

Framed: The Interior Woman Artist-Observer in Modernity

by

Rebecca Anne Gershenson Smith

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Doctoral Committee:

Professor Sara B. Blair, Chair
Professor Martha J. Vicinus
Associate Professor Kali A. K. Israel
Associate Professor Andrea P. Zemgulys

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	ii
Introduction. Modernity and the Interior Woman Observer	1
Chapter 1. Modernist Historical Materialism and the Missing 37 th Convolute	42
Chapter 2. Latch-Keys and Eye-Glasses: Amy Levy and the Spaces In-Between	77
Chapter 3. Wharton, Forster, and the Escape from the Interior Observer	135
Chapter 4. Modernism and the Magic of the Threshold: Virginia Woolf's Window in Correspondence with Walter Benjamin's Arcade	192
Epilogue. Postmodern Windows: West, Barnes, Morrison and the Quandary of Spatial Partition	264
Bibliography	277

Introduction

Modernity and the Interior Woman Observer

If Walther Ruttmann's highly influential 1927 documentary *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* aims for a depiction of the daily reality of the city in place of conventional narrative, it is appropriate that one of the key scenes in the film, the opening of the second act, is of women flinging open their domestic windows. The image of a woman at her window suggests some of the true first stirrings of the city and, given representations of this figure in the history of art, serves as a quintessential signifier of the everyday.

A collage of images that commences with the initial movements of the city and guides us through the day, portraying transportation, machinery, labor, sport, leisure, and rest, *Berlin* focuses on public spaces—streets, cafes, shops, factories. Our only access to the private domestic interior is seen from outside the window, which locates the camera perspective in the street-level view of the city stroller. Ruttmann depicts women opening their windows for fresh air and the light of day, shaking out cleaning rags through the window, and later hanging out their windows laughing and watching street musicians in the courtyard below. While women also appear as workers and walkers, active in the public spaces of the metropolis, the woman at the window serves as the symbolic guardian of the private residence, forestalling visual and physical access to the interior, and she is the closest that we get to the private domicile.

Strikingly similar to *Berlin* in form, Dziga Vertov's *Man with the Movie Camera* (1929), a day-in-the-life-of-a-city documentary shot in various Russian urban centers, plays off and transgresses the very boundaries that *Berlin* keenly respects.¹ In one of the opening shots, we see a window with lace curtains shot from the exterior; the view then transfers inside to a scene of a woman sleeping in her bed—a most intimate moment, as the camera intercuts pieces of her body with images of her room and reveals the unglamorous movements of her arousal from slumber. This foray into domestic space immediately establishes the film as a departure from *Berlin*, one that will treat femininity and domesticity differently from its predecessor. In a later scene, we see window shutters open and shift directly to the mouth of a woman who is brushing her teeth. The window is melded with the camera, both portals into private life, one screen or lens and its parallel shutters representing the other.² Spotlighting the private moments of women, often accessed through the window—whether dressing, sleeping, washing, crossing legs, even giving birth—is for Vertov synonymous with the camera's ability to know no bounds, to capture and penetrate intimacy.³

While both Ruttmann and Vertov distinguish the woman at the window as an image worth capturing, the differences between how these films relate to this image

¹ Resemblances between the two films have been noted, and Ruttmann and Vertov have been said to be mutually influential on one another (*Berlin* influencing *Man* and Vertov's earlier work influencing *Berlin*).

² Similarly, in another scene, a woman inside wipes off her face, shutters are closed, and the camera cuts back and forth between images of her drying her face and the shutters opening and closing. Interspersed are also shots of the camera lens focusing. The shutter slats open and the camera zooms and focuses (to get closer to the subject from outside window, perhaps).

³ Additionally, both films intersperse depictions of domestic windows with shop windows and follow both throughout the films—whether they are opened or closed, what they reveal or hide, changes the visual geography of the city immeasurably and gives indications about location, class, and time of day. Whereas, through Ruttmann's eyes, the shop window and domestic window are constitutionally different spaces—one that exists for display and visual access and the other that resists this very access—in Vertov's film, the interplay between shop windows and domestic windows underscores the degree to which both are interchangeable for the camera, penetrable and for exhibition.

underscores a tension around this figure running through cultural texts of this period.⁴ Indeed, during the modernist era, the woman at the window is at the center of a larger conversation about the role of the modern woman in relation to domesticity, the urban, and the visual. In the landscape of modernist explorations of the interplay between interior and street, she emerges as a principal locus of cultural exploration and debate.

The richness of the window in a filmic context has not been lost on film critics. Anne Friedberg's *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (1994) explores the ways in which nineteenth-century visual modalities such as photography and urban strolling anticipate postmodern visual experiences in film, shopping malls, and virtual reality.⁵ Her work later evolves into a larger exploration of the window in *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (2007), which highlights the predominance of the window metaphor in philosophical thought, aesthetic culture, and film theory by surveying the history of the window in its various manifestations, from early architectural theories to the ever-present Windows operating system for personal computers.⁶

Likewise, film critic Tom Gunning identifies the window and the window mirror as key

⁴ Technically speaking, Vertov figures the woman in association with the window—through the window—more frequently than at it. In analyzing the woman vis-à-vis the window, an inevitable prepositional game ensues regarding the various spatial clues to the subject's relationship to the object—"at the window," "in the window," "on the window," "by the window," as well as "and," "outside," "inside," and other spatial identifiers. My premise is that, regardless of the subject's positionality relative to the window, these writers and directors are calling on and conversing with the classic domestic image of the woman at the window. The various spatial signifiers serve to enhance our understanding of how the writer is dialoguing with the stock images of a woman looking out her window or looking into the interior, with the window behind her.

⁵ Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

⁶ Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007). Other critics have also connected some of these media. Television, for example, has been considered the "window on the world." See Charles I. Coombs, *Window on the World. The Story of Television Production* (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1965).

players in the optics of the detective narrative.⁷ Film theorists have been drawn to the window because of its obvious metaphorical caché in their field, the physical and figurative kinship between the window and the camera that also captivated Vertov.

What has yet to be revealed is that the window is as central and as evocative in modern literary texts as it is in film representations of the same era and that the woman at the window holds a special status in both genres—not only in a Continental context, but also among British and U.S. writers, on whose texts I focus of my analysis. Whether Clarissa Dalloway flinging open her windows, “what a lark, what a plunge!”⁸ at the opening of *Mrs. Dalloway* or Lucy Honeychurch staring out her *Room With a View*, the woman at the window is a widely represented and highly charged image not only in modernist literature and art, but also throughout Western culture, from *Romeo and Juliet* to *The Women of Brewster Place*. In modern art, we find portraits such as Picasso’s *Woman Seated Before the Window*, Dali’s *Woman at the Window*, and Van Gogh’s *Peasant Woman, Seen Against the Window* alongside films like Fritz Lang’s *Woman in the Window*. In fact, the woman at the window has been the primary subject of several literary texts during and after the modernist era: *The Woman in the Window* by Alma De Groen, *Woman at the Window*, by Nelia Gardner White, and *The Woman in the Window* by J. H. Wallis.⁹

⁷ Tom Gunning, “The Exterior as Intérieur: Benjamin’s Optical Detective,” *boundary 2* 30.1 (2003) 105-130. For other discussions of the window in a filmic context, see also Robert D. Romanyshyn *Technology as Symptom and Dream* (New York: Routledge, 1989) and Ron Burnett, *Cultures of Vision: Images, Media and the Imaginary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

⁸ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925; San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1981) 3. Quote continues, “For so it had always seemed to her, when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air.”

⁹ Once one’s eyes have been opened to the presence of this image in literature, art, photography, and film, its prevalence is truly astounding. It is impossible to visit any art museum without discovering yet another artist’s own stamp on the image of the woman at the window. It is rare to read any novel or see any film that explores the female psyche without seeing this image. J. H. Wallis, *Once Off Guard* or *The Woman in*

In the hands of modernist feminist writers, the woman at the window becomes something very different than she is through the lens of Ruttmann's or Vertov's filmic camera. Not just an object seen, she is a holder of her own gaze, a real and ideal figure in Western culture inhabiting a classic vantage of both the modern artist and the domestic woman.

This project is about the traditional, seemingly retrograde figure of the interior woman observer¹⁰ and how modernist writers in Britain and the U.S. circle around her in order to define what it means to be a modern woman vis-à-vis women of the past.¹¹ It asks the question: why are modernist narratives continually preoccupied with this ostensibly outmoded character, which appears to embody the shuttered interiority and narrowly-defined femininity that modernity seems to move beyond? To address this question, I use architectural theory in dialogue with cultural history and literary narrative to examine the window as a site that modernists use to negotiate tensions and form creative integrations of the aesthetic and the domestic and to define women's evolving relationships to private and public spaces.

In this study, the window as a material site becomes important beyond the woman who perches there. I float between discussion of both the window and the woman at the window because it is necessary to understand the material and metaphorical significance of the window in order to understand the meaning of the woman at the window more specifically. Additionally, the domestic window and woman at the window are in many

the Window (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1944), Nelia Gardner White, *Woman at the Window* (New York: Viking Press, 1951), Alma de Groen, *Woman in the Window* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1999).

¹⁰ I also refer to the woman at the window as the "interior woman observer" (that is, located in and viewing from the domestic interior) or "artist-observer" when the temperament or role of this figure aligns her with the modernist spectator or artist.

¹¹ Because of the need to limit the project in some fashion, I focus on American and British writers—but as Vertov, Ruttmann, and Walter Benjamin make clear, the fixation on the woman at the window is clearly one that extends beyond the literature of these two nations.

ways inextricable; so strongly is the domestic window associated with femininity in a Western context that the connection is nearly always latent, if not expressed; and, when a domestic window appears in a text, a dialogue with its history and associations is often lurking beneath the surface.

In this project, I reveal the woman at the window as a type around whom the dreams and anxieties of modernity circulate, an archetypal modernist figure belonging in a category with the *flâneur* and actually richer—more evocative and complex—in key ways. Whereas a man can find a relatively new figure to represent his position in the modern world, the *flâneur*, it is this older figure around whom concerns about women's roles, visibility, mobility, domesticity, and space circulate.¹² She is a figure that modernist critics can also miss precisely because she is not modern, or is not thought to be.

My principal inquiry begins in *fin-de-siècle* London and closes with the aged modernism of New York in the 1930s. I consider the texts of Walter Benjamin, Virginia Woolf, Amy Levy, Edith Wharton, E. M. Forster, Djuna Barnes, and Nathanael West. Many of these writers are often tagged “feminist” and engaged in work and/or writing related to women's advancement, social liberalism, progressivism, or gender bending; and yet, looking closely at their use of the woman at the window yields some observations that critical commentaries tend to elide. In short—the degree to which they value domesticity (highly) and the degree to which their feminist politics is complex and vexed. Despite their fascination with what are typically considered some of the central

¹² Critics have had varying opinions on the historical origins of the *flâneur*, some locating the origins in the nineteenth century, others as early as the seventeenth. Even if we accept the earliest dates as accurate, the *flâneur* remains a modern construction when compared with the woman at the window, whose origins can be traced back to ancient times.

features of modernism—the city, the streets, the spectacle—these are writers who, for various reasons, still want and see the value of the domestic interior.

The historical and geographical reach of this project enables me to trace a trajectory of significant transition for both architectural conceptions of interior and exterior and social conceptions of private (home) and public (street, world)—from the nineteenth century ideology of separate spheres and the architectural opposition of interior and exterior, to a social and architectural fantasy of fluidity between inside and outside, to a resigned acceptance of the interior/exterior dichotomy that comes on the verge of postmodernism. I explore how this trend in architecture and culture intersects with an evolving feminism, and more particularly, how the woman observer's negotiation of interior and exterior comports with her management of political and aesthetic aims.

My exploration of the woman observer at the window participates in several critical dialogues. I expand the cultural history of the modern woman observer and her experience of the city, figure fluidity and liminality as significant alternative spatial values in an era of supposed literary opposition between the home and the street, and open opportunities for an enhanced understanding of the relationship between modernist architectural theory and literary narrative. But at its base, this dissertation is about literary and cultural history—remaking our understanding of modernity and of women's place and experience in that period. I expose the woman at the window as one of the key figures of modernity that has been missed, passed over, on account of its apparent traditionalism in the context of contemporary values. I further trouble the street-centrist grounds of value on which many modernist critics think it means to write of this period. Moreover, identifying the significance of the woman at the window and exploring her

role opens opportunities for a critical re-envisioning of the place of the domestic in the modernist landscape. The domestic interior emerges as a vexed and vital site that is a significant constituent of modernity, and visuality is revealed as a mode that is much more ambivalent than many of our readings of the *flâneur* or *flâneuse* would imply.

On another level, this project forms a case study in feminist and proto-feminist reworkings of traditional roles and spaces—a literary demonstration of the continual feminist project of revisiting and remaking those avenues women have long inhabited, revealing deep ambivalences: denial, rejection, celebration, reclaiming (by alternating generations or by the same individual). Feminist writers rework traditional spaces not as a singular task, but in the context of artistic aims and values that are frequently in sync with their modernist peers.¹³ This study examines how the gender politics of a set of writers meld and disjunct with their own modernist aesthetic values, specifically in relation to their conception of visual-spatial perspective.

The Critical Elision of the Interior

As inheritors of Baudelaire’s idealization of “the hate of home, and the passion for roaming,”¹⁴ we tend to view the modern city in a way largely shaped by a privileging of street sights and figures that are wholly unlike and separate from those associated with the domestic interior. Clarissa Dalloway walking down Bond Street, Leopold Bloom

¹³ The term “feminist writers” is a convenient, albeit it indistinct term, which I use for lack of a better alternative. “Women writers” would not be an accurate signifier because I explore the literature of both men and women. The literary writers that I study were all invested in issues of gender. Though they did not in all cases necessarily associate themselves with the feminist movement of their day, they were concerned with social and historical restrictions placed on women and aimed for a widening of their roles.

¹⁴ Charles Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen*, trans. Louise Varese. (1869; New York: New Directions, 1970) 20.

navigating the alleys of Dublin, Baudelaire's *flâneur* ambling through the Paris arcades: these form the classic images in the story of modernity that we tell.

Feminist recovery projects, even, have tended to reproduce this familiar narrative by gravitating toward those writers and texts that offer a “woman’s point of view” from within the street, the shops, the spectacle. Since Janet Wolff published a brief essay in 1989 identifying the absence of a female counterpart to Baudelaire’s *flâneur* in accounts of modernity, her contentions have been ceaselessly cited and vociferously rebutted by a flurry of feminist critics who together seek to expose the existence of the *flâneuse* on the streets of London and in the malls of Los Angeles.¹⁵ Despite our recognition that the average middle-class woman at the turn of the century rarely wandered alone in public,¹⁶ the few literary instances we find of the woman street explorer—in a sea of masculine observers, in an era defined by the street—have been so enlivening as to captivate our attention. Inspired by modernist representations of ambulant urban female spectatorship, I, too, initially set out to explore accounts of the urban woman street observer.

It was Walter Benjamin—an unlikely source, certainly no feminist—who pointed me in a different direction. As I worked my way through his *Arcades Project*, interested in looking primarily at how Benjamin represents the *flâneur* and urban space in order to

¹⁵ See Janet Wolff, “The Invisible *Flâneuse*: Women and the Literature of Modernity,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 2/3 (1985): 37-46; Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola* (New York: Methuen, 1995); Deborah Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation, and the City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Sally Ledger, “Gissing, the Shopgirl and the New Woman,” in *Women: A Cultural Review* 6/3 (1995): 263-74; Judith Pascoe, *Romantic Theatricality: Gender, Poetry, and Spectatorship* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Deborah L. Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Erika Diane Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London’s West End* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000); Ana Vadillo, *Women Poets and Urban Aestheticism: Passengers of Modernity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). Griselda Pollock, on the other hand, supports Wolff’s contentions about the absence of the *flâneuse*: Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988).

¹⁶ See Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

further theorize the street observer, I became absorbed with the fine distinctions between the Benjamin I knew in critical discourse and the one I encountered through his massive tome. Benjamin is widely credited with reviving and sustaining interest in Baudelaire and is referenced in nearly every study that examines the *flâneur* as the central figure of modernity.¹⁷ He could well be called the high angel of the street-focused cultural understanding of that era. And yet, in *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin highlights the possibilities of a new, unconventional relationship between the street and the interior in the twentieth century, identifying modernity as an era in which “the street becomes room and the room becomes street,” where the “*flâneur* goes for a walk in his room.”¹⁸ Though Benjamin reflects a personal affection for urban rambling in his work and has indirectly propelled the critical spell cast by the *flâneur*, *The Arcades Project* reveals that he was far more invested in the potentially productive relationship of public space and discourse to the literal and metaphoric interior than in street-wandering for its own sake.

Reading through the modernist canon reveals that a segment of modernists join Benjamin in being intimately concerned with the domestic interior and the interpenetration of inside and outside spaces. Le Corbusier, the premier modernist architect, explores the notion of flowing space—the visual and physical erosion of boundaries within and between the inside and outside of a home—and renders the house

¹⁷ In a recent revisiting of the figure of the *flâneur*, Mary Gluck writes that: “Any effort to recapture the historical *flâneur* needs to begin with Walter Benjamin’s monumental study of 19th-century Paris (1999). As is well known, it was Benjamin who almost single-handedly recovered the figure of the *flâneur* for 20th-century criticism, establishing the connections between *flânerie* and the urban landscape of modernity.” *The Flâneur and the Aesthetic Appropriation of Urban Culture in Mid-19th-century Paris*, *Theory, Culture & Society* 20(5) (2003) 54.

¹⁸ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999) 406.

a machine for viewing.¹⁹ In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald represents Nick Carraway's core struggle in terms of interplay between domestic interiors and outside spaces. Sitting inside Tom's New York City apartment, Nick imagines himself merged with the "casual watcher in the darkening streets" who peers in the window: "I was him too, looking up and wondering. I was within and without . . ." ²⁰ And Virginia Woolf, in her depiction of textbook *flânerie*, "Street Haunting," focuses not only on the pleasure of rollicking through London alone, but on the fluid, synergistic relationship the narrator develops between her experiences of public and private space. The essay ends with an affirmation of the domestic: "Street haunting in winter is the greatest of adventures. Still as we approach our own doorstep again, it is comforting to feel the old possessions, the old prejudices, fold us round; and the self, which has been blown about at so many street corners, which has battered like a moth at the flame of so many inaccessible lanterns, sheltered and enclosed."²¹

Despite such vibrant engagements with the domestic interior, these writers, like Benjamin, are consistently read in ways that incorporate them into the prevalent, street-centrist version of modernism. Rachel Bowlby, for example, casts *A Room of One's Own* as an "imaginary ramble" that crucially links women, writing, and walking and suggests that Peter Walsh's failed encounter with a *passante* and Elizabeth's adventure atop a bus

¹⁹ Le Corbusier writes, "*Walls of light!* Henceforth the idea of the window was to provide light and air and to be looked through. Of these classified functions I should retain one only, that of being looked through. . . . *To see out of doors, to lean out.*" Like Le Corbusier's notion of the house as a "machine for living," it is also very much in his estimation a machine for viewing. In Beatriz Colomina's reading of Le Corbusier, "The house is a system for taking pictures. What determines the nature of the picture is the window." Le Corbusier, "Twentieth Century Building and Twentieth Century Living" in *The Studio Year Book on Decorative Art* (London: 1930); Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Architecture and Mass Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994) 7; 311.

²⁰ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1925; New York: Macmillan, 1980) 36.

²¹ Virginia Woolf, "Street Haunting," *Death of the Moth* (1942; San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1970) 35-6.

in *Mrs. Dalloway* might be making way for a feminine *flânerie*.²² In the same vein, Le Corbusier's ideas about visuality are frequently used to highlight a connection to the *flâneur*, rather than using his notion of the house as a machine for viewing to explore the distinctiveness of the perspective of the interior observer.²³ While such renderings of these writers accurately reflect their fascination with street observation, they neglect their equally generative exploration of the domestic interior and the relationship between interior and street.

Of course the dominant narrative of modernity as street-centric is not without basis. The tendency of certain modernist writers to hierarchize the street over the domestic interior is so familiar that it barely requires mention. Writers such as Eliot and Pound scorned the bourgeois interior in deference to a more vital life of observation in the street, and such scorn is widely accepted as a central feature of modernism.²⁴ Eliot's "Prufrock and Other Observations," for example, counterposes the freedom the poet experiences in wandering through and observing the streets to an over-cultured, stifled, feminized interior. While the street leads to "overwhelming question[s]," and provocative images, the interior houses the vacant rant of women who relentlessly "come and go / Talking of Michelangelo." Pound's *Lustra* presents a similar paradigm.

Repeated images of the bourgeois woman "dying of her ennui," of "emotional

²² Rachel Bowlby, *Feminist Destinations and Further Essays on Virginia Woolf* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997). She emphasizes: "Woolf's work contains such extended explorations of the relations between women, walking and writing; so much, sometimes, does it appear that the three are natural companions for her that it is sometimes as if the figure of the masculine flâneur had been pushed off satirically down a cul-de-sac, as someone from whom the adventuring woman had nothing at all to fear (still less to desire), on the streets or on the page" (204).

²³ See Amy Bingaman, Lise Sanders, and Rebecca Zorach, eds. *Embodied Utopias: Gender, Social Change, and the Modern Metropolis* (New York: Routledge, 2002) 221; Parsons 11.

²⁴ See T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917; San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1958). Ezra Pound, *Lustra* (1913-1915), "The Garden," "Commission," "Provincia Deserta", excerpted in *Personae* (1926; New York: New Directions, 1990).

anaemia,” are contrasted to an exalted picture of a solitary male, wandering through, observing, and ruminating on the streets. The last line of the collection fittingly illustrates the poet inhabiting this ideal: “I have walked over these roads; / I have thought of them living.” For Eliot and Pound, the street is home to images that inspire the wandering artist and offer him freedom from banal domesticities and empty, trifling bourgeois society. It is a legacy that is followed through the century, with texts such as Frank O’Hara’s *Lunch Poems*: “It’s my lunch hour, so I go / for a walk among the hum-colored / cabs.”²⁵

Recognizing this point of view, Christopher Reed notes that, “Exploiting the Odyssean contrast of heroic mission with domestic stasis, the modernist avant-garde positioned itself in opposition to the home.”²⁶ This phenomenon is so pronounced that Victoria Rosner has claimed that “modernism and the domestic have often seemed like antithetical categories.”²⁷ It seems we have Baudelaire to blame for much of this. Peter Nicholls has located the origins of modernism in a Parisian café, as Baudelaire drafts his poem, “*Une Passante*,” and Michael North has called Baudelaire “an almost unavoidable starting point” for understanding the modernist movement.²⁸ Such origins decisively shaped the characterization of modernism’s relationship to the domestic, for, as Reed indicates, “The tendency for avant-garde artists and architects, along with their

²⁵ Frank O’Hara, “A Step Away From Them,” *Lunch Poems* (City Lights Books, 1964).

²⁶ Christopher Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms: Modernism, Subculture, and Domesticity* (New Haven: Yale University Press for the Bard Graduate Center, 2004) 2.

²⁷ Victoria Rosner, *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995) 4.

²⁸ Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) 1. Michael North, *Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 205. See also Tim Armstrong, *Modernism: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005). In making his own case for the beginnings of modernism on American soil, Armstrong provides apt summary for the widely accepted literary understanding of the focus and origins of modernism: “Where does modern literature begin? Many recent accounts of modernism have begun in the metropolitan centre: Paris in the 1840s, the detached and ironic gaze of the masculine walker, the *flâneur*, and Baudelaire’s essay on ‘The Painter of Modern Life’” (23).

promoters, to assert their accomplishments through contrast with domesticity has characterized modernism at least since Charles Baudelaire's famous defense of impressionism, 'The Painter of Modern Life.'²⁹

This predilection for the street in modernist culture is not, of course, gendered neutral. As Rita Felski points out, "Many of the key symbols of the modern in the nineteenth century—the public sphere, the man of the crowd, the stranger, the dandy, the flâneur—were indeed explicitly gendered." And, "A recurring identification of the modern with the public was largely responsible for the belief that women were situated outside processes of history and social change."³⁰ It is the *feminized* domestic interior that is often considered hostile to the aesthetic impulse. Baudelaire comically dramatizes this point of view in "The Soup and the Clouds": "My dear little mad beloved was serving my dinner, and I was looking out of the open dining-room window contemplating those moving architectural marvels that God constructs out of mist, edifices of the impalpable. And as I looked I was saying to myself: 'All those phantasmagoria are almost as beautiful as my beloved's beautiful eyes . . . ' All of a sudden I felt a terrible blow of a fist on my back, and heard a husky and charming voice . . . saying, 'Aren't you ever going to eat your soup, you damned bastard of a cloud-monger?'"³¹ Here, the female figure tears the artist from his high thoughts and drags him back into base, material reality.

Despite the unmistakable scorn for the domestic typical of Baudelaire and his followers, we must be careful not to conflate modernist writers' own perspectives with

²⁹ Christopher Reed, ed. *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modernist Art and Architecture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996) 15.

³⁰ Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995) 16.

³¹ Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen* 91.

the critical milieu that has perpetuated precisely the phenomenon that Reed identifies. Critics have played no small part in reifying an idealization of urban street culture in counterdistinction to the domestic. Raymond Williams has said that the aesthetic perspective on the city has long been one of “a man walking, as if alone, in its streets,”³² and Deborah Parsons notes in her work on the *flâneuse* in modernity that “the *flâneur* is not only a historical figure but also a critical metaphor for the characteristic perspective of the modern artist.”³³ The extensive body of literature on the *flâneur* in modernist studies is a testament to the central role that modernist critics have accorded this figure and his street-level view of the city.³⁴ Critics who study the modern city and urban street culture have in their own analysis often reflected what I consider the quintessential modernist tendency to implicitly hierarchize the street over the home, replicating Baudelairean notions of the interior as claustrophobic, shuttered, and imprisoning—or simply irrelevant or uninspired. It is in some ways no surprise that those scholars who settle on modernism as a field are themselves often captivated by the very street culture that many of the central figures of the modernist canon valorize.

³² Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) 231.

³³ Parsons 5.

³⁴ The critical literature on the *flâneur* is far too extensive to cite the full body of references. See, for example, Susan Buck-Morss, “The Flâneur, the Sandwichman and the Whore: The Politics of Loitering,” *New German Critique* 39 (1986) 99-140; Dana Brand, *The Spectator and the City in 19th Century American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Elizabeth Wilson, “The Invisible Flâneur” *New Left Review* 191 (1992) 90-110; Keith Tester, ed. *The Flâneur* (London: Routledge, 1994); Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, “The Flâneur: The City and Its Discontents,” *Paris as Revolution: Writing the Nineteenth-Century City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Anke Gleber, *The Art of Taking a Walk: Flanerie, Literature, and Film in Weimar Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Kristin Veel, “The Irreducibility of Space: Labyrinths, Cities, Cyberspace,” *Diacritics* 33 (2003) 151-172; Mary Gluck, “Reimagining the Flâneur: The Hero of the Novel in Lukacs, Bakhtin, and Girard,” *Modernism/Modernity* 13 (2006) 747-764. In her attempt to locate a role for private space in the modernist landscape, Victoria Rosner notes the extensive valorization of the street as the locus of aesthetic inspiration in modernist culture: “The city street, commonly understood to be the central arena of modernist creativity and self-expression, is personified by the *flâneur*” (146).

While early studies on the *flâneuse* have been important and necessary in reshaping our views of modernity and of women's response to and place in it, it is problematic to conceive of them as conclusive—to both reduce the significance of the woman observer to her occasional presence on the street and to assume that her presence there is without question significant. It's time to widen the lens through which we conceptualize the woman artist-observer of modernity and to expand our questions about her beyond a “does she, doesn't she?” with regard to street observation and visuality.

