they believe to contain magical properties that they feel entitled to them. While living in London, Van strongly desires to acquire some Egyptian papyri fragments from a woman who promised them to her but then moved without making good on her promise. Van is convinced they're valuable "lost fragments."[63] She wants them so badly that she breaks into the woman's rooms, but with no success. The extent of her attempt to retrieve what she believes should be hers is in keeping with the Ashe tradition of collecting objects from the Near and Far East. Van no doubt views her potential ownership of the fragments as a project of recovery and preservation.[64]

In other words, her identity as an Ashe entitles her to the possession of magical, sacred, or exotic objects. Properly caring for them requires a certain pedigree and the appropriate behavior—knowing their value, arranging them in a pleasing collection, resting in their presence and appreciating their power, defending them from those who would abuse them. Stewart's comments briefly gesture towards this kind of intimacy between the self, décor, and decorum. In *About Possession*, John R. Wikse provides "etymological meditations" that further illuminate the connections I'm trying to make between property and the self:

> "[P]ossession" or "having" is the etymological root of our word *behavior*, formed in the fifteenth century from the prefix *be-* (about or concerning, intensively) and *haven* (to have or possess). The Old English *behabban*, which meant "to restrain," provides the original meaning of *behavior* as having oneself under one's own control. […] The logic of property and the logic of

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[63] Butts, *Ashe of Rings*. 59.

[64] In her reading of Butts, which concentrates largely on short stories but briefly touches on *Ashe of Rings*, Rives asserts as much. While I agree with her assessment that Butts related to objects through a kind of empathy, the locus of my argument lies in the origin of those goods in the novel, that, unlike the land itself, reveal the Ashes' participation in the imperialist economy. This economy allows them to ornament their identities and bolster their magical pedigree. See Rochelle Rives, "Problem Space: Mary Butts, Modernism, and the Etiquette of Placement," *Modernism/Modernity* 12, no. 4 (November 2005).

> propriety are the same: etymologically both words are from the French (late fifteenth, early sixteenth centuries) *proprieté*, meaning the fact of being one's own, "ownness," the right of possession.[65]

Propriety for an Ashe means practicing and passing on magical gnosis, knowing one's privileged place, and guarding the *temenos* of Rings as well as the objects displayed in the house.

When Melitta is disturbed by her husband's practice of ancient magic, Anthony explains why he cannot simply abandon it: "'We are a priestly house, like the Eumolpidae,'"[66] he tells her. The Eumolpidae were one of the sacred Eleusinian families of priests who conducted the mysteries, rituals of rebirth and fertility, during the Hellenic Era. They were descendants of Eumolpus, one of the first priests of Demeter at Eleusis. Like the Eumolpidae, the Ashes see themselves as mediators of a powerful, restorative life-force, inherent in Rings and accessible through magical objects as well. Van's decorating externalizes her interior self. On the wall of her London room, she hung "a plan of the Eleusinian precinct, a Degas ballet, and a design for a ballet by Picasso."[67] Her choice of décor points to her own interest in dance and its representation in modern art, and her familial identification with the Eleusinian priests. This peculiar triad brings ancient ritual magic into the realm of modern art, it maps the past, and it displays archeological work as art. In 1921 when Butts wondered if *Ashe of Rings* were prophetic, she also came to consider the possibility that she was part of a magical lineage: "A priestly house. Alkmaionids,

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[65] John R. Wikse, *About Possession: The Self as Private Property* (University Park and London: Pennsylvania State UP, 1977). 16, 27. Wikse proceeds to show the etymological affiliations between the realm of human actions and property-holding or having. "*Demeanor* derives from *demesne*, belonging to a lord, a differentiated spelling of *domain*, belonging to a lord (*dominus*). Eytmologically, *demeanor* is to *demesne* as *dominance* is to *domain*: how one does relates to what one has. Our word *deportment*…derives from Latin *portare*, to carry, in the sense of 'carrying oneself' or 'bearing oneself'…: ourselves are the property we carry around with us. Our word *conduct* derives from *conducere*, to collect or bring together, in the sense of 'Collect yourself….'"

[66] Butts, *Ashe of Rings*. 20.

[67] Ibid. 65.

Eumopidoi, Blake, I, Camilla?"[68] Butts's speculative hereditary line binds together primitive magical ritual, literary mysticism, and biological relation (her daughter Camilla)—a "house" set apart for magical-aesthetic work of possessing and preserving sacred property.

"The Great Work" of the Will

The will provides the link between magical and legal possession. In magical practice, the will "transcends its usual limitations and obtains for the self or group of selves something which it or they did not previously possess."[69] Underhill explains that "it is the declared object of occult education, or initiation, to actualize [the] supersensual plane of experience, to give the student the power of entering into conscious communions with it, and teach him to impose upon its forces the directive force of his own will…."[70] Just as the assertion of the individual's will is essential to the practice of magic, it also has a central place in the appropriation of things as property. In *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel posits that only by becoming conscious of one's free will does an individual become his/her own property and not someone else's. The will to possess marks the individual's freedom and domain:

> All things may become man's property, because man is free will and consequently is absolute, while what stands over against him lacks this quality. Thus everyone has the right to make his will the thing or to make the thing his will, or in other words to destroy the thing and transform it into his own…. Thus "to appropriate" means at bottom only to manifest the preeminence of my will over the thing….[71]

Claiming a "thing" as property establishes one's very self through the act of free will. It is an extension of the will over a thing, appropriating it, drawing it into the domain of the self and claiming it as "mine." Magic, as well, is about possession, about the extension of the will

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[68] ———, *The Journals of Mary Butts*. 183. See entry for 25 May, 1921.

[69] Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*. 71.

[70] Ibid. 156. In fact, the second axiom of magic is "the limitless power of the disciplined human will."

[71] Quoted in Wikse, *About Possession: The Self as Private Property*. 78.

into the environment in order to manipulate it, to exert dominance over it, to get it to respond to one's directed desire. Therefore, claiming possessions through the will also helps constitute the boundaries of the individual self.

Butts spent late June to mid-September, 1921, at Aleister Crowley's Abbey of Thelema (which means "will") at Cefalu, on the northern coast of Sicily. In 1909, Crowley had performed the rites of Eleusis in Caxton Hall, London, for seven straight nights.[72] He said his purpose was to "'bring Oriental wisdom to Europe and to restore paganism in a purer form,'" and along those lines, he taught Butts about yogic asanas and pranayama (postures and breathing techniques), mantras, and astral journeys, often while smoking hashish. Though she came to despise Crowley, she didn't reject all of his methods. She continued to practice astral journeys and consume heroin after she left the Abbey.[73] While at Cefalu, Butts revised *Ashe of Rings*, and her journal entries earlier that year bear out the importance of the will and the "great work" it can accomplish through magic.

The novel states that Van "is holy. She will do the great work."[74] A short series of journal entries juxtaposed with the novel unfolds the meaning of this phrase. On February 22, 1921, Butts wrote: "The magical secret seems to me to be simply this. The Great Work is to discover an automatic strengthening & intensification for the will."[75] In April of the same year, Butts enumerated what she hoped to gain through magic. Number three reads, "I don't only want to find my true will, I want to do it. So I want to learn how to form a

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[72] Surette, *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, and the Occult*. 23-24.

[73] Blondel, *Mary Butts: Scenes from the Life*. 99-106.

[74] Butts, *Ashe of Rings*.138. Serge thinks this while pondering Van's potential power to win out against Judy. Butts seems to have considered her novel an exercise of intense will when she wrote in a marginal note that "the book [Ashe of Rings] is written. The Great Work." See Butts, *The Journals of Mary Butts*. 120.

[75] Butts, *The Journals of Mary Butts*. 178.

magical link between myself and the phenomena I am interested in."[76] Butts clearly thought magic offered an avenue for the strengthening of the will—or more accurately, a kind of switch or trigger whose results would be "automatic." Butts also sought to use magic to establish some sort of empathetic bond between her self and "phenomena." Butts's view of magic matches up with Underhill's claim that magical practice is a strategy of the will to obtain something for the self or for others—that the will is an assertion of the self.

The "automatic strengthening and intensification for the will" that Van finds is language, "a word of power." [77] The loyal butler Clavel explains that "'the only good in [magic] is to take out of you what is already there. Inside out is the rule.'"[78] Words of power are the spoken magical will of the self, and Rings is a place where one's will can find such enactment, a dangerous prospect when the will is Judy's, who is a force of "anti-life." Van is frightened when she learns that Judy and Peter have been to Rings "'[b]ecause it is a place of evocation. Where the word is made flesh. That's too poetical—I mean a place where the shapes we make with our imagination find a body.'"[79] Although Van quickly decides that the "word made flesh" metaphor is "too poetical," Butts uses it liberally in the novel.[80] In using this biblical citation, Butts draws on *logos* as cosmic force, creative power, and spoken word.[81] Using words as creative acts represents magic as a kind of art. Magical

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[76] Ibid. 181.

[77] ———, *Ashe of Rings*. 130.

[78] Ibid. 220.

[79] Ibid. 150.

[80] See other examples on pages 44, 78, 105.

[81] Of course, in the biblical text, the Gospel of John, the word is capitalized and refers to the Incarnation of the godhead in the human form of Jesus. *Word* is the translation of the original Greek *logos*, whose meanings are salient here. In Greek philosophical definitions, *logos* is, with various modifications, the ordering, rational principle governing the cosmos, from which we get the word's meaning as a rational argument or a rhetorical strategy that appeals to reason. In Judaism and Christianity, *logos* is the creative word of God. *Logos* derives from *legein*, which means "to speak."

evocation is an act of will and speaking, and words of power become oral and aural embodiments akin to the written, embodied images theorized by Imagists discussed in Chapter One.

Van coins the phrase "making a magic of it" for the act of speaking words until they evoke their intentions and transfer one's will from the psycho-spiritual world to the embodied one. This happens one night as Van, Val, and Serge encounter Peter and Judy while out for a walk. They sense the ominous undercurrent in their meeting and that Peter, who is under the power of Judy's magical will, might do them harm. Judy has convinced Peter that "a whore" like Van and "a deserter" like Serge don't deserve to live because they haven't suffered in the war as he has. Though he doesn't really believe in magic, as he later tells Clavel, Serge apparently believes enough in his own words here. He confronts Peter, tells the shell-shocked veteran he's under Judy's influence, and claims that they all have suffered. "'Go find your car, and go home. The peace you deny us go with you.'"[82] As the trio leaves the seething couple, Van interprets Serge's authoritative command as an evocation, one strengthened by their wills. She gives instruction to her brother and Serge: "'*Love and man's unconquerable mind.* Say it over to yourself. Say it. Say it. You will evoke it. We did to-night.'"[83] Speaking words of power, even to one's self, can evoke the intention of those words and make them consequential.

In this scene, Butts claims poetic words of power as the "triggers" for assertion of self-will, and glorifies the "unconquerable mind" to will away forces of spiritual and political destructiveness. Thinking back to her own experience in a London air raid, Butts writes:

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[82] Butts, *Ashe of Rings*. 162, 163.

[83] Ibid.164. Italics in original.

> I can only try and tell what happened as I tried not to crouch [in an out-building]. Which was an infinitely clear, infinitely quiet voice repeating: '*Love and man's unconquerable mind. Love and man's unconquerable mind*'; and I was suddenly charged with knowledge that, somehow, it was important that I should command myself, that, in some unrealizable way, I had it in me to preserve or to destroy the meaning of those words. Repeating them, I went back; and inside the studio and the racket overhead there was a quiet into which I entered where both fear and death were swallowed up.[84]

This autobiographical moment speaks to Butts's discovered belief in the ability of poetry and will to inhabit and transform the mind, to generate an experience of peace in the midst of war's destruction and chaos. The tranquility that suffuses Butts in this episode results from her determination to "command herself," to choose to "preserve" and live out the meaning of the words "love and man's unconquerable mind." In other words, she takes possession of herself, aided by her poetic mantra or words of power. In the novel, the magical individual has such words of power at his or her disposal and can bring them into life, can command the self, evoke the spirits, and claim possession of property.

The phrase Van implores her companions to evoke is from William Wordworth's sonnet "To Toussaint L'Ouverture."[85] Wordsworth most likely composed the piece in August of 1802, and it was published in the *Morning Post* on February 2, 1803. L'Ouverture died in a French prison in April of the same year. The sonnet was later published in the first volume of *Poems, in Two Volumes* (1807), in the section entitled "Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty." Wordsworth's speaker tells the captured revolutionary to take heart:

> Though fallen thyself, never to rise again,
> Live, and take comfort. Thou hast left behind
> Powers that will work for thee; air, earth, and skies;
> There's not a breathing of the common wind

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[84] ———, *The Crystal Cabinet: My Childhood at Salterns*. 119.

[85] See Ibid. Ch.17, especially pages 117 and 119. Shelley's radical political stances and his poetry had considerable influence on Butts's artistic and political formation as a young woman. She quotes the refrain from Wordsworth in a chapter in which she discusses Shelley, without once mentioning Wordsworth, leading me to suspect that she may have wrongly attributed the line to Shelley.

> That will forget thee; thou hast great allies;
> Thy friends are exultations, agonies,
> And love, and man's unconquerable mind.[86]

The Wordsworthian allusion in the novel links magical evocation and poetic practice through the power of language—through the "infinite significance, the living mystery of words."[87] It also resounds with political tones that sound dissonant when one considers the suggestion of equating the positions of a privileged young white woman and her friends to that of a Haitian leader of dispossessed slaves. One can see the abstract parallels from which Butts might be working, albeit unintentionally: Van is connected to elemental "powers" that "will work for [her]," and she believes she has important, revolutionary work to do—to throw off the oppressive yoke of war, destruction, authoritarianism writ large, and to reclaim and maintain sacred property.

Whatever Butts's intentions or awareness of the implications of her chosen literary allusion, what's salient to my work with *Ashe of Rings* is that Van's magical mantra is tied to the deeply-embedded logic of possession that founds the novel's edifice of primitive magic, constitution of self, and power of the will. N.O. Brown writes that "'free persons…are those who own their own persons. It is because we own our persons that we are entitled to appropriate things that, through labor, become part of our personality or personalty. The defence of personal liberty is identical with the defence of property.'"[88] Through primitive magic expressed as literary "words of power," Van performs the "great work" of the will. It is magical, artistically-inflected labor that protects and preserves instead of manual labor that

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[86] William Wordsworth, "To Toussant L'Ouverture," in *Wordsworth's Poems of 1807*, ed. Alun R. Jones (London: Macmillan, 1987). 60.

[87] Butts, *The Crystal Cabinet: My Childhood at Salterns*. 48.

[88] Quoted in Wikse, *About Possession: The Self as Private Property*. 4.

depletes or develops, but it still allows her to claim and defend sacred property as hers and to define herself through it. She is a "true Ashe of Rings."

Critics often comment on what Ruth Hoberman has dubbed the "odd mixture of traditional and revolutionary values"[89] in Butts's fiction, focusing more recently on her conservatism and anti-Semitism. Van's magical-political purpose in *Ashe of Rings* is a prime example of such a strange brew of elitism and anti-establishment attitudes. Van believes that freeing the Rings estate from Judy's destructive advances will serve a larger anti-war purpose as well and will extend liberty to everyone:

> [Van:] 'If we save ourselves, we save the world, and its peoples. Don't you know we bear up the pillars of it?'
> [Val:] 'We shall do it again. Every time we do it, the world comes more into peace. I understand everything now.'[90]

Their brief exchange draws attention to the fact that the youngest generation of Ashes believes their experience stands as a microcosm of the warring world. They view themselves as the potential saviors of the world's peoples, as those who "bear up the pillars of it." Viewed generously, this microcosmic model advocates for personal responsibility, for a type of "think globally, act locally" ethic that asserts that wider political and spiritual change begins with one's own actions. At the same time, the novel as a whole depicts "the magical family's burden" and its exceptionalism by positioning the Ashes and Van in particular as the privileged, chosen ones upon whose will the peace the of the world depends. The magically-elite self, having acquired property through an imperial economy that enables one to collect the possessions of other cultures, houses the world's treasures and then stands in for and

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[89] Ruth Hoberman, *Gendering Classicism: The Ancient World in Twentieth-Century Women's Historical Fiction* (Albany: State U of New York P, 1997). 45.

[90] Butts, *Ashe of Rings*. 164.

acts on behalf of the dispossessed and those geographically and spiritually dislocated by military and political aggression.

In the Afterword, Butts writes that "[s]ome very curious things went on, in London and elsewhere, about that time [during WWI]; a tension of life and a sense of living in at least two worlds at once. Though it may be hard to believe now that respectable young women practised evil witchcraft."[91] The novel blames the war for what Van calls the "sickness" of the younger generation, and Judy is the ordinarily respectable young woman manifesting the symptom of evil witchcraft. Both young women have "gone primitive," in a sense, but the novel idealizes "white" or western European primitive magic and represents Afro-Caribbean primitive magic as a "dark" threat. Van says to her counterpart: "'You've been mixing yourself up with some devil's hocus-pocus; going bad the way people do sometimes in the tropics. And the years we are living through have stirred the same thing up here. It's a state, a turn of the soul, people are making.'"[92] The novel pinpoints "the tropics" as the origin of Judy's evil hocus-pocus, displacing her witchcraft as typically un-English. But the war has brought the savagery of foreign lands into the heart of civilized England, and Judy is its Kurtzian witch. Judy embodies the primitive as savage, violent, frenzied, and life-sucking. Van's primitive magic consists of reciting Wordsworth and calmly offering herself on a platter of moonlit stone. Bodily and bloody, Judy's primitive magic involves cutting Serge, smearing his blood on her wrists and sucking them, hurling brambles in a rage, and manipulating a shell-shocked veteran into sacrificing a dog and planning rape.