Beyond Parallel Narratives

Some critics are attempting to move us beyond this paradigmatic hierarchy of the street over the interior. Rosner's *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life* (1995), for example, “proposes that the spaces of private life are a generative site for literary modernism.”³⁵ In studies of modern American literature, Jane Tompkins' influential defense of sentimental and domestic fiction, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction* (1986), lead to two decades of arguments about the validity of domesticity as a historical category and mode of experience, leading up to the collection *No More Separate Spheres!* (2002).³⁶

³⁵ Rosner 2.

³⁶ Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). The groundbreaking collection *No More Separate Spheres!*, edited by Cathy N. Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), has argued for dismantling the “separate spheres” reading of the nineteenth century, an approach that is part of the postmodernism critique of binaries. The essays in this volume point out the ways in which “separate spheres” readings fail to take account of the effect of class, race, nationality, sexuality, and other factors in their promulgation of the separate spheres doctrine. While theirs is a worthy and important scholarly contribution that rightfully expands overly neat conceptions of the relationship between public and private in the nineteenth century, it does not change the fact that certain binaries that my own study centrally addresses—masculine/feminine, interior/exterior, home/street, domestic/public—were very real and important categories to the writers I study.

While studies of domesticity may be mainstream in literary studies, reclamations of the domestic interior in *modernist* studies, when they do occur, are often sidelined within feminist or niche discourse and have thus far largely failed to make their way into the textbook narrative of continental modernism. The reasons for this are manifold—modernist critical writings on urban street culture still vastly outnumber critical interpretations of modernist domestic space; the domestic interior continues to be equated with the “feminine,” which to some extent still relegates the interior to the periphery; canonical modernist texts themselves more often focus on the street than on the interior. As well, modernist critical studies of the domestic often focus on certain modernists’ interest in the interior without fully engaging the contrary vein of the modernist narrative—the valorization of the street.³⁷ Without an attempt to reconcile the reigning narrative of modernism with one that demonstrates a valuation of the domestic interior, the two accounts become parallel narratives—which would be fine, except that “parallel” does not begin to describe the intimately defined relationship certain modernist writers develop between inside and outside spaces.

Recognizing that parallel narratives of domestic and street are insufficient and misleading, there is nascent recognition in cultural studies of modernity of the modernist impulse to merge public and private spaces. This charge has been led by a set of cultural and literary critics that are, not coincidentally, focused on theories of modernist architecture. Sharon Marcus’ *Apartment Stories* rejects the notion that interiors are essentially “domestic” and focuses on what she reads as the fluidity of street and home in

³⁷ In his work, Christopher Reed, for example, accepts the antithetical relationship of the avant-garde and the domestic and works to fashion the domestic not as a useful category to modernists, but to the Bloomsbury group alone.

the Parisian apartment house of the mid nineteenth century.³⁸ Working in architectural and media studies, Beatriz Colomina argues that “Modernity, then, coincides with the publicity of the private.”³⁹ She writes,

The way we think about architecture is organized by the way we think about the relationships between inside and outside, private and public. With modernity there is a shift in these relationships, a displacement of the traditional sense of an inside, an enclosed space, established in clear opposition to an outside. All boundaries are now shifting. This shifting becomes manifest everywhere: in the city, of course, but also in all the technologies that define the space of the city: the railroad, newspapers, photography, electricity, advertisements, reinforced concrete, glass, the telephone, film, radio, . . . war. Each can be understood as a mechanism that disrupts the older boundaries between inside and outside, public and private, night and day, depth and surface, here and there, street and interior, and so on.⁴⁰

Colomina describes this phenomenon of the erosion of spatial boundaries in terms of architectural theory. Her observation that modernism is about the shifting and interpenetration of boundaries between street and interior is radical if we consider it in relation to the modernism of Eliot, Pound, Baudelaire, and the dominant ideal of aesthetic practice in modernity.

But, modernist architecture and modernist literature are only rarely considered in tandem. As Victoria Rosner writes, “Spatial arrangements are influential in many modernist texts, yet the confluences between architectural history and modernist literature have gone largely unremarked by critics.”⁴¹ This may be because the spatial values in architectural and canonical literary modernism are often rightly seen to be in

³⁸ Sharon Marcus, *Apartment Stories: City and Home in Nineteenth-Century London and Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

³⁹ Colomina 9.

⁴⁰ Colomina 12.

⁴¹ Victoria Rosner, *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004) 8.

opposition. As Peter Denney puts it, “T. S. Eliot’s London, for example, was an ‘Unreal City’ that offered the poet no God’s eye view and confined him to occupy dissonant urban streets . . . Whereas Eliot epistemologically positioned himself on the street . . . Le Corbusier located himself in a high-rise tower, from where he could visibly and intellectually control the chaotic movements of the urban crowd.”⁴² As I indicated above, many of the more established modernist writers rejected the interior in favor of the street and perceived a clear separation between public and private spaces, whereas modernist architectural theorists were focused on the fluid relationship between interior and street and focused their work on the creation of domestic spaces, among other projects.

My work reveals that, interestingly, the synergy of spatial ideas in modernist literature and architectural theory does not come from the likes of Eliot, but, ironically, from feminist modernists, a group that many prominent architectural theorists could not be ideologically further from on the issue of gender. Indeed, a limited view of women’s roles arguably pervades the field of modernist architecture.⁴³ The concept of “woman” is nearly absent from Benjamin’s work, showing her face almost exclusively in the guise of the prostitute or the central figure in a discussion of fashion. The treatment of women by Le Corbusier is equally knotty. A liberal user of photography and film to promote his work, Le Corbusier includes in his collection an image of a woman looking out of the window of the Immeuble Clarté (1930), one of the homes he built.⁴⁴ Instead of staring out at the vista, the woman’s gaze is fixed on a man who sits on the balcony just beyond

⁴² Peter Denney, “‘Botanising on the Asphalt’: Australian Modernity and the Street Poetics of Kenneth Slessor,” *Journal of Australian Studies* 13 (2002): 159.

⁴³ I use the term “architectural theorist” liberally and include Walter Benjamin. No architect by training, Walter Benjamin took up architectural history and metaphor as the centerpiece of his theories because of its singular resonance with the issues of space, materiality, and history he was exploring.

⁴⁴ Luis E. Carranza, “Le Corbusier and the Problems of Representation,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 48.2 (1994): 70-81.

the window. His glance turned to a child on his lap, the man does not return the woman's stare or even, apparently, notice her presence. The male and female figures' relative positions in the photograph reinforce traditional ideas about the spaces of femininity (interior) and masculinity (exterior). Feminist writers such as Luis Carranza have used this image and a score of others to call attention to the architect's limited and limiting view of women as decorative objects in service to men. While men in Le Corbusier's photos engage in a variety of activities and look toward the outside world, women continually look at men and inhabit interior spaces.

It is precisely, I argue, this narrow view of women's roles as held by modernist architectural theorists that has obscured important conceptual connections this project will reveal between modernist architectural theory and modernist feminist literature. Feminist scholars have shown little interest in modernist architectural texts (except to point out their uncharitable attitudes toward women), meaning that a sizable group of scholars that has historically been invested in writers' engagements with the domestic interior has largely dismissed or overlooked their work.

Exploring feminist literature through the interior woman observer at the window helps us to see a synergy between modernist architectural theory and modernist literature that has been missing until now. Modernist architectural theorists are invested in the relationship between interior and exterior spaces, including the notion of interpenetration and "flowing space." The concept of "free-flowing space" was developed by European and American architects, including Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, and Frank Lloyd Wright and involves designing homes with few defined (or perceived) boundaries between interior rooms and between the inside and outside of the home. Where Mies and

Le Corbusier used glass to eliminate visual boundaries between inside and outside, creating walls in which glass was a primary component, Wright also turned to glass as a means to create unity between mankind and nature.⁴⁵ The spatial relationship between inside and outside also becomes centrally relevant for modernist feminist writers in their explorations of the balance of home and work, inside and outside, visual and physical access to the street from the house.⁴⁶ Modernist feminists, that is, take up the very spatial values and ideas also reflected in modernist architectural texts in their explorations of the interior woman observer. Unlike many other modernist writers, modernist feminists and architectural theorists are commonly invested in both the street *and* the interior. Neither is invested in creating a completely alternative, “feminine” space. They are both actively shaping a perspective that reflects and maintains many of the values of street-focused culture in a way that also honors the potential of domestic space. And the window—as both a stock architectural form and a key site of femininity—is the perfect embodiment of the spatial fluidity that was of primary concern to both groups.

In addition, both feminist modernists and architectural theorists share a distinct investment in the historical and cultural resonance of objects and spaces. The work of architects concentrates on the concrete and material, while feminist writers frequently focus on the ways in which objects and spaces— whether houses, walls, or corsets— define women and their relative freedoms and restrictions. Likewise, feminist writers are often attentive to the relationship between past and present because they are writing

⁴⁵ See Brent Richards and Dennis Gilbert, *New Glass Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006) 16.

⁴⁶ Arguably, some of these issues were just as relevant for feminist writers in other time periods (including today) as they were in the modernist era. However, modernist feminists take up these issues with a particular focus on *space* and certain spatial values and questions in a way that is a hallmark of the modernist era. Feminist writers today, for example, are much more concerned with the struggle of individual women to balance responsibilities between home and work in a way that leads to personal fulfillment than they are with women’s visual and spatial experiences inside the home and out.

against a legacy of historical restrictions on women, while architects are always butting up against history in the process of the creation of new design against the backdrop of the old.⁴⁷

By noticing this connection between architectural theory and feminist literature, we are able to build bridges between modernist theories in different fields; and to note, again, the degree to which political predilections shape our readings and our greater sense of the era—in this case, failure to note key connections between modernist feminist literature and architectural theory because of the problematic gender politics of the architectural theorists.⁴⁸

More than this, developing a narrative of modernism that focuses on the spatial fluidity that captivated both feminist and architectural modernists helps us to align literary modernism more closely with the larger cultural modernist movement. While we have allowed the narrative of the street to be the dominant narrative of literary modernism, we can just as easily tell a narrative of modernist literature that fits in with the ideals in modernist architecture if we prioritize different texts and key figures. In exploring the woman at the window, a figure who inhabits a liminal space between the interior and the street, my work aims to move beyond parallel narratives of the interior and the street as it continues this trend of exploring the relationship between modernism

⁴⁷ Still, there are some key differences that must be noted. Architectural theorists focus on the interpenetration of interior/exterior spaces, a role for interior observer, and the vibrancy of domestic space. But, they still relegate women to a menial role. They renew the interior, but not the interior that has women as active agents in domestic space. Feminists obviously show how things operate for a distinctly feminine observer, in contrast to Benjamin and Le Corbusier, who focus on masculine figures.

⁴⁸ In one sense, this connection between feminist writers and architectural theorists would seem almost too obvious and the misogyny of the theorists arguably a defense mechanism. After all, these theorists are men who work around and write on interior spaces during an era in which these spaces are highly feminized. It is not surprising that they would try to distinguish their work as significant by diminishing women rather than allying with them and that, if we look closely, we nonetheless see the very connections that they potentially sought to obscure.

and the domestic interior—of moving beyond the street-centrist modernist narrative to recognize the ways in which a vein of modernist writers highly valued both fluidity between spatial-social realms and a modern version of the domestic interior.

Cultural History of Site/Object/Image: The Window

The window is just beginning to intrude on the scene as a relevant fixture or icon as concerns about the visual have arguably taken center stage in modernist studies. Beyond the works of Friedberg on the window in a filmic context, the commercial window has been considered for its presence in the world of the commodity, as in Erika Diane Rappaport's *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (2000). More recently, Isobel Armstrong has explored the role of the window, mirror, and other glassforms in *Victorian Glassworlds* (2008), which analyzes the cultural history and resonance of glass in the period just prior to that covered in my own study.⁴⁹ Art historians have shown some limited interest in the tradition of window representations in the history of art and the natural parallels between the window and the painting, as in Carla Gottlieb's *The Window in Art* (1981), which explores the window image from ancient Egyptian to postmodern representations.⁵⁰ But the domestic window in cultural and literary context remains under-explored. Even architectural studies appear to have under-theorized the domestic window as a cultural and architectural element. Certainly, the strides in visual theory and domestic criticism over the past decades have not been fully brought to bear on the role of this architectural fixture.

⁴⁹ Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830-1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁵⁰ Carla Gottlieb, *The Window in Art: From the Window of God to the Vanity of Man. A Survey of Window Symbolism in Western Painting* (New York: Abaris, 1981) 389. See also Steven Z. Levine, "The Window Metaphor and Monet's Windows" in *Arts Magazine* LVI 3 (November 1979) 98-103.

In literary studies, it is not uncommon for critics with a spatial or visual orientation to identify the prevalence of the window in a certain author's work or its role in a specific text, as, most recently, by Maggie Humm in her study of Virginia Woolf, *Modernist Women and Visual Cultures* (2002), Annette Benert in *The Architectural Imagination of Edith Wharton* (2007), and Diana Fuss in *The Sense of an Interior* (2004), which explores the literary and residential spaces of several writers.⁵¹ But, focused on other priorities, these critics do not fully address the figurative and material role of the window in these texts; often, as with Humm's study of Woolf, they admit that they do not know quite what to make of it. And much more significantly, no literary critic has identified the prevalence of this fixture in the texts and images of modernity.

This lacuna in cultural and gender studies is surprising, even in the context of the critical sidelining of the interior, given the overwhelming presence of the window in Western literature. In modernist literature alone, the examples are various and nearly endless. The window is a venue for spying on "real life" in William Dean Howells' *Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), as the Marches enjoy riding the train and watching in others' windows, a view that Basil claims "was better than the theater, of which it reminded him, to see those people through their windows . . . What suggestion! What drama! What infinite interest."⁵² The window is a space of vulnerability and demise in Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), as when Clare Kendry meets her fate by falling out of a Harlem window.⁵³ In Henry Roth's *Call it Sleep* (1934), the window is a site of both

⁵¹ Maggie Humm, *Modernist Women and Visual Cultures: Virginia Woolf, Vanessa Bell, Photography and Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002); Annette Benert, *The Architectural Imagination of Edith Wharton: Gender, Class, and Power in the Progressive Era* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007); Diana Fuss, *The Sense of an Interior: Four Writers and the Rooms that Shaped Them* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

⁵² William Dean Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890; New York: Meridian, 1994) 66.

⁵³ Nella Larsen, *The Complete Fiction of Nella Larsen* (New York: Anchor Books, 1992).

fluidity and division, enabling those in the house to communicate with those in the street and also symbolically and materially emphasizing the very separation of these spaces. As David leans out of his family's apartment window, "He wondered why it was that one could be half in the street and half out and yet never be able to picture the street and the inside of the house together."⁵⁴ In T. S. Eliot's "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" (1917), the window is an arena of double looking, as the street-wandering poet reports that "I have seen eyes in the street / Trying to peer through lighted shutters."⁵⁵

In part, the window has been neglected precisely *because* of its status as a site of everyday life. That is, the window's scholarly neglect and cultural pervasiveness are testimony to its everydayness. And yet, this everydayness is the source of its very richness. The window as a site for visual and literary representation has been so predominant, I believe, because it merges art and the everyday—figurative significance and literal, physical presence. It is a site, that is, where metaphor and materiality are richly interwoven, where the aesthetic and social-political meet and compete.

Window as Metaphor

When the window is handled figuratively, it becomes a place to step outside the real and work out concerns about the visual, the perspective of the artist, and boundedness versus permeability. With its transparency, detachment, and consciously limited, constructed view, the window perspective comes to be a useful metaphor for subject/object or artist/subject relations. In Henry James' *The Princess Casamassima* (1886), for example, when the princess moves to a working class neighborhood, she

⁵⁴ Henry Roth, *Call It Sleep* (1934; New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000) 132.

⁵⁵ Eliot 26.

opens the window and plays the piano for the dingy and downtrodden outside, who gather round to watch and listen. James frames the textual image of the princess with the window to emphasize the ways in which she makes herself a spectacle; she appears to the reader as a beautiful, untouchable picture for consumption by the poor.⁵⁶

The window's status as a visual and spatial boundary holder is crucial in an era obsessed with crossings and borders between inside and outside—a set of terms that accrues psychoanalytical and narrative meaning and socio-political resonance during the modernist period in terms of race, class, and gender. Psychoanalysts raised an awareness of the delicate boundaries between the body and the mind, between conscious and unconscious thought, between imagination and reality, between child and parent. Sigmund Freud himself, in advising analysts in the article “On Beginning the Treatment” (1913), uses the window as a metaphor for free association and the relationship of doctor and patient. The patient is advised to: “Act as though . . . you were a traveler sitting next

⁵⁶ Explorations of the window as a visual and aesthetic metaphor have followed upon the work of Renaissance architect, theorist, painter, and sculptor Leon Battista Alberti, who described the process of painting as one that involves imagining the view through a window: “First of all, on the surface on which I am going to paint, I draw a rectangle of whatever size I want, which I regard as an open window through which the subject to be painted is seen . . .” Alberti’s description alludes to the window not only as a casing for the image; it also fashions a relationship between artist and object in which the artist is viewing an unwitting figure through the window. Of course Alberti did not originate the association of the window with visuality, as Julia Orell points out that “The notion of seeing is already implied in the term window [sic] itself, which derives from the Middle English *vindauga*, eye of the wind (vindr = wind + auga = eye) replacing the Old English *eyethurl*.” Julia Orell, “window,” *The University of Chicago’s Theories of Media Keywords Glossary*. <<http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/window.htm>>. Orell refers to the following sources: “window, n.” *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 4 Apr. 2000 <<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/560382860>>. Alois Walde. *Lateinisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1910) 282. Modernist writers frequently relate the window to the eyes and the view, as in Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), in which Stephen’s gaze out the window is paralleled to his epiphany over the depraved state of his mind and recent activities. As Stephen feels that he has become ultimately sinful and “sunk to the state of a beast that licks his chops after meat,” he “presse[s] his face against the pane of the window and gazed out into the darkening street. Forms passed this way and that through the dull light. And that was life.” James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916; New York: Signet, 1991) 119.

to the window of a railway carriage and describing to someone inside the carriage the changing views which you see outside.”⁵⁷

Socially, modernity was an era of negotiation and transformation of the relationship between public and private—what really constituted the public sphere? Was privacy possible or even desirable? African-American writers, among others, grapple with the nexus and disjunction between the true, internal self and the definition of the self from without.⁵⁸ Modernity witnesses the debate over the proper station of women in relation to the home and the street and also reflects a tension between the stifling, cramped interiors of the poor and the relative freedom offered by the street and public space. In all of this, the window is an image modernist writers frequently turn to to explore the connections and disjunctions between interior and exterior. In *Of Human Bondage* (1915), when Philip Carey becomes uninterested in school, he takes to drawing Gothic windows over and over again—symbolic, naturally, of the route to freedom that he desires. In Ann Petry’s *The Street* (1946), Lutie feels the walls closing in on her because the bedroom of her cheap flat has no windows, a literal marker of poverty and suggestive of the ways in which she feels trapped, without options, light, or escape from her social circumstances. Suffragettes certainly grasped the power of the window metaphor in their barrage of window smashings in London’s West End in 1911, a symbolic act that served to break down barriers and transcend space between inside and

⁵⁷ Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, vol. 12 (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74) 12. Quoted in Diana Fuss, *The Sense of an Interior: Four Writers and the Rooms that Shaped Them* (Routledge: New York, 2004) 95.

⁵⁸ In *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison points out that what is internal, who you really are, your self, is to a large degree determined by what is external—the forces pressing against you, how others see you, since this also constructs how you see yourself.

outside, between the forces of capitalism and male power and the women they sought to exclude.⁵⁹

When referencing the metaphorical significance of the window, it is nearly impossible to be exhaustive, as Virginia Woolf suggests in her final novel, *Between the Acts*. Here, Mrs. Mayhew sketches how the scene at Pointz Hall might look if she had directed the pageant and includes “one window, looking east, brilliantly illuminated to symbolize—she could work that out when the time came.”⁶⁰ Woolf identifies the window as an image so laden with significance of various sorts that the writer can just throw one in, confident that some import can be attached to it. Her statement alludes not only to her own expansive use of this image, but also to the extent to which the window is a symbolically rich space throughout literary and aesthetic history, one of various and competing symbolisms. The image has clearly (and differently) defined associations in Medieval Christian art, in the poetry of the French Symbolists, in Greek comedy. Its status as a space between interior and exterior, a frame for the viewer, a threshold, a light source, and a portal both inside and outside is the stuff of which symbolism is made.⁶¹

⁵⁹ This was preceded by the similar smashing of government windows by suffragettes in 1909. Martha Vicinus writes that, “In all cases windows broke quite easily and with a satisfying noise, reminding one and all of the fragility of male institutions. Moreover, the barrier between the inside (the government offices) and the outside (the women refused entry) was metaphorically destroyed, leaving a gaping hole or boarded window to remind others of women’s position” (266).

⁶⁰ Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (1941; San Diego: Harcourt, 1970) 179.

⁶¹ In *The Window in Art*, Carla Gottlieb explores the image from ancient Egyptian to postmodern representations and struggles to craft a narrative of how the various images fit together. Though “it is not easy to select one feature of the window as representative of its significance for symbolism in art,” she nonetheless feels compelled to cohere them: “Since the decision must be made, the window’s ability to symbolize antithetical pairs is my choice.” By antithetical pairs, she means interior and exterior (body and soul), light and darkness (good and evil), open and closed (life and death), complete and incomplete (wholeness and mutilation)” (389).

Window as Material Site

Of course, at a most fundamental level, the window is not a metaphor at all. A material space, it is traditionally defined as an “opening in a wall or a side of a building, ship or carriage, to admit light and air, or both, and to afford a view of what is outside or inside.”⁶² The window uses glass as a primary material and provides a division between inside and outside spaces—between the private home and public or outdoor spaces such as the street, the garden, and the sea. It can also be said to provide a connection between these very spaces: an open window provides visual transparency or fluidity between inside and outside, an intermingling of light and air. The window can in some cases serve as a passage, a route that an individual can take in or out of the house—something that we see when Septimus jumps out the window in *Mrs. Dalloway* or when Maurice receives visitors through the window in E. M. Forster’s novel by that name.

As a material space, the window essentially defines the relationship between interior and street; without the window, the relationship would be flat and blank, only about division instead of connection.⁶³ The door is the only other portal that enables a connection between the two spaces, but is more limited in its associations, as it can be open or closed and rarely lingers open or with people on the threshold. The window, on the other hand, can be open or closed, transparent or opaque, with a view or without, stained or clear, paned or solid, near ground level or high above; it offers a sustained view out and possibly a view in. At times, it offers a constructed view, bringing a vision of the garden or the streetscape into the interior. It can be vacated of human presence or

⁶² “window,” *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. 2003.

⁶³ And indeed, some writers capitalize on this fact; in *Absalom, Absalom!*, the Sutpen house lacks windows for years. Likewise, in Stevenson’s novella, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Jekyll’s lab is in a windowless room, as is Hyde’s house.

connected with a figure looking out or in. For all of these reasons, the window becomes a key site for literary writers to negotiate the relationship between interior and street.

The role of the window as a material space should not be underestimated. While I was first drawn to this project by the prevalence and metaphoric potential of the window image in modernist literature, a recent change in my own locale has precipitated my awareness of the window's material significance. The process of writing this dissertation has carried me from tree-lined, midwestern Ann Arbor, where the project was conceived, to a historic rowhouse in downtown Baltimore—still a nineteenth-century city, some might say. Living in Baltimore has brought me into an acute realization of the materiality of the window. Not just a metaphor or space of ideas, the window is a very real space that significantly affects daily life, around which conscious decisions must be frequently made, and is a particularly complex space when it comes to urban life and the urban feminine.

To open or close, to curtain or not, are highly resonant and complex choices when windows face the sidewalk or street in a densely populated urban environment. One must manage the level of penetration and decide whether privacy is more valuable than light, air, and visual freedom. A choice to have a view is also a choice to be viewed. A preference for fresh air and light is a choice to compromise safety and security. In my community, most keep front shades closed tightly and suffer a dark interior, completely shutting out sunshine and ventilation; a very few make the choice to live in a fishbowl, as it were, with windows uncurtained for all to see, their front rooms bathed in light; some put their main living spaces on the second floor or in the back of the house to minimize some of these quandaries. In this context the class signifiers related to windows are also

readily apparent—grander homes have higher windows that can't be seen into so easily, larger windows that provide more light and better views, and often quieter streets with less foot traffic, meaning the inhabitants face fewer consequences and prying eyes by keeping their windows open.

Living in the city, I have experienced the singular pleasure of looking in others' windows and looking out my own. Residents strolling in my neighborhood will literally press their face to the glass to peer inside a house when front shades are for some reason open, stealing the chance to peek at the interior of a home they may have passed for years, but never seen beyond the façade. This is something that is not possible in a suburban environment, whose homes typically have a front yard, distance from the street, and the strategic placement of uninhabited spaces (libraries, dining areas, formal sitting rooms) at the front of the house. In a town ridden with crime, the window spyer has in some cases been modernized, replaced by the camera. But she still has her place, I have found, as I commonly investigate a noise in the street by attempting to look out the window without being seen.

These concrete, practical considerations about the window—nuisances, pleasures, and compromises—were well-known to the modernist writers I study, and it helps to remember that window spying (in or out) in their texts is not just about the theory of the visual; window position (open or closed) is not only suggestive of whether inhabitants are narrow-minded or avant-garde; curtain selection (spare or well-dressed) does not only indicate modern or Victorian sensibilities. These possibilities circulate around real and tangible practices and concerns inherent to the urban environment that forms the settings of the texts in this project.

Moreover, the materiality of the window is not one-dimensional, but threefold. For, notably, the window has the distinction of functioning as a space or site, an object, and an image. For example, one can stand “at the window” (space, site), the window itself is a tangible, physical object or frame, and the window (particularly with a female figure present) is historically the focus of frequent artistic and photographic representations or images. I often use these terms (“site,” “object,” “image”) interchangeably when referring to the window, since, in any given moment, the window usually functions for modernist writers in multiple ways.

The Interior Woman Artist-Observer

In the modernist period, writers especially draw on two distinct sets of associations when representing the window, and it is these in which this project is most interested: the window as a space of the domestic, feminine everyday and the window as a romantic space for the artist. Historically, the domestic window serves as a place of intimate concern with the distinctly feminine “real”: a site where woman waits and watches for her lover, where a neighborhood matron polices the streets, where the angel in the house longs for public life and experience, where the local busybody spies on all, where a woman’s privacy is violated by a peek inside. As in Ruttmann’s depiction of the window as a material space for the everyday, it’s a genuine threshold, protecting the woman inside from visual or physical contamination, preventing or allowing the invasion of the domestic, and providing women visual and sometimes verbal access to the street and public life outside.

In art, the window has been strongly associated with women, from ancient to Christian to modern art. Art historian Carla Gottlieb explains that, “For the Greeks, a woman who gazed from a window carried the meaning of offering herself ‘in wanton sportiveness,’” something that often plays out in the comedies of Aristophanes. In addition, “The basic window image of Italiote vase painting is a woman seen behind a window. This figure can have three roles: spectator, merchandise on exhibition, and intruder.”⁶⁴ Among many other works of Christian art, Vincenzo Foppa’s *Virgin of the Book* (1470) shows Mary leaning out a window from heaven.⁶⁵ Later, we often see realist portraits of a woman in front of a window, and Irene Cieraad tells us that “the representation of a window, with a figure or significant object placed before it, has roots in seventeenth-century Dutch genre painting, where the domestic interior was a popular subject.”⁶⁶

Alongside strong historical associations with the feminine, moving toward modernity, the window is increasingly associated with a masculine aesthetic. In the work of early nineteenth century German and French artists, “the window assumed increased importance—far greater than was required by its normal role in a domestic interior—for it opened onto a poetic vista.”⁶⁷ The window was also a favorite subject of French

⁶⁴ Gottlieb 56.