Despite her rebellion against her mother's religion and codes of propriety, Van's ancient magic preserves English calm and decorum even amid the anti-Sinclairian "vortex of

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[91] Ibid. 232.

[92] Ibid. 86.

death" that is the war and its savage proponents. Virginia Woolf may have thought *Ashe of Rings* an "indecent book about the Greeks and the Downs,"[93] but Butts intended her protagonist to measure up well to the "yard-stick for all conduct, that elusive quality the Greeks called Sophrosynê":

> "It is something like Temperance, Gentleness, Mercy, sometimes Innocence, never mere Caution, or tempering of dominant emotion by gentler thought." To this I would add—good form, fine breeding, humour, a sense of shapeliness—these guide choice. In all, this virtue is [the Greek term for] "with saving thoughts" contrasted with [the Greek term for] "with destroying thoughts."[94]

Butts's definition of sophrosynê encompasses the self-ownership and propriety of Van's primitive magic, the "fine breeding" of old, English families, the magical noblesse oblige that the Ashes take upon themselves, and the "saving thoughts" of Van's literary words of power. Van lives by her own primitive, magical code of propriety—self-possession and the will to possess the estate of Rings, ensuring that its land, house, and objects remain sacred.

The Levity of *Lolly Willowes*

Like *Ashe of Rings, Lolly Willowes* takes up the notion of sacred property and women's (dis)possession, but Sylvia Townsend Warner laces her narrative with wry humor and satirical playfulness. She uses the discourse of primitive magic to address serious concerns, but it doesn't become ponderous with the burden of solemn duty. Lolly shrugs off any such duty, approaches the possession of her self with relief and a remarkable casualness, and makes no mission of reclaiming her father's estate. The striking tonal differences in these two novels come about in part because of their authors' different views of magic. Butts was a sincere practitioner, but Townsend Warner treated the supernatural arts with levity.

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[93] Quoted in Blondel, *Mary Butts: Scenes from the Life*. 122. Woolf and Butts had tea on 29 October, 1922. The Hogarth Press was one of the printers that turned down *Ashe of Rings* (36).

[94] See entry for 26 October, 1917, page 89 in Butts, *The Journals of Mary Butts*. Butts is quoting from Gilbert Murray's Rise of the Greek Epic (1907).

Considering the autobiographical nature of *Ashe of Rings*, familial distinctions also come into play. Although she clashed with her mother and identified more closely with her deceased father as Butts did, Sylvia Townsend Warner didn't harbor the same despair over inheritance. Most simply, this was the case because Townsend Warner was her parents' only child. She was born to George Townsend Warner, head of the Modern Side at Harrow School, and Nora Huddleston on 6 December, 1893.

When her father died in 1916, his will endowed Nora with a legacy of £1000 and all his chattels and life interest in the rest of the estate, to be managed by two trustees. Sylvia received a yearly allowance of £100. By 1929, Sylvia replaced one of the estate's trustees. Due to an arrangement that also gave Nora freer access to her own money, Sylvia received £320 per annum allowance, £250 per annum marriage settlement, half of the current royalties on her father's books, as well as £195 as her share of the dividends from investments. Her biographer Claire Harman notes that this arrangement gave Townsend Warner "a secured income of almost four times her salary, plus dividends, to add to her already substantial income as a writer. She was rich."[95]

The period of wealth didn't last into the 30s, however. By 1933, her father's royalty payments were falling, and income from her own royalties from Chatto & Windus publications was dwindling as well. She earned £127 in 1933 compared with her highest intake of £1200 in 1927 after the publication of *Lolly Willowes* in 1926. Townsend Warner continued to write and publish up until a year before her death in May, 1978, but the international bestseller *Lolly Willowes* garnered her popularity and marked the peak of her earning power.[96] When Nora died in 1950, Sylvia inherited Little Zeal, the family house in

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[95] Claire Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Biography* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1989). 1, 37, 92.

[96] Ibid. 320-321.

Devon. Though a young couple was renting it at the time, Townsend Warner now had the security of knowing that she owned a home. She also became the sole beneficiary of her father's estate, receiving £420 in royalties within the month because the beloved headmaster's textbooks were still commonly used in schools.[97]

Her father's academic position had also benefitted Sylvia intellectually. She was educated at home by her parents and Harrow staff, and she applied her nimble intellect first to the study of music composition and theory. Much of her early work and personal life revolved, in one way or another, around music. In 1913, she began a 17-year affair with the married Percy Carter Buck, music master at Harrow. She moved to London in 1917 to take an appointment on the editorial committee of the Tudor Church Music project funded by the Carnegie UK Trust. The beginning of the war had postponed her plans to study composition with Arnold Schoenberg in Vienna, so she had turned instead to the War Help Committee in Harrow and worked as a munitions-maker at the Vickers factory in Erith, Kent. This was the subject of her first publication, an essay called "Behind the Firing Line" in *Blackwoods Magazine* in 1916.[98] Andrea Trodd suggests that Townsend Warner later regretted her "politically unenlightened war-work."[99] She and partner Valentine Ackland would take up other kinds of war work a couple of decades later, however, after joining the Communist Party.

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[97] Ibid. 130, 238. Townsend Warner sold Little Zeal within the year for £3,000. After going through Nora's papers and finding some unwelcome news about the management of her father's estate, she commented, "'but all done and destroyed now, and so much and no more for them: except to beware of heredity.'" See Harman, pp.246-247.

[98] Ibid. 14, 24, 38, 32.

[99] Anthea Trodd, *Women's Writing in English: Britain 1900-1945*, ed. Gary Kelly, Women's Writing in English (London and New York: Longman, 1998). 205-6.

Townsend Warner met struggling poet Valentine Ackland at the home of novelist T.F. Powys in East Chaldon, Dorset in 1927. Sylvia had befriended Powys in 1922, and like Butts, had taken to rural England. She bought "Miss Green's Cottage" in Chaldon in September, 1930, and intended to let Valentine live there. The two women became lovers the next month, however, and began living together, marking 12 January 1931 as their wedding anniversary. They settled down to a life of domestic pleasure and writing, marked by periods of self-doubt and heavy drinking by Ackland, who struggled to think of herself as a talented poet. In part to create a venue for Ackland's work and to boost her self-esteem, together they published *Whether a Dove or Seagull* in 1933, a collection containing unsigned poems by each of them.[100]

Their relationship suffered a great strain when, in 1938, Ackland began an affair with American scholar Elizabeth Wade White. Through their relational vicissitudes, Townsend Warner remained agonized but loyal. Tension also arose when Ackland began to believe prayer had cured her alcoholism and she re-joined the Catholic Church in 1956.[101] Even though she "vehemently disliked Christian mysticism,"[102] Townsend Warner still supported Ackland, though with worry, frustration, and bewilderment. By 1968 when Ackland was diagnosed with breast cancer, Sylvia had made a kind of peace with Valentine's Catholicism because it gave her dying partner comfort. Ackland, however, migrated out of the Catholic Church and into the Society of Friends. Quakerism was more palatable to Townsend

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[100] Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Biography*. 96-99, 111, 131.

[101] Ibid. 177-184, 260-264, 273, 290-292.

[102] Brooke Allen, "Sylvia Townsend Warner's 'Very Cultured Voice'," *New Criterion* 19, no. 7 (March 2001). 24.

Warner. She attended a few meetings with Ackland and continued to attend for awhile after Ackland's death the following year.[103]

Brooke Allen describes Townsend Warner's spirituality as "earthbound and pagan,"[104] but as I've pointed out, Townsend Warner wasn't sincerely invested in the pursuit of magic. *Lolly Willowes* wasn't an "aesthetic restatement" of her own spiritual experiences in magic as *Ashe of Rings* was for Butts. Although her novelistic purposes are politically earnest, Townsend Warner still treats witchcraft with a light-hearted, mischievous touch. Her August 1926 article "Modern Witches" is very tongue-in-cheek, joking that a modern-day witch uses her craft to "do what she wants, and have what she wants, without exciting any comment, except the usual exclamation, 'Selina always has such good luck!'"[105] What the witch wants is to grow large peas, have neat sandwiches, or have everyone enjoy her dinner parties. Witchcraft playfully explains the Martha Stewarts of the world. In the novel, Lolly becomes a witch to escape the pressures of having this kind of domestic and social pressure and success—and to become sacred property.

Lolly Willowes, or the Loving Huntsman (1926) tells the story of Laura Willowes, known as Aunt Lolly to her nieces and nephews, who decides to eschew family wishes and social custom by moving to the small village of Great Mop to live on her own. There, in her middle-aged years, Laura discovers that she is a witch and that the population of Great Mop (a name that hints at its inhabitants' instruments of flight) is composed of witches and warlocks. Townsend Warner divides the narrative into three parts, but the deeper divide in the novel is dichotomous: the city is the mechanical locale of the civilized but oppressed self,

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[103] Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Biography*. 292, 293, 295, 300.

[104] Allen, "Sylvia Townsend Warner's 'Very Cultured Voice'." 24.

[105] Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Eve: The Lady's Pictorial* (August 18, 1926). 331.

while the country is the repository of the natural and allows expression of the primitive, autonomous self—the witch.

Witchcraft, Primitivism, and Property

Lolly Willowes displays Townsend Warner's familiarity with late 19th- and 20th-century fascination with the witch trials of the 16th and 17th centuries. As a girl, Lolly reads Glanvil on Witches, and after becoming a witch herself, she recalls reading about Matthew Hopkins' interrogation of women accused as witches. She even names her feline familiar Vinegar after one of the witches' cats. Townsend Warner enthusiastically read Margaret Murray's book, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921), which enjoyed enormous popularity and influence for more than 50 years, even though other scholars pointed out its factual errors and methodological weaknesses.[106] She sent a copy of *Lolly Willowes* to Murray upon the suggestion of her friend David Garnett and in February, 1926, reported back to him in her characteristically wry style:

> [Murray] liked my witch though she was doubtful about my devil, and wrote to me a very pleasant letter to say so. Now I have just come back from lunching with her.
>
> She is most fit and right; short and majestic, a Queen Victoria with the profile of Louis Quatorze and small fierce fat white hands. I wish I were in her coven, perhaps I shall be. Round her neck she wears a broad black velvet band probably for a good reason. She said things that would make the hairs of your head stand bolt upright.[107]

Witch-Cult belongs to the primitivist trend in scholarship that looked back to ancient cultures through anthropological and archaeological study and reinterpreted them. Murray's work specifically seeks to counter prior interpretations of witchcraft made by the Christian church. She argues that an anthropological approach reveals that the practices called

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[106] Eliade, *Occultism, Witchcraft, and Cultural Fashions: Essays in Comparative Religions*. 72.

[107] Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner*, ed. William Maxwell (London: Chatto and Windus, 1982). 9.

"witchcraft" in medieval Britain were actually the continuation of "the ancient religion of pre-Christian Britain."[108] In Murray's account, Christianity is an invading and colonizing influence, powerful yet not totalizing in its attempts to replace the ritual religion of native inhabitants.[109] She gives witchcraft the prior claim in Britain and puts it on par with any other world religion.[110]

Excluding the evidence about charms and spells (what Murray calls "operative witchcraft" practiced by witches and Christians alike), Murray labels "ritual witchcraft" as the "Dianic cult." This pre-agricultural cult held highly organized beliefs and rites, mainly for fertility and the increase of livestock. Far from being the malignant devil of Christian belief, the witches' deity was "incarnate in a man, a woman, or an animal."[111] Another form of the god took shape as a man with two faces, called Janus or Dianus. Murray names the cult after Diana, the feminine form of this god.[112]

What's pertinent to this chapter is the concern with antiquity and origins, with "the primitive." Marianna Torgovnick writes that, "in its most generalized sense, 'primitive' refers to a posited but ultimately unknowable original state, whether of humans or of animals, nature, tissue and cell, or of religious and social institutions. It entered the English language with special reference to the Christian church; only later, in the eighteenth century, did it come to refer to cells, nature, and indigenous peoples."[113] Townsend Warner's reading

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[108] Margaret Alice Murray, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1962). 19.

[109] Ibid. 14.

[110] Ibid. 14-15.

[111] Ibid. 11, 12. In Ch. 2, Murray explains that a man, or more rarely, a woman, was disguised as the god through masks and/or animal skins. Wearing a mask facing outwards from the back of the head produced the effect of the double-faced god.

[112] See Ibid., especially "Introduction," Ch. 1 "Continuity of the Religion," and Ch. 2 "The God."

[113] Torgovnick, *Primitive Passions: Men, Women, and the Quest for Ecstasy*. 4.

of *The Witch-Cult* informed her rendering of witchcraft in *Lolly Willowes* most ostensibly by identifying witchcraft with "the natural" and "the primitive." The novel participates in the primitivist, "utopian desire to go back and recover irreducible features of the psyche, body, land, and community,"[114] exhibiting nostalgia for the essentialized idea of a primitive, natural locale, and a primitive, natural self. Through Lolly's attachment to English rural topography and the estate of her childhood, combined with the notion of witchcraft as the ancient religion of the isles, the novel locates the primitive in indigenous Britain as opposed to other cultures. Unlike *Ashe of Rings*, *Lolly Willowes* stages no battle between black and white magic, between English rituals and the "hocus pocus" of "the tropics." To Lolly's mind, witchcraft instead helps one *avoid* acts of revenge, justice, and obligation alike.

Critics have debated the relative health of Lolly's stance. Bruce Knoll reads Lolly's passive resistance to patriarchal society as an ineffective strategy, while Jane Marcus asserts that Great Mop is a feminist utopia of political "chastity" akin to Virginia Woolf's Outsiders' Society.[115] Townsend Warner could see that her character's longing for a sacred self might harden into individualism at any cost. Towards the end of her life, she harbored a "pronounced dislike" for her first novel. "'It seems,' she said, 'so poor a welcome for the General Strike—though I had begun it long before. […] Also, people persist in thinking it a piece of self-portraiture. But I was never a witch, you know. Why, Lolly (who was) might not have seen that she must of course support the miners. I hope sincerely she would have

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[114] Ibid. 5.

[115] Bruce Knoll, "'An Existence Doled Out': Passive Resistance as a Dead End in Sylvia Townsend Warner's Lolly Willowes," *Twentieth Century Literature* 39, no. 3 (Fall 1993). Jane Marcus, "A Wilderness of One's Own: Feminist Fantasy Novels of the Twenties: Rebecca West and Sylvia Townsend Warner," in *Women Writers and the City: Essays in Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. Susan Merrill Squier (Knoxville, TN: U of Tennessee P, 1984).

had the sense, for she was meant to be likeable.'"[116] Her creator recognized that Lolly might've had a blind spot when it came to political action on the behalf of others.

Like Gore-Booth, Townsend Warner authored the story of a woman's renunciation but vigorously engaged in political life herself. From 1935-45, she and Ackland entered into a period of unwavering political commitment and activity. In 1935, they joined the Communist Party of Great Britain, and the next year Townsend Warner became secretary of the Dorset Peace Council. She and Ackland also founded a local branch of the Left Book Club. In September of 1936, Townsend Warner went to Brussels as a member of the Communist Party's International Peace Congress, and during September and October, she and Ackland worked in Spain for a Red Cross unit during the Civil War. Townsend Warner became secretary of Association of Writers for Intellectual Liberty in 1937, and in June of that year, she and Ackland traveled as delegates to the second International Congress of Writers in Defence of Culture in Barcelona, Madrid, and Valencia.[117]

Lolly Willowes, however, is no fictionalized manifesto championing communalism; nor does it bend to the other extreme and preach a gospel of private wealth. Questions of community and property are at the heart of the narrative's playful work with primitive magic and what it affords women, but as I will show, the logic of property that undergirds the narrative complicates readings that find complete female autonomy in Lolly's position. The questions at the root of scholarly concern over Lolly's autonomy are "After becoming a witch, does Lolly own herself? Does she then engage in the community around her?" As in *Ashe of Rings*, the assumption underlying these questions is that to have freedom and

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[116] Arnold Rattenbury, "Plain Heart, Light Tether," *PN Review* 8, no. 3 [23] (1981). 46. He notes that the 1978 reprint of *Lolly Willowes* states that Townsend Warner began the novel in 1923-24.

[117] Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Biography*. 140, 152, 159-164, 169.

autonomy is to own one's self. These are political and religious questions that I believe the novel explores through the concept of sacred property. This is why Townsend Warner's friend David Garnett wrote of Lolly's experience as motivated by a desire for autonomy and also as a "deep religious experience." He explains what Townsend Warner added to Margaret Murray's work on witch cults:

> [W]hile Miss Murray has given us the facts, Miss Townsend Warner is the first woman to reveal the spiritual side of the witch-cult. In *Lolly Willowes*—the life story of a modern witch—she explains the psychological craving for witchcraft, and for the first time the reader can understand the great spiritual force which drove thousands of women during the middle ages out of the church and into the covens. But Miss Townsend Warner's story…is much more than the story of a woman's deep religious experience. It is an extremely well written book, absorbingly interesting and the wittiest book I have read for a very long time.[118]

Lolly Willowes isn't primarily about the craft of witchery. Lolly doesn't utter any specific spells or perform any rituals, and she doesn't plan on attending any more Sabbath meetings after her first. The novel's foremost preoccupation is Lolly's self—a being who finds its desire fulfilled in witch-ness or "primitive" closeness to nature. As Garnett points out, it is the story of a "woman's deep religious experience." In *Lolly Willowes*, the "deep religious experience" of claiming her self as sacred and autonomous through primitive witchcraft is shot through with notions of property, of what it means to possess and be possessed.