⁶⁵ Gottlieb 72.

⁶⁶ Irene Cieraad, “Dutch Windows: Female Virgine and Female Vice” in Irene Cieraad, ed. *At Home: An Anthropology of Domestic Space*. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999) 31-52. Cieraad’s essay reveals the close and intensely symbolic association between women and windows in a Dutch context. She takes an anthropological look at different domestic spaces, in this case the Dutch window and its changing symbolism, and how practices like cleaning the window, sitting at the window, closing or opening the window have changed from the 17th to 20th century in art and culture and what those have to do with changing ideas about the status and role of women.

⁶⁷ Carol Troyen, “The Open Window and the Empty Chair: Charles Sheeler’s *View of New York* in *Reading American Art*, Marianne Doezema and Elizabeth Milroy, eds. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998) 379. Troyen offers a keen analysis of the role of the window in the work of modernist artists in the context of analyzing a painting by Charles Sheeler.

symbolists, and most had poems titled after the window.⁶⁸ Artists represented their studios (often with themselves in the picture) and included scenes of the window as a romantic space, sometimes with the artist looking out, pondering.⁶⁹ This tradition includes Marcel Duchamp's *Fresh Widow* (1920), Edward Hopper's *Room in Brooklyn* (1932), and Charles Sheeler's *View of New York* (1931), which shows an open window in the artist's studio looking out on open sky.⁷⁰

In modernist literature, these two traditions meet in feminist versions of the interior woman artist-observer, who simultaneously contends with the aesthetic-metaphorical and the material-political-real. The woman at the window becomes a site for modernist writers to grapple with concerns about visibility and boundedness and to engage the gender issues associating this space with traditional femininity and women's roles. Indeed, the window serves as both a realistic vantage for the woman artist-observer and also an ideal historical metaphor for her position—she sees out, but is

⁶⁸ Gottlieb 302.

⁶⁹ Of course, everyone did not see the window as a masculine space. Beatriz Colomina quotes from Le Corbusier's *Urbanisme* (1925): "Loos told me one day: 'A cultivated man does not look out of the window; his window is a ground glass; it is there only to let light in, not to let the gaze pass through.'" Le Corbusier, *Urbanisme* (Paris, 1925) (Colomina 234).

⁷⁰ Duchamp's *Fresh Widow* is a pun on "French window" and replicates a miniature French window, with black leather over the glass panes, obscuring the view. According to the Tate Gallery, which holds the pieces, "By denying any view through the window, and murkily reflecting the viewer instead, it indicates Duchamp's rejection of the traditional notion of painting as a "window onto the world." Tate Gallery, London, Display caption, 2004. Hopper focused much of his work on urban scenes, and many of his paintings depict windows, whether those of the interior, shops, or buildings. In *Room in Brooklyn*, we see the back of a woman, somewhat somber and slumped in a chair, positioned toward a pristine view out three upper floor windows. The dark mood around the figure is contrasted to the view itself and the light that shines in the interior. Hopper was fond of scenes that depict women staring out of windows, such as *Morning in the City* (1944) and *Morning Sun* (1952). Sheeler's painting was based on a photograph and draws on a tradition of artists representing their own studios. He made several key changes between the art forms, including going from a closed window in the photo to an open window with a view of the sky in the painting, which draws on a history of romantic associations with the artist (Troyn 371-86).

always aware of her status as seen, her seeming transparency, the assumed connection between her art and her person/life.⁷¹

Given the window's longstanding feminine associations and more recent connections to the artist, it's no surprise that what we see among some of the women writers I study is an attempt to reclaim the window and fashion it as an ideal vantage for the woman artist. These writers render the window a distinctly feminine space, connected with both art and the everyday, with strong feminine historical associations and a distinct resonance for women spatially and visually, given the unique and complex social relationship women during the modernist period necessarily have to public and private spaces. And yet, aside from occasional passing references and narrow local analyses, critics are essentially silent on the woman at the window.

Part of what fully grappling with the prevalence of the interior woman observer entails is a shift in our political lens. Recognizing the significance of the interior woman observer, that is, often means contending both with some writers' retrograde politics with regard to feminism and domesticity and the critical bias regarding the very same issues. In seeking the feminist in contemporary terms and thus finding it, we've too often missed the nuance, the hesitations, the lacunae, and the negative politics in modernist representations of the woman observer. Historically, remarking upon the high degree to which feminist writers focused on and highly valued domesticity would be considered too feminine, too traditional, and part of the point is that these writers are modernist because they share the same values and characteristics as modernist standards. I think we have moved beyond the need to legitimate women writers and characters by associating them

⁷¹ Women inhabit roles on both sides of the window pane, in a vexed fashion, as they are the object viewed when one looks in the window, they are the lookers out, as the quintessential window watchers.

with the values of the modernist establishment, and I thus dispense with the burden of association. Neither, however, is this project about the need to create a distinctly feminine space, to define women's contributions and perspectives outside of masculine terms; many feminist writers saw themselves as actively participating in "masculine" conversations and did create texts that are in line with these values. We cannot lump all modernist feminist writers into one category or line of thinking. What we must do, in recognizing the overwhelming presence of the woman at the window, is to evaluate honestly its meaning and purpose, even when that means discovering the politics of some writers are not what we thought or want.

Moreover, in terms of the critical landscape, I believe examining the perspective of the interior woman observer provides for a more nuanced version of women's visual and spatial experience in the city than looking only at the female street wanderer allows us. For rather than appropriating a traditionally masculine role, modernity's woman at the window is engaged in the complex task of reworking a traditionally feminine role and renegotiating it in line with modern values. In this position, she is not just a lover of the pleasures of modernity, but is a locus of contestation over the allegiances to domestic and public, to aesthetic and political, to interior and exterior that many women did and do face.

Indeed, the window's status as a nexus between the domestic interior and the world outside makes it a crucial site to play out the conflicts of feminism—a term which is evacuated of exact meaning precisely because of tensions between home and work, private and public, which are alternately prioritized and complexly negotiated by different sectors of the feminist movement at different moments in history. When we

allow ourselves to get outside the notion that the street-wandering observer holds the primary position in modernity and the related tendency to see the woman observer only in terms of the *flâneur/se*, we are able to see how truly complex modernist grappings are with regard to domesticity, gender, feminism, visibility, mobility, and women's contention with inside and outside spaces.

Case Studies

Rather than focusing on texts that are of the same, tightly-defined historical or literary category, my project examines different nodes in transatlantic modernism from the 1880s to the 1930s—*fin-de-siècle* aestheticism, novels of manners, mainstream modernist masterpieces, surreal pre-postmodern texts—and explores how the image of the woman at the window is, surprisingly, significant in distinct ways to each group. All of these narratives of the city, so different, traffic in the same language, sharing key words or ideas such as visibility, mobility, space, interior, window, object, domesticity, the city, the *flâneur*. They also address various spaces and mechanisms of visibility and reinforce the significance of the domestic interior in modernity.

Though the window centers my analysis, the concept of liminality in these texts naturally extends beyond the window itself. I consider the inside/outside split when thinking about the home versus the street, but also consider in-between spaces for how they complicate the strict division. Writers relate the window to other social-physical spaces that form a similar function; spaces like the omnibus, the club, and the hotel work to straddle the inside/outside divide in the way that the window does.

One especially notable liminal site or object writers explore in tandem with the window is the camera, another space with a complex relationship to “inside” and “outside.” The window and camera share a place in the landscape of explorations on the well-established modern interest in visual subjectivity—how we see, whether we can rely on what we see. Both the camera and window offer a limited, framed view. Both provide a view that is consciously constructed to include or exclude certain sights or phenomena. Both offer the observer detachment through physical separation from her object. I argue that the window becomes a site for modernists to analyze the relationship between the new visual medium of photography versus classic visual art alongside explorations of new versus traditional roles for women. By linking photography and the window perspective, that is, women remake a traditional role and perspective into a quintessentially modern one. Looking at women’s reference to the camera in the context of the window thus provides insight into how women used (or in some cases, rejected) modern technology to rework their traditional visual and spatial experiences.

Chapter 1, “Modernist Historical Materialism and the Missing 37th Convolute,” establishes my methodological approach in analyzing the image of the woman at the window. I use the methods described in Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* in tandem with Virginia Woolf’s formulations as a cultural-theoretical model. Specifically, their shared use of historical materialism and their investments in collection and allegory provide a framework to explore the woman at the window as a key figure in modernity and an image of what Benjamin calls “the collective unconscious.”

Chapter 2, “Latch-Keys and Eye-Glasses: Amy Levy and the Spaces In-Between,” recreates the back story to the fantasy of fluidity that is at the center of this

project by placing Amy Levy's realist novel, *Romance of a Shop* (1886), in conversation with her collection of urban street poetry, *A London Plane-Tree* (1889), to examine the ways in which they employ liminal spaces in service to the *fin-de-siècle* woman artist-observer. During an era when associations of home-woman and street-man are still very much in place, Levy negotiates versions of the domestic woman observer alongside instantiations of the street-wandering *flâneuse*. Through a matrix of visual practices and the use of in-between spaces—the window, the omnibus, the camera—Levy allows her heroines legitimately to experience urban street watching, while thoughtfully demonstrating the genuine conflictedness associated with a nineteenth-century woman's relationship to looking. This chapter reveals the surprisingly complex set of issues between the woman observer and feminist politics at the turn of the century.

Where Levy employs the view from the interior as a socially acceptable vantage for women's observation, a later group of writers rejects this stance. In Chapter 3, "Wharton, Forster, and the Escape from the Interior Observer," I explore early twentieth century attempts at escape from the inherited image of the woman at the window in favor of women's presence on the street and in the world. Focusing on *The House of Mirth* and on *A Room With a View*, this chapter analyzes Edith Wharton's and E. M. Forster's explicit refusal of this iconic figure and her associations during an era when women are beginning to move beyond the drawing room, but there is uncertainty and discomfort surrounding their new roles. Lucy Honeychurch and Lily Bart reflect a frustration with socially liminal spaces such as the window and a desire to live rich lives both inside and out. The woman at the window emerges in these texts as an avenue to explore the relationship between the traditional woman and the New Woman, thereby enabling us to

understand Forster's and Wharton's oft-debated posture toward both feminism and modernism.

Chapter 4, "Modernism and the Magic of the Threshold: Virginia Woolf's Window in Correspondence with Walter Benjamin's Arcade," reconceptualizes the apex of modernism (1920s and 30s) in terms of the dream to fuse, literally, spatially, and figuratively, the dichotomies of modern life and aesthetic practice by focusing on Woolf's window and Benjamin's arcade as ideal embodiments of spatial fluidity. I argue that Woolf fixates on the window throughout her body of work as part of a fantasy of fluidity typical of her era, a key facet of the idealism of modernism. The idealism we see in Woolf's representation of the window as a space that merges interior and exterior, aesthetic and social, the everyday woman and the female artist, finds its match in Benjamin's fascination with the arcade as an architectural form that blends inside and outside. By forging a site for productive encounter between social and spatial dichotomies instead of hierarchizing the street over the home, Woolf and Benjamin trouble the very grounds of value on which many of their contemporaries think it means to write of modernity.

In the epilogue, "Postmodern Windows: West, Barnes, Morrison and the Quandary of Spatial Partition," I consider the 1930s New York novels of Nathanael West (*Miss Lonelyhearts*) and Djuna Barnes (*Nightwood*) as attempts to reinstantiate boundaries between interior and exterior, with an accompanying foreclosure of spatial-social possibilities for women, in line with an emerging postmodernism. Within the social worlds of West's and Barnes' texts, the modernist illusion of a possibility for visual-spatial fluidity between inside and outside is rejected in favor of a sober acceptance of the

division in conjunction with a recognition of the inevitability of having to choose sides. Gender roles and gendered space are complicated by both writers, as we move toward the mid twentieth-century. By the time Barnes and West are writing, women have supposedly achieved the mobility those of Levy's generation pined for, and yet we see how spaces and persons are categorized by gender more than ever. The woman at the window in these texts becomes a way both to connect the contemporary women to and ultimately to distinguish her from those in the past and to emphasize the tragically rigid barrier between domesticity and public life. The epilogue closes with an analysis of Toni Morrison's *Jazz* (1992), which offers a contemporary take on the modernist woman at the window.

I follow a historical trajectory and tie relevant history to each writer's perspective on the woman at the window, but other writers could have been chosen and might present a different narrative. The point is not that the woman at the window was valorized universally at certain historical moments and discarded at others, but that she has consistently been a site of contestation—celebration, rejection, reclaiming—and that she houses so much that taps, for these writers, central questions about gender, representation, visibility, and urban culture. She is a site of cultural ambivalence, and whether these writers are shunning or revering her, they're working through all that she signifies.

Chapter 1

Modernist Historical Materialism and the Missing 37th Convolute

In the unfinished, posthumously published text that was to be the masterpiece of his career, *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin maps the keywords of modernity, indexing a collection of thirty-six topics or “convolutes” that consist of quotations, ideas, history, and facts on many of the persons, objects, and concepts that have come to define the era (causally, prophetically, or both). Those items indexed include “Baudelaire” and “Fourier,” “The Flâneur” and “The Collector,” “Panorama” and “Photography,” “The Streets of Paris” and “The Interior, the Trace,” among others.

Neither “Window” nor “Woman at the Window” is among Benjamin’s convolutes. Indeed, in *The Arcades Project*, our only encounter with the window is a virtual negation of that space:

What stands within the windowless house is the true. Moreover, the arcade, too, is a windowless house. The windows that look down on it are like loges from which one gazes into its interior, but one cannot see out these windows to anything outside. (What is true has no windows; nowhere does the true look out to the universe.)¹

¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999) 532.

Benjamin envisions the window as both a sham gateway² and, evidenced by his infrequent references to the window, a useless symbol, not nearly as conceptually or culturally resonant as the arcade, certainly, or even as the mirror, for example.³

Despite Benjamin's neglect and dismissal of my central figure of investigation, his theoretical framework in *The Arcades Project* is well-suited to elucidate the significance of the site/object/image of the woman at the window—much as he successfully helps us to understand the other keywords of modernism. In this work, Benjamin uses historical materialism, collection, and allegory to unmask the “latent mythology” of the iconic modern fixtures and figures that serve as “images of the collective unconscious”—those that house dreams or what he calls “phantasmagorias” of the collective. The strong presence of the woman at the window in modernity's texts, the figure's resistance to operating as a straightforward symbol or metaphor, and the absence of self-conscious contemporary analysis on this figure all point to its being an image of the collective unconscious. Thus, applying Benjamin's approach, what I offer in this dissertation is the “woman at the window” as another entry in the compendium on the keywords of modernity, a kind of missing 37th convolute (no doubt, one of several), and I work to reveal this figure as an image of the collective unconscious by collecting and analyzing key instances of its presence in the literary texts of this era.⁴

² Modernist architect Adolf Loos apparently concurred. Le Corbusier reported: “Loos told me one day: ‘A cultivated man does not look out of the window; his window is a ground glass; it is there only to let light in, not to let the gaze pass through.’” Le Corbusier, *Urbanisme* (Paris, 1925) 174. Quoted in Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000) 297.

³ “The way mirrors bring the open expanse, the streets, into the café—this, too, belongs to the interweaving of spaces, to the spectacle by which the flaneur is ineluctably drawn” (Benjamin 537). And, “where doors and walls are made of mirrors, there is no telling outside from in, with all the equivocal illumination. Paris is the city of mirrors” (Benjamin 537).

⁴ While this project is inspired by the theoretical underpinnings of *The Arcades Project*, it clearly cannot take on the montage form of that text, for obvious reasons. I use Benjamin's methods in the context of a traditional critical format.

In this methodology chapter, I examine the Benjaminian concepts of historical materialism, collection, and allegory and suggest how they will be useful in reading modernist literary texts to develop a cultural understanding of the role and significance of the woman at the window. Among the methods I explore, collection stands out as housing a special relationship to the window. Collection was, indeed, my starting point for thinking about windows, the method that I intuitively turned to in the early phases of this project, as I will detail in this chapter. Collection involves inclusiveness, and the window, too, embodies inclusiveness: sitting in the window can involve an endless array of sights, sounds, and variables. By exploring similarities between the approaches of Benjamin and one of his feminist contemporaries, I also further develop the bridges this project forges between modernist architectural theory and feminist literature.

Benjamin and Woolf: Theoretical Correlations

The confluence of architectural theory and modernist feminist literature is reflected in the shared theoretical approach of Walter Benjamin and his contemporary, Virginia Woolf, whose theories I use jointly in exploring the woman at the window. While Benjamin's *Arcades Project* serves as both the inspiration for this study and its methodological basis, I believe it is important to resist the prevalent tendency to read Benjamin as a larger-than-life figure who is, both as a theorist and historical commentator, outside and above his time. When Benjamin is placed in theoretical dialogue with other writers, they are most often other Continental thinkers and philosophers, such as Theodor Adorno and Friedrich Nietzsche. Where Benjamin makes an appearance in Anglo-American modernism, he is persistently invoked as an authority,

rather than a fellow traveler or a figure exploring analogous spaces and questions. Yet Benjamin's theories were not developed in a vacuum, nor were they wholly unique. Benjamin's historical methodology grew out of modernity; and given that his theories are historically situated, it is no surprise that they share key ideas with those developed by others, particularly Virginia Woolf.

Both Woolf and Benjamin engage with the practices of collection and allegory as critical-historical materialist tools by which one attempts to discern or create political, historical, or literary meaning in or for an object or space. Focusing on the historical, nostalgic, or what Benjamin calls "dream" content housed in objects like the window or the arcade is part of a larger goal that Woolf and Benjamin share. Each wishes to define an alternative historical or political process: in his case, to wake readers up from the dream of the past and motivate political consciousness and awakening; in her case, to attain historical accuracy and motivate present work on women's history and literature through the process of recording unrecorded histories of women's everyday life.

That a strong theoretical and methodological correlation between the work of Woolf and Benjamin would occur is actually somewhat unsurprising, for the writers were unequivocally contemporaries, sharing a similar personal, professional and cultural space. Born a decade apart in *fin-de-siècle* Europe (Woolf in 1882, Benjamin ten years later), both started their careers, not uncommonly, with short essays and literary reviews. Both recognized and underscored the personal, subjective aspects of their work and experimented by melding personal history with critical analysis, autobiography with fiction or cultural theory. Both struggled to reconcile themselves to their roles as intellectuals in the face of political struggle and world events. Both sustained a

connection to Judaism (Woolf by marriage, Benjamin by birth) during a most trying time for Jews in European history. And both committed suicide just months apart (Benjamin in 1940, fearing apprehension by the Nazis; Woolf in 1941, upon despair surrounding the approach of Germany during the Second World War).⁵

Over twenty years ago, Jane Marcus noted a series of personal and political links between Benjamin and Woolf. In working toward establishing Woolf as a political writer, Marcus conceives of her alongside Benjamin as a cultural “outsider,” a Jew, a Marxist. She compares their personal experience of the city: “While Benjamin was haunted by all the Berlin streets from which class and race prohibited him, Woolf was inhibited both by sex and by class from following her nose or her eyes wherever they longed to go.” She parallels their literary methods: “Walter Benjamin kept notebooks full of quotations; tearing statements out of context, he felt like a robber making attacks on history. Virginia Woolf did the same thing, as the notebooks for *Three Guineas* and *The Pargiters* show us. By quotation she sought to rob history of its power over women.” Marcus concludes, “If we see [Woolf] with Benjamin and Proust, Brecht and Kafka rather than with Forster and Lawrence, we are doing the right topographical job as critics.”⁶

More recently, critical studies of Woolf’s work such as the collection *Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* have paired Woolf and Benjamin, in evaluating Woolf’s response to the technological evolutions of the twentieth century that often captivated Benjamin’s attention: photography, film, and radio. Despite the title of the collection,

⁵ Of course, where Woolf was quintessentially British, Benjamin had a more cosmopolitan range.

⁶ Jane Marcus, *New Feminist Essays* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1981) 3-7. This charge has not been realized, in part because it overreaches and is erroneous. Woolf belongs with Forster and Lawrence, as much as she does with Benjamin and Proust.

Leslie Hankins' article is one of the few that explicitly pairs the two writers. Her entry point is to examine their "insights about the marketplace" and, in particular, their concern with the "unsettled position of the intellectual as commodity."⁷ Hankins envisions both writers as "privileged insiders" who "also identified themselves as outsiders."⁸ She offers a very different sense of Woolf than does Marcus: "Read together, the urban critiques of Woolf and Benjamin enable us to survey city spaces through the critical trajectories of the revolutionary modernist outsiders—the neo-flâneur and the striding feminist—and to interrogate the vanishing and emerging sites for the intellectual in the commodity culture."⁹

As a theoretician, Benjamin develops theories that are much more fully and explicitly articulated than those of the literary Woolf. Yet reading Benjamin alongside Woolf allows us to appreciate the synergies between modernist architectural theory and feminist literature¹⁰ and better to address the issues of feminism that are at the center of the site/object/image of the woman at the window and the transfer of these theories to a wholly literary context. Additionally, while in many respects Benjamin's work is distinctive to its specific European contexts, its parallel relationship to Woolf's version of Anglo modernism expands possibilities for reading his work alongside that of European literary contemporaries.¹¹

⁷ Leslie Hankins, "Virginia Woolf and Walter Benjamin Selling Out(Siders)," *Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, editor Pamela L. Caughie (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000) 5.

⁸ Hankins 21.

⁹ Hankins 9.

¹⁰ I will confess the strong temptation to center this project around the methods of Benjamin and to exclude discussion of any similarities with the approach of Virginia Woolf. Much as this would make for a neater presentation, I have resisted this urge precisely because I think it's important to contextualize Benjamin's work as part of its era and, in a project focused on a female figure in a feminine space, to reveal the bridges between architectural theory and modernist feminist literature.

¹¹ On a more local scale, reading Woolf in conjunction with Benjamin allows for productive dialogic exchange between the writers' texts. Because Benjamin is much more direct and explicit in his

Benjamin's Alternative Historical Approach

Benjamin's *Arcades Project* baffles the reader unfamiliar with its unconventional presentation. His method in this volume, explicitly stated, is one of collection or montage.¹² In his early notes on this study, he outlines: "Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them."¹³ When Benjamin uses the terms "the rags, the refuse," he alludes to the cultural figure of the rag-picker, which forms one of Benjamin's models for his own process in *The Arcades Project*. He quotes Baudelaire on this role: "Here we have a man whose job it is to pick up the day's rubbish in the capital. He collects and catalogues everything that the great city has cast off, everything it has lost, discarded, or broken. He goes through the archives of debauchery, and the jumbled array of refuse. He makes a selection, an intelligent choice."¹⁴

In the guise of this character, Benjamin creates in *The Arcades Project* a vast, sundry, and fragmented collection of varied material on the arcade that takes the form of notes, questions, comparisons, suggestions, possibilities, outlines, and a bevy of quotations from historical, political, and literary sources—what Graeme Gilloch calls "a

methodological and theoretical commentary, reading Woolf's texts in dialogue with his theories gives us a new and highly relevant vocabulary for exploring her aims and methods. Terms such as "collector," "allegorist," and "historical materialism" are Benjamin's, but Woolf owns the method, purpose, and form as surely as does Benjamin. Secondly, the juxtaposition of Benjamin's practices and theories with corollaries in Woolf's familiar texts may provide a more accessible means of conceptualizing the work of this very esoteric thinker than what is currently offered in Benjamin criticism.

¹² Collection, for Benjamin, is the process of assembling like objects into a categorized system or montage, allowing the collector to furnish information about the history, origin, and function of his objects.

¹³ Benjamin 460.

¹⁴ Benjamin 349.

vast, sprawling, amorphous study.”¹⁵ Benjamin writes, “Here, the Paris arcades are examined as though they were properties in the hand of a collector.” We find in the mix, for example, Benjamin’s observation of the “similarity of the arcades to the indoor arenas in which one learned to ride a bicycle”, a quotation from Ferdinand von Gall in 1845 that “In each arcade there is at least one cleaning establishment”, a claim that “Surrealism was born in an arcade”, and apparent possibilities for further thought such as “Animals (birds, ants), children and old men as collectors” and “Baudelaire’s liking for porter.”¹⁶

Profound insights are mixed with quotidian information and material details with metaphorical gestures. Benjamin expands his collection of material beyond the arcade by assembling information on related objects, figures, ideas, and structures: railroad stations, the interior, museums, iron construction, exhibitions, the streets of Paris, photography, gambling, prostitution. While the collection is indexed by thirty-six general topics or “convolutes,” within each category is an assortment of notes and quotations with no clear organizing principle. Reading through the collection and attempting to make its various parts logically cohere into a central argument is therefore at once an exercise in perplexity and serendipitous discovery, since the mortar explicitly linking each of Benjamin’s observations is loose at best.¹⁷

In accounting for collection or montage as one of his practices of choice in *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin writes: “The first stage in this undertaking will be to carry over the principle of montage into history. That is, to assemble large-scale constructions

¹⁵ Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997) 93.

¹⁶ Benjamin 205; 62; 41; 82; 211; 258.

¹⁷ Susan Buck-Morss has said, “Every attempt to capture the *Passagen-Werk* within one narrative frame must lead to failure. The fragments plunge the interpreter into an abyss of meanings, threatening her or him with an epistemological despair that rivals the melancholy of the Baroque allegorists.” Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989) 54.

out of the smallest and most precisely cut components. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event.”¹⁸ Central to this attempt to define an alternative historical process through collection is his own brand of historical materialism,¹⁹ which rests on the conviction that physical spaces, objects, and images retain historical meaning and nostalgia. Benjamin stipulates that every object can serve as an “encyclopedia of all knowledge of the epoch, the landscape, the industry, and the owner from which it comes”²⁰ and that “the historical object finds represented in its interior its own fore-history and after-history.”²¹

The notion of image is clearly central to this historical methodology, as Benjamin writes: “History decays into images, not stories” and notes “Outline the story of *The Arcades Project* in term of its development. Its properly problematic component: the refusal to renounce anything that would demonstrate the materialist presentation of history as imagistic in a higher sense than in the traditional presentation.”²² And, quoting Rudolf Borchardt, “Pedagogic side of this undertaking: ‘To educate the image-making medium within us, raising it to a stereoscopic and dimensional seeing into the depths of historical shadows.’”²³

¹⁸ Benjamin 461.

¹⁹ “On the elementary doctrine of historical materialism. (1) An object of history is that through which knowledge is constituted as the object’s rescue. (2) History decays into images, not into stories. (3) Wherever a dialectical process is realized, we are dealing with a monad. (4) The materialist presentation of history carries along with it an immanent critique of progress. (5) Historical materialism bases its procedures on long experience, common sense, presence of mind, and dialectics” (Benjamin 476).

²⁰ Benjamin 205.

²¹ Benjamin 475. When referring to this phenomenon, Benjamin quotes Proust’s *Du Cote de chez Swann*, a key text from which he draws in developing his sense of the connection between object and remembrance: “The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach, of intellect, in some material object . . . which we do not suspect” (403).

²² Benjamin 463.

²³ Benjamin 458. Benjamin looks to collection because of what he deems the inadequacy of other historical methods, as he questions: “What sort of perceptibility should the presentation of history possess? Neither the cheap and easy visibility of bourgeois history books, nor the insufficient visibility of Marxist histories. What it has to fix perceptually are the images deriving from the collective unconscious” (911). Of all

Essentially, then, objects house history, and history decays into images. In this process, all objects are not interchangeable. The images that history decays into are recurrent. In highlighting many of the keywords for the epoch in the *Arcades Project* (*flâneur*, mirror, street, interior), Benjamin reveals a shared vocabulary among many modern writers and thinkers. Why this shared language? Benjamin suggests that it is related to the collective unconscious²⁴ and that, enabled by capitalism, objects and images express collective dreams—and here Benjamin refers to images that house social dreams for progress, development, and utopia and, in doing so, reflect society’s “resolute effort to distance oneself from all that is antiquated—which includes, however, the recent past.”²⁵ Together, these images form what he calls a “phantasmagoria,” a sequence of images like those seen in a dream.²⁶

It is through such images that the historian can study and discern the dreams of the collective in order to demythologize them and enable active, conscious awareness of and engagement with historical meaning and present life. Benjamin pinpoints the role of the collector in demythologizing the phantasmagoria, stating that, “The collector interprets dreams of the collective.”²⁷ By collecting information on the arcades, detaching these objects from their “functional relations” and thus “allow[ing] no mediating construction from out of ‘large contexts,’” Benjamin attempts to bring into full

phantasmagorias or images of the collective unconscious, the arcade itself is chosen to ground the project in part because, according to Gilloch, Benjamin claims “architecture as the most important evidence of latent ‘mythology.’ And the most important architecture of the 19th century is the arcade” (Gilloch 123). Indeed, Benjamin refers to the arcades as “galleries leading into the city’s past” (84). In the arcade, with its newfangled iron construction and space dressed up like a drawing room, Benjamin locates nineteenth-century phantasmagorias of both the marketplace and the interior: desires for newness, evolution, civilization, and economic advancement.

²⁴ Adorno criticized Benjamin by arguing that his notion of the collective unconscious was too closely tied to the theories of Carl Jung; but Benjamin maintained that their ideas were distinct. Michael Calderbank, “Surreal Dreamscapes: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades” in *Papers of Surrealism* 1(2003) 11.

²⁵ Benjamin 4.

²⁶ Benjamin 14.

²⁷ Benjamin 908.

view the scope and extent of the dream content housed in the arcades. He urges that readers have to see and recognize the recent past, manifest through a collection of objects and details, before they can awake from it: “We construct here an alarm clock that rouses the kitsch of the previous century to ‘assembly.’”²⁸ Benjamin’s metaphor intimates the ways in which his collection of kitsch aims to give renewed energy to discarded cultural artifacts as a route to wake up the populace.

Benjamin maintains that one can access the history that objects and images contain not only through collection, but also through allegory—a familiar tool that Benjamin conceives of differently than it is often understood. These two methods are interconnected and overlapping. They float and move into one another without clear demarcation in the same way Benjamin claims spatial relationships between interior and the street in modernity do. Nonetheless, Benjamin works to discern the essential qualities and distinctions of each:

The allegorist is, as it were, the polar opposite of the collector. He has given up the attempt to elucidate things through research into their properties and relations. He dislodges them from their context and, from the outset, relies on his profundity to illuminate their meaning. The collector, by contrast, brings together what belongs together; by keeping in mind their affinities and their succession in time, he can eventually furnish information about his objects. Nevertheless—and this is more important than all the differences that exist between them—in every collector hides an allegorist, and in every allegorist a collector. As far as the collector is concerned, his collection is never complete; for let him discover just a single piece missing, and everything he’s collected remains a patchwork, which is what things are for allegory from the beginning. On the other hand, the allegorist—for whom objects represent only keywords in a secret dictionary, which will make known their meanings to the uninitiated—precisely the allegorist can never have enough of things. With him, one thing is so little capable of taking the place of another that

²⁸ Benjamin 205-7. As Vanessa Schwartz puts it in exploring Benjamin’s use of the fragment to represent history, “histories would need to be written not only *for* their times but to embody the *forms* of their times if awakening (the goal of history) was to be achieved.” Vanessa R. Schwartz, “Walter Benjamin for Historians,” *The American Historical Review* 106.5 (2001) 42.

no possible reflection suffices to foresee what meaning his profundity might lay claim to for each one of them.²⁹

Benjamin engages with the practices of collection and allegory as different styles by which one attempts to discern or create meaning from an object—to “elucidate things” or “illuminate their meaning.” Based on his distinctions, to make a crude but illustrative comparison, we can liken the collector to an empirical scientist and the allegorist to a romantic poet. The first tries to “furnish information about his objects” through systematic categorization, careful observation, methodical “research,” objective facts, and comprehensive historical or material detail; the second relies on his own vision, wisdom, “profundity,” and ostensibly superior ability to see or unmask truth. Despite the recognition that the collector and allegorist are “polar opposite[s],” Benjamin determines that, as a collector, he is unavoidably also an allegorist because his collection of material on the arcade is never complete, can never be comprehensive; no matter how much information he collects about his object, his collection remains a “patchwork” with gaps and holes.

To understand allegory as it relates to Benjamin’s practices, it is most useful to distinguish it from symbol. In common parlance (and many dictionaries), “allegory” is often conflated with “symbol” and signifies a story or other art form that reveals a hidden meaning, especially a moral one. Benjamin’s notion of allegory, however, is far more intricate and closely tied to the history of an object. While symbol, in Benjamin’s schema, equates an object with a distinct meaning, in allegory meaning is, according to Gilloch, “elusive and multiple,” and “each object represented may have a host of

²⁹ Benjamin 211.

competing possible meanings.”³⁰ Benjamin describes the allegorical process: “Through the disorderly fund which his knowledge places at his disposal, the allegorist rummages here and there for a particular piece, holds it next to some other piece, and tests to see if they fit together—that meaning with this image or this image with that meaning. The result can never be known beforehand, for there is no natural mediation between the two. . . . At no point is it written in the stars that the allegorist’s profundity will lead it to one meaning rather than another. And though it once may have acquired such a meaning, this can always be withdrawn in favor of a different meaning. The modes of meaning fluctuate almost as rapidly as the price of commodities.”³¹ The series of meanings in allegory is intimately related to what Benjamin calls the “category of time”; for while symbol, in Benjamin’s schema, refers to the instantaneous present, allegory involves retrospective contemplation. It is related to natural history—where an object is now, where it was, and where it will be.³²

Benjamin finds allegory useful as a critical-historical tool because it dispenses with one-dimensional renderings of objects and spaces: “Allegory has to do, precisely in its destructive furor, with dispelling the illusion that proceeds from all ‘given order,’ whether of art or of life: the illusion of totality or of organic wholeness which transfigures that order and makes it seem enduring. And this is the progressive tendency of allegory.”³³ As Gilloch puts it, “Allegory also contains a positive, redemptive moment The world is reduced to ruins so that the rubble and fragments that result can be

³⁰ Gilloch 135.

³¹ Benjamin 369.

³² See Gilloch and Buck-Morss for an extensive discussion of the idea of retrospective contemplation in allegory. My discussion here is indebted to their work.

³³ Benjamin 331. But allegorical and dialectical images are separate: according to Buck-Morss, allegorical image is subjective and arbitrary; dialectical image is objective and an expression of sociohistorical truth (241).

gathered up and reused. The allegorical gaze, like the magical gaze of the child-as-collector, is the salvation of the thing.”³⁴ Instead of being one-dimensional, allegory “saves” objects and spaces by revealing them as multi-faceted and multi-layered in symbolic and historical meaning and resonance. To make sense of *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin’s readers must essentially become allegorists themselves and rely on their own profundity; as much as the text may initially appear as a neatly systematized collection, it is a jumbled mass that forces the reader to think, cohere, engage, and ultimately rely on his or her own wisdom to create meaning. Literary theorists may have established that no reader can ever isolate the “true” meaning of a word or object in a text, but Benjamin forces all readers into an awareness of this position, as most readers of *The Arcades Project* will recognize that they do not and can never grasp its full, potential meaning. This realization demands a sort of consciousness that Benjamin finds absent in modern society, which is dominated by individuals drifting through life in a dreamlike state.

While Benjamin strives for activating “historical awakening” through his use of collection and allegory, what he is ultimately after is political. For Benjamin argues that, in the final analysis, “Politics attains primacy over history.”³⁵ He aims not for a new “history” on the books, but for a change in the way historians work in order to engender a new relationship to the recent past that will bring on political consciousness. Susan Buck-Morss, indeed, has written that “what saves the project from arbitrariness is Benjamin’s *political* concern that provided the overriding orientation for every constellation.”³⁶

³⁴ Gilloch 138.

³⁵ Benjamin 388-9.

³⁶ Buck-Morss 54.

Woolf's Feminist Approach to History

Virginia Woolf had different motivations for developing an alternative approach to history. While Benjamin sees the possibility of creating social agency as the foremost concern, Woolf maintains a belief in the importance of creating actual history—narration of the past—for its own sake. Woolf envisioned herself as an alternative historian from the first moments of her career to the last. Most prominently, she devotes her middle and late novels to experiments with unorthodox historical methods and subjects, as *To the Lighthouse*, *The Waves*, *Orlando*, *The Years*, and *Between the Acts* are all sophisticated experiments in producing alternative histories.³⁷ Critics often treat these novels in terms of Woolf's experiments with time—but they are also historical experiments featuring unconventional means of charting personal and national history. In part, Woolf aimed to contribute to the modernist project of seeing history as not only about external, objective facts, but also as personal, internal thoughts, ideas, and development.³⁸

Still, Woolf's historical work is, like Benjamin's, by and large politically motivated. Indeed, it is difficult to divorce Woolf's project of casting off traditional ideas about what history is and how it is recorded from her gender politics. Woolf laments the almost complete absence of any representation of women's experiences in history books and aims to right the wrong by shifting ideas about what properly constitutes historical subject matter and method. In *A Room of One's Own* (1929), for example, she expresses

³⁷ In this vein, *The Waves* charts history largely through the interior monologues of six friends, from childhood through old age. *To the Lighthouse* turns assumptions about historical time on their head by making a single day much more meaningful than a span of ten years, reflected through the attention the novel gives to each of these periods of time. *Orlando* conveys social and personal history through the (biologically impossible) experience of a character over a period of several centuries. *The Years* provides an abundance of social, historical, and political comments and facts in addition to chronicling personal experiences, in an attempt to narrate both the inner and outer lives of the Pargiter family over the span of several generations. *Between the Acts* addresses British history through a present-day play and incorporates the thoughts and experiences of the observers into the narrative.

³⁸ As reflected elsewhere, for example, in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

skepticism toward the common feeling that “This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing room.”³⁹

Though Woolf’s and Benjamin’s approaches are similar in method, their political goals differ considerably. Benjamin’s stated disbelief in progress stands in stark contrast to Woolf’s belief in and work toward the advancement of women. He writes, “It may be considered one of the methodological objectives of this work to demonstrate a historical materialism which has annihilated within itself the idea of progress.”⁴⁰ Maintaining that no era is better or more advanced than any other, Benjamin aims for individual awareness of whatever reality one faces. Woolf, in contrast, aims to change present society in terms of the lived reality of women and their professional and personal opportunities, to empower women to political action and progress and to redress the absence of history, literature, and art by women. So while *The Arcades Project* breaks off at the urge for political consciousness and never distinctly defines an alternative politics, Woolf’s texts venture into the realm of the concrete. She consistently offers specific injunctions to her readers in terms of the work they need to do in carrying out her vision for an alternative history—a vision that is political as well as historical.

In *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf famously details this project of cataloguing the everyday history of women as a task for a new generation of young women. Of the average middle-class Elizabethan woman, for example:

One knows nothing detailed, nothing perfectly true and substantial about her. History scarcely mentions her. . . . She never writes her own life and scarcely keeps a diary; there are only a handful of her letters in existence. She left no plays or poems by which we can judge her. What one wants, I

³⁹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (1929; San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1989) 74.

⁴⁰ Benjamin 460.

thought—and does not some brilliant student at Newnham or Girton supply it?—is a mass of information; at what age did she marry; how many children had she as a rule; what was her house like; had she a room to herself; did she do the cooking; would she be likely to have a servant?

Also, in present-day London: “All these infinitely obscure lives remain to be recorded, I said . . . and went on in thought through the streets of London feeling in imagination the pressure of dumbness, the accumulation of unrecorded life, whether from the women at the street corners with their arms akimbo . . . or from the violet-sellers and match-sellers . . .”⁴¹

The historical project that Woolf describes in *A Room of One's Own* is one she had been working on fulfilling from her very first writings. In Woolf's novels, diaries, and stories, she persistently laments the lack of a women's history of the everyday, and her career is filled with unorthodox attempts to chronicle and produce this unrecorded history. Woolf's earliest known story, “Phyllis and Rosamond” (1906), takes as its task documenting for “posterity” the rarely recorded experience of “one of those many women who cluster in the shade,” since the existing catalogues of daily life “are almost invariably of the male sex.”⁴² Woolf also works through her project of creating the unrecorded histories of women in her first full novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915). Here, she invests her character Terence Hewet with opinions in keeping with those she will later express in *A Room of One's Own*. He tells Rachel:

⁴¹ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* 89.

⁴² Virginia Woolf, “[Phyllis and Rosamond],” *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1989) 17. “The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn” (1906), in the same collection, similarly introduces a female historian who has given up motherhood and wifedom to travel around the countryside in search of “old papers” that document everyday life. The story reproduces the text of a journal the historian happens upon, from the daily life of a fifteenth-century young woman, giving Woolf a venue to write a history that has never been recorded.

I've often walked along the streets where people live all in a row, and one house is exactly like another house, and wondered what on earth the women were doing inside . . . Just consider: it's the beginning of the twentieth century, and until a few years ago no woman had ever come out by herself and said things at all. There it was going on in the background, for all those thousands of years, this curious silent unrepresented life. Of course we're always writing about women—abusing them, or jeering at them, or worshipping them; but it's never come from women themselves. I believe we still don't know in the least how they live, or what they feel, or what they do precisely. If one's a man, the only confidences one gets are from young women about their love affairs. But women of forty, of unmarried women, of working women, of women who keep shops and bring up children, of women like your aunts or Mrs. Thornbury or Miss Allen—one knows nothing whatever about them. . . . It's the man's view that's represented, you see."⁴³

Hewet's is a most eloquent statement of Woolf's own career project of examining women's everyday lives from the inside out—imagining and recording what various women are feeling, thinking, and doing. It could be said that Woolf takes Hewet's list as her cast of characters and makes it her life's work to explore the unrepresented, unrecorded lives of different kinds of women—the mother, the spinster, the wife, the young single girl.

As part of her attempt to chronicle the history of women's everyday, Woolf, like Benjamin, turns in part to the collection of everyday objects. In one of her early short stories, "Solid Objects" (1918), she directly explores the method of collection decades before it will become the basis for *The Arcades Project*. Here, a young MP named John touches upon an object while digging in the sand on a vacant beach: "It was a lump of glass, so thick as to be almost opaque; the smoothing of the sea had completely worn off any edge or shape, so that it was impossible to say whether it had been a bottle, tumbler

⁴³ Virginia Woolf, *The Voyage Out* (1915; New York: Modern Library, 2001) 221.

or window-pane.”⁴⁴ His friend, Charles, is unimpressed, but the man slips the glass in his pocket and provides it a home on his mantelpiece.

Soon, John finds “himself attracted to the windows of curiosity shops when he was out walking, merely because he saw something which reminded him of the lump of glass.”⁴⁵ While “standing for Parliament upon the brink of a brilliant career,” John develops, almost obsessively, into a collector of discarded objects that remind him of the glass. “He took, also, to keeping his eyes upon the ground, especially in the neighborhood of waste land where the household refuse is thrown away. Such objects often occurred there—thrown away, of no use to anybody, shapeless, discarded. In a few months he had collected four or five specimens that took their place upon the mantelpiece.”

Neglecting his political duties in favor of his search for discarded objects, he is not reelected, nor is he shaken by this defeat. After finding a piece of iron for his mantel, John’s obsession mounts to an all-consuming vocation: “The determination to possess objects that even surpassed these tormented the young man. He devoted himself more and more resolutely to the search. If he had not been consumed by ambition and convinced that one day some newly discovered rubbish heap would reward him, the disappointments he had suffered, let alone the fatigue and derision, would have made him give up the pursuit. Provided with a bag and a long stick fitted with an adaptable hook, he ransacked all deposits of the earth; raked beneath matted tangles of scrub; searched all

⁴⁴ Virginia Woolf, “Solid Objects,” *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1989) 103.

⁴⁵ Woolf, “Solid Objects” 104.

alleys and spaces between walls where he had learned to expect to find objects of this kind thrown away.”⁴⁶

In Woolf’s depiction of John’s relentless collection of refuse along railways lines and on sites of demolished houses, it is not difficult to discern a parallel to the method Walter Benjamin employs in his *Arcades Project*. Though Woolf does not theorize collection with the degree of detail that Benjamin does, “Solid Objects” indicates the meaning Woolf locates in this practice. In this story, though John forsakes his political career to become essentially a high-class rag-picker, he is not fashioned by Woolf as an idle n’er-do-well; he is rather said to be “consumed by ambition” and plods on in his search despite opposition, resistance, and difficulty—with purpose.

It is particularly notable, in the context of a comparison with Benjamin, that John has forsaken *politics*, via traditional participation in the political process, in favor of collection—the material objects, with their solidity (“so hard, so concentrated, so definite”), and the asocial quest for these objects, bring him in greater touch with reality than everyday, “real life”; as Benjamin claims that the collector’s removal of objects from their context allows a more incisive view of them, John has removed himself from the mediating context of daily life to focus on these objects. The montage created by the assorted objects provokes greater questions for their collector: “The contrast between the china so vivid and alert, and the glass so mute and contemplative, fascinated him, and wondering and amazed he asked himself how the two came to exist in the same world, let alone to stand upon the same narrow strip of marble in the same room.”⁴⁷ John studies these objects in order to demythologize them and enable active, conscious awareness of

⁴⁶ Woolf, “Solid Objects” 106.

⁴⁷ Woolf, “Solid Objects” 105.

present life—using Benjaminian language, we could even say that he is attempting to reveal their “dream content.”

Woolf contrasts John’s investment in his collection with the response of his friend Charles. Benjamin argues that people have to see the recent past through collection of objects before they can awake from it, and in Woolf’s story, Charles plays the role of the majority who fail to receive this message. Shortly after John’s political defeat, Charles visits, absently picking up the pieces on the mantelpiece to emphasize his points about the government, without really noticing the objects. He questions what made John give up politics, to which John replies, “I’ve not given it up.” Confused, Charles “had a queer sense they were talking about different things.” John’s statement that he has “not given it up” indicates that he envisions this process of collection as meaningful and purposeful, in a way that is never fully elaborated, but that is tied in his mind to the political aims he was previously engaging through participation in Parliament.

Though he handles the objects of John’s collection, Charles doesn’t truly see or understand them, nor does he understand the significance behind John’s new vocation of collecting. The montage doesn’t speak to him. He fails to awaken. Through Charles, Woolf highlights a challenge for both her own work and Benjamin’s. Is John an unsuccessful collector because he remains a social outsider, his “art” failing to communicate? Was Benjamin unsuccessful on the same count—despite the elaborate theory behind it, the unusual presentation of *The Arcades Project* fails to communicate a coherent message to many readers. Both Benjamin and John (and, in turn, Woolf) baffle and confuse their audiences through collection and montage. But of course it is this very disorientation, even if not fully processed and understood, that is apparently the point.

Readers of both Woolf and Benjamin may respond to their work as Charles does to John's collection, but the modernists rest on the fact that their readers are arguably *more likely* to interrogate the meaning behind their form than that behind the form of a text with a conventional format.

As with Benjamin's interest in repeated images of the collective unconscious, John finds himself particularly fascinated with the visual and physical properties, origins and meanings, of certain objects and resolutely searches for those and considers them.⁴⁸ That is, far from being random, John settles on certain objects as the focus of his collection. A profound difference for John as collector and Benjamin, however, is that while Benjamin locates limitless information in each subject of his collection, John is highly selective and only locates a few items worth keeping. He becomes more consumed with the process of searching than the process of categorizing, which is what overwhelmed Benjamin. I think we find in this a fitting parallel to the feminist historian, who finds little historical material to work with—so much is forgotten, unrecorded, lost, so there is not a preponderance available to sift through. For this reason, the few, rare objects that are located become the focus of significant thought and analysis.

Indeed, it is notable that what John spends his time collecting is domestic objects—broken china, glass, and other household objects. These are the objects of women's everyday history, most likely used primarily by women and discarded by

⁴⁸ In another uncanny similarity, it seems Gilloch must be writing of the following passage by Woolf when he says of Benjamin, "The allegorical gaze, like the magical gaze of the child-as-collector, is the salvation of the thing." For as John slips the glass inside his pocket, Woolf describes: "That impulse, too, may have been the impulse which leads a child to pick up one pebble on a path strewn with them, promising it a life of warmth and security upon the nursery mantelpiece, delighting in the sense of power and benignity which such an action confers, and believing that the heart of stone leaps with joy when it sees itself chosen from a million like it, to enjoy this bliss instead of a life of cold and wet upon the high road. 'It might so easily have been any other of the millions of stones, but it was I, I, I!'" (104-5). Here, John—as if a child—invests the object with feeling, vitality, and humanity, much as Gilloch claims Benjamin approaches objects.

women.⁴⁹ In fact, Woolf emphasizes this very point when John is looking for china and has difficulty finding it: “You have to find in conjunction a very high house and a woman of such reckless impulse and passionate prejudice that she flings her jar or pot straight from the window without thought of who is below.”⁵⁰ By bringing together these household objects discarded by women, he is shoring up the ruins and creating a kind of montage housing and displaying the traces and remnants of women’s daily experience.⁵¹

John’s role in this respect is a seeming parallel to Woolf’s own role and methods as a historian throughout her oeuvre. While Woolf’s body of work provides few direct corollaries to Benjamin’s methodological emphasis on collection—her brief story “Solid Objects” being one such case—she was in practice no less a collector than he. Indeed, her choice of a lump of glass that might have been a windowpane as the catalyst for John’s obsessive collecting is significant and telling. For in the long career that follows “Solid Objects,” Woolf fashions and reveals herself as a dedicated collector of window associations and scenes; she was constantly assembling these scenes, experimenting with them and reworking them in different contexts. I will explore Woolf’s use and collection of the window image in detail in Chapter 4. For now, it suffices to say that her collection was varied and expansive. Her career dramatizes the endless constellation of associations that can be attached to the window, and taken together, Woolf’s window scenes form a montage akin to Benjamin’s collection of material on the arcade.⁵² Through the collection of this object, Woolf crafts the history of women’s everyday.

⁴⁹ Benjamin might remind us that they are also the products of capitalism and, as such, house collective dreams.

⁵⁰ Woolf, “Solid Objects” 105.

⁵¹ Of course Woolf’s sharp satire is notable in constructing a story about a highly feminized MP during an era when women could not hold a parliamentary position.

⁵² Notably, Woolf ironizes the process of collection in a way that Benjamin is not quite ever able to do.

We can better understand Woolf's practice of collection as a historical method when we understand how Woolf approaches objects more generally. Like Benjamin, Virginia Woolf, I argue, can be read as a kind of historical materialist—not in the usual, Marxist sense, but in the idiosyncratic Benjaminian sense of one who focused on images and objects as part of her attempt to recreate women's history. Woolf frequently materializes Benjamin's abstract claims about the ways in which objects and spaces retain their own "fore-history and after-history." In *Night and Day*, Katharine Hilbery determines that, "Rooms, of course, accumulate their suggestions, and any room in which one has been used to carry on any particular occupation gives off memories of moods, of ideas, of postures that have been seen in it . . . Katharine was unconsciously affected, each time she entered her mother's room, by all these influences, which had had their birth years ago, when she was a child, and had something sweet and solemn about them, and connected themselves with early memories of the cavernous glooms and sonorous echoes of the Abbey where her grandfather lay buried."⁵³ Similarly, in *Between the Acts*, Mrs. Swithin jerks open the window, watches the birds singing, and is "tempted by the sight to continue her imaginative reconstruction of the past . . . she remembered her mother—her mother in that very room rebuking her. 'Don't stand gaping, Lucy, or the wind'll change . . .'"⁵⁴ Woolf dramatizes the history contained in this space and how the open window triggers a flood of associations and personal history for Mrs. Swithin.⁵⁵

⁵³ Virginia Woolf, *Night and Day* (1920; San Diego: Harcourt, 1948) 113.

⁵⁴ Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (1941; San Diego: Harcourt, 1969) 9.

⁵⁵ See also, for example, "A Haunted House" (1921), which presents an account of a long-dead couple re-exploring the home currently inhabited by the narrator: "Wandering through the house, opening the windows, whispering not to wake us, the ghostly couple seek their joy." (123). Here, the house itself serves as a retainer of historical meaning, still inhabited by residents from "hundreds of years ago." (122). Virginia Woolf, "A Haunted House," *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf* (1921; San Diego: Harcourt, 1989).

Likewise, Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* is centrally concerned with the history and meaning latent in various everyday women's objects—flowers for the party, Miss Kilman's green mackintosh coat, women's gloves. When Clarissa walks down Bond Street and passes "a glove shop where, before the War, you could buy almost perfect gloves," Woolf uses the evolving status of the object to access changes in women's roles. She writes, "And her old Uncle William used to say that a lady is known by her shoes and her gloves. . . . Gloves and shoes; she had a passion for gloves; but her own daughter, her Elizabeth, cared not a straw for either of them."⁵⁶ Elizabeth, a certain version of the New Woman, is rather associated with a different, apparently more modern garment, as "the beautiful body in the fawn-colored coat responded freely like a rider, like the figure-head of a ship, for the breeze slightly disarrayed her."⁵⁷ In this case, it is the artifacts of consumer fashion and the historical and present role that each plays that Woolf uses to access personal and national history (a different life for a mother and daughter; a different world before and after the war). Unlike the pieces John collects, these are not discarded objects (at least not yet—though they have become so for the contemporary reader). Woolf analyzes the significance of these objects in present time so the everyday history of women in her own era need not be collected later from shorn-up ruins.

Unlike Benjamin, Woolf did not take up "allegory" as a keyword to describe her method of representation, and the question of the presence or absence of "symbolism" in Woolf's work has in fact been long debated.⁵⁸ I believe certain components of allegory can become important and useful for conceptualizing Woolf's relationship to many of her

⁵⁶ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925; Dan Diego: Harcourt, 1981) 11.

⁵⁷ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 136.

⁵⁸ See Bernard Blackstone, *Virginia Woolf: A Commentary* (London: Hogarth Press, 1972). N. C. Thakur, *The Symbolism of Virginia Woolf* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965).

recurring images. While “Solid Objects” is principally focused on the practice of collection, in the illusiveness of the lump of glass that John discovers we see the crossover with allegory that Benjamin describes. The solidity of the object is what really grabs John: “so hard, so concentrated, so definite an object compared with the vague sea and the hazy shore.”⁵⁹ And yet, while the object itself is solid, its history, meaning, and origins are not. Recall “the smoothing of the sea had completely worn off any edge or shape, so that it was impossible to say whether it had been a bottle, tumbler or window-pane; it was nothing but glass; it was almost a precious stone.”⁶⁰ In that last incompatible comparison—“nothing but glass” versus “almost a precious stone,” Woolf drives home the ways in which this object lacks firmness of meaning and origin. Like an allegorical object, the lump of glass might be ordinary or extraordinary; its meaning is in the hands of the viewer.⁶¹

Indeed, Woolf’s writing on her own practices demonstrates that her ideas about representation very much align with Benjamin’s notion of allegory and the distinction between allegory and symbol. She writes in her diary, upon finishing *The Waves*: “What interests me in the last stage was the freedom & boldness with which my imagination picked up used & tossed aside all the images and symbols which I had prepared. I am sure this is the right way of using them—not in set pieces, as I had tried at first, coherently, but simply as images; never making them work out; only suggest. Thus I hope to have kept the sound of the sea & the birds, dawn, & garden subconsciously

⁵⁹ Woolf, “Solid Objects” 103.

⁶⁰ Virginia Woolf, “Solid Objects,” *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1989) 103.