Historically, accusations of witchcraft in England were closely linked to concerns over personal property and economic livelihood. Women who competed with men in trades like brewing or weaving were often accused of witchcraft, and accusations were usually made by someone who believed he suffered illness or injury, or harm to livestock or crops, at the

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[118] Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Sylvia and David: The Townsend Warner/Garnett Letters*, ed. Richard Garnett (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1994). 27-28.

hands of a witch.[119] Convictions of witchcraft could also result in the confiscation of property if the accused possessed any.[120] Carolyn Matalene notes that "the witches themselves were almost always economic liabilities in the community. They were weaker than their accusers, of a shade lower social status than their accusers, older than their accusers—the average witch was between fifty and seventy years of age—and poorer than the [sic] their accusers."[121]

I bring up the historical connection between labeling a woman "witch" and holding her responsible for property damage not because *Lolly Willowes* replicates this plot; Lolly comes fully into her witch self in middle age, but she isn't accused of being a witch nor held responsible for damage to anyone's property. The novel reworks the old belief that witches were liabilities to property into the idea that the witch's *self* is sacred property. Townsend Warner critiques the bourgeois freedom to own, particularly to accumulate, property, as well as the bourgeois self constructed through that freedom. Lolly finally comes to reject her family's treatment of her as valuable property (and her own acquiescence to that treatment). She reclaims her right to a primitive, natural self that enjoys autonomy. However, the logic of possession is the cornerstone for the very self Lolly wants to reclaim.

Focusing on the text's sly playfulness, Jacqueline Shin refers to the text's ekphrastic moments to claim that it engages in an "arts of dispossession" that prevents Lolly from being categorized or owned.[122] To my mind, the interpretive conundrum that results from

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[119] Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism*. 273, 267.

[120] Matalene, "Women as Witches." 578.

[121] Ibid. 582.

[122] See Jacqueline Shin, "Lolly Willowes and the Arts of Dispossession " *Modernism/Modernity* 16, no. 4 (November 2009). In her chapter on *Lolly Willowes*, Garrity also focuses on the text's playful, subversive qualities to read the novel's witchcraft as encoded lesbianism. See Garrity, *Step-Daughters of England: British Women Modernists and the National Imaginary*. 140-187.

trying to decide if Lolly is owned or not doesn't prove that she playfully eludes all ownership in the novel. Rather, this quandary suggests the close affiliation of belonging and possession and points to the impossibility of absolute autonomy—an impossibility to which Lolly is willfully blind. In making a compact with Satan, Lolly becomes his sacred property, defended from the institutional powers of nation, empire, state church, and patriarchal family that can acquire and smother the individual self. Ironically and surprisingly, she discovers freedom and rest in being his possession. She enters into the possibility of a new economy, a new kind of property relation that offers her temporary stewardship of her own self and is more akin to belonging. The self and possession are still the operable terms, but they're reimagined in this magical, primitive economy. The narrative walks the fine line between autonomy and isolation, belonging and possession. This is the core of its daring playfulness—that it walks such a highwire with flourishes and winks, with a showmanship that can mask the seriousness of the task.[123]

To explore the text's balancing act between belonging and possession, I'll first offer some examples of the Willowes habits concerning property, in the form of souvenirs that allow the family to narrate its collective self through its members' affiliations with powerful institutions. Next, I'll suggest that Lolly extracts herself from this tradition and adopts an ethic of material simplicity in order to rediscover her primitive self and carve out a private, autonomous space for herself.[124] At the same time, Townsend Warner sets this pivotal

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[123] After hearing her novel described as "charming" and "distinguished," Townsend Warner wrote to David Garnett, who understood *Lolly* for the weapon it was: "I felt as thought I had tried to make a sword only to be told what a pretty pattern there was on the blade. But you have sent me a drop of blood." Townsend Warner, *Sylvia and David: The Townsend Warner/Garnett Letters*. 26.

[124] See Wendy Gan, "Privileging Privacy: the Pre-Modern Roles of the Witch and the Primitive," in *Women, Privacy, and Modernity in Early Twentieth-Century British Writing* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). 76-103, for a reading of Lolly's witchcraft as feminist access to privacy, though without reference to property discourses.

scene firmly in the sphere of the marketplace and catalyzes Lolly's transformation with a fantasy of property ownership. Finally, I'll explore the contract moment that establishes Lolly's sacred self, offering a reading of the interplay of primitivist discourse, the self as property, and the complications of Lolly's pursuit of autonomy and possession-as-belonging.

Property as Souvenir: Remembering Ancestors and Institutional Powers

When Lolly's father dies and she prepares to move from Lady Place to London, she must divest herself of the great bulk of her possessions. She must give up what the novel calls the Willowes "tradition of hoarding,"[125] to lighten her material load before moving on. While she relinquishes ownership of many things, Lolly herself is clearly owned: "Her father being dead, [her relatives] took it for granted that she should be absorbed into the household of one brother or the other. And Laura, feeling rather as if she were a piece of property forgotten in the will, was ready to be disposed of as they should think best."[126] What follows this opening scene is a history of the Willowes family, a history that places emphasis on particular objects that have been hoarded up and passed down through the generations, transported via the "patriarchal train of manservants and maidservants, mares, geldings, and spaniels, vans full of household stuff, and slow country waggons loaded with nodding greenery."[127] For the Willoweses, property functions less as a generator of capital and more as souvenir, as "token of remembrance." Through these souvenirs and the narratives they generate, ancestors live on in the memories of their descendants; successive Willoweses, in turn, can claim an identity for themselves through the souvenirs and the family narrative.

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[125] Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Lolly Willowes, or, The Loving Huntsman* (New York: New York Review Books, 1999). 40.

[126] Ibid. 10.

[127] Ibid. 37.

Property-as-souvenir, then, constitutes the self through a form of collective memory and is a bulwark against death. Of all the goods the "patriarchal train" could carry, I want to look briefly at two specific family possessions that follow the Willoweses through their successive moves from Dorset to Somerset, to London, to Hampstead: Great-great-great-aunt Salome's prayer-book from the time of King George III and the stuffed green parakeet Ratafee, whom Salome's father brought back alive and squawking from his trip to the Indies.[128]

As Kristianne Kalata has pointed out regarding Townsend Warner's short stories, in *Lolly Willowes*, objects signify association beyond their "traditional use-value" and with "the larger realm of national identity" or even "national history."[129] The parakeet Ratafee commemorates the Willoweses' participation in imperialist travel. After his death and subsequent stuffing, Ratafee was set on his perch to watch four generations of Willoweses. In the early 19th century, one eye fell out and was replaced with a slightly larger one, an asymmetry which gave him a "leering" look. The family hangs on to him, though, because he became well-known in county as well as Willowes history, being the first such parakeet in Dorset.[130] The exotic imperial trophy affords the Willowes family a place of remembrance at the intersection of personal, county, and imperial history. As a reward of sorts, the Willowes family treasures him, keeping him "alive" as a stuffed and mounted version of himself, despite the unnatural effects of the attempts to replace his original eye. When Lolly's father Everard dies, her brother James moves in to Lady Place with his wife Sibyl. When James dies in 1905, Lady Place is leased and Sibyl moves to Hampstead. Displaying a kind of

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[128] Ibid. 10-11.

[129] Kristianne Kalata, "'There Was a World of Things...and a World of Words': Narration of Self through Object in Sylvia Townsend Warner's Scenes of Childhood," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 24, no. 2 (Fall 2005). 331.

[130] See Townsend Warner, *Lolly Willowes, or, The Loving Huntsman.* 11-59, for the history of these family members and objects.

familial and imperialist nostalgia for a time he never actually experienced, their son Titus insists that Ratafee be moved with Sibyl.

Lolly has the opportunity to continue the family tradition and collect exotic souvenirs of her own. Aunt Emmy returns from a trip to India and wants to return there with Lolly. Lolly listens to her aunt's tales with attention but then instinctively declines the invitation,[131] rejecting the experience that would likely mean a return with her own exotic objects to pass down as remembrances of her life. Life with her father at Lady Place completely satisfies Lolly, and the traditions she remembers with fondness are mainly the domestic rituals of her childhood, such as the smells of great-great-aunt Salome's marmalade recipe made in February, the dusting of the stuffed foxes and otters on Good Fridays, and the Midsummer Night's Eve picnics.[132] Lolly will exercise her preference for the homely and natural over the exotic again in Great Mop after her long exile in London.

Just as Ratafee is a souvenir of the Willoweses' imperial travels, local prominence, and desire to keep their past alive, Salome's prayer book becomes a souvenir of the entanglement of her family's Anglicanism with patriarchy and national power:

> Laura was not in any way religious. She was not even religious enough to speculate towards religion. […] Religion was great-great-aunt Salome's prayer-book which Caroline held in her gloved hands. Religion was a strand in the Willowes life, and the prayer-book was the outward sign of it. But it was also the outward sign of the puff pastry which had been praised by King George III. Religion was something to be preserved: it was part of the Willowes life and so was the prayer-book, preserved from generation to generation. Laura was bored by the church they attended. She would have liked, now that she was come to London, to see the world, to adventure in churches. She was darkly, adventurously drawn to see what services were like amongst Roman Catholics, amongst Huguenots, amongst Unitarians and Swedenborgians….[133]

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[131] Ibid. 27-9.

[132] Ibid. 29-30.

[133] Ibid. 49-50.

The family remembers and honors Salome through an object she owned that garnered her some notoriety—not solely for her religiosity but primarily, in Lolly's view, for the favor Salome's puff pastry found with the king. Willowes religion has become indistinguishable from governmental power and family pride, religious piety and skilled cooking comparable virtues. To preserve the marriage of these institutions, Henry exerts his power as male head of the household and refuses to allow Laura to go to church elsewhere. But for Lolly, religion is something signified, made into object and status symbol. She wants to try a religion she imagines will satisfy the "dark" yearnings of her "adventurous" spirit. Unlike her "old-fashioned" and "conservative" relatives, Lolly does not wish to abide by all the "canons of behavior imposed upon them by the example of their ancestors."[134]

Personal and familial history partially narrate national history as the possessions point back to a conglomerate of Willowes affiliations—patriarchy, religion, the nation, and empire. Weaning herself of the tendency to hoard signals Lolly's extrication from the power of such institutions as it extends through her family. Property-as-souvenir is the model by which lineage, tradition, and family memory constitute the self. With her release of family souvenirs and the tradition of hoarding, Lolly lives out an ethic of material simplicity that allows her to enter into a property relationship with Satan that will preserve her self as sacred—protected from institutional powers—through "satanic" memory instead of ancestral memory.

"To be *almost* wholly earth": In the Market for Material Simplicity

Although she has released some possessions in order to move to London, the moment that truly catalyzes this ethic and gives Lolly momentum occurs when she

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[134] Ibid. 10.

impulsively enters a shop on her way home to Apsley Terrace. The novel doesn't eschew an exchange system altogether, however: the produce, flowers, and homemade jams that transport Lolly into the country are, after all, for sale. This marketplace scene generates crosswinds of claim, purchase, communal property, simplicity.

The culinary wares in the shop conjure Lolly's nostalgia for rural areas like the ones she wandered through in her childhood. As she peruses the jars of jam, Lolly envisions "a solitary old woman picking fruit in a darkening orchard, …standing with upstretched arms among her fruit trees as though she were a tree herself…." Oblivious to her immediate surroundings and "the whole of her London life," Lolly "seemed to be standing alone in a darkening orchard, her feet in the grass, her arms stretched up to the pattern of leaves and fruit…. […] The back of her neck ached a little with the strain of holding up her arms. Her fingers searched among the leaves."[135] Completely absorbed in the mental landscape, Lolly becomes the old woman stretching upward, and her body aches in response. Like a curious Eve, she reaches for the fruit, but for Lolly it's elusive, not yet offered to her. When the salesman interrupts her mental travel, Lolly chooses a bunch of chrysanthemums whose colors, textures, and smells send her back into the country. Upon learning where they came from, Lolly knows on the spot that she will move there. Finding the location on a map, Lolly again imagines the place so vividly it's as if she is there. She lays claim to the wildness of her childhood haunts, to her growing sense of autonomy, and to her future home, by purchasing the flowers grown in that region.

Lolly's purchase in the shop participates in the notion that owning property, even simple goods, can define and fortify the individual self, but in observing her relatives, she

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[135] Ibid. 80, 81.

also realizes that owning too much can damage the self.[136] When she returns home to a dinner party, she finds her relations "almost unrecognizable." Henry and Caroline "were half hidden under their accumulations—of prosperity, authority, daily experience."[137] The self can become buried and malformed under the weight of too much wealth and power. This also implies that a true, natural, essential self exists and must be preserved or freed from such burdens. Lolly must shed the part of the Willowes self that lives under the weight of hoarding and thrills at having authority and being connected to institutional power. Townsend Warner uses this quick series of revelations to loosen Lolly from her stultifying, mechanical life in London and to return her to the natural, primitive self.

Ironically, Lolly's brother Henry unintentionally makes renouncing Willowes habits of accumulation easier for her. After deciding to move to Great Mop, Lolly plans to use her remaining inheritance to buy herself a home, a donkey, and some fruit trees of her own—life as she imagined it in the shop. However, Henry has squandered it with a poor investment in the Ethiopian Development Syndicate and has been replenishing her account with his own funds until the speculations pay well again (which he believes will happen when there is a "Conservative Government again").[138] Lolly quickly adjusts her expectations and accepts the reality of living on less than she intended:

> It did not matter about the donkey, nor the house, nor the darkening orchard even. If she were not to pick fruit from her own trees, there were common herbs and berries in plenty for her, growing wherever she chose to wander.

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136 Donna Dickenson, *Property, Women, and Politics: Subjects or Objects?* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1997). 97. In her analysis of Hegel's developmental philosophy of property (that the self is actualized through its relationship to external objects), Dickenson explains that, for Hegel, "self-actualization may actually require that we own *just enough* property. Hegel thinks the extremely rich are as likely as the very poor to manifest anti-social attitudes, laziness and mistrust; he refers to the 'ethical corruption' engendered by both extremes…."

137 Townsend Warner, *Lolly Willowes, or, The Loving Huntsman.* 84.

138 Ibid. 96-7.

> It is best as one grows older to strip oneself of possessions, to shed oneself downward like a tree, to be almost wholly earth before one dies.[139]

Lolly's planned self-assertion originates as a fantasy of property ownership that she must replace with an ethic that's more amenable to her revised situation. Property accumulation, instead of signaling power, actually communicates a fear of death and a death-like state of being buried alive under a tradition of hoarding. Souvenirs may memorialize ancestors, but the earth remembers and reclaims its own. In shedding herself downward, Lolly isn't yearning for death or self-erasure; she's looking to remember and reclaim her natural self, the one that is most like the tree, like the earth. Her life has taken a turn, "for now at last she was simplifying life for herself."[140]

The Props of Civilization

After moving to Great Mop, embracing her primitive self means simplifying possessions and relinquishing mental holds on the powers that are affiliated with them. Bowed low in a meadow of cowslips, Lolly experiences a sudden understanding of the intensity of her recent misery and then an immediate release from it. She is "absolved," "humbler, and more simple." She no longer feels the bitter satisfaction of knowing that she "outraged" "her tyrants" by moving to Great Mop.[141] Though the passage approximates a Christian economy of humility and forgiveness (bowing as if in prayer, awareness of being wronged and doing wrong, experiencing humility, receiving absolution), Lolly chooses to substitute forgiveness with forgetting when it comes to dealing with her family:

> There was no question of forgiving them. She had not, in any case, a forgiving nature; and the injury they had done her was not done by them. If she were to start forgiving she must needs forgive Society, the Law, the

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[139] Ibid. 98.

[140] Ibid. 83.

[141] Ibid. 136, 137.

> Church, the History of Europe, the Old Testament, great-great-aunt Salome and her prayer-book, the Bank of England, Prostitution, the Architect of Apsley Terrace, and half a dozen other useful props of civilization. All she could do was to go on forgetting them. But now she was able to forget them without flouting them by her forgetfulness.[142]

Bruce Knoll claims that Lolly's choice reflects her refusal to exercise personal power over others by forgiving them.[143] While this fairly suspicious view of forgiveness may be the case in part, it doesn't account for the "props of civilization" that seem to be Lolly's deeper concern. The familial injustices Lolly has suffered are byproducts of the institutionalized powers Lolly acknowledges here, so forgiving immediate kin by extension requires forgiving the unjust systems in which they operate and through which they've been formed. Just as the old prayer-book is a prop the Willoweses use to re-enact their family story, it and the immense religious and economic systems Lolly lists are the possessions and props for the progress narrative of modern civilization. Lolly chooses to turn away from these props and opt for the primitive tradition of witchcraft instead, which she believes offers women more independence. Thus the novel sets the bourgeois, property-laden self in opposition to the primitive, unencumbered self, associating the former with oppression, a mechanized London existence, and imperial, patriarchal Christianity, and the latter with autonomy, the dynamic, natural countryside, and witchcraft.

Once again, Townsend Warner teasingly situates Lolly's pursuit of her primitive self within a context of property and purchase—she marries the sacred and the possessive. When Lolly realizes she is a witch, Townsend Warner upsets the traditional roles in the drama of the sacred and the profane, and the Devil becomes the supplier of the sacred:

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[142] Ibid. 137.

[143] Knoll, "'An Existence Doled Out': Passive Resistance as a Dead End in Sylvia Townsend Warner's Lolly Willowes." 355. Lolly's thrill in feeling the power of the henwife contests the notion that she doesn't want the power to potentially control others.

> She raised her eyes, and looked at her room, the green-painted walls with the chairs sitting silently round. She felt herself inhabiting the empty house. Through the unrevealing square of the window her mind looked at the view. About the empty house was the village, and about the village the hills, neighborly under their covering of night. Roof, house, village, hills encircled her like the rings of a fortification. This was her domain, and it was to keep this inviolate that she had made her compact with the Devil. She did not know what the price might be, but she was sure of the purchase. She need not fear…any of the Willoweses. They could not drive her out, or enslave her spirit any more, nor shake her possession of the place she had chosen."[144]

This passage joins the languages of sacred space, property ownership, and military defense. Like the Ashes of Rings, Lolly is positioned as if at the center of ringed layers of protection—roof, house, village, and hills. She is planted and in "possession" of her place, a "domain" that is now, due to her compact with Satan, "inviolate." In realizing and accepting her "vocation" as a witch, Lolly begins to inhabit her home fully and to extend her possession to the village and wooded hills that encircle the silent house. She believes she can no longer be removed, shipped like a piece of property from a father's to a brother's house.

Lolly is unsure of the complete terms of her purchase because, unlike those who trade their selves for fame or wealth, she has bartered for her privacy and autonomy. In modern minds (including Lolly's), this implies that she is in possession of her self. She has acquired sacred property, a domain for her self that cannot be violated, but the narrative reveals that she has also become Satan's sacred property, a primitive self that has gone from being her father's favorite stuffed ermine "come true to life" to being the "loving huntsman's catch," his pet, the souvenir he'll never forget.[145]

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[144] Townsend Warner, *Lolly Willowes, or, The Loving Huntsman*. 159-160.

[145] Ibid. 15, 217. In Lolly's final conversation with Satan, he also refers to himself as a "master" and his humans as "servants" and Lolly as one of his "conquests." Lolly displays her contempt for Mr. Jones, the servile clergyman who is also a warlock, saying that he "can't even call is soul his own." Satan replies with a reprimand and a reminder: "'Have you forgotten that he has sold it to me?'" The implication that Lolly has done the same is abundantly clear.

Possession and Belonging

Moments after realizing her deal with Satan, "the true Laura" knows "where to turn"[146] for confirmation of her primitive self's reanimation. This memory is not severed from family completely because it involves her childhood at Lady Place, but neither is it evoked by family souvenirs that in Lolly's opinion are barnacled to imperial travel or state religion. Lolly realizes that "even in the old days of Lady Place the impulse had stirred in her. What else had set her upon her long solitary walks on "forsaken green byways," her quests for powerful and "forgotten herbs," her brews and distillations? In London she had never had the heart to take out her still."[147] As a girl, Lolly subscribed to Nannie Quantrell's belief that eating young nettles in the spring clears the blood; she "had a taste for botany" and a "fancy for brewing." She "turned her attention into the forsaken green byways of the rural pharmacopeia," gathering herbs with which to brew concoctions and make salads. With her father's assistance, she wrote "Health by the Wayside," a small book on natural remedies.[148] "A taste for" and "a fancy for" suggest that Lolly's interests in the study and use of botanicals were inherent, so the return to nature is a return to her natural mode of being in and with the world. For Lolly, witchcraft enacts a recovery of the "forsaken" and "forgotten," in the primitive, natural Britain and in the primitive, natural self.

When Lolly engages in an act of remembering and lamenting the loss of "Folly's Wood," which was harvested during the First World War, Townsend Warner's inscription of primitive magic finally comes to linger over the notion of possession-as-belonging as the

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[146] Ibid. 160

[147] Ibid. 161.

[148] Ibid. 30-32. Townsend Warner also drops clues to Lolly's "vocation" with periodic descriptions of her appearance, including her sallow skin, wide gray eyes, and pointed features (25), which grow more pronounced and stereotypically witch-like as she ages. "Laura's nose and chin were defined as sharply as the peaks of a holly leaf" (109).

nation's primitive past and Lolly's primitive self survive into the present through an alternative "satanic economy." Satan offers Lolly the enigmatic but consoling reply, "'once a wood, always a wood'":

> The words rang true, and she sat silent, considering them. Pious Asa might hew down the groves, but as far as the Devil was concerned he hewed in vain. […] There remaineth a rest for the people of God (somehow the thought of the Devil always propelled her mind to the Holy Scriptures), and for the other people, the people of Satan, there remained a rest also. Held fast in that strong memory no wild thing could be shaken, no secret covert destroyed, no haunt of shadow and silence laid open. The goods yard at Paddington, for instance—a savage place! as holy and enchanted as ever it had been. Not one of the monuments and tinkerings of man could impose on the satanic mind. The Vatican and the Crystal Palace, and all the neat human nest-boxes in rows…he saw through them, they went flop like card-houses, the bricks were earth again, and the steel girders burrowed shrieking into the veins of earth, and the dead timber was restored to the ghostly groves.[149]

That lumberjacking Asa is named for his piety hints that the woods he fells are more than woods. They represent primitive magic, still thriving though hidden and encoded in enclaves such as Great Mop; still thriving despite imperialist schemes and nationalist-inflected Christian efforts to cull such a "folly" and to civilize the primitive. Lolly believes that Satan, that storehouse of memory, claims and preserves the primitive as sacred property, never lost or profaned despite appearances. She trusts that he sees through the grand spectacles of progress that commerce (the goods yard), religion (the Vatican), and empire (the Crystal Palace) build, to a time when those props will topple and the earth will reclaim its resources. And Lolly's self, once a piece of property forgotten in her father's will, is also "irrevocably"[150] remembered, acquired, and made sacred property by Satan: once a witch, always a witch.

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[149] Ibid. 207-208.

[150] This is Satan's reply when Lolly, seeking reassurance that her sacred self is guaranteed, asks if she really is a witch now. Ibid. 210.

Complications arise out of Townsend Warner's take on witchcraft, however, particularly through Lolly's individualism and the representation of Satan. Scholars of Townsend Warner's period such as Jane Ellen Harrison understood collectivity as a fundamental component of primitive religion.[151] In Lolly's estimation, God offers "a rest" or spiritual belonging to Christians, and Satan provides the same—protection, belonging and communion in life, security of some sort of belonging after death—for "his people." In *Lolly Willowes*, the natural, primitive world is Satan's sanctuary, and Great Mop houses the members of his living body that would be traditionally figured as the "mystical body" of Satan as opposed to the "mystic body" of Christ that is the Church.[152] Lolly has no desire to participate fully in this community of witches and warlocks, not to mention her family or the political body of British citizens. She wants autonomy, sacredness, and sanctuary; she wants belonging without communion.

Another difficulty that results from Townsend Warner's idiosyncratic construction of primitive magic is her depiction of Satan, the character with which Murray was dissatisfied. The Devil has "a religious character"[153] because in the cosmic drama, he plays the part opposite God, and in Lolly's mind they're inextricably linked. To reconnect Lolly to the natural world and her natural self, Townsend Warner attempts to bring to life Murray's definition of witchcraft as primitive magic mistaken for the worship of the Satan of the Christian narrative. But Lolly's cagey conversation partner doesn't completely escape the

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[151] Durkheim argued that "…religion should be an eminently collective thing." He excluded magic from his category of religion because "the magician has a clientele and not a Church." Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. 60, 63. Harrison applied Durkheim's emphasis on collectivity to primitive magic or religion, asserting that "among primitive peoples, religion reflects *collective* feeling and *collective* thinking." Harrison, *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion*. ix.

[152] Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism*. 269, 246.

[153] Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. 58.

Christian Satan—the devil in disguise, promising humans their hearts' desires on earth and collecting his payment in the afterlife.[154]

Thus the novel's discourse on property sways between simply being a possession of Satan and having belonging in the satanic mind and community. To Lolly's mind, what she gets in the bargain is a kind of belonging wholly different from the demanding nature of her family. She trusts that Satan's ownership is more akin to stewardship than enslavement. His gaze is "undesireing and unjudging"; his is a "satisfied but profoundly indifferent ownership"[155] that protects the primitive from the destructive forces of powerful institutions. And yet, one can't help but suspect that Lolly's pact, though apparently quite benign, is played out on a stage once set for *Faust*. Satan appears to Lolly in as a gamekeeper and gravekeeper, disguises that appeal to and confirm her need to connect to the earth. As the title indicates, he is also the "loving huntsman" who pursues Lolly with "sweet persuasions,"[156] and "his interest in mankind is that of a skilful and experienced naturalist."[157] These analogous professions imply that whatever his role or intentions, Satan has a studied, masterful knowledge of the earth and its inhabitants. He has a deep interest and investment in it and them. To Lolly's mind, he chooses to act on this knowledge with care and pity.

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[154] Trodd, *Women's Writing in English: Britain 1900-1945*. Trodd writes that "Warner's narrative relishes Murray's fantasy of an access of secret power and status for women. Warner's treatment of Murray's thesis, however, remains satirically unconvinced; the meetings of the local coven suffer from the banality of ordinary social events, and the companionable Devil, manifesting himself in Lawrentian guises as huntsman, gamekeeper and gardener, proves a slippery concept, realizable only in death" (206-7). The original manuscript concluded with Lolly's burying her bag of apples, but the publisher asked Townsend Warner to write an alternate ending that was less suggestive of death. See page 62 in Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Biography*.

[155] Townsend Warner, *Lolly Willowes, or, The Loving Huntsman*. 222. Lolly's relationship with Satan undoes the traditional lore and historical accusations of the witch as Satan's sexual partner. Satan, at least in his interactions with Lolly, is "undesiring."

[156] Ibid. 161.

[157] Ibid. 162.

She notices that Satan "hides," and even tells him that it's "obvious" he can't be "merely a benevolent institution," but she doesn't fully consider his props or property. Instead, she decides she must be his witch "in blindness."[158] Satan eventually withdraws, and Lolly, feeling secure in the autonomy purchased with her primitive, sacred self, plans to sleep outside in the wild woods, peacefully ignoring the likelihood that she has been handed one of western civilization's most valued and enduring props.

Butts and Townsend Warner participate in the modernist turn to "the primitive" in order to fashion a magical strategy for their characters to resist the overwhelming forces of empire, war, state religion, or the patriarchal family and to secure sacred property. Shot through with the logic of possession, their narratives constitute the self through its acceptance or rejection of family heirlooms that affiliate the Ashes and Willoweses with imperial access to other cultures, access gained in part through the dispossession of indigenous peoples. Through the connections between magical property and primitive magic controlled by English propriety and the will, *Ashe of Rings* relies on conceptions of the self as a possession. The same is true for *Lolly Willowes*, though the novel imagines the possibility of the self as a sacred possession that experiences belonging. I've suggested that the novel falls short of this possibility for Lolly because sacred belonging requires communion or community. In the final chapter, I look to the ways Virginia Woolf's work takes up the tension between mystical structures of the self as the center and as sprawling limbs of another "mystical body"—not that of a coven, but of empire.

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[158] Ibid. 216.

CHAPTER FOUR
"TO WORSHIP AT THE SHRINE THAT [HER] OWN HANDS HAVE BUILT": CLARISSA DALLOWAY AND THE MYSTICAL IMMANENCE OF THE SELF

Endings and Beginnings

In Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*,[1] oppositional themes, movements, and images create a contrapuntal effect, yet they also paradoxically bend, meet, and blend: life and death; a "lark" and a "plunge"; a solid center and an atmospheric ripple. The notion of finding life's completion through other human beings and using one's ability to create that kind of satisfying life for others underwrites Clarissa Dalloway's ethical and mystical speculations and plays out in language that also circles back on itself. While she confronts what she sees as the imposing, conjoined power of God and Empire through her offerings of mystical connection, Clarissa's images of her self as a living social and spiritual hub and as a connective, spiritual mist after death still bear the imprint of imperial structure and movement. My aim is to show how Woolf's mystical-aesthetic philosophy of life fosters such structures and bends paradoxes into self-contained loops through the mystical immanence of the self in *Mrs. Dalloway*. One might take "In my beginning is my end.... In my end is my beginning"[2] as an apropos mantra of mystical circularity, and so I return briefly to my project's beginning: Evelyn Underhill.

Anne-Marie Priest writes that Evelyn Underhill's definition of mysticism excludes Virginia Woolf's work because the definition requires union with God.[3] Though she

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[1] Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, ed. Mark Hussey, Annotated with Introduction by Bonnie Kime Scott ed. (Orlando: Harvest, 2005).

[2]T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (Orlando: Harvest, 1971). 23, 32.

[3] Anne-Marie Priest, "Virginia Woolf's Brain: Mysticism, Literature, and Neuroscience," *Dalhousie Review* 89, no. 3 (Fall 2009). 290. Priest argues that developments in neuroscience allow us to understand mystical experience of "oneness" with the world, or "unitive consciousness," as a shift into "right-brain consciousness." Thus, she speculates that Woolf's "intuitive mysticism" and the mysticism of her literary writings were products not of bipolar disorder, but of Woolf's "access to right-brain awareness" (294, 304).

emphatically denies the existence of God, the mystical elements in Woolf's personal philosophy and in her fiction are compatible with numerous attributes that Underhill ascribes to mystic experiences and the mystic view of life that allows for them. While she favors Christian mysticism, Underhill's definition takes into account various formulations of mysticism in addition to it. According to Underhill, mysticism is

> the expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit towards complete harmony with the transcendental order; whatever be the theological formula under which that order is understood. This tendency, in great mystics, gradually captures the whole field of consciousness; it dominates their life and, in the experience called "mystic union," attains its end. Whether that end be called the God of Christianity, the World-soul of Pantheism, the Absolute of Philosophy, the desire to attain it and the movement towards it—so long as this is a genuine life process and not an intellectual speculation—is the proper subject of mysticism.[4]

It is uncertain whether or not Woolf read Underhill's work, but she most likely heard of the best-selling *Mysticism*, and she knew other writers and their work, such as Sinclair and Eliot, who befriended Underhill and were influenced by her knowledge of the subject. Critics have dealt with the metaphysical aspects of Woolf's writings by identifying scientific and philosophical sources to counter claims of Woolf's "mysticism," arguing that Woolf found affirmation for her mystical intuitions in new scientific theories, situating Woolf within a nexus of Bloomsbury philosophers and aesthetic theorists, and tracing Woolf's philosophical and aesthetic influences to her father's agnosticism and her aunt's Quakerism.[5] In this

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[4] Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*. xiv-xv.

[5] See Patricia Waugh, "Science and the Aesthetics of English Modernism," *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics* 49 (Spring 2003). 33-47. Waugh covers much of the same ground as Banfield in her exploration of the influence of science and logic, via Russell and Moore, on Bloomsbury aesthetics (particularly Roger Fry) and their synthesized influence on Woolf's aesthetics. Like Banfield before her, she understands Fry's Post-Impressionism as a response to the breakdown of 19th-century scientific assumptions that left the need for a theory of knowledge that would connect sensory experience data to the abstract realm of logic and mathematics, which is what Russell provided. Both Fry and Woolf wanted to explore art as a form of knowledge beyond the sensory perception of the individual (the sense data of impressionism). Waugh claims that readers often misidentify these influences as "mysticism" in Woolf's work. Kane, however, suggests that new scientific theories of Woolf's day, such as Sir James Jeans's *The Mysterious Universe* and Sir Arthur Eddington's *Science and the Unseen World,* actually offered Woolf support for her mysticism, which she was

chapter, I'm not primarily concerned with identifying and explaining influences, rather with placing Woolf in conversation with other women writers of the same period who also inscribed their own aesthetic, ethical, and/or imperial mysticisms. Reading Woolf in conjunction with some of Underhill's claims, for example, throws Woolf's mystical alterations into relief and underscores the aspects of mysticism that persist in her writing despite her rejection of its theological components.

Woolf does not only deny a deity; her mysticism refuses the "Absolute of Philosophy" that a writer such as Sinclair claims instead of an anthropomorphic God. In Underhill's description, mysticism names the human orientation "towards complete harmony with the transcendental order," but Woolf attempts to convey mystical experience without a transcendental order or "theological formula." This re-orientation necessitates Woolf's significant readjustment of the "movement" of the self that Underhill mentions.

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hesitant to embrace due to Leonard's dismissal of it and her own fears that it was a product of mental instability. See Julie Kane, "Varieties of Mystical Experience in the Writings of Virginia Woolf," *Twentieth Century Literature* 41, no. 4 (1995). 328-350. Ann Banfield, *The Phantom Table: Woolf, Fry, Russell and the Epistemology of Modernism* (Cambridge Cambridge UP, 2000). Banfield argues that Woolf forged her theories of modern fiction through interaction with and as a literary partner to Bertrand Russell's philosophical realism and Roger Fry's notion of vision and design. Berman reasons that emphasizing Fry's influence leaves no room for ethical considerations. Turning instead to Jane Goldman's work, *The Feminist Aesthetics of Virginia Woolf*, as well as Levinas, Irigaray, and Nancy, Berman posits that an ethical opening out towards the other occurs during moments of aesthetic reflection in Woolf's fiction. Jessica Berman, "Ethical Folds: Ethics, Aesthetics, Woolf," *Modern Fiction Studies* 50, no. 1 (Spring 2004). 151-172. Tseng traces the influences of Pater and Plato via Leslie Stephen, and, like Marcus, finds the origins of the healing value of silence in the mysticism of Woolf's Quaker aunt, Caroline Stephen. See Jui-hua Tseng, "Walter Pater, the Stephens [sic] and Virginia Woolf's Mysticism," *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 30, no. 1 (January 2004). 203-226. Jane Marcus, "The Niece of a Nun: Virginia Woolf, Caroline Stephen, and the Cloistered Imagination," in *Virginia Woolf: A Feminist Slant*, ed. Jane Marcus (Lincoln and London: U of Nebraska P, 1983). 7-36. In addition to these critics, Madeline Moore psychoanalyzes Woolf's relationships to her mother, men, and food to argue that mystical and sexual asceticism provide the "power behind the rationality" Woolf applied to her "materialist understanding of women's oppression." Moore emphasizes Woolf's mystical separation from the "commonplace" and the "secular" to a greater degree than I do; this emphasis is probably the reason for her exclusion of *Mrs. Dalloway* as a chapter subject. See Madeline Moore, *The Short Season Between Two Silences: The Mystical and the Political in the Novels of Virginia Woolf* (Boston: George Allen and Unwin, 1984). 24.