⁶¹ Woolf drives home the uncertainty of the objects’ history, as John considers: “Perhaps after all it was really a gem; something worn by a dark Princess trailing her finger in the water as she sat in the stern of the boat and listened to the slaves singing as they rowed her across the Bay. Or the oak sides of a sunken Elizabethan treasure-chest had split apart, and, rolled over and over, over and over, its emeralds had come at last to shore.” (103).

present, doing their work underground.”⁶² Later, Woolf more directly expresses her rejection of symbolism, writing to her friend, Roger Fry: “I meant *nothing* by The Lighthouse. One has to have a central line down the middle of the book to hold the design together. I saw that all sorts of feelings would accrue to this, but I refused to think them out, and trusted that people would make it the deposit for their own emotions—which they have done, one thinking it means one thing another another. I can’t manage Symbolism except in this vague, generalised way. Whether its right or wrong I don’t know, but directly I’m told what a thing means, it becomes hateful to me.”⁶³ Woolf expresses her rejection of symbolism in the context of her use of images in her own work, claiming that she chooses to use “images and symbols,” but only in a “vague, generalised,” suggestive way that allows readers to attach their own meaning to an object.⁶⁴

Woolf later demonstrates greater confidence in this approach and clarifies the rationale behind this method. In the radio broadcast “Craftsmanship” (1937), she takes aim at readers and writers who erroneously simplify words in crafting or interpreting them. The piece involves a comically intensive reading of railway signs like “Do not lean out of the window” and “Passing Russell Square.” Woolf’s central point in interpreting these seemingly straightforward signs is that “it is the nature of words to mean many things. . . . besides the surface meaning it contained so many sunken meanings. . . . one sentence of the simplest kind rouses the imagination, the memory, the

⁶² Virginia Woolf’s diary entry, 7 February 1931. Anne Olivier Bell, ed. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*. Volume Four: 1931-1935. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1982) 10-11.

⁶³ Virginia Woolf, letter to Roger Fry 27 May 1927. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, eds. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf* Volume III: 1923-1928. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1977) 385.

⁶⁴ Woolf also reflects her dialogue here with the Symbolist movement, the principles of which she rejected.

eye and the ear—all combine in reading it.”⁶⁵ The process of reading a sign can be so complex, in part, because “words, English words, are full of echoes, of memories, of associations—naturally.”⁶⁶ Woolf concludes by describing the kind of reading process she has demonstrated in the piece: “The moment we single out and emphasize the suggestions as we have done here they become unreal; and we, too, become unreal—specialists, word mongers, phrase finders, not readers. In reading we have to allow the sunken meanings to remain sunken, suggested, not stated; lapsing and flowing into each other like reeds on the bed of a river.”⁶⁷ ⁶⁸ Thus, like Benjamin, Woolf rejects straightforward symbolism and instead allows the reader to draw on the fore- and after-history of an object, its “echoes,” “memories,” and “associations,” in order to fix its meaning, which varies to some degree with each reader.

The correspondences between Woolf’s and Benjamin’s approaches often seem uncanny. They speak to the writers’ deeply rooted connections to objects and images as part of an alternative historical agenda and approach, which arguably revolves around their shared modernity and outsider status and the larger similarity I have explored between feminist modernism and architectural theory. Exposing the similarities in their work is instructive, I hope, in repositioning Benjamin as a historically-located thinker, a part of his own culture, while also recognizing the brilliance and usefulness of his theories. Indeed, this comparison of the similarities between Woolf and Benjamin

⁶⁵ Virginia Woolf, “Craftsmanship” in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (1942; San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1970) 202.

⁶⁶ Woolf, *The Death of the Moth* 203.

⁶⁷ Woolf, *The Death of the Moth* 201-2.

⁶⁸ Critics have noted the absence of a referent to many of Woolf’s signs, associating her work with postmodernism. I resist this reading. Woolf may have anticipated certain postmodern values and techniques, but she did so in the context of many ideals and practices that were in line with her modernist peers. Nowhere do we find evidence of genuine postmodern theory behind Woolf’s methods. I believe we can use Woolf’s differences from other modernists in this respect to reshape our sense of modernism, rather than associating her with a movement she was historically and constitutionally distinct from.

heralds a view of literary writers and their work not simply as flat surfaces to which Benjamin's theories can be applied: they write the stories, he provides the more advanced and incisive meta-analysis. Far from this, we see in Woolf a feminist literary writer actively exploring similar historical and theoretical issues and begin to understand the distinctly feminist angle on everyday objects—why and how they can be so significant to feminist literary writers.

The Woman at the Window as an Image of the Collective Unconscious

Benjamin's and Woolf's shared theories of collection, allegory, and historical materialism become the lens through which I read literary representations of the woman at the window in the chapters that follow. From both theorists, we glean that objects and images house suggestions, history, and meanings that always lurk below the surface and that are intimately related to the role and presence of these images in the past. Collecting these objects for both writers becomes a way of holding onto the past and also making it new—accessing the history and nostalgia contained in these spaces and objects, while giving them new meaning through a fresh presentation via montage and collection.

My own motivation in calling on these methods differs from those of both Woolf and Benjamin; my project is not intended to be political, but historical and critical: filling in the history of literary and cultural modernism and its images, with special regard to the experience of women and the inclusion of a highly resonant image that has been neglected. Essentially, in this project I work as a historical materialist in the sense of isolating the history and meaning within a specific object and argue that the woman at the window is an image of the collective unconscious. I collect literary instances and use

allegorical ideas about symbolism in my analysis; these theories help us to see why we fail to come up with a precise “answer” to what the window signifies, for to do so would be both reductive and antithetical to the way it is being used as a historical image.

In undertaking this project, I have myself experienced the quandary and crossover of collector and allegorist that Benjamin describes. Intuitively, I began this project as a collector, assembling instances and appearances of windows in modernist texts. This is an almost inevitable approach to this subject because the vast number of window images taps the collector’s instinct to assemble and categorize. Collection is not an uncommon approach in literary analysis; often collecting occurrences of similar moments and the repeated appearance of ideas will lead to an unequivocal conclusion. But not so for the window. The images are too varied, too expansive, and lead in too many directions.

Indeed, one of the greatest challenges in this project has been the sheer tenacity with which modernist writers ceaselessly explore and variously use the window image. I believe it is precisely the overwhelming number of references and their diversity that is partly responsible for the fact that critics have barely scratched the surface in analyzing them. Many authors have consciously taken up the window metaphor or site, but others have unwitting or offhanded references; some of these writers might well be surprised at the prevalence of the image within their own texts. Its presence in literature is overwhelming and seductive at the same time.

Critics who address the window often experience the same tendency to approach the window as a collector. Isobel Armstrong’s massive *Victorian Glassworlds* (2008) takes an essentially Benjaminian approach to explore the nineteenth-century window and other forms of glass. We find example piled on top of example: case studies, images,

texts, lists, and infinite theses fill this impressive work, from which it is almost impossible to distill a core narrative. It is, above all, a well-organized collection with insightful analyses, reflecting the refusal to make choices embodied by the window itself—inclusion is clearly the *modus operandi* here, just as the view from the window is infinite in its sights and sounds, real and imagined. As such, Armstrong's contributions are historical more than critical; and like Benjamin's, her insights are highly suggestive rather than conclusive.

Not wishing to create a historical compendium on the woman at the window, I have discovered that, as Benjamin and Woolf allude to, playing the collector only gets us so far. My collection could not possibly be comprehensive, and attempts at partial but representative analysis of window images are unsuccessful because they are not truly representative. As well, the window image resists interpretation through collection. Each instance of its occurrence can be rich in local significance, but when all of these images are amassed together, the reading can become reductive and general. We can see this, for example, in Carla Gottlieb's umbrella argument in *The Window in Art*. Though she claims that "it is not easy to select one feature of the window as representative of its significance for symbolism in art," she nonetheless feels compelled to synthesize them: "Since the decision must be made, the window's ability to symbolize antithetical pairs is my choice."⁶⁹ That the window represents antithetical pairs is certainly a helpful statement, but one that barely scratches the surface in analyzing its significance as an image.

⁶⁹ Carla Gottlieb, *The Window in Art: From the Window of God to the Vanity of Man. A Survey of Window Symbolism in Western Painting* (New York: Abaris, 1981) 389.

Tempering collection with the allegory offers some hope by recognizing the insufficiency of symbol and of symbolic methods of interpretation. Allegorical methods becomes useful for reading the woman at the window because the writers in this study approach this image not as a symbol, but as an allegorical image empowered to access past and present meanings. Indeed, it is the rich historical associations that the woman at the window contains that lends it such significance for all of the writers I study. These writers circulate around this image in order to define their relationship to modernity, contemporary womanhood, and women's relationship to inside-outside spaces. Together, their readings and use of the window are illusive and multiple, and we can only discern the meaning of the image by relying on profundity—not simply the historical data, categorization, and systemization that are the purview of the collector. Though my project is ordered by a collector, then, the ultimate meaning we come away with is one that would be appreciated by the allegorist—as, ultimately, illusive in its reliance on profundity and not a scientific, objective approach.

The assorted, allegorical collection of window images that I present in this project uncovers the woman at the window as an image of modernity's collective unconscious: how the writers I study use it so variously and meaningfully, how it resonates so deeply, how it calls on so many images of the past, both consciously and unconsciously. Indeed, the sheer frequency of this image in the texts of modernity in part indicates its status as an image of the collective unconscious. For the fact that images of the woman at the window are sufficiently present to merit collection at all—either in the same form or various instantiations—tells us something about the relative significance of this image in its era. In addition, despite the everpresence of the image of the woman at the window,

the absence of analysis of this figure in the modernist era and the ways in which its presence appears to be unwitting as often as witting, without clear purpose as often as purposeful, suggests the absence of a clear and conscious cultural understanding of the roles and significance of this figure. Its meaning, that is, is often buried. By reading through a set of literary appearances of the woman at the window, I develop a nuanced understanding of the significance of this image across the modernist era.

As an image of the collective unconscious, I argue, the woman at the window can be used to interpret the dreams of the collective. During Western history prior to the modernist era, especially from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth century, the woman at the window truly represented a collective dream. As this project will elucidate, the woman in front of her window, painted from the interior, indicated domestic bliss and woman as object—the happy home with everything in its place, including the leisure time to create this image. Because she represented a collective dream that was eroding and problematic but still held great power in the modernist era, modernist writers went to work on the image—unpacking it, reshaping and redirecting it, rejecting it. Rather than hastening its extinction, some writers see it as worthy of resurrection and rebirth in a new form. It comes to house revised dreams: sometimes, it may be the dream of women's access to the street; or the dream of woman as artist; or the dream of balance and fluidity among women's public and private lives.

In describing the role of these techniques in this project, there is a muddle that becomes apparent among critic, theorist, and literary writer. Am I the collector, or are the writers I study collectors? Am I the allegorist or are the writers I study allegorists—particularly since I use Woolf and Benjamin as both theorists and subjects of analysis?

These techniques function on two levels because while the literary writers I study may not be explicitly taking up these techniques, many of them, like Woolf, are responding to the same impulse to connect simultaneously the past and the present through an object or image. Many of the writers I explore harness these techniques to hold onto the inherited image of the woman at the window and her power while recreating her. The literary writers I study create present meaning around the woman at the window through connection to the past, through sunken associations they do not mention and at times do not even recognize. The woman at the window becomes itself the locus of writers' attempts to reconcile the present and the past.⁷⁰

I am not suggesting that all of the writers I explore were employing Benjaminian-Woolfian techniques in their texts, though they sometimes use versions of this, especially as the century progresses. Rather, I am employing their techniques in order to fill in the modernist lexicon with a missing figure or image, which will help us to rewrite our understanding of modernism itself. Writers were working through their relationship to the woman at the window. How conscious they are of their own relation to the object indicates how modern they are (later writers generally more conscious of their relation to the object, what the object means for them is more explicit, less suggestive—and though more explicit, more complicated in some ways because it draws explicitly on so many past associations). Though Woolf and Benjamin also use images in similar ways, they theorize their work more, they think about the window as an object in history, in a way

⁷⁰ It is not that the modernist focus on the woman at the window is unique—clearly, it is historically based, which is where it gets its cache—but that we learn something about modernists and modernity through their fixation on a figure that enables them to explore continuity and their ties to the past.

that the other writers simply carry it out, use it, without interrogating its meaning in quite the same way.

Though I have identified key synergies between architectural theorists and modernist feminist writers, the question has to be asked: what does it mean to explore feminist texts partly through the lens of a theorist whose view of women was so problematic? What are the implications and the limitations of this approach? In my estimation, Benjamin provides a theoretical approach that is nonetheless valid in discerning images of the collective unconscious. Given his limitations, feminist writers are able to develop the cultural understanding of the interior and the interior observer far beyond what he was able to do. Feminist writers introduce problems with the visual that elude Benjamin, Le Corbusier, and their peers. The very specific social and political aspirations of feminist writers and their gendered entry point affect their relationship to the ideal that Benjamin presents. All of my feminist literary writers are idealizing spatial fluidity in various forms, even while, in certain cases, recognizing that this fluidity is sometimes impossible. So, there is in some cases more of a sense of realism coming from the feminist writers—they have the same spatial ideals as Benjamin, but, not surprisingly, the materiality of everyday life does not always reflect these ideals as possible, as the chapters to come will reveal.

Chapter 2

Latch-Keys and Eye-Glasses: Amy Levy and the Spaces In-Between

“Mr. Partridge [*sic*] horrid pictures came,” Amy Levy noted in her diary entry for 15 July 1889, just a few short weeks before her death.¹ Levy had commissioned the pictures for her forthcoming lyric poetry collection, *A London Plane-Tree, and Other Verse* (1889), and her publishers would ultimately include the images despite Levy’s unequivocal disdain for them. One of the two drawings depicts an interior view of a woman in her office, in masculine dress, scribbling at her desk amid piles and scatters of papers. Her large garret windows are flung wide open, revealing the spires of the city scene. The writer appears in deep concentration, essentially oblivious to the world beyond her room or, even, her pen.

Given the themes of *A London Plane-Tree*, it’s not surprising that Partridge would choose to illustrate the woman writer at her window as a central image for the collection—nor is it at all surprising that Levy would have strong feelings about how this image would be represented.² Clever, ironic, at once bold and reticent, Levy’s texts navigate an intricate network of questions surrounding women’s visualization of the modern world decades before important theoretical work on these ideas appeared. In

¹ Levy committed suicide in 1889 at the age of 27 by carbon monoxide poisoning.

² In her work on urban aestheticism, Ana Vadillo speculates that Levy’s contempt for this drawing derives from the fact that Partridge positions the woman writer with her back to the window, instead of looking out at the city. Ana Parejo Vadillo, *Women Poets and Urban Aestheticism: Passengers of Modernity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 61.

novels such as *Romance of a Shop* (1888) and the poetry collection *A London Plane-Tree*, Levy works to convey the excitement surrounding women's newfound access to the London landscape. In these texts and throughout Levy's work, the woman at the window is at the nexus of her explorations of visibility, domesticity, work, mobility, and the urban aesthetic. It's a key venue through which she explores women's burgeoning visual access to the city and one that becomes the basis for other technologies of seeing that she draws on.

Levy's career spanned only fourteen years (1875-1889), but her small body of rich work has lately received renewed attention from scholars of the *fin-de-siècle*,³ Anglo-Jewry, and women's studies—so much so that Ana Vadillo has recently noted that, “After a century of critical demotion, it would not be an exaggeration to say that Amy Levy (1861-1889) has been elevated back into the literary canon.”⁴ Over the past decade, Levy's work has been explored mostly by scholars of late Victorian women's poetry, starting with her dramatic monologues such as *Xantippe* and more recently her urban verse; her prose, particularly *Reuben Sachs*, has largely been explored within studies of Anglo-Jewish culture and identity.⁵

³ For a new and comprehensive look at this era and Levy's place in it, see Joseph Bristow, *The Fin-de-Siècle Poem: English Literary Culture and the 1890s* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005). As Bristow points out, studies of the *fin-de-siècle* have largely been focused on male poets and the culture of decadence. But there was a rich body of female poets, such as Michael Field, Alice Meynell, and Amy Levy, who paint a very different picture of the literature and culture of this era.

⁴ Vadillo 38.

⁵ For analyses of Levy's work, see Deborah Epstein Nord, “‘Neither Pairs Nor Odd’: Women, Urban Community, and Writing in the 1880s” in *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation, and the City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995) 183-206; Emma Francis, “Amy Levy: Contradictions?—Feminism and Semitic Discourse” in *Women's Poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian: Gender and Genre*, ed. Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blaine (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999) 183-206; Deborah L. Parsons, “The New Woman and the Wandering Jew” in *Streetwalking in the Metropolis: Women, the City, and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 82-122; Karen Weisman, *Playing with Figures: Amy Levy and the Forms of Cancellation Criticism* 42.1 (Winter 2001) 59-79; Cynthia Scheinberg, “Amy Levy and the Accents of Minor(ity) Poetry” in *Women's Poetry and Religion in Victorian England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 190-237; Iveta Jusova, “Amy Levy: The Anglo-Jewish

Levy's work increasingly resonates with modern critics because, as Cynthia Scheinberg argues, "so many of the issues she addresses in her writing speak to concerns of the contemporary critical moment: Jewish Diasporic identity, lesbian identity, women's emancipation, and more general theories of 'otherness' within the English literary tradition."⁶ Levy has been an especially appealing figure to critics of women's literature who see in her life and work progressive choices that anticipate contemporary feminist values. Levy was one of the first Jewish women to attend Cambridge University. She was in a social circle with notable British feminists and reformers, such as Clementina Black, Vernon Lee, Eleanor Marx, Bella Duffy, and Olive Schreiner. In her nonfiction, she addresses women's rights and social issues.

While some critics have celebrated the extent of Levy's nerve and confidence in conveying women's experience of the city, others have viewed her creative work as more timid or traditional than her essays and life would seem to warrant. In both cases, these analyses have followed a pattern not unusual among criticism of women's literature of this era. Too often, critical responses to novels invested in women's emerging freedoms, especially those of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, focus on the extent to which the writers "succeed" in extracting their characters from the chains of their circumstances and fulfilling the possibility of liberation. Where their characters "fail," the novelists are excused as portraying the harsh reality of the difficult life of a New Woman or other unconventional figure. As part of this approach, Levy's critics almost universally attempt to distance her from or express frustration with anything in her work

New Woman" in *The New Woman and the Empire* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2005) 131-77; Nadia Valman, *The Jewess in Nineteenth-Century British Literary Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁶ Scheinberg 190.

that smacks of traditional nineteenth-century notions—the marriage plot, separate spheres, domesticity, the interior, the home. And yet, this approach neglects evidence of Levy’s sustained perpetuation of some traditional notions of gendered space and precludes recognition of the nuances of Levy’s strategic negotiation of the expansion of women’s roles in the context of those very values.

In my estimation, Levy neither “succeeds” nor “fails,” but navigates a more sophisticated and strategic relationship to the challenges and fate of her characters than writers addressing these issues are often given credit for. Levy both creates feminist characters and draws on a genuine investment in nineteenth-century values surrounding the spaces and roles of femininity. As she works actively to claim territory for women in the city, she opts not to trample over tightly held nineteenth-century associations of home-woman and street-man. Instead, I argue, her expansionism focuses on venues that physically or socially inhabit in-betweeness—liminal sites that are neither fully private nor fully public or that are socially in-between in terms of accepting the presence of women. This approach is not borne out of conflictedness, timidity, or indecision, but strategy. Levy works to market feminism to her nineteenth-century audience by using liminality to engender acceptance while exploring progressive ideals.

Critics using “liberation” as a yardstick miss the ways in which Levy’s work mediates on, negotiates, and exploits imaginatively the possibilities for women’s increased mobility, protection from damaging visibility, and freedom of observation opened by various apparatus of the visual. Making the connection between Levy’s fiction, public self-presentation, social essays, and visual practice at the end of the century enriches our sense of the way feminist literature during the *fin-de-siècle* engages

key questions about both aesthetics and social change and makes them keenly relevant to one another. Through an emphasis on visual strategies and ideologies of looking, we can understand how integrally related Levy's social aims and aesthetic project are: it's looking at *looking* that reveals the intimate and vexed relationship between Levy's urban aesthetic and her social project. The woman at the window becomes for Levy the figure that is best able to straddle this divide—a touchstone for balancing Levy's social goals and urban aesthetic.

The Perplexing Amy Levy

Amy Levy often frustrates even her most devoted critics. Her poetry, narrative, and prose appear straightforward, even simple at times. Late Victorian and modernist scholars accustomed to poring over dense and difficult material find Levy a light and pleasant read. And yet, when critics attempt to parse out the details of her arguments and worldview and to reconcile the perspectives expressed in the various genres she explores, particularly with regard to issues of women's freedoms, they are commonly perplexed, disappointed, or both. Deborah Nord, in her study of Levy's close look at the urban female spectator in her work, takes issue with Levy's resolution of her plot in *Romance of a Shop*: "Levy's failure in the novel is precisely that she does not know what to do with her independent, idiosyncratic heroines"; toward the end, she argues, the novel "begins to resemble a shoddy *Pride and Prejudice*, with all four sisters searching for an appropriate mate . . ." ⁷ Iveta Jusova explains her disappointment with the same novel as an issue of genre: "The striking difference between the radical interrogation of femininity and rejection of matrimony in Levy's poetry and the conventional use of the marriage trope in

⁷ Nord 202.

much of her fiction invites questions about the impact of genre and audience on gender politics inscribed into Victorian texts.”⁸

Everything we know about Levy indicates that she was undoubtedly a feminist, genuinely focused on improving opportunities for women. And yet, she appears so often to back off these feminist ideals—to have outcomes for her progressive, thoughtful characters that critics find disappointing and even confusing. A comparison between Levy’s exploration of the female observer in *A London-Plane Tree* and her social essay “Women and Club Life” helps to isolate her apparent contradictions and exposes what I call Levy’s aesthetic-social predicament. Recognizing these contradictions and the needs and climate they arose from—which are not, I argue, simply a matter of genre, marketability, or “failure”—will ultimately prove helpful in understanding the nuances of Levy’s take on women’s expanding freedoms.

When the Parisian poet and intellectual Charles Baudelaire marked the modern metropolis as an object of study for the artist-wanderer in his 1863 essay “The Painter of Modern Life,” he did not anticipate the eventuality of Amy Levy’s actualization of his vision (with her own slant). Women populate Baudelaire’s essay as the ideal objects of the *flâneur*’s stare, not bearers of their own perspective on the city sights. Yet in *A London Plane-Tree*, Levy evokes Baudelaire. Consider the juxtaposition of the following passages:

So out he goes and watches the river of life flow past him in all its splendour and majesty. He marvels at the eternal beauty and the amazing harmony of life in the capital cities, a harmony so providentially maintained amid the turmoil of human freedom.

-Charles Baudelaire, 1863.⁹

⁸ Jusova 142.

⁹ Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. Jonathan Mayne (New York: Da Capo Press, 1964) 11.

I mark, untroubled by desire
Lucullus' phaeton and its freight.
The scene whereof I cannot tire,
The human tale of love and hate,
The city pageant, early and late
Unfolds itself, rolls by, to be
A pleasure deep and delicate.

-Amy Levy, 1889¹⁰

Here, Levy's speaker watches as the "city pageant . . . unfolds itself, rolls by," a scene of "the human tale of love and hate" as Baudelaire's *flâneur* beholds the "river of life flow past him," "amid the turmoil of human freedom." The synergy in language and positionality between the two passages is striking. Baudelaire appears as a chosen predecessor for Levy—she was fluent in French and completed some translations, and it has been argued that *A London Plane-Tree* is a direct response to French symbolism—and her appropriation of the mode of aesthetic engagement he pioneers is revealed through such frequent correspondences between their language and subject matter.¹¹ One of Levy's aesthetic agendas, like Baudelaire's, is to access the modern city through the view of the lone spectator—his of course male, hers decidedly female.

¹⁰ Amy Levy, "Ballade of an Omnibus," *A London Plane-Tree and Other Verse* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1889) 22. (hereafter, *London*)

¹¹ Susan Hunt Beckman establishes the connection between Levy's work and French symbolism, arguing that "there can be no doubt that Levy knew the work of Charles Baudelaire" and identifying an affinity between the language of Levy and Baudelaire in her "Out of this World" and his "N'importe ou hors du monde" (1867). She writes, "Anywhere, anywhere out of the world," and Beckman claims, "Her phrasing is a cross between Baudelaire's title and the last words of his prose poem, which, translated literally are 'Anywhere!—Anywhere, provided it is out of this world!'" Linda Hunt Beckman, "Amy Levy: Urban Poetry, Poetic Innovation, and the Fin-de- Woman Poet" in Joseph Bristow, Joseph Bristow, *The Fin-de-Siècle Poem: English Literary Culture and the 1890s* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005) 210. There is a notable literary genealogy here that I coincidentally follow in this project, as Marc L. Ratner claims that this poem of Baudelaire's was the creative source for Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*, which I address in the epilogue. "Anywhere Out of This World: Baudelaire and Nathanael West," *Nathanael West: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Jay Martin, 102-109. In addition to her appropriation of Baudelaire, Levy's work shows a rich body of literary allusions and rejoinders, as Beckman, Jusova, and Francis explore Levy's various rejoinders to Tennyson, Browning, and Arnold.

Levy's urban female spectator is in a singular class in nineteenth-century literature. In step with Baudelaire's own confinement of the *flâneur* to the "he," Janet Wolff makes the case in "The Invisible *Flâneuse*" for the absence of a female version of his wandering, spying hero of modern life. Wolff argues that while a woman might traipse the streets masquerading as a man, as George Sand did in Paris, only "disguise made the life of the *flâneur* available to her . . . women could not stroll alone in the city." Even more categorically: "There is no question of inventing the *flâneuse*: the essential point is that such a character was rendered impossible by the sexual divisions of the nineteenth century."¹²

As studies by Deborah Nord and Judith Walkowitz have underscored, late nineteenth-century norms for respectable behavior generally excluded middle-class women from the liberty to travel independently about to experience and observe the city.¹³ Judith Walkowitz contends that during the 1880s, marginalized groups (working men and women of all classes) spilled out into the streets. Middle class women could then be seen at shopping malls, galleries, museums, libraries, concerts, picture exhibitions—both with friends and even alone.¹⁴ However, the streets of London persisted as dangerous territory for women, and walking round the city unchaperoned outside of controlled, sanctioned areas placed both a woman's physical safety and her reputation on the line.¹⁵ The notion of looking, in particular, retains a distinct resonance for women during this period, as Nord explains:

¹² Janet Wolff, "The Invisible *Flâneuse*: Women and the Literature of Modernity," in *The Problems of Modernity*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (London: Routledge, 1989) 148 and 154.

¹³ Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

¹⁴ Walkowitz 41 & 68.

¹⁵ Walkowitz 46.

Given [women's] absence, their dubious legitimacy, their status as spectacle, and the eroticization of their presence on the streets, the relationship of women to spectatorship itself remained a vexed and nearly irresolvable one. If the rambler or flâneur required anonymity and the camouflage of the crowd to move with impunity and to exercise the privilege of the gaze, the too-noticeable female stroller could never enjoy that position.¹⁶

This denial to women of a gaze of their own rendered them, as Walkowitz phrases it, “bearers of meaning rather than makers of meaning,” the ultimate objects. Further, because of their inevitable association with the figure of the prostitute, women in public were commonly viewed as a “source of danger to those men who congregated in the streets.”¹⁷ Women who did venture through the city alone were taught to avoid the gaze of men, to refrain from returning a man's stare or initiating a gaze of their own, for fear of being sexually harassed.¹⁸

Though nineteenth-century women in Paris and London were largely excluded from the perspective of “*la passante*” because of norms for respectable behavior, Wolff's conclusion that the *flâneuse* unequivocally did not exist proves, as Judith Pascoe has stated in her own work on the *flâneuse*, “perhaps too conclusive.”¹⁹ A flurry of critics, among them both Walkowitz and Nord, has traced the presence and development of peripatetic urban female spectatorship in nineteenth-century London, establishing that certain (limited) middle-class women did walk through and write of the city streets, in increasing numbers as the century progressed.