Still relying on a duality of body and soul or self,[6] Woolf's novel frames mystic experience within an earthbound, lateral structure rather than a transcendental one. The self in a traditional formulation of mysticism moves on an upward trajectory during mystical union in life and in the ultimate union after death, fictionalized in Constance Tyrell's spirit shooting upward like an arrow and piercing into the Heart of Being.[7] The self in Woolf's novel disperses outward horizontally as if through some sort of osmosis, and becomes part of others, both human and inanimate.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, then, mysticism isn't an experience of union or harmony with a transcendent Divine Other but a speculation of the self's immanence in the world and its completion in other selves and places. *Immanent* is from the Latin, meaning "indwelling; inherent; actually present or abiding in; remaining within," as opposed to the "climbing over" and "going beyond" of transcendence.[8] Evident in her autobiographical writing, her essays on modern fiction, and in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf's shifting of mystical axis of self/other from the vertical and transcendent to the lateral and immanent supposes a world in which aesthetic creations and ethical actions are "things in themselves," without relation to any outside authority's prompting or reward. A human is no longer the *imago dei* of Evelyn Underhill's *The Column of Dust*, but now is life itself. Constance Tyrell's claim that woman is life is predicated upon her participation in the realm of divine creativity—upon her potential motherhood. Woolf's novel takes this a step further and in another direction: Clarissa

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[6] Mark Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World: The Philosophy of Virginia Woolf's Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1986). Hussey states that for Woolf, "self" refers to the unseen, mysterious, and possibly eternal aspect of human being traditionally denoted by "soul." xix.

[7] In Underhill's novel, the mystical relationship has both a horizontal and a vertical axis; one's love for God flows outward in love to others. However, this outward flow doesn't merge the self with others.

[8] From the Latin, "transcend" literally means "to climb over or beyond; surmount. When applied to the Deity, transcendence refers to the "attribute of being above and independent of the universe." "Transcendence," in *Oxford English Dictionary*. Online. Accessed 29 April, 2010.

Dalloway's being harnesses all of life, not because her motherhood connects her to God's creative power, but because she is a mystical artist of everyday life. Her self finds its completion in others and offers that connection for others. In what follows, I argue that in the mystical movement of the self, Clarissa takes on the very form and movement of modernism in response to empire, a centralized core as well as a diffuse expansiveness.

Looking to Edward Said's "A Note on Modernism" from *Culture and Imperialism* helps account for these mystical shifts and structures in Woolf's novel and provides interesting commentary on her declarations about the writing practice. According to Said, certain features of modernist narrative, such as irony and self-questioning, respond to and signal the "pressures of the imperium." At the British Empire's height, growing awareness of competing empires and the presence of the "contending native" indicated the possible unhinging of the imperial structure. To maintain a sense of cohesiveness, modernist authors took on the role of collecting reality and holding it together, functioning as the organizing principle. At once circular and open-ended, narratives that employ an "encyclopedic aesthetic" gather and juxtapose fragments from other cultures and from "high" and "low" culture. This inclusiveness attempts to create the sense of something comprehensive and complete, an aesthetic totality to replace the once-whole system that empire appeared to be.[9] The ideal of "totality," once mapped and depicted as the empire's geography, becomes a spatialized aesthetic in the modernist novel.

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[9] Said, *Culture and Imperialism*. 188, 189, 190. Of course, the empire was never a whole without dissension or fissures, but it could provide the illusion of an England completely united with its colonies. Jameson also argues that "spatial language" as a characteristic of modernist style substitutes for the "unrepresentable totality" of existence in the imperial structure. In the topographical structure of empire, a significant economic segment (the colony) is spatially remote and therefore absent from the consciousness of the subject in the imperial center. Unlike Said, Jameson ignores the British subject's awareness of "the contending native," as well as contacts between British writers and colonial writers. See Frederic Jameson, "Modernism and Imperialism," in *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature* (Derry, Ireland: Field Day Theatre Company, 1988).

Take *Mrs. Dalloway's* narrative devices, structure, and repetitions, for example. Woolf limits and contains its plot to one day in June, packaging the novel as a comprehensible unit. While the novel is enclosed within one day, it also opens up to time past through the consciousnesses of its characters. It begins with Mrs. Dalloway's plunge into her morning errands and moves towards Septimus's suicidal leap from his window, which in turn recasts the narrative's beginning in a more somber light. The parameters of the novel's plot and setting and the rhythmic quality of its structures—the looping, repetitive iterations of images (of the sea, for instance), refrains ("Fear no more the heat o' the sun"), the turns and returns to the consciousnesses of its characters—attempt to create a kind of aesthetic whole that Said perceives as a cultural reaction to political instability and corrosion. Mrs. Dalloway tries to recreate this whole but remains inconclusive regarding the possibility. Exhibiting the unsettledness regarding the stability of the world and the ambivalence about empire that mark modernist writing, Woolf's novel couches the formation of a mystical, connected whole in the language of speculation and possibility.

I see Woolf's work in *Mrs. Dalloway* as exemplifying the aesthetic markers that Said connects to empire and yet modifying them. In addition to the narrative as self-contained and yet open, the novel also demonstrates the spatial aesthetic that Said briefly mentions. Set in the imperial metropolis and laden with imperial monuments and markers, the novel explicitly relies on the geography of empire as its characters move throughout London.[10] Woolf's modernist aesthetic, however, moves from geographical space into psychological space. And the literal space of the page is occupied by the internal, psychic spaces of the

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[10] See Scott Cohen, "The Empire from the Street: Virginia Woolf, Wembley, and Imperial Monuments," *Modern Fiction Studies* 50, no. 1 (Spring 2004). 85-109 and Susan M. Squier, "The Carnival and Funeral of Mrs. Dalloway's London," in *Virginia Woolf and London: The Sexual Politics of the City* (Chapel Hill and London: U of North Carolina P, 1985). 91-121.

characters even more than the streets, parks, shops, and homes of London. The physical and political geography through which the body moves is revealed to be a mystical landscape as well, where the self like a mist inhabits the spaces between limbs and the seats of buses and where the mind inhabits the past and reaches out into the future. Finally, and most relevant to my aims in this chapter, Woolf also figures imperial geography through character. Clarissa Dalloway herself functions as a metaphorical centre, the metropolis where strands of the relational web meet and intersect and for whom Peter at once feels nostalgia and contempt.

What I would like to add to Said's theory is that the modernist attempt to conceive and create a "totality" or "whole" is also an aesthetic analogue to the mystical ideal of connection or unity, in which the human person is an inextricable part of the whole body of creation or in which the self is united with its particular version of the Divine. While critics have identified the notion of "wholes" with a broader modernist aesthetic preference,[11] I would like to examine the ways it links imperial structures to the novel's mystical elements. As I pointed out in the second chapter, imperial propaganda capitalized on the discourse of unity, national unity with Britain and imperial unity among Britain and its colonies, as ads like the 1910 drawing of two white officers (one British and one South African) shaking hands exemplify. The two men occupy the center of the drawing, flanked by the Union Jack on the left and a giraffe on the right. Two native South Africans, physiologically identical and both shirtless, sit on branches suspended in mid-air. Looking down towards the

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[11] Damon Franke, *Modernist Heresies: British Literary History, 1883-1924* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State UP, 2008). Franke calls modernist aesthetic wholes "synthetic" (xi), tying them to the notion of heresy as a synthesis of sacred and secular impulses, but he doesn't attend to their connections with the imperial context within which these writers lived and to which they frequently responded. Following Said and, to a lesser extent, Jameson, I argue that the modernist preoccupation with "wholes" and "unity" can be understood as responses to imperial structure and tensions. In addition, modernist aesthetics of wholeness and unity dialogue with mystical discourse that also favors such concepts, images, and values.

officers, they hold a sign that fills the top center of the picture and reads, "Unity is Strength."[12] Advancements in communications technologies also aided the notion of imperial consensus and community. As Michael Whitworth points out, the telegram and telephone helped create the image of empire as a body, a tingling nerve system whose fibers splayed out from and ultimately ran back to the central metropolis.[13]

Ambivalence and anxiety shadow the slogans and metaphors of unity, questioning their motives and their possibility. Peter's ambivalence toward Clarissa and the heart of English "civilization" mirrors modernist writers' ambivalence regarding empire, their conflicted attempts to challenge imperial domination while still viewing the world through western, imperial cultural categories. That *Mrs. Dalloway* cannot imagine a civilization *not* founded upon imperial rule, for example, reveals what Elleke Boehmer calls the "immense moral and imaginative effort which was required for the transformation of colonialist discourses."[14] By analyzing Woolf's own statements about writing in conjunction with the novel, I will show that, through the character of Clarissa, the structures and movements of the self the novel puts forward simultaneously critique and mimic the centrality and expansiveness of empire. Woolf was aware of the common conflation of God and

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[12] Julia Bush, *Edwardian Ladies and Imperial Power*, ed. June Hannam and Pauline Stafford, Women, Power, and Politics (London: Leicester UP, 2000). See Plate 8. Originally published in *Victoria League Notes*, May 1910.

[13] See Michael Whitworth, "Woolf's Web: Telecommunications and Community," in *Virginia Woolf and Communities: Selected Papers from the Eighth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf*, ed. Jeanette McVicker and Laura Davis (New York: Pace UP, 1999). 161-167. Whitworth argues that Woolf's images of webs, threads, and networks borrow from technology of the time period, advancements that enabled the British to establish an imperial network of communications. Woolf's fictional webs or communities challenge the hierarchical web model in which the European metropolis is the "authoritarian center" from which the web radiates (162). Whitworth only briefly mentions *Mrs. Dalloway*, but the metaphors for Clarissa's self that I'm examining clearly fit into the models he identifies. She is both the metropolitan center of a radiating web and a dispersed mist, which resembles the "decentered, rhizomic structure, cutting across established hierarchies" that Whitworth points to as the second model for networks during the period.

[14] Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors.* 143. In addition to Virginia and Leonard Woolf, Boehmer also discusses the ambivalence of Orwell, Forster, Greene, and Waugh.

Empire,[15] and through the mystical structures of her novel tries to subvert them; however, the movement or impulse of empire is retained. As Said contends, the imperium still leaves its imprint in the creation of a totality—in modernist *form*, even as the substance of empire is critiqued or dismissed. I'm asserting that Clarissa's self takes on this form, impulse, and movement.

Woolf's Mystical-Aesthetic Philosophy

The project of constructing aesthetic "totalities" that Said pins on the modernist author is evidenced in Woolf's autobiographical writings, where she explains her intention to make "wholes" through her art. Her comments in *Moments of Being* clearly underscore the mystical nature of her personal philosophy and writing practice:

> And so I go on to suppose that the shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer. I hazard the explanation that a shock is at once in my case followed by the desire to explain it. […] …it is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together.[16]

In Woolf's syntax an undertow is at work, pulling the crest of one sentence under and circling it back up again into the coming phrase. The overlapping of these linguistic waves ("by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness….") reveals that to make the "severed parts" into a whole through the act of writing is to make them "real," inextricable from the patterned "real thing behind appearances." The "real thing" is therefore a whole, and the author's work is to both construct and reveal this. I want to tease out a few intertwined implications here: the

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[15] *Mrs. Dalloway* makes this connection plain in its critique of the goddess "Conversion." For a later example, see Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (San Diego: Harvest, 1938). 70.

[16] ———, *Moments of Being: A Collection of Autobiographical Writing*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind (San Diego: Harvest Book, 1985). 72.

mystical perception of and belief in a reality that exists behind the visible world; the position of the artist in relation to this hidden order; and the repetitive, intuitive basis for Woolf's ideas that enmesh art with life.

In her discussion of the common ground of the "Real" that mystics and artists intuit and occupy, Underhill explains its application to aesthetic judgment:

> The intuition of the Real lying at the root of the visible world and sustaining its life, is present in a modified form in the arts: perhaps it were better to say, *must* be present if these arts are to justify themselves as heightened forms of experience. […] We know that the picture which is 'like a photograph,' the building which is at once handsome and commodious, the novel which is a perfect transcript of life, fail to satisfy us. It is difficult to say why this should be so, unless it were because these things have neglected their true business: which was not to reproduce the illusions of ordinary men but to catch and translate for us something of that 'secret plan,' that reality which the artistic consciousness is able, in a measure, to perceive.[17]

Underhill claims that mystics possess a broader and more sustained vision of reality than artists do, but Woolf—as a mystical artist, not an artistic mystic—attests that she sees the pattern of reality "when [she has] a shock." In fact, she identifies this "shock-receiving capacity" as the ability that then presses her to reconstruct and make sense of the shock through language. With this statement, Woolf identifies mystical experience as the elemental and generating material for at least some of her art. Her comments to this effect in *Moments of Being*, then, partially support Don Cupitt's claim that "mysticism is mystical writing: that is, it is writing and only writing that reconciles conflicting forces and turns suffering into happiness. A person 'has a religious experience' when she is able through religious imagery or ritual to 'get herself together,' and to experience the harmonization and reconciliation of the various forces bearing upon her and within her."[18] Cupitt's emphasis on writing and the

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[17] Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*. 74.

[18] Cupitt, *Mysticism After Modernity*. 74-75. For more examples of the ineffable nature of mystic moments and the concern that language is inadequate to describe them after the fact, see Woolf, *Moments of Being: A Collection*

mediation of language, however, stems in part from his bald denial that individuals can actually have ineffable experience. For Woolf, it appears that mystical experience does occur before she can give language to it. Woolf's cyclical process of mystical experience-rapturous writing-mystical philosophy finds its closer kin in Underhill's statement that mysticism is "the art of arts, their source and also their end."[19]

Woolf's experiences, her aesthetic, and what she calls her philosophy reinforce one another and form a circular process: She has a mystical experience (a "shock") that she explains and converts into a revelation through the writing process, thereby transmuting the moment's power to confound and hurt her into an experience of artistic pleasure.[20] Then, in making the moment into a "whole" through art, she arrives at her own personal philosophy of the whole:

> From [writing the parts into a whole] I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. *Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. And I see this when I have a shock. This intuition of mine—it is so instinctive that it seems given to me, not made by me….[21]

Woolf cannot help but harness the pulling oppositions of paradox in her attempt to explain herself. The oscillations between the language of revelation and the language of

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of Autobiographical Writing. 65, 66. Wood states of Woolf's mysticism that art is the true moment of being, as compared with the experience that inspires it. See James Wood, "Virginia Woolf's Mysticism," in *The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief* (New York: Random House, 1999). 100.

[19] Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*. 76.

[20] Instead of bringing peace and unity, sometimes mystic moments confront oneness as a terrifying void or chaos. One might think of Mansfield's Linda Burnell, whose mystic moments in the presence of the aloe afford her a hazy peace, but who also has hallucinatory, paranoid mystical experiences in which she's fearful of unnamed, unseen presences.

[21] Woolf, *Moments of Being: A Collection of Autobiographical Writing*. 72.

construction confound the question of source. Her intuition seems given instead of made, yet she has arrived at its conclusion through the creative process of writing. The shock she receives either already "*is or will become* a revelation of some order." It is a token of unseen reality, and she also must *make* it real through writing. This "real thing," this "order" that's revealed is that all of life makes up a patterned work of art, with no God or Author-ity. Humans are the elemental stuff of this masterpiece, the plural parts that connect to equal the singular "thing itself." While "thing" clearly refers back to the work of art composed of humanity, Woolf's use of "the thing itself" immediately brings to mind the phrase's history as a philosophical term for the unknowable "thing-in-itself" (*Ding an sich*) or *noumenon* in Kant or for the Idealist notion of the Absolute, which I addressed in relation to Sinclair's personal philosophy in Chapter Two. Woolf's use of the phrase refutes the Absolute and, contra Kant, posits that in mystical moments of insight, whether through intuition or through artistic endeavor, one might glimpse and know the noumenal. One might see into and behind the appearances of life, and know one's place in it in relation to others.

I want to draw attention to these two important, related aspects of Woolf's mystical-aesthetic philosophy—the circular process through which life reinforces art and art reinforces life, and the writer's position within her philosophy. Bertrand Russell's work in "Mysticism and Logic," published first in 1914, describes the tautological process that circumscribes many mystical experiences, and Woolf's thought process is recognizable in his comments. He identifies revelation, unity, and intuition as some of mysticism's defining traits, as opposed to the sense, reason, and analysis of logic.[22] However, "fully developed

[22] Bertrand Russell, "Mysticism and Logic," in *Mysticism and Logic and Other Essays* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1918). 9-10: The other characteristics are the belief that all evil is appearance and the denial of distinctions between past, present, and future. Teresa Prudente analyzes the mystical elements of Woolf's writing in *Moments of Being* in order to explore the "stratified temporality" in the novels, both linear time as well as eternity as a state of timelessness, "which the subject experiences through the expansion of instants in the

mysticism"—that which relies solely on the experience of direct insight—is "rare in the West." Instead, most westerners attempt to apply their reason to mystical experience after the fact, and the "logic" they use inevitably affirms the mystical insight they've gained.[23] This offers one explanation for Woolf's sense that she both received and made her idea of reality's artistic pattern. Earlier in her career, in her well-known essays on character-making in modern fiction, and in the intrinsic quality that shapes the mystical-aesthetic self in *Mrs. Dalloway*, she explored the overlays between art and life whereby humans are "the thing itself."