¹⁶ Nord 4.

¹⁷ Walkowitz 21.

¹⁸ Walkowitz 51.

¹⁹ Judith Pascoe also uses Wolff's essay as a point of entry in her important work on Mary Darby Robinson, the Romantic poet whom Pascoe constructs as a “spectacular *flâneuse*” in her book *Romantic Theatricality* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997) 130-162.

Amy Levy was certainly one of them. The epigraph of *A London Plane-Tree*, from Austin Dobson's rondeau "On London Stones" (1876), proclaims Levy's project to pay tribute to the city in her poetry collection: "Mine is an urban Muse, and bound / By some strange law to paven ground."²⁰ With spirited nerve, Levy responds to her urban muse with a series of poems that map a woman's visual and spatial experience of the city. Through the first section of the collection, Levy moves us through the streets of the British capital, noting and extolling fixtures and features peculiar to the metropolis.²¹ She registers the "wide waste of square and street,"²² the newsboy who "tramps the town,"²³ the "sound of the wheels and feet,"²⁴ the "dusty brown" "London trees."²⁵ In "London Poets," she expressly binds her work to an urban heritage, to the generations of lyricists who have "trode the streets and squares where now I tread."²⁶ And in the collection's title poem, the poet explicitly compares herself to the plane tree, which loves the city as much as she while others "droop and pine for country air."²⁷

Levy's focus on the aesthetics of the urban is of course very timely, as the city arguably forms the preeminent modern subject, explored most prominently by the wandering male. The observer's gender is never identified in *A London Plane-Tree*, but as Levy knew, the conventions of lyric poetry, a highly personal form, would have meant that readers would identify the speaker in a woman poet's lyric work as female.²⁸ Levy's

²⁰ *London* 6.

²¹ The first section of the collection is titled after the volume ("A London Plane-Tree"). The second section, "Love, Dreams, and Death" contains mostly love lyrics, while the third, "Moods and Thoughts," focuses on melancholia and suicide. "Odds and Ends," the final section, offers what its title promises.

²² *London* 18 ("London in July").

²³ *London* 23 ("Ballade of a Special Edition").

²⁴ *London* 25 ("Straw in the Street").

²⁵ *London* 18 ("London in July").

²⁶ *London* 29.

²⁷ *London* 17 ("A London Plane-Tree").

²⁸ See Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993).

urban aesthetic as I define it, then, is the celebration of the city through the eyes of the female spectator. In this sense, women's visuality is essential to and inextricable from the urban aesthetic that Levy advances.

Within *A London Plane-Tree*, Levy reveals street observation as a mode for the female spectator to access the city. In "A March Day in London," arguably Levy's most transgressive poem in the collection, she charts a woman's sweeping peregrination of the city: "From end to end, with aimless feet / All day long have I paced the street."²⁹ The trek Levy's restless, pacing female figure makes through the city in "A March Day in London" forms a decidedly suspect move. Her "aimless feet" constitute perhaps the most reproachable aspect of the speaker's behavior since, as Martha Vicinus notes, "aimlessly wandering" remained controversial or even unacceptable as late as the 1880s.³⁰ Even more dubious, the speaker's pacing "from end to end" implies a full transversal of the city, from the East End³¹ to the West, participation in what Walkowitz calls the shift during the 1880s of the "imaginary landscape of London" from "one that was geographically bounded to one whose boundaries were indiscriminately and dangerously transgressed."³² Poor East Enders appeared as a new, threatening presence in West London in the 1880s, while *flâneurs* and "social investigators" explored the streets of East London, either to compile information to "help" the individuals there or simply to observe.³³

²⁹ *London* 19.

³⁰ Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) 297.

³¹ The East End served as the home of London's poorest (among them a growing number of East End Jews with which Levy shared religious and ethnic identity, if not her address or social station).

³² Walkowitz 29.

³³ Even women during this period began to go "slumming," looking for meaningful work on the wrong side of town (Walkowitz 53). The nature of the figure's walk in "A March Day in London" is ambiguous, but Levy appears to set herself up in opposition to this sort of behavior in her fiction (as I will demonstrate),

But—and here is where we get to the perplexing part—while Levy celebrates the city sights and at times embodies the urban spectator in her poems, she had denied the existence of a female counterpart to the *flâneur* the year before she published *A London Plane-Tree*: “The female club-lounger, the *flâneuse* of St. James Street, latch-key in pocket and eye-glasses on nose, remains a creature of the imagination.”³⁴ Levy’s statement here comes as a real surprise to many of her contemporary readers, as it stands out in a body of work that is acutely concerned with women’s visual experiences. So many feminist critics of the 1990s were excited to find Amy Levy’s work, which appears to be a clear rejoinder to Janet Wolff’s claim to the nonexistence of the *flâneuse*, only to discover that Levy had herself explicitly and forcefully denied this figure. Why would a writer clearly interested in women’s visuality and the urban aesthetic take special pains to disavow the *flâneuse*—a figure that would seem to be the ideal instantiation of both? The answer gets to the heart of Levy’s version of feminism, in which her exploration of women’s visuality in the city is not an end in itself, but a mode that is related to—and restrained by—Levy’s social positions on young professional women and attendant issues around work and domesticity.

Levy’s critics commonly extract her dismissal of the *flâneuse* without contextualizing it in connection with the subject of the essay in which it appears—“Women and Club Life,” which makes the case for the meaningful role newly established London ladies’ clubs play in the lives of women scholars and professionals.³⁵ According

where her characters do not transverse boundaries for the sake of interest or intrigue, but for economic reasons.

³⁴ “Women and Club Life,” *Woman’s World* 1:364-67, 1888. Reprinted in *The Complete Novels and Selected Writings of Amy Levy 1861-1889*, ed. Melvyn New (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993) 532-538. (hereafter *Complete*)

³⁵ In her biography on Levy, Linda Hunt Beckman remarks that “Levy’s observation about the *flâneuse* [sic] implies that while the city does not yet belong to women in the same way, she foresees a time when

to Vicinus, clubs targeted to upper middle class and professional women, which came on the London scene in the 1880s, offered meals, companionship, a suitable place to read and to spend leisure time, as well as “a smoking room, meeting rooms, and formal evening entertainment.”³⁶

The reader perhaps detects some sense of longing in Levy’s choice of “remains” to describe the absence of the *flâneuse*, with its suggestion that this figure may some day exist, but at the same time Levy uses this phrase to capitalize on the absence of the female spectator within the clubs she wishes to uphold. Her linking—collapsing—of the club lounge and the *flâneuse* (notice the listing of the two titles with the singular verb that follows: “The female club-lounge, the *flâneuse* . . . remains a creature of the imagination”) demonstrates an assumed connection between these two figures. The titles signify a woman who has the leisure to wile the day away in the club or on the streets (as Baudelaire claimed that becoming one with the crowd is the “passion and *profession*” of the *flâneur* [emphasis mine]³⁷), and Levy unequivocally disavows the existence of this character with language that Janet Wolff will later reverberate.

What motivates Levy’s negation of the *flâneuse* in “Women and Club Life,” I argue, is her practical advocacy of serious, respectable women worker-scholars within this piece, in contrast to the leisured frivolity of the full-time urban spectator. Her denial of the presence of the *flâneuse* immediately follows on her claim that “there is, so far, no good reason to suppose that” women have been “intoxicated” away from their families

women will be as much at home in the modern cityscape as men,” while Deborah Nord takes the statement at face value, as evidence suggesting that perhaps, to Levy’s mind, the female “leisurely stroller and street spectator did not yet exist in reality.” Beckman, *Amy Levy: Her Life and Letters* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000) 140. Nord 184.

³⁶ Vicinus 298.

³⁷ Baudelaire 9.

and personal duties because of club life.³⁸ Dissociating the club from the *flâneuse* forms one of several techniques she employs in support of ladies' clubs—among them, “there is no reason to suppose that because she is a member of a club a woman will develop the selfishness of her husband and brother.”³⁹

Ultimately, in this essay Levy attempts to dispel the idea that providing women with a space to work will encourage idleness and whimsy, in contrast to responsibility to one's personal and professional obligations. As “the natural outcome of the spirit of an age which demands excellence in work from women no less than from men,” the club space Levy describes forms an earnest space for work, not play; the individuals who populate her clubs do so for professional connections and support. They are often part of a new breed of women: those of the “respectable” middle class who struggle financially and socially in attempts to make it on their own.⁴⁰

Levy's distancing of the street-wandering female spectator from the professional woman who frequents the club accords with social norms at the time. Vicinus contends that women turned to clubs precisely because they weren't supposed to be wandering the streets. The cultural norms that restricted women's mobility and visibility and delimited the spaces in which they could respectably be seen created a special obstacle for professional women, who, instead of being sheltered at home and in the company of family and friends, found themselves having to navigate the city alone as part of their work and independent lifestyle. In this respect, clubs solved an important problem for independent working women: “how to spend two or three hours after work but before a

³⁸ *Complete* 535.

³⁹ *Complete* 538.

⁴⁰ *Complete* 533.

meeting or theater engagement.”⁴¹ They existed, in part, to keep women off the streets—or safe from the streets, some might say. In this respect, the very basis of the existence of women’s clubs implies a rejection of the *flâneuse*.

Levy’s tone and argument in this essay are above all designed to engender acceptance. “Women and Club Life” establishes her as a writer who is realistic, persuasive, even conciliatory—who prizes incremental progress over lofty ideals and who aims to make her readership comfortable with women’s rising freedoms as non-threatening. Women’s growing movement into public realm will not change women, she insists; it will not change their allegiance to their duties at home; it will not enable unsavory associations and behaviors; certainly, it will not engender voyeurism. Essentially, Levy exposes herself as a skillful marketer of a realistic agenda for promoting increased freedoms for nineteenth-century women.

And yet we still have this tension between Levy’s insistence in “Women and Club Life” on women workers and professionals as serious figures who use the club or metropolis to do necessary business, rather than to lounge and observe, and her explorations of the wandering female spectator in *A London Plane-Tree*. Levy’s political trajectory suggests that, in an ideal world, she would support women’s unrestricted presence in the public sphere, for she wrote passionately in support of women’s expanded opportunities in the traditionally male worlds of work, the public sphere, and the academy.⁴²

⁴¹ Vicinus 297.

⁴² Critics provide various accounts of how Levy situated herself within the feminist movement. Jusova places her “decidedly . . . within the discourse of the New Woman movement,” while Francis states more strongly: “Levy’s earlier poetry is governed by a militant radical feminism.” (Jusova 133; Francis 188). Beckman articulates in Levy’s biography, perhaps most lightly: “An apprehension of the devaluation of women and the need to widen their opportunities were integral to Levy’s sense of self and of society at a

One would be wrong, however, to assume that Levy's investment in the female spectator's visualization of the city and her feminist politics were fully complementary. Though fundamentally borne of the same desire to see women as fully liberated members of modern society, her aesthetic and social projects were actually in opposition in several important ways. For negotiating women's visualization of the city is complicated in Levy's texts not only by gender, but also by the political and literary ideologies of her day. In an era that conjoins the "art for art's sake" of aestheticism with the feminist politics of the New Woman, negotiating between allegiances to the aesthetic and the social became a critical concern of the feminist literary writer. Talia Schaffer and Kathy Psomiades argue that "New Women and female aesthetes often embraced widely differing opinions about literature and gender, and they ought to be read according to a different criteria."⁴³ Merging socio-political ideals and independent artistic goals held particular poignancy for Levy as an individual associated with both New Womanhood and aestheticism, but who arguably never aligned herself fully with either. Levy bears out Schaffer and Psomiades' contention, demonstrating areas of potential divergence between political ideals of a branch of *fin-de-siècle* feminism and aestheticist standards for art. Ultimately, Levy's body of work acts out this tension as a central conflict: how to do the art one wants and needs to do, while advancing (or not hindering) the social agenda one wants to further.⁴⁴ More specifically, how to represent the woman writer's

very early age, and the desire to right the wrongs experienced by her sex continued to be important throughout her life" (6).

⁴³ Talia Schaffer and Kathy Alexis Psomiades, eds., *Women and British Aestheticism* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999) 15.

⁴⁴ Put succinctly, Levy's aesthetic goal is to represent the urban spectacle through the eyes of the female observer. Her social goal, broadly conceived, is to expand women's freedoms—professional, academic, social; to expand the territory in which they can be, the jobs that they can hold, the ways that they can move in and through the city.

access to the city as part of her urban aesthetic while advancing opportunities for women professionals in socially acceptable ways?

Examining how Levy negotiates modalities of seeing becomes central to understanding how she resolves the quandaries surrounding her aesthetic and social projects. Visuality takes center stage as a mode that is, on the one hand, essential for the urban woman writer and, on the other, apparently counterproductive for the serious woman professional—and in both cases, highly suspect to a nineteenth-century audience. *Romance of a Shop* and *A London Plane-Tree* unfold inventive strategies for managing this friction, and the woman at the window emerges as a foundational figure in bridging this tension. By making use of liminal sites and methodology, Levy navigates the murky territory of London street walking and watching as a woman writer, effecting a shrewd merging of an aesthetic project and feminist polemic.

Levy's Liminal Strategy

Romance of a Shop: A Case Study in Contradiction

In 1888, Amy Levy published *Romance of a Shop*, one of three novels she wrote during her lifetime.⁴⁵ *Romance* is referenced by critics as a contrast to Levy's explorations of Jewish identity, as evidence of her desire to produce work for the market, and, by those working on her poetry, as a text that shares affinities with *A London Plane-Tree*. But the novel has yet to receive serious attention on its own. What is so fascinating about *Romance* is the way in which it consciously converses with many of Levy's other texts, both implicitly and more directly. As a work of social realism, the novel negotiates Levy's social aims in concert with her aesthetic project by concretely representing her

⁴⁵ Levy's other novels are *Reuben Sachs* (1888) and *Miss Meredith* (1889).

characters' engagement with the visual modes that she also engages in her social essays and poetry. The novel stands out in Levy's oeuvre as offering some context for understanding her apparent disparities and demonstrating how her various projects work in tandem. Ultimately, *Romance of a Shop* becomes the space where Levy most clearly works out issues surrounding women's visuality and the urban aesthetic within the matrix of late nineteenth century feminism.

The volume charts the experiences of the four Lorimer sisters—Fanny, Gertrude, Lucy, and Phyllis—upper middle-class young ladies who choose to open a photography studio in the attempt to support themselves after their father's death and accompanying loss of fortune leaves them virtually penniless. The women opt to take on this commercial venture instead of countenancing the condescension and dependence entailed by residing with their persnickety, carping Aunt Caroline or other relatives, their assumed option for livelihood.⁴⁶

Levy transports the Lorimers from their middle-class world of leisure and propriety to the working-class arena of labor and mobility as a means of exploring the class and gender dynamics associated with the rare instances of women's social and economic independence during this period. In the milieu of nineteenth-century middle-class values, the Lorimers' conduct in establishing and maintaining a photography studio stands out as suspect and potentially transgressive. Working and succeeding as photographers necessarily entails treading the boundaries of proper behavior, pushing the limits of female respectability—by “pac[ing] the town from end to end” to find studio space, only “sometimes accompanied” by male chaperones; going alone to the studio of an unknown young man because their multiple obligations preclude an available sister to

⁴⁶ Two of the sisters were to live with Aunt Caroline in London and two with other relatives in India.

serve as escort, and they cannot afford to turn away work; taking several dubious assignments, generally for male clients; and daringly riding atop the omnibus as an affordable means of transportation.⁴⁷

In their new endeavor, the Lorimers find relative success—self-reliance, professional development, and a tolerable degree of social acceptance. Each takes on her own role, with Gertrude and Lucy wielding the camera and managing the business and Fanny directing the more domestic needs of the household. It is only Phyllis, the youngest sister, who neither finds her role in the business nor fares well socially and dies an early death after a tryst with an older man, which I will explore in detail below.

Within the novel, Gertrude Lorimer stands out as the central heroine. It is Gertrude's idea to open the photography studio, putting to work the skills the young women had learned from their father, and she who persuades her sisters to take the leap—“Think of all the dull little ways by which women, ladies, are generally reduced to earning their living! But a business—that is so different. It is progressive; a creature capable of growth; the very qualities in which women's work is dreadfully lacking.”⁴⁸ Gertrude takes the lead in getting the business off the ground, locating studio space, and taking photography classes. Gertrude further maintains the strongest voice among her sisters, defending their independent life and vocation to family, friends, and others. Gertrude's most explicit defense of the Lorimers' choices comes when Aunt Caroline—the voice of old school propriety in the novel—questions the Lorimers about their unconventional work. Gertrude replies to her aunt's interrogation: “We have our living to earn, no less than our lives to live, and in neither case can we afford to be the slaves of

⁴⁷ Amy Levy, *The Romance of a Shop* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1888). Reprinted in *Complete*, 59-196. Quotations from 81, 102, 90, 86.

⁴⁸ *Complete* 63.

custom. Our friends must trust us or leave us; must rely on our self-respect and our judgment. Convention apart, are not judgment and self-respect what we most of us do rely on in our relations with people, under any circumstances whatever?"⁴⁹ Gertrude is a visionary, a thinker, and a doer.

It is also through Gertrude that Levy most directly explores women's visual experience of the city in *Romance*, including the pleasure of the visual and the power of the female gaze. Gertrude relishes viewing the street scene from her open window. As her sisters are arguing over whether the window should remain open or closed, we are told that: "Gertrude, who had herself a secret, childish love for the gas-lit street, for the sight of hurrying people, the lamps, the hansom cabs, flickering in and out the yellow haze, like so many fire-flies, took no part in the dispute . . ." ⁵⁰ Levy mediates Gertrude's pleasure by signifying it as "childish," rather than voyeuristic, but the pleasure of the gaze is certainly present. Likewise, the one significant privilege that Gertrude allows herself is sitting atop the omnibus, which she uses for jaunts to the British Museum to take a "course of photographic reading" and to go to clients. As Gertrude "mount[s] boldly to the top of an Atlas omnibus" in one instance, Levy describes:

Indeed, for Gertrude, the humours of the town had always possessed a curious fascination. She contemplated the familiar London pageant with an interest that had something of passion in it; and, for her part, was never inclined to quarrel with the fate which had transported her from the comparative tameness of Camden Hill to regions where the pulses of the great city could be felt distinctly as they beat and throbbed.⁵¹

Gertrude visualizes the "familiar London pageant" from her seat on the omnibus and delights in the view the vehicle provides. Visualizing the urban scene engenders not only

⁴⁹ *Complete* 106-7.

⁵⁰ *Complete* 110.

⁵¹ *Complete* 87.

Gertrude's interest, but her "passion" and "fascination." Indeed, so great is Gertrude's love of the city sights that she expresses gratitude for the misfortune that has catapulted her from the secluded existence of the middle-class woman to a position in which she can travel about and observe the city.

And yet, *Romance* contests such visual self-possession of the woman observer. For while Levy highlights Gertrude's visual fascination with the city through the window and omnibus, she effaces the looking inherent to Gertrude's professional work. Though the bulk of the novel focuses on the trials and exhilarations of running the studio, Levy provides the reader with very few scenes of the Lorimers' actual photographic work. Instead, we read detailed accounts of their search for studio space; decoration of private and professional quarters; identification and solicitation of clients; technical training; economic misfortunes; and division of labor. In those select moments when Levy describes the interaction between photographer and subject, she uses the camera to mediate the relationship between the observer and her subject, removing any sense of power or pleasure in looking from the photographic work that the Lorimers undertake.

In one instance, Gertrude must go alone to photograph a deceased woman, as her sisters are all occupied with other responsibilities. Fanny comments aptly that "it is very strange . . . that he should select young ladies, young girls, for such a piece of work!" Gertrude explains, "Oh, it was a mere chance. It was the housekeeper who came, and we happened to be the first photographer's shop she passed. She seemed to think I might not like it, but we cannot afford to refuse work."⁵² Levy's descriptions of the job accentuate the absence of Gertrude's gaze. Clearly, Gertrude must observe her subject and her surroundings in order to carry out her task, but the language Levy uses to describe her

⁵² *Complete* 90.

viewing of the scene emphasizes that Gertrude manages as little looking as possible.

Levy writes that upon her arrival in the room of the woman to be photographed, Gertrude finds herself “too dazzled [by the light] to be aware with any clearness of her surroundings.” She catches “glimpses” of the outer quarters through the window. The woman’s husband sits at the edge of the room, and Gertrude “instinctively refrain[s] from glancing in the direction of this second figure; and ha[s] only the vaguest impression of a dark, bowed head, and a bearded, averted face,” though she accidentally catches “the glance” of his eyes in a “flash” as she leaves the scene.⁵³ Each choice that Levy makes to signify a mode of looking stresses a limited, partial visual experience.

With every move, then, Levy underscores the absence of a penetrating, voyeuristic photographic gaze on Gertrude’s part. Though her sisters and their neighbors view their work as somewhat shocking and sensational (“you young ladies are actually going by yourselves to the house to make a picture of the body?” one neighbor asks in excitement and incredulity), Gertrude’s work is tainted neither by sentimentality, horror, nor thrill; rather, it is carried out with the utmost dignity, respect, and *restraint*.⁵⁴ She accomplishes her work with a solemn sense of professional duty, with no suggestion of voyeuristic pleasure, control, or even affect. In this scene, and elsewhere by omission, Levy puts the very act of looking and its attendant pleasures under erasure in the women’s photographic work.

It is worth recognizing that photography during Levy’s period had not been theorized as an act of gazing or, certainly, voyeurism to the degree that it has today.⁵⁵

⁵³ *Complete* 92.

⁵⁴ *Complete* 94.

⁵⁵ Though, there is some basis for Levy’s linking of photography and spectatorship. Charles Baudelaire, for example, served as one of the earliest critics of photography. His commentary on the matter, given the nature

However, Levy's conspicuous avoidance of scenes of actual photographic work, her selection of the most detailed scene as that of a figure deprived of her own gaze, who cannot look back, and her careful attention to issues of spectatorship throughout her body of work all point to her erasure of the gaze within photography as marked and material. More immediately, Levy's removal of pleasure, power, and looking itself from the photographic gaze within *Romance of a Shop* stands out because it occurs within a matrix in which the power and pleasure of the visual are repeatedly emphasized—and mediated—in multiple forms. For, Levy's denial of women's professional gaze coexists with her direct contention with their public spectatorship through the omnibus and the window in *Romance*. This contrast is similar and related to Levy's celebration of the female spectator in *A London Plane-Tree* and her denial of the *flâneuse* in "Women and Club Life"—an emphasis on the pleasure of the visual through the eyes of the woman spectator, alongside a denial of the gaze or the figure who holds it. But here, this tension exists within the same text.

I argue that these discrepancies can be explained through Levy's liminal strategy. While I recognize that Levy celebrates women's spectatorship through the window and the omnibus, I want to temper this perspective by drawing attention to the ways in which Levy mitigates women's view and experience of the city through these apparati in *A London Plane-Tree* and *Romance of a Shop*. From the Latin word *limen*, meaning "a threshold"—most literally, the doorway between rooms or at the entry of a building—"liminality" is a concept that has gained traction in literary and media studies. The *OED* notes that "liminal" first appears in publication in the field of psychology in 1884, which

of much of his other work, naturally invites a consideration of photography in association with acts of perception, with the figure of the *flâneur*. See <http://www.visibledarkness.com/blog/archives/00000505.html> for a selection of Baudelaire's critical responses to photography.

means that the concept is contemporaneous with Levy's era.⁵⁶ It was further developed through the psychological and anthropological theories of Arnold van Gennep in 1909 and Victor Turner in 1967.⁵⁷ In *Romance of a Shop* and *A London Plane-Tree*, Levy consistently uses objects literally to create a space or threshold between the woman observer and the city, in order to filter her view, and she turns to socially liminal sites (those that are neither private nor public, but inhabit some place in between) and practices (those that ride the line between improper and acceptable) to soften women's exposure to the city. Walls and objects nearly always mitigate her female observers' view and experience of the city. The panes of the window, the lens of the camera, the walls of the club, and the casing of the omnibus all provide a separation between the woman observer and the city. Far from advancing a wholly radical agenda or offering untempered support for the female street observer, Levy reveals her keen investment in liminality—what Victor Turner calls that which resides “betwixt and between”—as key for professional women's negotiation of aesthetic and social aims amidst their newfound mobility in the visual spectacle of the modern city.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “liminal” (adj.) is: “Of or pertaining to the threshold or initial stage of a process.” “liminal” in OED. “1884 Mind July 428 The liminal difficulties cannot be evaded without the most disastrous consequences to the body of the exposition. 1884 J. SULLY Outlines Psychol. v. 114 Every stimulus must reach a certain intensity before any appreciable sensation results. This point is known as the threshold or liminal intensity. 1895 TITCHENER Külpe's Outl. Psychol. 243 We may also introduce the concept of the limen, defining the just noticeable deviation from indifference as a liminal pleasantness or unpleasantness.” *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 4 Apr. 2000 <<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00181778>>.

⁵⁷ More recently, the concept has been used in media theory by Donna Haraway. It's a concept that we will later see as also connected to Benjamin's *Passagen Werk (Arcades Project)*. Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” in Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature (New York: Routledge, 1991) 150.

⁵⁸ Levy existed in a liminal social space herself: as a writer who struggled to balance aesthetic aspirations and social ideals; as an individual who faced the tension between homoerotic feelings and the appeal of heterosexual marriage; and as an academic, bourgeois Anglo-Jewish woman in late nineteenth century London. On the latter, Jusova writes that “Levy appears to have had to negotiate between (often contradictory) pressures coming from the two cultural communities within which she located herself and which both in some ways helped construct her difficult sense of identity,” the two identities being British and Jewish (Jusova 132). Levy's character Ruben Sachs also struggles with these two identities.

Van Gennep's concept of the liminal can be helpful in understanding Levy's use of this idea. Van Gennep introduced the concept of the "liminal period" in his exploration of the rites of passage that are associated with changes in age, status, place, and other nodes of transition. In *The Rites of Passage* (1909), he writes that: "A complete scheme of rites of passage theoretically includes preliminal rites (separation), liminal rites (rites of transition), and postliminal rites (rites of incorporation."⁵⁹ Turner is most interested in the door as the liminal or "threshold" object, as he notes that, "the door is the boundary between the foreign and domestic worlds in the case of an ordinary dwelling Therefore to cross the threshold is to unite oneself with a new world."⁶⁰ The liminal, for Van Gennep, is the state of transition, a significant moment between detaching from one stable space and assimilating into another.

I am working with a somewhat different kind of liminality than Van Gennep when I refer to Levy's use of this strategy—not a rite of passage in an individual's lifetime, but a moment of transition for society at large in terms of women's freedoms of visibility and mobility in the city. For Levy, liminality—essentially, "in-betweenness"—is both spatial and strategic. It relates not only to the limitation of women's visibility through the mediation of a liminal object, but also to Levy's investment in social choices for women—those related to professional work and domesticity—that straddle a middle ground. Essentially, I argue, Levy is focused on this middle state that Van Gennep describes, and while moving beyond the need for this middle state—completing the rite of passage—in some ways is no doubt something Levy envisions as ideal, she also

⁵⁹ Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedon and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977) 11.

⁶⁰ Van Gennep 21.

accepts this phase as a necessary rite of passage, and she strategically uses this in-betweenness to further her advancement of women's autonomy in the city.