The textual whole that Woolf weaves from parts of her experience resembles but does not quite mirror the world as revealed through those experiences and through the act of re-creating them. Whereas the author remains necessary for the writing of a literary whole, authoritative creators, human or divine, are negated in the revelation. The revealed order isn't divine; it's aesthetic. It isn't transcendent; it's immanent, a distinction I have claimed is significant for understanding Woolf's mystical aesthetic in *Mrs. Dalloway*. As an artist, she positions herself as receptive and constructive in relation to this reality, inside the work of art that is the world *and* able to see the whole of it, *as if* there were an outside position from which to see.[24] Woolf maintains this perspective in the novel, and it informs her reviews of her contemporary, Dorothy Richardson.

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present." Teresa Prudente, *A Specially Tender Piece of Eternity; Virginia Woolf and the Experience of Time* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2009). ix.

[23] Russell, "Mysticism and Logic." 19.

[24] In "The Religious and Ethical Import of Idealism," Sinclair argues that one's awareness of being part of a process or one's consciousness of being part of a whole can only be possible if individual human consciousness partakes in an eternal, Absolute Self, a transcendent consciousness. For her, it strongly and reasonably suggests the existence of a transcendent point of view. See 696-697, Sinclair, "The Ethical and Religious Import of Idealism."

Capturing and conveying the whole, a vision of the reality that envelops appearances, functions as a mystical-aesthetic criterion with which Woolf judges modernist novel-writing. Like Underhill, Woolf also defined "reality" in a novel as something other than "a perfect transcript of life." In "Character in Fiction" (1924), she identifies the "great" novels, such as *War and Peace*, *Vanity Fair*, or *Pride and Prejudice*, as having a character "who has seemed to you so real (I do not by that mean so lifelike) that it has the power to make you think not merely of it itself, but of all sorts of things through its eyes—of religion, of love, of war, of peace, of family life, of balls in county towns, of sunsets, moonrises, the immortality of the soul. …"[25] For Woolf, a "real" character consists of more than the external appearance of lifelikeness; instead, the reader shares the character's vision; has access to her internal reality as well as a broad vision of life.

Woolf's prescription for character closely resembles the "plunge" into "Reality" that May Sinclair identified in 1918 as the distinguishing mark of Dorothy Richardson's novels and the trend of modern novels as a group—a vision of a character's life as it comes to and is experienced by that character, with all its compressions and expansions of time, all its trivialities and momentous occasions.[26] Reviewing Dorothy Richardson's novel *The Tunnel* in 1919, Woolf, like Sinclair before her, points out that Richardson dismantles the old realist scaffolding in order to lay bare Miriam Henderson's consciousness. The reader's access to Miriam's consciousness isn't shaped by an external story: her consciousness *is* the story, and the reader is "invited to embed himself" in that consciousness. While acknowledging that

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[25] Virginia Woolf, "Character in Fiction," in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth Press, 1988). 426. This essay first appeared in the *Criterion*, July 1924 and evolved from paper read to Cambridge Heretics on 18 May 1924, which had itself evolved from "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," published first in the "Literary Review" of the *New York Evening Post*, 17 November 1923.

[26] Sinclair, "The Novels of Dorothy Richardson." 57-59.

she finds Richardson's novel "better in its failure than most books in their success," Woolf argues that if this new method is successful,

> according to the artistic gift of the writer, we should perceive in the helter-skelter of flying fragments some unity, significance, or design. That Miss Richardson gets so far as to achieve a sense of reality far greater than that produced by the ordinary means is undoubted. But, then, which reality is it, the superficial or the profound? We have to consider the quality of Miriam Henderson's consciousness, and the extent to which Miss Richardson is able to reveal it. We have to decide whether the flying helter-skelter resolves itself by degrees into a perceptible whole.[27]

She concludes that Miriam's consciousness relates a "very vivid surface" that only momentarily conveys "the reality which underlies these appearances."[28] Woolf's standard for critiquing novels is whether or not they convey "profound" reality, the subterranean reality "beneath" and "underlying" surface impressions. Richardson's radical method, to which Sinclair applied the label "stream of consciousness," conveys more of reality than the "ordinary means," but the impressions made on Miriam's consciousness must ultimately indicate "unity," "design," or a "perceptible whole." In short, they must be more noticeably shaped by art. It is the artist's job not to record impressions made on a consciousness, but to reveal the whole that Woolf intuits is already present in life. Only art can re-present or re-enact the submerged pattern, the "real thing behind appearances."

Diane Gillespie writes that Richardson, unlike Woolf, "actually applied to her fictional method the implications of their shared belief that such a thing as the art of life exists and that all people are potential artists." Thus, through her work, Richardson "attacked 'art' itself. […] She looked for and found sufficient order and pattern in the inner life itself. It is a source of aesthetic pleasure to which the so-called work of art need not,

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[27] Virginia Woolf, "'The Tunnel'," in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth P, 1988). 11.

[28] Ibid. 11, 12.

indeed cannot, add."[29] The qualified complaint of not employing quite enough art[30] to convey life's profound reality that Woolf lodges against Richardson's novel, along with Woolf's comments in *Moments of Being*, begin to highlight the enmeshment of life and art through mysticism as well as the places where they refuse to join. For Woolf, the writer's "artistic gift" of revelation through construction is not a microcosmic mirror of the work of art that is the world. The world is intrinsic, self-generating, and self-contained, without a transcendent shaping force. Humans make up, in both senses of the phrase, the work of art that is life in the world; they are word and writer, music and composer. Woolf's review of Richardson shows how closely she thought character and narrative form were linked. Although Richardson's method was perhaps more daring or extreme, I would argue that, in Clarissa, Woolf does depict the everyday artistry of humans. Woolf's "plunge" is, of course, different than Richardson's because she makes use of an omniscient narrator to relate the contents of the characters' consciousnesses, but Clarissa's consciousness is privileged.

Clarissa, Contradictions, and the Artistry of Everyday Life

This brings me to the difficulty of Woolf's using two distinct metaphors—a kind of crystalline center and a diffuse mist—to depict Clarissa's view of herself. These suggest two very different conceptions of the self, one as a more solid, fixed identity and one as dispersed and vaporous. Critics have tried to account for this complexity in various ways: as

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[29] Diane Filby Gillespie, "Political Aesthetics: Virginia Woolf and Dorothy Richardson," in *Virginia Woolf: A Feminist Slant*, ed. Jane Marcus (Lincoln and London: U of Nebraska P, 1983). 145.

[30] Sinclair's review implies that Richardson's refusal to "be the wise, all-knowing author" and to instead inhabit Miriam Henderson's mind is partly responsible for other novelists' complaints that the novels in *Pilgrimage* "have no art and no method and no form." Richardson's "plunge" then, renders an internal point of view with the limitations that "life imposes on us all" instead of an external, omniscient perspective that is authorial and godlike. Sinclair herself thought the art, method, and form carried to "punctilious perfection." Sinclair, "The Novels of Dorothy Richardson." 58.

a discrepancy in Clarissa's character, more commonly as a combination of essential self and socially-constructed self, and as a psychological process of toggling between the symbolic self and the semiotic self.[31] Herbert Marder comes closest to my understanding of this feature of the novel, writing that Woolf's "method is to hold two mutually exclusive views in mind at once and to believe in them both."[32] Or, to place it in the mystical frame of my project, such paradoxical images of the self demonstrate the inclusion of opposites, a traditional feature of mystical writing that I discussed in the first chapter's conclusion about the pieta of the self.

Clarissa Dalloway represents an imaginative amalgamation of various people Woolf knew.[33] As both a center and a mist, she recalls Woolf's comments about her own mother in *Moments of Being*: "She was keeping what I call in my shorthand the panoply of life—that which we all lived in common—in being." Woolf's memories are of her mother "surrounded; of her generalised; dispersed, omnipresent, of her as the creator of that crowded merry world which spun so gaily in the centre of my childhood. […] She was the centre; it was herself."[34] Though Clarissa is a fiction, not a replica from Woolf's life, this

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[31] See Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie, vol. III (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1980). 32. In the entry for 18 June, 1925, Woolf records that Lytton Strachey thought there was a "discrepancy" in Clarissa, that she's "disagreeable & limited, but that I alternatively laugh at her, & cover her, very remarkably, with myself." Also see Herbert Marder, "Split Perspective: Types of Incongruity in Mrs. Dalloway," *Papers on Language and Literature* 22, no. 1 (Winter 1986), Jean Wyatt, "Avoiding Self-Definition: In Defense of Women's Right to Merge (Julia Kristeva and Mrs. Dalloway)," *Women's Studies* 13 (1986). 115-126. For a variety of perspectives on Woolf's famous character, see Harold Bloom, ed., *Clarissa Dalloway*, Major Literary Characters (New York Chelsea House Publishers: 1990).

[32] Marder, "Split Perspective: Types of Incongruity in Mrs. Dalloway." 59.

[33] Marder cites Ottoline Morrell as partial model, Lytton Strachey, as noted above, saw part of Woolf in Clarissa, and Olivier Bell names Kitty Maxse as a model. Ibid. 51; Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972). 80.

[34] Woolf, *Moments of Being: A Collection of Autobiographical Writing*. 83, 84. Also see Ellen Bayuk Rosenman, *The Invisible Presence: Virginia Woolf and the Mother-Daughter Relationship* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State UP, 1986). Rosenman writes that the "states of merging and diffusion" in Woolf's novels are one of Woolf's "most powerful means of recovering the mother" by recreating "the sense of pre-Oedipal wholeness" (20).

depiction of Julia Stephen offers insight into the seemingly contradictory images of Clarissa as the repository and generator of the "panoply of life" or "summing it all up," as Peter puts it—as center of an intimate circle of lifelong friends within a larger social circle of acquaintances and as a dispersed mist.

Woolf also uses the inclusion of opposites within single sentences when describing Clarissa: "She felt very young; at the same time unspeakably aged. She sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time, was outside, looking on."[35] Like a Whitmanian self that recasts contradiction as the containment of multitudes, Clarissa feels simultaneously very youthful and ancient, incisively in life and outside it, observing. Her ability to harness and contain two extremes of the temporal spectrum at once hints at her role as a mystical figure of abundance, or the "panoply" of life. Her dual positioning in and out of life speaks to her relation to the artist and mystic, engaging in everyday while also pulling away to observe it for the purposes of recreating it.

Though Woolf imagined Clarissa long before she recorded her mystical-aesthetic philosophy in *Moments of Being*, the middle-aged hostess enacts Woolf's notion of the artistry of everyday life. From Clarissa's point of view, one constructs, imagines, and re-creates life, "making it up, building it round one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh."[36] Through the active language of artistic creativity, her role as hostess makes her an artist of social life:

> And she felt quite continuously a sense of their existence [a stranger in Bayswater, one in South Kensington, one in Mayfair]; and she felt what a waste; and she felt what a pity; and she felt if only they could be brought together; so she did it. And it was an offering; to combine, to create; but to

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[35] Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*. 8.

[36] Ibid. 4.

> whom? An offering for the sake of offering, perhaps. Anyhow, it was her gift.[37]

The mystical theory of completion in others (which I'll explore later) forms the philosophical foundation for and complement to her bringing people together at her parties. Both are born out of relational longings, out of the desire to overcome the distances between individuals, and so mysticism has a primary social, relational element. Her party-giving also fulfills the human, artistic impulse to receive and make life. To combine, to create is somehow to stir up more life, catalyze more connection. Peter identifies this ability to enliven, create connection, and assemble new interpersonal configurations as Clarissa's "genius," her ability to "make a world" wherever she goes.[38]

Through Peter's mind, we see that Clarissa fulfills in life what Woolf's famous Mrs. Brown stands for in character-making: "You [the reader]," Woolf writes in "Character in Fiction," "should insist that she is an old lady of unlimited capacity and infinite variety; capable of appearing in any place; wearing any dress; saying anything and doing heaven knows what. But the things she says and the things she does and her eyes and her nose and her speech and her silence have an overwhelming fascination, for she is, of course, the spirit we live by, life itself."[39] This is exactly Peter's "reading" of Clarissa. Like Van Ashe and Constance Tyrell, Clarissa Dalloway has a force of abundance that swells within her and that she somehow emits. Watching her, in her mermaid's dress, escort the Prime Minister through her party, Peter thinks that she had "that gift still; to be; to exist; to sum it all up in the moment as she passed."[40] Peter's point of view, his "ecstasy" and "extraordinary

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[37] Ibid. 119.

[38] Ibid. 75.

[39] ———, "Character in Fiction." 436.

[40] ———, *Mrs. Dalloway*. 169-170.

excitement," dominates the novel's memorable conclusion, indicating that readers might also see "something more" in Mrs. Dalloway. It links Clarissa to a sublime experience of exaltation and exquisite trembling.

Peter Conradi points out that Mrs. Dalloway has a numinous quality that imbues her role as hostess with more than its apparent social significance: She is a "metaphysical hostess," the "local demi-goddess of the cult of personal relations" who has a "more-than-earthly power of accommodation and reconciliation." However, he acknowledges that while the metaphysical hostess "suggests the possibility of a centre to the book-maze of meaning," there may be no certain meaning or "no unity for her to uncover or represent."[41] Thus the splits among critics who find that possibility fulfilled, those who see the promise as empty or misleading, and those like Marder who read Clarissa's contradictory selves as indicative of the novel's paradoxical claims to unity and individualism. To cite only two representative examples, in the introduction to the annotated edition of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Bonnie Kime Scott writes that the party is related to Clarissa's "thoughts of connection" and "serves a concept of unity, which was precious to modernists and their interpreters."[42] Gillian Beer claims that Clarissa and Septimus are "no mystical pair" and that the party is an "atomistic gathering," not a unified community.[43]

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[41] Peter Conradi, "The Metaphysical Hostess: The Cult of Personal Relations in the Modern English Novel," *ELH* 48, no. 2 (Summer 1981). 433, 435, 436.

[42] Bonnie Kime Scott, "Introduction," in *Mrs. Dalloway*, ed. Mark Hussey (Orlando: Harvest, 2005). lxiv. For an reading of unity created through collective consciousness and the influence of the French school "Unanimism," see Allen McLaurin, "Virginia Woolf and Unanimism," *Journal of Modern Literature* 9, no. 1 (1981/1982). 115-122. Whitworth also discusses Unanimism in Michael Whitworth, "Virginia Woolf and Modernism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. Sue Roe and Susan Sellers (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000). 146-163. For an introduction to Unanimism, see Ben F. Stoltzfus, "Unanimism Revisited," *Modern Language Quarterly* 21, no. 3 (1960). 239-245.

[43] See pages 93-94 in Gillian Beer, "The Body of the People in Virginia Woolf," in *Women Reading Women's Writing*, ed. Sue Roe (Brighton: Harvester P, 1987).

The seemingly incompatible metaphors for Clarissa's self and the related and equally paradoxical claims for mystical unity and diverse individualities make sense with a reading of the novel's mystical-aesthetic structures, such as the "whole," and the shift from a framework of mystical transcendence to one of mystical immanence. An exploration of Clarissa through these lenses also facilitates a reading of her "odd affinities" with empire. The novel critiques the imperial consumption of men like Septimus ("London has swallowed up many millions of young men called Smith"),[44] asserts the complicity of the medical establishment and the imperial government (as seen most briefly and symbolically when Richard Dalloway and Dr. Bradshaw are colluding at the party), and exposes misguided nostalgia for English "civilization" through Peter's ironic interpretation of the ambulance that carries Septimus.[45] My reading suggests that Clarissa's role as hostess—when her self is imaged as a jewel and set in the privileged center of a community structure—aligns her with the queen and with the imperial metropolis. At the same time, the image of her self as a mist destabilizes the fixity of the "self-centered" position.

Jewel and Crown: Clarissa and the Self as Center

As I've pointed out in previous chapters, other modernists used the image of a jewel-like structure and its properties to depict the mystic life or mystical consciousness: Butts's Blakean crystal cabinet; the clear, hard consciousness of the soldier in peril in Sinclair's novel; and the "crystalline structure" of the modernist Image. When Woolf depicts Clarissa as a glittering jewel in the center of her assembled lonely hearts, the unity of her self is something quite different. It's a constructed presentation, a deliberate (and Clarissa thinks,

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[44] Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*. 82.

[45] For a reading that focuses on the novel as a scathing critique of British society's complicity with imperialism and abuse of power, see Kathy J. Phillips, "Devouring the Lamb: Sex, Money, and War," in *Virginia Woolf against Empire* (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1994). 1-51.

necessary) exercise in "collecting the whole of her at one point": "That was her self when some effort, some call on her to be her self, drew the parts together, she alone knew how different, how incompatible and composed so for the world only into one centre, one diamond, one woman who sat in her drawing–room and made a meeting-point, a radiancy no doubt in some dull lives, a refuge for the lonely to come to…."[46] The self as a radiant point for a group of disparate people serves as a spiritualized model of London as the shining center of Britain's vast imperial web. As Susan Merrill Squier notes, "jewellike, central, and inexplicably significant, the city recalls both Clarissa Dalloway's evocative presence in the lives of her friends and the presence of Julia Stephen as her daughter remembered her."[47] Multi-faceted and prismatic, hard and pointed, kindling and illuminating through reflected light, Woolf insists that this compressed self is less "real" to Clarissa than the self as a mist.