By comparing how Levy similarly conceptualizes visual apparatus in *A London Plane-Tree* and *Romance*, I contest the argument others have made for explaining Levy's apparent contradictions on the subject of women's emerging freedoms through differences of genre. Levy's seemingly disparate responses to women's visibility, I contend, fit with her larger agenda to market realistic expansions of women's freedoms to her readers. In her exploration of technologies of seeing, Levy turns natural associations with these spaces on their head in order to make her reader more comfortable with women's movement into new territory.

Window

It is the domestic window that serves as Levy's signature site of women's visual experience in her work and that therefore helps us to understand her position toward visibility more generally. Levy's account of Gertrude's visualization of the city through the window in *Romance* finds an almost identical parallel in *A London Plane-Tree*, which sheds further light on her use of the window in her work. In the title poem, "A London Plane-Tree," the woman poet addresses the plane tree in the city square from the perspective of the interior: "Here from my garret-pane, I mark / The plane-tree, bud and blow, / Shed her recuperative bark, / And spread her shade below." The poet implicitly parallels herself and her own love for the city with the plane-tree's similar contentment with her urban home, for while the other trees "droop and pine for country air; / The

plane-tree loves the town.”⁶¹ “A London Plane-Tree” occupies a significant position and one that sets the stage for the collection’s break with the pastoral Romantic tradition by celebrating the city through the eyes of the female poet.

Levy’s woman at the window in “A London Plane-Tree” becomes a troubling and problematic figure for those critics advancing a narrative of Levy’s investment in the ambulant urban female spectator. In her analysis of Levy’s project of celebrating women’s newfound freedom to observe and travel through the metropolis, Ana Vadillo bases her primary analysis on the *London Plane-Tree* poem “Ballade of an Omnibus,” clearly echoed in *Romance of a Shop*. Vadillo claims that the “poet-passenger uses the omnibus as an optical apparatus” to view the city sights and that the “woman poet is ultimately in control of her gaze.”⁶² Vadillo continues, “for the first time the urban woman appears to write freely.”⁶³ And yet, in another example of the tension in Levy’s work, Vadillo has some apparent difficulty reconciling her argument for Levy’s bold representation of women’s mobility via the omnibus with other representations of women in *A London Plane-Tree*, particularly in the title poem of the collection. Vadillo explains the woman’s position behind the window in the signature poem by arguing in different versions of her essay for “A London Plane-Tree” as either a “contrast” or precursor to “development” of women’s mobility explored in “Ballade of an Omnibus.” Comparing the title poem and “Ballade of an Omnibus,” she claims, “Amy Levy describes the modern woman poet’s constrained spectatorship in the private sphere and contrasts this

⁶¹ *London* 17.

⁶² Ana Parejo Vadillo, “Phenomena in Flux: The Aesthetics and Politics of Traveling in Modernity,” manuscript page 18.

⁶³ Vadillo, *Women Poets and Urban Aestheticism* 73.

with the freedom represented by the figure of the mass-transportation passenger.”⁶⁴ She elsewhere argues, through comparison of these two poems, that the collection evidences a “development in modernity from the spectator incarcerated in her garret-pane, to the passenger in the omnibus.”⁶⁵ Of “A London Plane-Tree,” she writes: “The questions this poem seeks to answer are thus: how does the speaker behind the windowpane manage to break through the barriers of the window? How does the urban woman poet cross the transparent border that divides the private realm, where she exists, from the public sphere where she wants to be? How can the woman poet enter the space of the city and still be a spectator of modern life?”⁶⁶

It is this apparent tension between the omnibus spectator and the window watcher that I wish to contest through closer examination of these poems and the spaces they reflect. The tension identified between the woman on the omnibus and the woman behind the window is indicative of cultural assumptions about these venues. On the surface, the woman who observes the city from the interior seems constitutionally different from the one who observes as she is transported through the metropolis. The former appears locked away in the Victorian domicile, shuttered from city, while the latter seems representative of freedom, modernity, and mobility. And yet, these figures do exist side by side in this volume and elsewhere in Levy’s work. The basis for explaining the gap between the window and the omnibus in the vein of development is suspect because, after “Ballade,” Levy returns to the woman at the window in *A London Plane-Tree*, without a negative context. In “The Piano-Organ” (five poems after

⁶⁴ Ana Parejo Vadillo, “Phenomena in Flux: The Aesthetics and Politics of Traveling in Modernity” in *Women’s Experience of Modernity, 1875-1945*, eds. Ann L. Ardis and Leslie W. Lewis (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003) 213.

⁶⁵ Vadillo, *Women Poets and Urban Aestheticism* 73.

⁶⁶ Vadillo, *Women’s Experience of Modernity* 214.

“Ballade”), for example, the poet listens to the melodies of street musicians from her window, as I will explore below. The placement of the title poem—indeed, its mere existence *as* a title poem—does not suggest it is something to escape from, but something that is foundational for the other poems in the volume. And in *Romance*, one woman inhabits both figures, as Gertrude Lorimer enjoys the view from both the window and from the omnibus.

Indeed, I argue that the very characteristics that make the window a negative and problematic vantage for Vadillo are at the heart of Levy’s investment in it. Whereas later writers, such as Woolf and Fitzgerald, will focus on the fluidity of the window, its unique ability to blend public and private and blur boundaries, Levy capitalizes instead on the window as a mediating object *between* the observer and the city. As Gertrude views the city from her open window in the passage cited above, she is able to view and enjoy the urban visual images, but she is also separated from the city scene below by distance, frame, and the building itself—she remains in the interior, enclosed in the house, while the sights she observes are those of the street outside. As such, Levy fashions the window as a productive liminal space that enables the woman observer to legitimately view and experience (though not move through) street life from within the interior.⁶⁷ It is true that, as a private space that renders the observer immobile and offers only a circumscribed, framed view, the window inherently has certain limits. But Levy uses these very limits strategically, to significant purpose for the woman observer. The garret window holds a different set of associations than the window from the family home, as during Levy’s era the garret was often a rented space for a solitary individual. Nonetheless, it is the window’s historical associations with femininity and domesticity

that Levy capitalizes on to further her social project: the window provides the view of the street that her character or speaker needs to convey the scenes of the city, but in a fashion that most of her contemporaries would consider beyond reproach.

The notion of the window as a liminal object restricting women's visibility would have been a familiar cultural concept for Levy. For the cultural lexicon Levy drew from was not limited to European narratives of the male gaze and the position of women; it was equally rooted in Jewish tradition. As a Jew in the 19th century, Levy would have been familiar with the *mehitzah*—literally, “partition”—which separated men and women in many synagogues during her era and remains a fixture in many Orthodox congregations today.⁶⁸

The practice is succinctly described in Myriam Tangi's 2007 photographic essay, “Mehitzah: Seen by Women.” Tangi's project “explores the distance and separation between men and women in the Jewish tradition, specifically in synagogues and places of prayer. Various architectural strategies are employed in order to ensure that men do not see women, and women have a limited view of men. The area for women is often placed behind the space for men, physically separated by a *mehitzah* which can be a curtain, a latticed wall, or a folding screen.”⁶⁹ According to Louis Jacobs, often the *mehitzah* will be a “separate room at the back of the synagogue, where the men cannot see [the women] but where they can see what is going on in the synagogue, with some difficulty, through small windows in the joining wall or through a grill in the wall. The reason for this

⁶⁸ Today, nearly all Conservative and Reform congregations have done away with the *mehitzah*, and families sit together.

⁶⁹ Myriam Tangi, “Mehitzah: Seen by Women, A Photographic Essay.” Paris, France. 2007-2008.

insistence on separate seating is usually given that it is to prevent the men being distracted in their worship by the proximity of the women.”⁷⁰

According to Levy’s biographer, her family seems to have been observant only intermittently, on holy days, and sometimes attended the Upper Berkeley Street Synagogue, which also makes an appearance in her novel *Ruben Sachs*.⁷¹ Upper Berkeley Street was consecrated in 1870, when Levy was a girl. Instead of a formal *mehitzah*, Upper Berkeley Street was built with a ladies’ gallery, which was a different architectural response to the need to separate men and women in houses of prayer. Much like a set of balconies, the first ladies’ galleries were built by Christian architects in the seventeenth century and sought to avoid the “creation of often asymmetrical and screened-off spaces that might block windows or entrances. These integrated galleries overlooked the synagogue, though screens and grilles blocked men’s view of the gallery’s female denizens.”⁷² The concept of the *mehitzah* arguably provided Levy with a model for allowing women in a secular context appropriate and limited visual access to “masculine” public spaces, in alignment with contemporary mores. Moreover, the arrangement of the ladies in their gallery and the men on the ground floor provides an apt parallel to the woman at the window, the man in the street below. Levy’s notion of the window as a space providing free visual access while allowing women to remain in a distinctly feminine space, then, is likely a derivative of both Anglo and Jewish mores and traditions.

⁷⁰ Louis Jacobs, *The Jewish Religion: A Companion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 513-14.

⁷¹ Beckman, *Amy Levy: Her Life and Letters* 17-18.

⁷² Karla Goldman, *Beyond the Synagogue Gallery* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2001) 40. The first known women’s gallery was built in Amsterdam in 1639.

Through both the title poem and the collection's illustration of the woman scribbling at a desk in front of her window, *A London Plane-Tree* additionally designates the window as a space of writerly practice and craft, her language—"from my garret pane I mark"—underscoring the close connection between the window and the writing process. The window is the space where Levy ostensibly takes impressions of the city garnered from the street, the window, the garden, and elsewhere, and translates them into the poetry we read in the volume. While highly aesthetic, then, Levy's window in *A London Plane-Tree* is also a professionalized space, and Levy uses its association with work and productivity to mediate the visuality of the spectator as part of her strategic marketing of expanded opportunities for women professionals. Levy's technique here is powerfully rendered in "The Piano-Organ" in *A London Plane-Tree*:

My student-lamp is lighted,
The books and papers are spread;
A sound comes floating upwards,
Chasing the thoughts from my head.

I open the garret window,
Let the music in and the moon;
See the woman grin for coppers,
While the man grinds out a tune.⁷³

While Edouard Manet, who associated with Baudelaire and embodied his *flâneur*, had to traverse to the disreputable outskirts of Paris to observe the undesirables who form the subject of his painting *The Old Musician* (1862), Levy paints her musicians from the perspective of the interior. In doing so, she evades the predicament of French women impressionists (such as Berthe Morisot), who generally painted only domestic scenes and commissioned portraits because they could not haunt the streets, the bars, and the ballets

⁷³ *London* 28.

as could Degas, Caillebotte, and Manet.⁷⁴ Levy's musicians form part of a street scene that might be viewed from any number of locales in the city, but her speaker views the scene from her window, avoiding the complications of occupational female spectatorship.

The speaker's responsibility for her gaze in "The Piano-Organ" is further diminished by the impulse that draws her to the musicians. Neither strolling the streets nor spying from her home, the speaker is drawn from proper pursuits to "open the garret window" by the sound of the tune that "comes floating upwards" and invades her personal space. Levy's speaker eludes being cast in the role of the *flâneuse* by casting herself as the studious scholar who prefers her private occupations to an encounter with the colorful characters who "chas[e] the thoughts from [her] head."⁷⁵

Far from rejecting the woman at the window in favor of more enlightened figures, I argue that Levy uses the model of the woman at the window and transfers it to new venues in order to expand territory for women in the city. I call the window foundational because Levy draws on and emphasizes its natural, assumed, and unconscious qualities as a space of femininity and makes us see the more "progressive" modes of looking that she explores—the omnibus and the camera—in the same light. The woman in the omnibus and the woman with the camera are an extension of the woman at the window, not a departure from her. They are similar not because Levy's woman at the window is more free, but because her woman at the omnibus is more constrained than Vadillo imagines.

⁷⁴ See Griselda Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity" in *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988).

⁷⁵ We can contrast this, for example, to Gustave Caillebotte's *Young Man at His Window* (1876), an impressionist painting that depicts a man, his back turned to the viewer, staring out a full-length window at a woman in the street below. Because there is no indication of anything else to distract or occupy the man, the spectatorship in the painting appears to be powerful and all-consuming.

Omnibus

Like the window, the omnibus similarly provides the woman observer physical separation from the object of her stare in a way that is socially acceptable. The omnibus serves as a physical object that separates the observer from the street, encased in a functional apparatus that penny-wise Londoners use to get to and from work, school, and social obligations. A newcomer on the urban transport scene in the *fin-de-siècle*, the omnibus figures as a socially liminal site during this era because it is gaining acceptance as a respectable means of transport for ladies, though its status remains precarious. Riding an omnibus for women was not considered so daring as walking alone, nor so conventional (or expensive!) as a chaperoned carriage ride—it lurked somewhere in the uncertain middling territory.⁷⁶ And though the omnibus is a vehicle for public transportation—in no sense private—its functional, purpose-driven nature, with a fixed route and defined method of use, shields the woman observer riding on well-traveled routes from unseemly sites in the city. While giving the woman observer a view of the city, the omnibus also provides a remove that prevents her from directly engaging with it (loitering where she wishes, drifting in and out of shops, exploring an untapped alleyway).

We know that the omnibus provided certain kinds of visual and physical freedom that the window did not, and Levy could have emphasized these distinctions. However, Levy does not distinguish between these spaces by emphasizing these differences. In fact, she emphasizes that while the omnibus and window enable Gertrude a distinct perspective on the city, her gaze from both venues is filtered so that she views only inanimate objects and the generic visualization of the “London pageant” and “hurrying people.” Levy encourages us to see Gertrude’s gaze as a panoramic vision of a city

⁷⁶ See Vadillo, “Phenomena in Flux: The Aesthetics and Politics of Traveling in Modernity,” 205-220.

scene—akin to such entertainment as panoramas, zoopraxiscope, and other similar forms—rather than a penetrating, threatening stare.⁷⁷ Likewise, while the omnibus in *A London Plane-Tree* provides the poet with a distinct perspective on the city—what she calls “the scene whereof I cannot tire, / The human tale of love and hate, / The city pageant, early and late”—the female speaker recedes, I think, from full control of her gaze. For the female figure Levy constructs—here, and in *Romance of a Shop*—exhibits a self-conscious awareness of what she should and should not be looking at as a respectable, responsible woman.

Baudelaire’s *flâneur* makes his career not only by closely observing the crowd, but also by creating art from detailed portraits of those he observes—“from costume and coiffure down to gesture, glance and smile,”⁷⁸ he identifies and categorizes dandies, prostitutes, absinthe drinkers, criminals, and other figures. Levy omits such details and defined characters from Gertrude’s view and from the view of the poet in *A London Plane-Tree*. Her urban spectators identify “gas-lamps,” “wind,” “straw in the street,” “shining roofs and towers,” “dirty snow,” “the scene,” “the . . . pageant,” “ruby lights of the hansoms,” but they provide no detailed portraits of individuals. In “The Piano-Organ,” Levy’s profiles of the two musicians lack specificity, but are actually as detailed as any in the collection. I want to suggest that Levy conspicuously avoids constructing individualized figures, in part, in recognition of the problematic status of urban female spectatorship in the feminist politics she aimed to advance.

For while Levy forwards the volume’s project of representing modernity by displaying the individuals in the city as anonymous and uniform, her depiction of the

⁷⁷ See Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990).

⁷⁸ Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life* 13.

facelessness of the crowd has a special resonance for her as a woman poet. Figures may at times literally blend together in the impressionist paintings of street figures in Paris by Baudelaire's *flâneurs*, but in order to achieve this effect, the painters must be observing, and their subjects belie both the artists' locations and their sustained spectatorship. For example, Gustave Caillebotte's *Paris Street: A Rainy Day* (1877), characteristic of this period, is a sharply detailed painting of smartly dressed men and women with umbrellas in the city's streets that would have required detailed observation to construct; Auguste Renoir's more provocative *The Umbrellas* (1881) depicts a crowd of men and women—with precisely drawn clothing, hair, and facial expressions—in a public park and places the viewer in the position of leering spectator at a working-class girl.⁷⁹ The absence of such detailed figures in Levy's street poems that would parallel representations in the art of this period cannot, I believe, be dismissed as solely a matter of aesthetic taste. Levy knew that respectable women should not be scrutinizing the characters in the street and, more importantly, was invested in forwarding the notion that, busy with multiple, consequential obligations, professional women had not the time or interest to be *flâneuse*. She negotiates this terrain in her texts by omitting the kind of detail (Baudelaire's costume, coiffure, and gesture) that implies sustained, deliberate observation. With her hazy, hurried depictions of the individuals in the city, she provides the readers of the volume with the impression that, instead of studying characters on the street, penetrating their subjects with a threatening gaze, Levy's figures have their eyes cast down or make only passing glances.

⁷⁹ For an analysis of this painting, see Paul Smith, *Impressionism* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1995) 39.

In employing this tactic, Levy intimates—or at least leaves open the possibility—that her spectators view the city sights and characters as a blur en route to socially sanctioned destinations. For unlike Baudelaire’s *flâneur*, Levy’s omnibus rider is not a figure of leisure. Quite the opposite, as with the window and the club, Levy associates the omnibus with professional and scholarly work. Recall that Gertrude takes the bus not for exploration or even leisure, but to go to the British Museum and to take a course on photography as a means to develop her business. While the male *flâneur* is a leisured figure who stares and ambles (never walks hurriedly, as that would be a sign that he had somewhere to go), the New Woman professional has a job, a specific destination, and uses the streets or omnibus to get there. Gertrude’s is a very specific kind of visibility, then—one that is enjoyed as a professional woman, en route to jobs, clubs, meetings, and classes, not as the idle male wanderer who wiles away his days spying on people in the street.

As in her association of the window with scholarship and work, Levy further mediates the visibility of the omnibus by emphasizing that her characters’ use of the omnibus is driven by financial need. Gertrude Lorimer explains her use of the omnibus in terms of economic necessity: “‘Because one cannot afford a carriage or even a hansom cab,’ she argued to herself, ‘is one to be shut up away from the sunlight and the streets?’”⁸⁰ Levy admits to the exhilarations that come with these new freedoms, as Gertrude relishes the city scene, but exonerates Gertrude’s spectatorship as a matter of “fate”—a fate within which she abides without “quarrel,” but which she, critically, did not solicit. “Fate” in this sense becomes a justification of Gertrude’s spectatorship, when the reality is that her love of the city scene indicates that she would likely prefer the

⁸⁰ *Complete* 86.

omnibus if given a choice. The “Ballade of an Omnibus” in *A London Plane-Tree* plays out the same strategy. The speaker of this poem defends her riding of the omnibus as a matter of necessity—“I am contented with my fate”—rather than freedom, but clearly delights in the view that the tour provides. The looking associated with riding the omnibus brings a great amount of pleasure and an aesthetic outlet, then, but it is a pleasure granted by economic necessity.⁸¹

The practice of justifying the pleasures that come with mobility as a matter of “fate” draws on Levy’s recognition of the freedoms allowed to working class London women, but denied to those of the middle class. During the nineteenth century, working class women largely moved about unchaperoned as their work required, while norms for middle-class femininity confined most middle class women to the domestic sphere or to proper public spaces (shopping venues, libraries, museums). Levy had written to Vernon Lee that she did not pity those she visited at the working girls club at Westminster, given their relative freedom: “Somehow those girls fr. the streets, with their short & merry lives, don’t excite my compassion half as much as small bourgeoisie shut up in stucco villas at Brodesbury or Islington.”⁸² The distance between Levy and the working class women whom she to some degree envied draws nearer when one considers that, according to her biographer, Levy herself worked diligently to earn money both out of

⁸¹ *London* 22.

⁸² Beckman, *Amy Levy: Her Life and Letters* 266-7. Deborah Nord also points out that, during this period, “the issue of economic precariousness” was “a condition that middle-class women now confronted and acknowledged for the first time.” She explains, “Women who participated in the movement away from traditional domesticity struggled to maintain their economic independence and to negotiate their marginal social status.” As such, writers during this period often compared the “situation of working class girls and women to that of the ‘new woman’ of the upper classes” (216-17).

“the recognition that the family coffers could use replenishment and from the impulse toward self-sufficiency and professionalism.”⁸³

Camera

As with the omnibus, Levy sharply draws back from any dubious behavior when it comes to visibility in women’s work and uses the material object of photography, the camera, to circumscribe the visibility of her heroines and efface the looking inherent to the work that the Lorimers undertake.⁸⁴ As reflected in Gertrude’s photographing of the dead woman above, armed with a camera, Levy’s heroine need not even look.⁸⁵ The new technology can represent the image and essentially do the looking for her, and the camera quite literally stands between the woman’s eyes and what she sees, mediating the connection between the two. Moreover, as a practical artifact, a tool of industry, the camera not only separates the observer from the object, but also justifies the relationship between observer and object as an economic one, as in Levy’s defense of the omnibus.

Levy’s choice of photography as a vocation for the Lorimers appears in many ways provocative to the modern reader, schooled as we are in theories of the power of the gaze and the authority of the observer. But the history of photography during this period and awareness of the work of its key feminist leaders, such as Levy’s contemporary

⁸³ Beckman, *Amy Levy: Her Life and Letters* 76.

⁸⁴ Unlike the omnibus and the window, the camera does not make an appearance in *A London Plane-Tree*. But Levy’s conception of women’s visual experience through photography in *Romance* is consistent with her techniques in her poetry collection and elsewhere in her novel.

⁸⁵ In step with Gertrude’s absent gaze in photographing the deceased woman, Lucy, the only sister still working as a photographer at the novel’s close, ultimately chooses to specialize in a branch of photography beyond reproach—portraits of children. Her work in this respect again accords with that of French female impressionists of the same era, whose projects were restricted to domestic scenes in line with Parisian standards of what proper women should and should not be looking at. Lucy’s photographing of children is arguably the least transgressive conceivable, since, conventionally, a woman’s gaze *should* be directed at children as part of her role of supervising and shaping them. Levy’s tactic here is not to erase the act of looking, but to select a subject with which gazing is a non-issue.

Catherine Weed Barnes, demonstrates that the profession Levy chose for her heroines was not as culturally radical a choice for women during the *fin-de-siècle* in England and America as it might appear. Instead, Levy crafts photography as an exciting, new (socially liminal) avocation that allows women work, mobility, and an aesthetic outlet in moderately acceptable ways.

Levy was an early leader in introducing the notion of photography as a field for women. Photography was not considered a practical field for young ladies until just about the time Levy wrote *Romance of a Shop*. C. Jane Gover writes that, “Before the 1880s photography, like many areas of professional endeavor, was inaccessible to women. In the early years of the history of the medium, the appearance of a woman with a camera was quite unusual.”⁸⁶ This was due to the heavy equipment (50-70 pounds), the need for a portable darkroom, and the training needed to undertake what was at first a very complex process. The Lorimers set up their photography studio just as technology was becoming much more manageable for women and amateurs. By the late 1870s, plates need no longer be processed immediately, which had previously been the case and made having portable dark rooms necessary or photographic sites less varied. By the 1890s, particularly with the addition of the Kodak push-button camera, the photographic apparatus became much lighter and more wieldy.⁸⁷

In fact, Gover tells us, “In the years 1880 to 1920, photography, a male bastion before 1880, emerged as a career option and avocation for women,” employing an

⁸⁶ C. Jane Gover, *The Positive Image: Women Photographers in Turn of the Century America* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988) 5. The first professional female photographer in London is listed as early as 1852. See also Grace Seiberling, *Amateurs, Photography, and the Mid-Victorian Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) 3-7, and, Elizabeth Heyert *The Glass-House Years: Victorian Portrait Photography 1839-1870* (Montclair, NJ: Allanheld & Schram: 1979.) 58.

⁸⁷ Naomi Rosenblum, *A History of Women Photographers* (New York: Abbeville Press, 2000) 55.

estimated several thousand women in Europe and the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century.⁸⁸ Wexler concurs that, “Throughout the 1890s, the periodical press carried many articles that praised photography as a vocation for women,”⁸⁹ and by 1899, the journal *American Amateur Photographer* could proclaim that, ‘photography is becoming more and more recognized as a field of endeavor particularly suited to women.’⁹⁰

The Lorimers may have been “forced” into the career world, but their trajectory in entering the photography profession fit many of the conventions of their day. It was common, for example, for women to learn photography on the heels of the interest of a male relative—usually a husband or, in the case of the Lorimers, a father.⁹¹ It was typical for women photographers to be educated, middle-class women—a status that applies to the Lorimers before the loss of their father. Photography was specifically promoted for well-educated, middle class women ‘with refinement, art tastes, literary culture . . . and considerable business ability.’⁹²

Advertisements and periodical literature of the era reflect this market for women as both professional and amateur photographers. Writing of an American context, Hirshler agrees that ‘photography was considered a proper medium for women, and it was actively marketed to them by film and camera manufacturers, whose advertisements frequently depicted women as photographers.’⁹³ Camera companies began advertising in women’s magazines and targeting their products toward women in 1886; by 1888,

⁸⁸ Gover 17 and Rosenblum 45.

⁸⁹ Laura Wexler, *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000) 210.

⁹⁰ Erica E. Hirshler, *A Studio of Her Own: Women Artists in Boston 1870-1940* (Boston: MFA Publications, 2001) 56.

⁹¹ Gover 27.

⁹² Gover 52; internal quotation from Barnes, *Wilson’s Photographic Magazine*, 1 (1891), p. 686-687.

⁹³ Hirshler 56

women became central to some advertising schemes.⁹⁴ The ‘Kodak Girl’ became the symbol of George Eastman’s company and was regularly promoted in the articles of women’s magazines from the late 1880s on.⁹⁵ Eastman was interested in middle-class women as a new market, given that they had both leisure and money to invest in a pursuit like photography.

The association of women with photography evolved from a marketing scheme to a feminist platform. The female photographer came to capitalize on women’s growing desire for some degree of independence and modern spirit. Gover explains: “What began as an advertising gimmick emerged as a symbol of a new middle class woman who, though not yet fully emancipated, could still enjoy an expanded notion of acceptable behavior.”⁹⁶ Catharine Weed Barnes (later Ward) stands out as a promoter of women’s photography in this capacity during Levy’s era. Naomi Rosenblum chronicles her personal and professional development: “Forced by family obligations to cut short her education at Vassar College, she discovered photography’s allure in 1886 and insisted on making her own living by turning what had initially been a hobby into a profession.”⁹⁷ Barnes promoted photography to women’s and feminist groups, arguing that it “appeals to [one’s] artistic sense, embraces an endless variety of scientific interests, . . . cultivates the observing and reasoning powers, [and] . . . is elevating work when fully apprehended and respected.”⁹⁸ Barnes emphasized to middle-class women that photography required

⁹⁴ Gover 14.

⁹⁵ Hirshler 56 and Gover 15.

⁹⁶ Gover 15.

⁹⁷ Rosenblum 56.

⁹⁸ Catharine Weed Barnes, “Women as Photographers.” *American Amateur Photographer* 111 (September 1891): 338; text of a talk to the Working Women’s Club of Syracuse, New York. Rosenblum writes that “Barnes expressed similar ideas in an address to the Association for the Advancement of Women in 1891” (58).

“‘mental culture,’ willingness to learn, and the desire to do genuine work.”⁹⁹ Barnes also voiced the aims of the feminist movement when she declared that, “‘every woman, like every man in this country, should have a means of earning a living if obliged to do so.’”¹⁰⁰ By the turn of the century, Barnes was, according to her contemporaries, “the foremost woman in the ranks of photography today,” and in addition to having her own professional studio, was an editor of *Photogram* in England and *American Amateur Photographer*.¹⁰¹

As a middle-class woman who made the move from amateur to professional, Barnes’ moves parallel those of the Lorimers, and she also had a feminist message that might have appealed to Amy Levy. This is not to suggest that Levy was necessarily familiar with Barnes, but that there were models available that must have shaped Levy’s and her readers’ larger cultural understanding of the medium and its particular appeal to women. Indeed, given that many of the seminal articles on photography for women were published in the 1890s, we can see Levy’s novel as not only participating in this movement, but also at the forefront. Levy forecasts, for example, the oft-cited 1897 article in *Ladies’ Home Journal* by Frances Benjamin Johnston, called “What a Woman Can Do With a Camera,” which urges photography as a profitable business venture for women under the right circumstances.¹⁰²

Of course photography is such an appropriate choice for Levy’s Lorimers not only because it has a practical professional capacity, but also because it is ripe for so many

⁹⁹ Catharine Weed Barnes, “Women as Photographers,” *Photographic Mosaics Annual*, 1891, pp. 117-25. Quoted in Rosenblum 58.