Looking to the character of Lady Bruton is instructive here because, though the two women are quite different, Woolf doesn't so much create a complete opposite for Clarissa Dalloway in Millicent Bruton as an imprint on the reverse side of a single coin. Both women share a kind of respect for each other, though they have little to say to one another and think they have nothing in common.[48] On the surface, this is the case, but the narrator exposes the "caves" that "connect" them.[49] Thin, bird-like, and weakened by her bout with influenza, Clarissa feels deeply and applies her charm on the surface. Lady Bruton is a

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[46] Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*. 36.

[47] Squier, "The Carnival and Funeral of Mrs. Dalloway's London." 119. While Squier reads Peter as representative of masculine imposition, the parallels between Clarissa and London lead me to focus on traces of imperiousness in Clarissa, her impositions on Peter, and Peter's part as the "returning native" come to visit the Queen.

[48] Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*. 175.

[49] Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie, vol. II (London: Hogarth P, 1978). 263.

"strong martial woman," "well nourished," robust, "broad and simple." Her project for helping wellborn young men and women emigrate from England to Canada forms "the ramrod of her soul," the "sublime conception" that motivates and defines her. Emigration is the "object round which the essence of her soul is daily secreted, becomes inevitably prismatic, lustrous, half-looking glass, half precious stone; now carefully hidden in case people should sneer at it; now proudly displayed. Emigration had become, in short, largely Lady Bruton."[50] Clarissa's prismatic self also forms around one object with which she has become identified—parties that bring people together—but the movement of her project is a reversal of Lady Bruton's. Clarissa is a site of gathering, instead of the launching point of emigration. Both women, however, serve as examples of female characters who embody imperial geography—the capital as the central hub for fluctuating movement across empire.

In fact, Peter perceives that women like Lady Bruton, "these great swells, these Duchesses, these hoary old Countesses one met in [Clarissa's] drawing-room…stood for something real to her."[51] Clarissa's emotionally volatile relationship with Peter Walsh often acts as the mirror that reflects her identification with the role of the Queen and allows us to see her associations with the seat of empire. Though she cried at the intentional sting of Peter's accusation that she'd "marry a Prime Minister and stand at the top of a staircase" like a "perfect hostess," Clarissa now thinks with an amount of pride that she will "kindle and illuminate" with her party. And although it could be the Prime Minister, the Prince of Wales, or the Queen in the mysterious car stalled on Bond Street, Clarissa's mind favors the latter, thinking, "it's probably the Queen." Thoughts of the Queen entice Clarissa until she

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[50] Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*. 106.

[51] Ibid. 75. Peter blames her growing respect for these women on Richard: "In all this there was a great deal of Dalloway, of course; a great deal of the public-spirited, British Empire, tariff-reform, governing-class spirit, which had gown on her, as it tends to do" (75).

realizes that, like the lavish and glowing dinner she imagines set out for royalty, she, "too, gave a party. She stiffened a little; so she would stand at the top of her stairs."[52] In Clarissa's erect deportment, in her stiffening at the realization, lies both a hint of begrudging awareness that Peter's prediction has in part been fulfilled, as well as a possibly unconscious attempt to assume the regal bearing of the queenly role.

In the vignette "Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street," Clarissa's thoughts about the Queen include Victoria as well: She "saw at the end of the empty road with its thin trees Victoria's white mound, Victoria's billowing motherliness, amplitude and homeliness, always ridiculous, yet how sublime."[53] For the novel, Woolf transferred these thoughts to Richard Dalloway's mind,[54] but traces of their associations with Clarissa remain. Something equally ridiculous and sublime animates Clarissa Dalloway (Woolf feared she was "tinselly"),[55] with her preference for roses over Armenians and her persistent awareness of life's variegated richness, her tendency to cover awkward situations with effusiveness coupled with her intense concern for the presumed loneliness of strangers.

"Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street" also records Clarissa thinking that the reassuring power and presence of the British royalty, specifically the queen, "matters." It matters most of all "to the poor" and "to the soldiers."[56] In the novel, Clarissa willingly positions herself at the center of a party to act as a "refuge for the lonely." However, through Septimus, who is consumed by the damaging powers that be in London, the novel shows that not all

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52 Ibid. 7, 5, 16, 17.

53 Virginia Woolf, "Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street," in *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Susan Dick (San Diego and New York: Harvest, 1989). 153.

54 Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*. 114.

55 ———, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*. 272.

56 ———, "Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street." 153.

soldiers find reassurance in the crown, and not all of the lonely—consider the poor, socially neglected, and belatedly invited Ellie Henderson, not to mention the despised Miss Kilman—find much refuge in Clarissa.

Seeking approval and comfort from Clarissa despite himself is Peter, the "returning native" whose arrival imports the shadowy presence of the colonies.[57] He returns to London in 1923 after five years of service in India during a period of nationalist foment and increasingly violent tensions between anti-colonialist nationalists and colonialist forces. In 1919, the Rowlatt Acts extended war time restrictions on freedom of the press and civil liberties such as the right to trial by jury. At a peaceful protest of these "Black Acts," General Dyer ordered his men to open fire on the enclosed crowd, killing around 380 and wounding over 1000. The incident, known as the Amritsar Massacre, occurred shortly after the murders of Europeans near the city and the assault of a white missionary woman. In response, Dyer issued the "crawling order" that forced Indians to crawl on hands and knees at the site of the beating.[58]

Though the novel offers no specific details of what Peter saw in India, he seems to detest the possibility of his own complicity with imperial assumptions of superiority and to mask it with his judgments of others. Through him, the colonized space of India is a constant disturbance for Clarissa, who more clearly becomes a figure of the imperial center.[59] In their interaction, she sits "like a Queen whose guards have fallen asleep and left her unprotected." Both she and Peter muster their defenses to "beat off the enemy": "'Well,

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[57] Elleke Boehmer rightly asserts that, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf "replicates exactly the imperial geography of a centered metropolis and a largely invisible periphery." See Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*. 143.

[58] Philippa Levine, *The British Empire: Sunrise to Sunset* (Harlow, England: Pearson Longman, 2007). 174-175.

[59] Cohen calls Peter "the return of the imperial repressed." See Cohen, "The Empire from the Street: Virginia Woolf, Wembley, and Imperial Monuments." 105.

and what's happened to you?' she said. So before a battle begins, the horses paw the ground; toss their heads; the light shines on their flanks; their necks curve. So Peter Walsh and Clarissa, sitting side by side on the blue sofa, challenged each other."[60] Peter's feelings towards Clarissa resemble his feelings about England: simultaneous attraction and contempt. Although he descends from a long line of imperial managers, Peter dislikes India, the empire, and the army, but knowingly harbors a "ridiculous" nostalgia, sentimentality, and pride for England.[61] Even after the notorious violence of Amritsar, he associates England itself with "civilization": "It struck him coming back from the East—the efficiency, the organisation, the communal spirit of London."[62]

As a hostess, Clarissa facilitates one aspect of the city's "communal spirit." As a member of the powerful class in contact with individuals like Lady Bruton, Peter sees her as increasingly complicit with the London that devours the weak, with the dark side of the glittery party gathering that looks more like a pack of hunting animals. Though he holds them with contempt and thinks, "[Clarissa will] think me a failure, which I am in their sense…in the Dalloways' sense," Peter returns to London to receive their help. That Peter returns to secure a divorce for Daisy and to see if his old friends can help find him employment "vaguely flatter[s]…them all. He had come back, battered, unsuccessful, to their secure shores. But to help him, they reflected, was impossible; there was some flaw in his character."[63] The collective derives a measure of satisfaction in its powerful position to bestow or refuse benevolence. They possess the "secure shores" of England.

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[60] Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*. 43.

[61] Ibid. 54.

[62] Ibid. 147.

[63] Ibid. 42, 105.

Peter's emotional mismanagement displays his flawed Englishness: "It had been his undoing—this susceptibility—in Anglo-Indian society; not weeping at the right time, or laughing either." The reason for his return, the evidence of his emotional "flaw" that they all have suspected, is, as Lady Bruton says, his "'trouble with some woman.'"[64] He wants legal and professional aid from Richard, Bruton, and Whitbread, but a return to London is by definition a return to Clarissa. It is her approval he truly desires. Their defensive confrontation dissolves quickly as Peter, under the pressure of seeing her and the emotional weight of their shared past, breaks down and weeps. "What a waste! What a folly!" Clarissa muses, just as Lady Bruton might. "All his life long Peter had been fooled like that; first getting sent down from Oxford; next marrying the girl on the boat going out to India; now the wife of a Major in the Indian Army."[65] Even without the political pull of her husband, Hugh Whitbread, or Lady Bruton, Clarissa embodies Peter's infuriating and beloved England, the figurehead "ridiculous, yet how sublime," positioning him as the returning native whose emotional impulsiveness others him in the eyes of his more properly reserved friends.

"Odd Affinities": The Dispersed Self and

Imperial Expansiveness

The dispersed self, depicted most memorably as a mist, simultaneously offers a radically different version of self than the imperial, enlightenment subject (which is unified and distinct from others) and a kind of model of imperial pervasiveness. Though Clarissa thinks this conception of the self is more real than the self as a centralized diamond, the two images are inextricable; they are both Clarissa. A moment when the narrator attends to

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[64] Ibid. 148, 105.

[65] Ibid. 45.

Peter's consciousness deals with a similar schema: a solid object as the central, originating point for a dispersed field.

> Ah, said St. Margaret's, like a hostess who comes into her drawing-room on the very stroke of the hour…. [H]er voice, being the voice of the hostess, is reluctant to inflict its individuality. Some grief for the past holds it back; some concern for the present. It is half-past eleven, she says, and the sound of St. Margaret's glides into the recesses of the heart and buries itself in ring after ring of sound, like something alive which wants to confide itself, to disperse itself, to be, with a tremor of delight, at rest—like Clarissa herself, thought Peter Walsh, coming down the stairs on the stroke of the hour in white. It is Clarissa herself, he thought…. […] It was her heart, he remembered; and the sudden loudness of the final stroke tolled for death that surprised in the midst of life, Clarissa falling where she stood, in her drawing room. No! No! he cried. She is not dead![66]

The hostess, like St. Margaret's, is both a structural landmark (a centered diamond) and a dispersed sound (a dispersed self). Clarissa the hostess has dual desires—to gather people to her and to lose her solid self and reverberate into others. For a moment, in Peter's mind, Clarissa is the thing itself. She is the sound traveling out in concentric rings, an elemental music and the passage of time. She is the bell that tolls the foreshadowing of Septimus's surprising death in the midst of her party's life and that tolls, Donne-like, for all.

The outward movement of the self accompanies thoughts of death. For Clarissa, love of life acts as a consolation for the inevitability of death and might even bind her to the places and people that populate England:

> …what she loved was this, here, now, in front of her; the fat lady in the cab. Did it matter then, she asked herself, walking towards Bond Street, did it matter that she must inevitably cease completely; all this must go on without her; did she resent it; or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely? but that somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there, ugly, rambling to bits and pieces as it was; part of people she had never met; being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best, who lifted

[66] Ibid. 48-49.

> her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, herself.[67]

In this hypothetical (after)life, the woman who gathers her self into a hard and brilliant gem for others softens and becomes part of the landscape, stretched out to strangers, and born up by those "who knew her best." Notably, Woolf destabilizes Clarissa's theory with vacillations. She asks herself, as a means of persuasion it seems, if it matters that she will not exist, and then she proceeds to posit a way that she will continue to exist after death. Woolf follows the consolation of death's "absolute" finality with Clarissa's "positive" belief that she will be part of familiar territory after her death. Like Underhill's Constance, she remains skeptical yet open.

This passage also suggests that humans are constituted through meaningful, formative places and through others, even others who are complete strangers. Existence is fluid; selves "ebb and flow" like tides of energy instead of remaining static and discrete. That Clarissa and Peter are already "in each other" is demonstrated by the way his thoughts challenge, confirm, or fill in Clarissa's, and by the narrator's comment that they can go "in and out of each other's minds without any effort."[68] Peter recalls Clarissa's notions of her mystical self, and his thoughts make readers privy to the genesis of Clarissa's ideas. He and Clarissa came up with theories in their younger days "to explain the feeling they had of dissatisfaction; not knowing people; not being known." Thus mysticism grows out of a place of lack and longing, out of a relational thinness or incompletion. As a center, Clarissa provides others with connections. Her mist-like dispersal complements the fixed center by allowing her self to find its completion in others:

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[67] Ibid. 9.

[68] Ibid. 61.

> But she said, sitting on the bus going up Shaftesbury Avenue, she felt herself everywhere; not 'here, here, here'; and she tapped the back of the seat; but everywhere. She waved her hand, going up Shaftesbury Avenue. She was all that. So that to know her, or any one, one must seek out the people who completed them; even the places. Odd affinities she had with people she had never spoken to, some woman in the street, some man behind a counter—even trees, or barns. It ended in a transcendental theory which, with her horror of death, allowed her to believe, or say that she believed (for all her scepticism), that since our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places after death…perhaps—perhaps.[69]

The unseen, wide-spreading self is long-lasting. It expands to become part of the "real thing behind appearances." As Woolf notes in *Moments of Being*, the realization of this mystical-aesthetic web leads to the knowledge that "one's life is not confined to one's body and what one says and does; one is living all the time in relation to certain background rods or conceptions."[70] Clarissa can gesture towards the cityscape and claim it as her own being. The unseen self's survival depends on others; like some sort of mystical barnacle, it "attaches" to the people and physical structures that remain. This involves an intriguing play on the ghostly nature of both the self and the body: the unseen may "haunt" places after death, but the visible body is the "apparition," less real and substantial because visible (able to be apperceived) and ephemeral.

Peter's use of "transcendental" to categorize Clarissa's "theory" is a bit misleading because it can skim over the theory's actual end—the immanence of the self. The visible world of bodies and objects screens the more real and everlasting world of the self. The self reaches out beyond the body even in life. When the body dies and disappears, the self outlasts it, but it does so by remaining attached to, though now dispersed in, the visible

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[69] Ibid. 149.

[70] ———, *Moments of Being: A Collection of Autobiographical Writing*. 73.

world. The self stays present; abides; infuses the world in a way that the body can't. Clarissa hypothesizes that her very self cannot be severed from material reality though her body will disappear.

Interestingly, Lady Bruton's departure from the places that define her self and her passion is also unimaginable:

> [S]he had the thought of Empire always at hand, and had acquired from her association with that armoured goddess her ramrod bearing, her robustness of demeanor, so that one could not figure her even in death parted from the earth or roaming territories over which, in some spiritual shape, the Union Jack had ceased to fly. To be not English even among the dead—no, no! Impossible![71]

Ostensibly generating and buttressing her emigration projects is "the thought of Empire always at hand." Its presence in her mind pervades her life and forms Lady Bruton into Britannia herself. As Britannia, her departure from the earth and the end of empire are equally inconceivable. The territories over which her spirit will roam must retain some imprint, even spiritual, of the empire's presence. Considered in light of Clarissa's distinctly similar yet less explicitly imperial self-conception, one can see that the novel places the object of devotion under critique, not the possibility of mystical attachment. The narrator mocks the constitution of the self through nationality, but like Lady Bruton, Clarissa will "haunt" the places that define and complete her. What she has given herself to in life will also connect (or tether) her in death.

Clarissa already "haunts" Peter in life. The effects of his "brief, broken, often painful" meetings with her are "immeasureable":

> There was a mystery about it. You were given a sharp, acute, uncomfortable grain—the actual meeting; horribly painful as often as not; yet in absence, in the most unlikely places, it would flower out, open, shed its scent, let you touch, taste, look about you, get the whole feel of it and understanding, after

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[71] ———, *Mrs. Dalloway*. 176.

> years of lying lost. Thus she had come to him; on board ships; in the Himalayas…. She had influenced him more than any person he had ever known. And always in this way, coming before him without his wishing it….[72]

The central event mysteriously unfolds across immense distances and across time. The sharp kernel blossoms; one can feel and understand the "whole," the completeness that was contained in the moment but needed time and distance to breathe. For Woolf, Peter's experience of the moment's flowering through time correlates with the experience of receiving and writing one's life. It resembles Woolf's description of the way she learned to process the painful "shocks" of her life, the dark moments of being, through writing, and to weave them into a comprehensible pattern.

Peter has always been "prey" to "revelations," such as the moment he suddenly and simply "knew" that Clarissa would marry Richard Dalloway. His "susceptibility" opens him up to Clarissa's "immeasureable" personal influence. Clarissa's presence fans out into Peter's thoughts, bonding him to her even decades after she rejected him for Richard. Although in most of these experiences Peter imagines Clarissa at Bourton, internal visions of her arrive before him unbidden no matter how far from England he travels. It's as if part of her life, her self, already stretches far and rests completed in Peter. For all her dislike of Peter's relational demands ("with Peter everything had to be shared; everything gone into"),[73] and her thinking his love, like Miss Kilman's religion, insinuates itself on others, Clarissa trespasses (though not always unwelcomed) upon his thoughts, his life.

Through the structures of the self as center and mist, the novel positions a mystical love of life against forms of conversion or imposition while also showing that they can

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[72] Ibid. 149-150.

[73] Ibid. 7.

occupy the same relational continuum. On their own, even the novel's highly self-reflective characters cannot completely see the whole, which includes their own contradictions. Rather, Woolf's arrangement of characters' internal voices into a polyphonic chorus makes the reader privy to the secrets characters occlude from one another. Contra Peter's interpretation of her, Clarissa, at least in her interior monologues, vigilantly guards against the smothering and controlling potential of intimate connection with others. For instance, when Richard brings her flowers as a token of his unspoken love, she accepts his silence: "And there is a dignity in people; a solitude; even between husband and wife a gulf; and that one must respect, thought Clarissa, watching him open the door; for one would not part with it oneself, or take it, against his will, from one's husband, without losing one's independence, one's self-respect—something, after all, priceless." Her self-proclaimed value for the "privacy of the soul"[74] leads Clarissa to respond to Dr. Bradshaw with dislike and repulsion, instinctively knowing that his manipulative use of power made life "intolerable" for Septimus.[75]

The narrative voice reiterates Clarissa's disdain for the forcible imprint of one's image onto another, for power-hunger disguised as charity. As critics like Val Gough have noted, Woolf's mysticism is often a tool with which she deconstructs institutions of hegemonic authority.[76] The narrator deflates mystery and mysticism when their premises are hierarchical: the "mystery," "voice of authority," and "spirit of religion" that leave the

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[74] Ibid. 117, 124.

[75] Ibid. 180.

[76] See Val Gough, "Teaching Woolf as Feminist Mystic," in *Re: Reading, Re: Writing, Re: Teaching Virginia Woolf: Selected Papers from the Fourth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf*, ed. Eileen Barrett and Patricia Cramer (New York: Pace UP, 1995). 294-298 and Val Gough, "With Some Irony in Her Interrogation: Woolf's Ironic Mysticism," in *Virginia Woolf and the Arts: Selected Papers from the Sixth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf*, ed. Diane F. Gillespie and Leslie K. Hankins (New York: Pace UP, 1997). 85-90.

onlookers in awe as the car carrying the Queen or Prime Minister passes through Bond street; the making of servants into "adepts in a mystery or grand deception practised by hostesses in Mayfair"; and Proportion and Conversion, the "goddesses" of the unholy trinity of religion, imperialism, and the medical establishment.[77] However, the novel's main mystical moments and propositions are not so much ironic and deflationary as sincere, as skeptical but wished-for.

Goods, Gifts, Mystical Devotions

Peter's memories of Clarissa's "transcendental theory" expose the "horror of death" and the relational "dissatisfaction" that drive her mysticism. Or, put in another way, the attachment to life and the longing to know others and be known by them fuel her speculations. The language of uncertainty leaves room for the possibility of two opposing options: Clarissa's theory either "allows her to believe or say that she believed." This is why I began the chapter by calling the novel's mysticism *speculative* or *provisional* regarding the self's immanence. Woolf qualifies the mystical (after)life with "perhaps—perhaps." Clarissa is, after all, one of the "most thorough-going sceptics" Peter knows, a critical approach intensified, he thinks, by the senseless death of her sister.[78]

In Peter's estimation, the death of Sylvia Parry darkened Clarissa's view of life, but she pressed her to realize and maintain her own ethic: "…she thought there were no Gods; no one was to blame; and so she evolved this atheist's religion of doing good for the sake of goodness."[79] In a formulation that resembles G.E. Moore's assertion that "goods" are

[77] Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*. 14, 102, 97-98.

[78] Ibid. 76.

[79] Ibid. 76.

inherently so,[80] good becomes "good in and of itself"—not for the sake of religious imperative, Peter implies, but for its own sake. Clarissa asks, "to whom?" she offers her creative, relationship-building parties, and her response is that she does it as "[a]n offering for the sake of offering, perhaps. Anyhow, it was her gift."[81]

The intrinsic tenor of Clarissa's ethical propositions results from the shift of the axis of the mystical relationship from self and God to self and others—to the people and things that constitute "life"—creating "all the more" need, in Clarissa's mind, for devotions to flow horizontally:

> It was her life, and, bending her head over the hall table, she bowed beneath the influence, felt blessed and purified, saying to herself, as she took the pad with the telephone message on it, how moments like this are buds on the tree of life, flowers of darkness they are, she thought….; not for a moment did she believe in God; but all the more, she thought, taking up the pad, must one repay in daily life to servants, yes, to dogs and canaries, above all to Richard, her husband, who was the foundation of it….one must pay back from this secret deposit of exquisite moments….[82]

Clarissa's thoughts operate in an idiom of religious receptivity and humility (bowed, blessed and purified) and indebtedness (repay, pay back, deposit) that depict daily life within an economy of reciprocity. For Clarissa, everyday life is "enough. After that, how unbelievable death was!—that it must end; and no one in the whole world would know how

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[80] Members of Bloomsbury, such as Leonard Woolf, Lytton Strachey, and Maynard Keynes, cited Moore's "common sense" ethical philosophy as greatly influential and important to them. Moore writes that the key question of ethics is "'What things are goods or ends in themselves?'" He answers with "personal affection and the appreciation of what is beautiful in Art or Nature." He goes on to explain that these goods form the truth of "Moral Philosophy." It's only for their sake "that any one can be justified in performing any public or private duty; that they are the *raison d'être* of virtue; that it is they—these complex wholes *themselves*, and not any constituent or characteristic of them—that form the rational ultimate end of human action and the sole criterion of social progress…." See G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, ed. Thomas Baldwin, Revised ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993). 233, 237, 238. Moore's notion of goods as wholes in and of themselves worked its way into Bloomsbury aesthetics, perhaps most notably, in Clive Bell's hypothesized "significant form," the pleasing arrangement of visual forms into a whole that can release the viewer into a mystical experience of transcendence. See Bell, "The Aesthetic Hypothesis." 67-74.

[81] Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*. 119.

[82] Ibid. 28-29.

she had loved it all…."[83] Life is not only enough; it is all. To make manifest her love of life and to offer more of it to others, which Clarissa does through her parties, becomes for her the ultimate good, a mystical art of everyday life.

As with Underhill's pieta of the self, two compelling readings present themselves. One emphasizes the intrinsic, tautological nature of Clarissa's logic and interprets the party as empty gesture, extreme self-centeredness, or imposition. Peter thinks she hosts parties because she enjoys "imposing herself," but the alternate reading, the one on which Clarissa insists, is that enjoyment of life motivates her: "'That's what I do it for,' she said, speaking aloud, to life."[84] From Clarissa's point of view throughout the novel and in the above passage in particular, positioning her self as a center and throwing parties is her version of a faithful response to the "gift" she has received (Richard and roses, servants, dogs, and canaries) as well as made for herself and others: life. The thing itself. The removal of God as an ontological and epistemological certainty (in Woolf's thought and in the previous passage) makes space for a Derridian faith.[85] Precisely because of her skepticism and uncertainty regarding the mystical immanence of the self, Clarissa adopts a posture of trust in the possibility of life being the whole and even believes she can glimpse it.

The novel's modernist form reveals the nuanced gradations that separate the merging, mist-like self from the expansive, permeating, overpowering self. Juxtaposing the generous and interdependent aspects of Clarissa's visions of connectedness with her

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[83] Ibid. 119.

[84] Ibid. 118.

[85] Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York and London: Routledge, 2002). 42-101. Looking for a way to "think religion" without complicity in its associations with political oppression and spiritual imperialism, Derrida discusses "faith" as a posture of openness, of expectation without certainty. Clarissa's "faith-ful" posture is directed towards immanent, not transcendent life and being.

influence on Peter and her similarities with Lady Bruton, both as a jewel-like center and as a disembodied self haunting the earth, the novel draws attention to the potential of the self's expansiveness to mimic the drive for expansion inherent in imperialism. Lady Bruton, not Clarissa, is figured as a commander sending out troops and emissaries, and the strings that connect her to others are ominously compared to spider webs,[86] not an airy mist. In contrast with the other texts covered in this project, subtle distinctions such as this in Woolf's novel demonstrate a greater degree of awareness of the possible slippage between well-intentioned connectivity or even mystical union and imperial unity that actually consists of controlling or consuming the other.

Woolf was no formal philosopher, but she postulated the collusion of atheistic mysticism and aesthetics to provide ethical responses—to marvel at the fact of life, generate more life for others, and preserve the "good" that is life—to counter and resist the "goddess" of Conversion. Her thinking corresponds with the inquiries of some of her generation's philosophers. May Sinclair asked how one can have ethics without religion and found her satisfactory answer in Idealism, which still relied on the existence of and access to a transcendent, though pervasive, consciousness or Absolute Self. Woolf's mystical philosophy, enacted through the aesthetic form of *Mrs. Dalloway*, supposes that one can envision "the whole" through art, though she didn't believe an outside, transcendent point of view exists. In an essay entitled "A Free Man's Worship," first published in 1903 and republished in *Mysticism and Logic and Other Essays* in 1918, philosopher and Bloomsbury affiliate Bertrand Russell's suggestions for those "who have no dogmatic religious beliefs" harmonizes with the approach Woolf writes for Clarissa and resonates with the novel's concerns:

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[86] Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*. 109-110.

> If Power is bad, as it seems to be, let us reject it from our hearts. In this lies Man's true freedom: in determination to worship only the God created by our own love of the good…. […] [F]or Man, condemned to-day to lose his dearest, to-morrow himself to pass through the gate of darkness, it remains only to cherish, ere yet the blow falls, the lofty thoughts that ennoble his little day; disdaining the coward terrors of the slave of Fate, to worship at the shrine that his own hands have built….[87]

As a mystical artist of everyday life, Clarissa Dalloway is "blessed and purified" by the life she has both been given and has made. In her love of life, she "worships at the shrine [her] own hands have built," flooded with the possibility of an interdependence that resists conversionary politics, and risking the possibility that her very self will become the central object that demands devotion.

[87] Bertrand Russell, "A Free Man's Worship," in *Mysticism and Logic and Other Essays* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1918). 50, 56-57. In the 1918 preface, Russell commented that "In theoretical Ethics, the position advocated in 'The Free Man's Worship' is not quite identical with that which I hold now: I feel less convinced than I did then of the objectivity of good and evil. But the general attitude towards life which is suggested in that essay still seems to me, in the main, the one which must be adopted in times of stress and difficulty by those who have no dogmatic religious beliefs, if inward defeat is to be avoided" (v).

AFTERWORD
WOMEN, POLITICAL DEATH, MYSTICAL LIFE, OR, THE MYSTICAL ECONOMY OF THE IMPOSSIBLE

I began this dissertation with the death and afterlife of Forster's Mrs. Moore. The authors I've covered in the previous chapters wrote in a political milieu of various "deaths," literal and metaphorical: the apparent defeat of the suffrage movement, the death toll of the 1914-1918 war, deaths caused by the influenza pandemic, deaths and executions in Anglo-Irish conflicts, not to mention deaths in other colonies, such as those of the Amritsar Massacre. To look around one's country or the entire world and witness death is nothing new, and as we know from our own contemporary vantage-point, it is nothing solely old, either. However, these women writers, especially the ones writing during and after World War I, explicitly position their characters in environments of death and make it a prominent concern: Constance spares her own child's life by choosing to die, Maeve confronts Fionavar's death, Dorothy Harrison loses two brothers and a fiancé in the war, Van battles Judy, who in part represents the war's destructive energy, Lolly feels deadened by wartime and post-war London, and Clarissa, weakened by the flu pandemic, daydreams of mystical afterlife and later identifies with the suicide of the shell-shocked veteran Septimus.

Thus far, I have offered a sampling of the prismatic diversity of early 20th-century mystical discourses, arguing that certain women writers created mystical compositions of the self in the attempt to find aesthetic, ethical responses to imperial events, injustices, and conditions. In my chapter studies, I've attempted to refrain from providing a simplified taxonomy of mysticism, but it is possible to suggest that a mystical economy of life and death frames these texts, a system in which individuals sacrifice, give, withdraw, or preserve the self. This is primarily an economy of paradox, the "idiom of mysticism."[1] It's an

[1] Nugent, *Mysticism, Death, and Dying*. 2.

economy that claims the possibility of the impossible, a dynamic in and through which all renunciations, offerings, and sacrifices augment or restore the self (or at least *seem* to have *the potential* to restore it).

The "compositions of the self" suggest this to varying degrees. Texts in which the character attempts to preserve the self depict preservation as its own consolation. Arguably, those texts in which the main character sacrifices her self or surpasses the self's rigid boundaries in some way also reward such a character with mystical abundance of life, the paradoxical, transformative elevation of the self through its own loss. In sacrificing herself, Underhill's Constance becomes the human self's apotheosis, a work of art and compassion, as well as an object of devotion. Maeve renounces the warring self constructed through political power and sovereignty in order to embrace her mystical self. Facing death, Sinclair's artist-soldier realizes he is actually part of the eternal Absolute Self. Van simultaneously asserts her magical will and lays herself down as an offering to the protection of Rings, whose animus joins her self with the natural elements. Lolly renounces community ties to make her self sacred. Clarissa "composes" her self as a jeweled center to assuage others' loneliness and imagines her self as a mist that finds its completion, not its loss, in others. I have problematized the "success" of these compositions as ethical possibilities, questioning the adequacy, for example, of the primitive, magical self as sacred property as a response to patriarchal controls.

The ways in which I have tried to unsettle the mystical compositions reveal my own assumptions and preferences. Primary and most active among them is my "political" or perhaps "communitarian" bias. My assessments of literary texts have been shaped by the view that participation in political life and general engagement in community are preferable modes for living responsibly than renunciation or self-imposed solitude. This viewpoint

clearly conflicts with the positions Gore-Booth and Townsend Warner advocate in *The Triumph of Maeve* and *Lolly Willowes,* and it doesn't fully consider the potential gifts (spiritual and/or political) of periods of solitude and acts of abstinence or refusal. Nonetheless, I have tried to balance my critiques of their texts with an openness to the possibilities of their positions—by acknowledging that political renunciation is in fact a political act that radically questions cultural and historical assumptions about the sovereignty of the self and the nation, and that exposes the narrowness of what counts as "political." In my reading of *Lolly Willowes*, I have paired the reading of possession as oppressive ownership with the possibility of possession as a kind of belonging.

As I briefly indicated in the Introduction, my focus on British writers (with the exception of Gore-Booth) could unintentionally reinforce the perception of the "imperial center" as the most important locale for the efflorescence of literary modernism and its inscriptions of mysticism. I have contextualized literary selections with their authors' interest in "eastern" forms of mysticism, as well as their contacts with writers from India, to draw attention to the channels of cultural interaction the empire established. The project could emphasize this crucial context even more with the inclusion of other writers from colonial locations in addition to Eva Gore-Booth, such as Indian poet Sarojini Naidu[2] or New Zealand short story writer Katherine Mansfield. Though I opted to include less frequently studied authors like Gore-Booth, Towsend Warner, and Butts instead of another

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[2] See, for example Sarojini Naidu, "To a Buddha Seated on a Lotus," in *The Golden Threshold* (London: Heinemann, 1909). 97-98. The speaker addresses "Lord Buddha" on his lotus-throne, asking what "mystic rapture" and peace he possesses (97). While the speaker repeatedly claims the Buddha's peace, she also acknowledges the distance between the collective human experience and Buddha's "mystic rapture." Nirvana remains unknown and far off, and the speaker questions how humans can reach it. The assertions of peace despite constant striving become statements of faith, which are tempered by the speaker's questions. The intense emotion and longing of the poem interestingly counter Sinclair's statements regarding the ease and stillness of eastern mystics contrasted with the restlessness and longing of western ones.

well-known modernist writer, Mansfield's *Prelude* (1917) provides rich ground for investigations of mystical, modernist, and imperial intersections.

Mansfield's story unsettles the self's steady, trustworthy perception through a move further inland on the settler colony of her native New Zealand. It locates mysticism in the colonial outskirts and depicts it as a feminist dream of escape from the everyday confines of the patriarchal household. For her character Linda Burnell, it is a quasi-hallucinatory experience of animism. Household objects and decorations come to life, and unnamed presences observe her. The enigmatic aloe plant, which was the subject of Mansfield's original title, is a botanical manifestation of Linda's psyche. When standing with her mother under the moonlight, the aloe transforms into a ship that flies through the wavy sea of the sky. Kezia, one of Linda's daughters, also senses presences and envisions the transformation of objects. Through Kezia's experience and the infusion of the less-settled colonial area with mystical presences, Mansfield associates mysticism with altered perception, the unsettling of "reality," and the "primitive," "natural" realms of childhood and the colony. The story provides no conclusions regarding Linda's and Kezia's awareness of unseen presences, the new life the family has begun, or the probable outcomes of Linda's often hazy, almost catatonic, death-in-life states. It is a prelude to an unknown drama, a no-ending that opens out into the unwritten future of mysterious possibility.

My hope is that *Mystical Compositions of the Self: Women, Modernism, and Empire* conveys the complexity of women writers' formulations of belief and skepticism, the heterodox "possible impossibilities" they imagine for the self. In its explorations of the sometimes strange marriages of mystical discourse, modernist aesthetics, and the political frictions caused or exacerbated by the imperial enterprise, this project's literary engagements open out into questions that sound surprisingly familiar and contemporary. How do we work against

the politics of oppression and violence without participating in them ourselves? How do we live responsibly in an increasingly globalized world without abandoning intimacy and belonging? What roles should religion and art take in times of war? What does a good-faith devotion to life look like? How do we treat our gendered, racial, cultural, political, and religious others with dignity and compassion while still maintaining difference? How do we discern when to choose self-sacrifice over self-preservation, and what will be the cost and the recompense? Like the discourse of mysticism itself, such questions enjoy a plasticity, an ability to modify themselves and accommodate to the shifting particulars of various historical moments. They press us to continue attending to the ways we relate to one another, to the ways we can seek justice and generosity within unjust systems, to the ways politics, collective religion, and personal spirituality can cooperatively challenge one another, and the ways we might imagine and tell those stories.

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