¹⁰⁰ Catharine Weed Barnes, “Photography as a Profession for Women,” *American Amateur Photographer* 3 (May 1894): 176. Quoted in Rosenblum 58.

¹⁰¹ “A Woman Worth Knowing,” reprinted from the *New York Recorder* of May 2, 1891, in *Photographic Times* 21 (May 1891): 262. Quoted in Rosenblum 57.

¹⁰² Wexler 38.

aesthetic metaphors; as a tool of observation, it fits right in with Levy's profound interest in the visual. While these factors work in concert in Levy's novel, photography had been said to highlight the cultural tension between art and industry during an earlier moment, the 1850s and '60s. Trachtenberg explains: "The idea of culture in whose ambience the Victorian debate about photography took place assumed a deep division within modern society, between 'work' (including industry, business, commerce, trade) and 'art.'"¹⁰³ The tension between work and art within the profession of photography was contentious during the nineteenth century, as Victorians tried to decide whether photography was an industrial practice or an aesthetic one. Baudelaire made his opinion known, famously stating that: "If photography is allowed to deputize for art in some of art's activities, it will not be long before it has supplanted or corrupted art altogether, thanks to the stupidity of the masses, its natural ally. Photography must, therefore, return to its true duty, which is that of handmaid of the arts and sciences, but their very humble handmaid like painting and shorthand, which have neither created nor supplanted literature."¹⁰⁴

Where Baudelaire denounced photography in favor of traditional art forms, Levy made a different choice for her characters. A man like Baudelaire may have endless artistic and academic choices open to him, unlike women. Photography, in comparison to art, was considered a particularly attractive career choice for women for a number of reasons. By making the Lorimers photographers, Levy gives them a medium whereby they do not have centuries of masculine success to stack up against or extensive training from which they have been excluded (i.e., Latin and Greek). She gives them a field that

¹⁰³ Alan Trachtenberg, ed. *Classic Essays on Photography* (New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980) x-xi.

¹⁰⁴ Baudelaire continues, "I know perfectly well I shall be told: 'The disease you have just described in the disease of boneheads. What man worthy of the name of artist, and what true art-lover has ever confused art and industry?'" (Trachtenberg 88).

requires a very small initial investment to become established as a professional and for which information on starting out professionally was readily available and directed explicitly toward women.¹⁰⁵

Levy constructs photography, then, as a practical vocation that enables some aesthetic outlet. In “New American Fiction,” Levy touches on her perspective in regard to the relationship between art and the industry of photography. In this review of American realists, she writes:

If we compare Henry James’ books to paintings by Alma Tadema, so may we compare those of Howells to a photograph from life. There are all the familiar details; the table, the picture in its frame, the very orange lying cleft on the casual plate. We ourselves, to be sure, are a little self-conscious in our attitudes, a little stiffly posed; but then there were those uncomfortable head-rests, and the photographer made us put our hands on the silly ornamental columns he brought with him. We are like and yet strangely unlike ourselves. And the novels of Mr. Howells are just so many photographs where no artistic hand has grouped the figures, only posed them very stiffly before his lens.¹⁰⁶

In this revelatory statement, Levy implies the supremacy of traditional art forms (paintings) to photography, but also indicates the place of the aesthetic in the practice of photography by gesturing toward the possibility of an “artistic hand . . . group[ing] the figures.” Levy never suggests that the Lorimers’ professional work is truly art, and their practice of photography is in fact acceptable because it is industry, not art. But, importantly, she indicates that photography has some aesthetic capacity. That the Lorimers learn photographic technique as leisured amateurs (making their initial practice of photography aesthetic, rather than commercial), then turn professional, further

¹⁰⁵ Rosenblum writes that: “Another advantage of photography was the relatively small investment required to set up as a professional.” “Articles directed toward women often included detailed lists of materials to be acquired and plans for converting attics or other unused spaces into studio and darkroom” (59).

¹⁰⁶ Levy, “New American Fiction”, *Complete* 513-14.

indicates the ways in which their photography has one lens in each realm. In a social context in which claims about photography as art vs. industry were being vigorously debated, Levy's representations can be seen as active in framing women's observational activities as both professional and aesthetic. As a practice that exists at the nexus between work and art, photography becomes the perfect choice for Levy to advance her urban aesthetic while exploring social issues related to professional roles for women.

Given the fact that photography was not a radical choice for women during her era, why did Levy find it necessary to erase photographic looking completely? Why not contend with the visuality of photography incidentally, much as she did with that of the omnibus? In Levy's explorations of the window, omnibus, and camera, we find an interesting sleight of hand. Conventional wisdom now and during Levy's era would place the camera as the most transgressive of the three objects and the most aesthetic, with its potential to capture images permanently and its ability to go anywhere and see anything; the camera knows no bounds. The omnibus would come in second, offering the potential to travel to the far and dark ends of the city, view a wide variety of sights, and experience encounters with a multiplicity of people. The window would seem the most banal of all, offering a single, fixed view, a lack of direct encounters, a complete absence of mobility. And yet, in Levy's work, this intuitive ordering is turned upside down. Ironically, the window is the most transgressive of Levy's liminal spaces, strongly associated with pleasure and observation. The omnibus is more restrained aesthetically and visually, and the camera is the most limited of all, with visuality erased and aesthetic creation a non-issue.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Interestingly, Vadillo's reading of Levy aligns with our contemporary understanding of which spaces are progressive and experimental and which are more conservative. Vadillo knows that Levy is a feminist,

Essentially, Levy turns our natural associations with these spaces on their head in order to make her reader more comfortable with women's movement into new territory. Our assumptions about each space are reversed, with the most taboo spaces rendered the most acceptable. Levy's technique of calling on the window and transferring that association to other spaces is so effective precisely because, as I argued in Chapter One, the window is an image of the collective unconscious, and the collective understanding is of the space as acceptable and feminine. If the window is considered reasonably benign, Levy demonstrates that the omnibus and camera are ever more so. Offering increased mobility and advanced technology, she argues, does not necessarily result in increased or threatening visuality.

Ultimately, while Levy's exploration of the woman observer within *A London Plane-Tree* stands out as bold and progressive, it also manages to convey the constraints upon a *fin-de-siècle* urban woman writer with social as well as aesthetic goals. Levy's tempering of the visuality of Gertrude Lorimer and the speaker of *A London Plane-Tree* prove an effective way of managing this friction: by manipulating perspective, detail, and the economic conditions of her female figures through the use of liminal sites and objects, Levy eradicates many of the problematic facets of the ambulant spectatorship of her texts, while powerfully relaying the experience of moving through and observing the metropolis. Facing the challenge of celebrating the city as she apparently wished while maintaining the norms of professional sobriety that she suggests would ultimately advance women's autonomy, Levy represents women's visual experiences and the city sights, but restrains her characters in line with her social objectives. In doing so, Levy

and she correctly senses that she wants more for her poetess than life behind a windowpane. And yet, taken as a whole, Levy's work suggests quite the opposite of Vadillo's contemporary logic.

manages to convey the tangled subtleties of the nineteenth-century woman's relationship to looking and invites us to consider her moves to mediate or restrain the female gaze as slyly, politically motivated, rather than fused with tentativeness and ambivalence.

Beyond Liminality

In *Romance of a Shop*, Levy emphasizes the significance of Gertrude's restrained visuality by offering a counterexample in the form of the youngest sister, Phyllis, the most beautiful of the three. Through Phyllis and elsewhere, as through Judith in *Ruben Sachs*, Levy indicates the possibility of the woman's gaze and its attendant pleasures and freedoms going what most nineteenth-century readers might consider "awry"; in doing so, Levy forcefully articulates purposeful limits to women's visuality.

In contrast to Gertrude's reserved, generic gaze at the London scene, Phyllis uses the window as a vantage point for pointed spying, a "sport" she revels in despite her sisters' protestations. Among her "observations" are the recognition of a male figure that "It is wet underfoot, and he has turned up his trousers, and his pumps are bulging from his coat pocket. I wonder how many miles a week he walks on his way to dances?"¹⁰⁸ Phyllis' looking, with her attention to the figure's dress, falls in line with a (window-gazing) version of Baudelaire's *flâneur*, who makes his career not only by closely observing the crowd, but by creating detailed portraits of those he observes. Scandalously, Phyllis often directs her gaze at male figures, and her musings involve not only description, but also speculation. And while Gertrude finds herself reasonably contented with the pleasures afforded by removed spectatorship, Phyllis longs for more direct experience: "Wearying suddenly of the sport [of spying at people from her

¹⁰⁸ *Complete* 110.

window], Phyllis dropped the blind, and, coming over to Gertrude, knelt on the floor at her feet. ‘It is a little dull, ain’t it Gerty, to look at life from a top-floor window?’”¹⁰⁹

In accord with this, it is Phyllis who imagines camera work in terms of experience and visuality, rather than economic independence or professional satisfaction. When the idea of becoming photographers is posed, Phyllis fantasizes about taking on the role of the man who has been calling her a pretty picture, inhabiting his space and holding his gaze: ‘And I,’ cried Phyllis, her great eyes shining, ‘I would walk up and down outside, like that man in the High Street, who tells me every day what a beautiful picture I should make!’” Phyllis envisions herself appropriating the role of the image seeker, walking the streets to search out subjects and identify images instead of being rendered a photographic object herself. Phyllis’ thrilling vision expresses a longing for a reversal of the traditional positions of gazer and gazed—an aspiration to become the woman who sees in place of the woman seen. In doing so, Phyllis expresses the utmost feared possibility in nineteenth-century culture—complete reversal of the traditional gazer-gazed relationship, which never materializes in the text.

Ultimately, Phyllis lives out a fantasy of sexual and visual freedom, with no regard for restraint, and perishes because the moral world of Levy’s novel declines to carve out a place for a woman with her lack of judgment and disregard for decorum. In one instance, when her sister asks her to close the window and end her spying game, Phyllis proclaims, “‘Why do you waste your breath, Lucy? You know it is never any good telling me not to do things, when I want to.’”¹¹⁰ The young beauty ultimately perishes, dying from consumption after an inappropriate dalliance, at least in part because

¹⁰⁹ *Complete* 111.

¹¹⁰ *Complete* 110.

she stands in for the kind of whimsical, pleasurable, leisure-driven female gazing for which Levy refuses to sustain a place.¹¹¹

While Phyllis is not satisfied with a window view and transgresses beyond that, others sustain a life with *only* a window view, which is equally unsatisfying in Levy's worldview. The writer's disdain for living through looking is made most startlingly evident in *Ruben Sachs*. At the close of this novel, we see Judith seated by an open window. Since she has left life behind by choosing a loveless, moneyed marriage, all she can do is to observe it, listen to the children's voices and the shuffle of footsteps, smelling the London odor. The city lives on, in contrast to this "automatic woman" by the window:

She moved across to a chair by the open window and sat down. . . . And below in the roadway the ceaseless stream of carriages moved east and west. On the pavement the people gathered, thicker and thicker. A pair of lovers moved along slowly, close against the park railings, beneath the shadow of the trees. The pulses of the great city beat and throbbed: the great tide roared and flowed ever onwards. London, his London, was full of life and sound, a living, solid reality—not—oh, wonder!—a dream city that melted and faded in the sunset. . . . And here by the open window sat Judith, absolutely motionless—a figure of stone. Before the great mysteries of life her soul grew frozen and appalled.

Judith watches the city instead of living life, conceiving of the space between life and herself as a great, uncrossable "gulf."¹¹²

Levy's positioning of the window vis-à-vis Phyllis and Judith serves as a counterpoint to the way Gertrude uses the window in *Romance*. Whereas Gertrude inhabits that crucial middle liminal phase, betwixt and between the interior and the street, Phyllis attempts to complete the process prematurely and move beyond the window,

¹¹¹ Interestingly, Phyllis shares a number of desires and characteristics with Wharton's Lily Bart; though Wharton is writing at a later moment, the result for her heroine will not be altogether different.

¹¹² *Complete* 290-2.

while Judith is fixed firmly on the interior side. “In between” in no sense, Judith is shut off from the city, from life, and from any kind of process to move herself into something more engaged. As Levy has it, the window can allow visual access, though it can also reflect the looking-instead-of-living paradigm that Levy has no space for. Baudelairean pleasure is valued, but not at the expense of family life and real ties. Her ideal is one in which a woman can watch and enjoy the city scene as an anonymous, detached observer, but still maintain a real life that is intimate and engaged.

Liminality and the Marriage Plot

Recognizing Levy’s liminal strategy enables us to understand the logic behind the resolution of *Romance*. It is tempting for some readers to see *Romance of a Shop*, with its bold exploration of issues surrounding women’s personal and professional freedoms, as a radical text—but Levy’s ending resists this reading. After Levy takes us through the opening, distresses, and successes of the photographic studio, the book is compelled toward the marriage plot—evidencing, perhaps, the impossibility of having the ultimate romance in this era be *of* the shop. Following lengthy descriptions of the trials of courtship, the novel closes with Lucy, Gertrude, and Fanny happily married. Lucy takes children’s portraits in a studio adjacent to that of her husband (a graphic artist), but aside from this, the multiple marriages effectively shut down what is for a period a successful family business.

Scholars have expressed frustration with Levy’s ending for her characters, as I noted at the start of this chapter. Jusova notes that “Levy was well aware, it seems, of what her popular audience desired and was willing to give them the sense of satisfaction

a happy ending provides.”¹¹³ Recall, also, Deborah Nord’s issue with Levy’s resolution of her plot: “Levy’s failure in the novel is precisely that she does not know what to do with her independent, idiosyncratic heroines—particularly Gertrude—and resorts to killing off the beautiful, ‘fallen’ sister and marrying off the remaining ones.” And, “After the struggle for independence is essentially won in the novel, Levy cannot sustain it, at least in part because she understands that independence as painful, precarious, and exhausting, and because as a fledgling novelist she shies away from writing a book that might tell an uncomfortable truth.”¹¹⁴

Given Nord’s elevation of the urban independent woman and her narrative of progress (as the century progresses, she argues, women writers embrace more and more independence for single female characters), it is not surprising that she finds Levy’s ending to *Romance* disappointing. However, her claims that Levy “does not know what to do” with her characters and “shies away from” the truth in her ending neglects a vision of how Levy’s narrative ultimately fits within her larger project. In contrast to Nord’s perspective, I see Levy’s resolution not as tentative or unwitting, but shrewdly congruent with her larger aims and another instance of the in-betweenness that defines Levy’s work.

For while Nord positions Levy in opposition to domesticity biographically,¹¹⁵ this vision runs counter to what Levy reflects in her prose—a desire to merge the two worlds,

¹¹³ Jusova 142.

¹¹⁴ Nord 202.

¹¹⁵ Nord positions the professional woman writer in opposition to the domestic woman, discussing Levy among those women writers to “attempted to live outside the sphere of family” and shape their own community. She writes, “. . . they were united by no single vocation or ideology but rather by their revolt against the constraints of bourgeois family life and by their attraction to London as the place where those constraints might be escaped and where a field for intellectual, political, and professional engagement might be found.” “The city also represented the antithesis of those private and protected spaces that middle-class women had traditionally occupied” (181).

the domestic and the professional, through the vocation of photography.¹¹⁶ This is evidenced most directly through the housing of the photography studio in the Lorimers' private home and the fact that the sisters all both work and reside together, maintaining a sense of familial domesticity that permeates their professional work. The studio becomes the site of work, sisterly banter, and gatherings with friends and relatives.

It is also worth remembering the women's musings at the opening of the novel, when they imagine what kind of life working as photographers might bring. Gertrude fantasizes that: "We should become the fashion, make colossal fortunes, and ultimately marry dukes!"¹¹⁷ Her statement here is deliberately hyperbolic, but nonetheless, marriage is viewed as the ultimate, ideal end of the project from the beginning. For the Lorimers, the photography business is not about carving out a completely alternative lifestyle, rejecting all sense of propriety, or departing completely from mainstream life. It serves as a temporary, if exhilarating, fix, a way for the women to support themselves given their difficult circumstances. As such, Levy sets her characters up in opposition to the "Glorified Spinsters" described by Judith Walkowitz, or even to a version of the New Woman.¹¹⁸ She demonstrates that career-mindedness and independence can actually lead to the ends the Aunt Carolines of the world desire.

¹¹⁶ Levy's approach was far from unusual in this respect, as Rosenblum writes that *Godey's Magazine*, before the turn of the century, urged that women "could combine making camera images with their domestic obligations," since photographic skills took little time to acquire and could also be undertaken at home" (59). Other historians concur, as Gover indicates that: "Here was an opportunity to adjust the career/mothering dilemma, for within photography women could keep one foot at home while taking first steps to expand their vistas. The three interrelated directions for educated women, as defined by historian Joyce Antler, as 'whether to live at home or away from home, whether to pursue a leisurely avocation or a specific vocation . . . and finally whether to marry or remain single,' were neatly resolved within the scope of commercial and artistic photography. One could work in a home studio, record family and friends, and photograph domestic scenes that might include gardens, pets, and intimate interiors. Photography as vocation or avocation gave a woman room to find her own identity while remaining close to the hearth" (32).

¹¹⁷ *Complete* 64.

¹¹⁸ See Walkowitz 63.

Levy moves toward the suggestion that women's freedom of mobility and
visuality and their professional and economic independence are ends that can be achieved
without a threat to the values and structure many during her period considered to be
foundational to society. She charges her heroines' activities as transgressive and
potentially destructive (running a business, taking public transportation, working with
men unchaperoned), but demonstrates that the women can still be respectable and
marriageable if they are allowed to undertake these activities.

The Quandary of the Woman Writer

While photography may provide an ideal compromise for Levy's aesthetic and
social values, a paragon of liminality, it does not enable Levy to eradicate the tension
between competing ideals. The central complication to Levy's negotiation of social and
aesthetic ideals is suggested by *The Romance of a Shop*. Readers of the novel may easily
forget—are even invited to forget—Gertrude's position at the onset of the story. When
the sisters contemplate how to support themselves, Gertrude's sister Fanny proclaims,
“Oh Gertrude, you might write! You write so beautifully! I am sure you can make a
fortune at it.” Gertrude replies, “I have thought about that, Fanny . . . but I cannot afford
to wait and hammer away at the publishers' doors with a crowd of people more
experienced and better trained than myself.” Before commencing her work as a
photographer, Gertrude undertakes a “clearance” of her manuscripts, tossing out most of
her work, which had seen “frequent and fruitless visits to the region of Paternoster Row,”
the publishing district in London.¹¹⁹ Prominently, it is only the move that forces Gertrude
to abandon her writing for “real work” that puts her in the position to freely observe a

¹¹⁹ *Complete* 62 and 67.

possible and attractive subject for her writing (*the* subject, in Levy's case), the "city pageant" that she delights in atop the omnibus. Had Gertrude remained a respectable middle class writer, she could not have traveled around the city in the way that her relative penury necessitates and sanctions.

Through Gertrude, Levy highlights the dilemma facing women writers who aspire to represent the urban aesthetic of Baudelaire's *flâneur*: just as working class and, increasingly, professional women are allowed to travel freely if their work demands it, the woman writer of the city requires the freedoms of mobility and spectatorship *for her work*. Indeed, Levy's text evinces a serious anxiety about the status of the female writer—how does this professional soberly carry out her work, as she argues the ladies of the women's clubs and the female photographers do, if her lab is the city itself? Levy is not able to carve out a space for the female urban artist-as-worker within "Women and Club Life," and *A London Plane-Tree* and *Romance of a Shop* reify this tension, as Levy must mediate the very practices that are essential to her trade. A liminal object (like the window, omnibus, or camera) is in some sense insufficient because what is truly desired is for the woman and her pen to be at one with the street and the city—requiring no artifact, no excuse, no "job."

Nonetheless, the key to understanding Levy's portrayal of the woman writer is that Levy defines her, above all, as a professional. She may write of the city spectacle, but she is no *flâneur*. She writes in her garret, socializes in her club, and views the city en route to lectures, meetings, and work. In an era in which writers and theorists are debating whether art should have social components or solely aesthetic purpose, I believe we have to acknowledge that Levy ultimately came down on the side of social. Her

explorations of women's visual experience and the urban aesthetic are consistently sublimated to her uplifting of the professional woman, and her statement on the *flâneuse* is a case in point. Strictly defined, Levy was no aesthete, despite some of her connections to British aestheticism and its influences upon her.

Indeed, while critics generally see Levy's disavowal of the *flâneuse* as a statement about her perception of current limitations for women, which will eventually be overcome, there is another possibility—that Levy's negativity toward the *flâneuse* is part of a more genuine argument she has with the idle, dallying, undisciplined, rootless lifestyle and wholly aesthetic agenda of this figure. That, while she may share the *flâneur's* fascination with the aesthetics of the urban, she truly believes that art should be tempered with social purpose, that women should aim for something different and higher than the life of the wandering spy. Her own example and the ideals to which she devoted her life and work would seem to support this viewpoint.

* * * *

As with Deborah Nord's frustration with the ending to Levy's novel, Jusova's rationalization of her marriage plot as market-driven, and Vadillo's struggle to reconcile the omnibus traveler and the woman behind the garret pane, Levy's critics try to explain away any evidence of limits Levy places on the woman observer or deem such instances "unsuccessful." These critics and others see in Levy an advanced articulation of urban femininity in modernity and want her to go all the way. But rather than embracing a radical feminism, Levy instead chooses to accept the association of home-woman and street-man as a reality whose terms she might manipulate, but not completely unravel. Liminal spaces and practices become a strategic and realistic path to forging acceptance

of women's presence in public and professional realms and progressing her feminist ideals. Jane Gover's statement about women photographers in the *fin-de-siècle* could well be Levy's mantra for the Lorimer sisters and even herself: "They used domesticity, art, and technology for their own needs. In so doing they defined themselves as women who were independent rather than idiosyncratic, rebellious but not radical."¹²⁰

Levy's strategic use of in-between spaces and methods ultimately enables us to conceptualize the woman artist-observer of the *fin-de-siècle* in a way that is more complex and nuanced than how this figure has been previously understood. The woman observer is not necessarily a figure fixated on urban visuality to the exclusion of other goals; the *flâneur* is not necessarily her ideal model. The urban woman artist-observer is instead a figure who may maintain a highly vexed relationship with visuality itself and who navigates her own path among competing social and aesthetic objectives.

We can accept Levy's strategic marketing of feminist ideals as all the more important when we acknowledge that, while the original movement has in many ways succeeded, some of her arguments supporting it have proven—like much effective marketing—illusory. In comparison to her counterpart in the late nineteenth century, today's upper middle class professional woman does not always prioritize household duties. Marriage is not always her end goal. She sometimes uses her freedom of movement to explore the underside of the city and to make morally questionable decisions. And unlike Phyllis, she does not always perish for them. Today's woman with a camera has seen and captured subjects that occasionally make her contemporaries blush. Arguably, a number of the early fears and objections related to the feminist movement, which so many feminists such as Levy insisted were without basis, have

¹²⁰ Gover 134.

materialized. When we understand that reality was not always on Levy's side, we can appreciate the success she and others experienced in advancing their position.

While the window encapsulates the in-betweenness of women's social position in the *fin-de-siècle*, a rite of passage for women on their way to having certain kinds of freedoms, it also has an intransience that goes beyond this. Indeed, one issue this project addresses is the relative temporality or lack thereof of this liminal moment. In the 1930s, a writer such as Djuna Barnes may indicate that women have moved beyond the restrictions of Levy's era in certain ways, but the currency of the woman at the window in Barnes' work reinforces the significance of the concept of the threshold or in-betweenness in women's lives. Levy is of course far more concerned with the social consequences of her commitment, as a writer, to the emergent links between women, visibility, and domestic ideology than later writers will be concerned with the social consequences of these commitments in their moment. And yet, what is singularly remarkable about Levy is that she is nonetheless able to exploit this conventional image imaginatively as a route to expanded opportunities for women. While Woolf and Barnes will turn to the woman at the window as a relic that they wish to reclaim and transform, Levy reveals how the image could be purposeful for feminists in its traditional form. As I will go on to show, the window will remain a signature image for feminist writers because, though women may gain certain freedoms (such as the freedom to wander the street, forbidden during Levy's era), subsequent generations will nonetheless return to a focus on the push-pull of women's public and private responsibilities and allegiances, which the window will continue to emblemize.

Chapter 3

Wharton, Forster, and the Escape from the Interior Observer

In *The House of Mirth*, the actual and metaphorical position of Lily Bart's aunt Mrs. Peniston is at "the secluded watchtower of her upper window" on the Fifth Avenue thoroughfare, from which she observes the comings and goings of the fashionable New York set and can "tell to a nicety just when the chronic volume of sound was increased by the sudden influx setting toward a Van Osburgh ball, or when the multiplication of wheels meant merely that the opera was over, or that there was a big supper at Sherry's."¹ Wharton explains, "She had always been a looker-on at life, and her mind resembled one of those little mirrors which her Dutch ancestors were accustomed to affix to their upper windows, so that from the depths of an impenetrable domesticity they might see what was happening in the street."²

Mrs. Peniston's perch relative to the street would seem to ally her with the position of Levy's Lorimer sisters; and indeed, their novelists are both concerned with the problem of looking instead of living, spectatorship as a substitute for life. But there is a lack of sympathy, an absence of tenderness Wharton displays toward Mrs. Peniston's window watching, so different from Levy's fashioning of the Lorimers' perspective. Where Levy employs the view from the interior as a socially acceptable vantage for

¹ Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (1905; New York: Scribner, 1995) 176.

² Wharton, *The House of Mirth* 63.

women's observation of street life, a later group of writers, including Wharton and her contemporary E. M. Forster, rejects this stance. Socially and spatially liminal spaces (the hotel, the garden party, the window) are scorned by Wharton and Forster as offering insufficient freedom for their female protagonists, whose needs and temperaments require free access to public and private spaces beyond those traditionally sanctioned for marriageable girls. Wharton and Forster explicitly refuse the inherited image of the interior woman observer in favor of women's mobility and lived experience. Focusing on *The House of Mirth* (1905) and *A Room With a View* (1908), this chapter explores early twentieth-century attempts at escape from this iconic figure and her associations.

Literary bedfellows, *The House of Mirth* and *A Room with a View* are hewn from a similar social and intellectual milieu. The novels sit at the precipice between the nineteenth century and the twentieth, looking back at the well-made novel and veering forward to the alternative explorations of the interwar years. Published during this transitional period in literary history and culture, both grapple with modernity—women's growing independence, loosening of class barriers, exploration of urban culture visually and spatially—without being formally or culturally modernist in the most common sense.

In their examination of their heroines' search for independence, Wharton and Forster are in good company among novels of the Edwardian era, an under-studied literary period. As Jane Eldridge Miller explains, the "rebellious woman" was a popular fixture in Edwardian novels, but the figure had developed beyond the New Woman and included longing for independence among other categories of women, including spinsters, domestic matrons, and working women. "What all these various rebel women have in common is a dissatisfaction with the circumstances of their lives, and a

recognition that those circumstances are dictated in large part by the fact of their being women.”³

As novels of manners that engage the marriage plot as the central locus of action, *The House of Mirth* and *A Room With a View* explore the challenges and choices of heroines who find themselves in similar predicaments as young, marriageable girls who do not want to follow the course prescribed for them. Where Lily Bart is supremely beautiful, perceptive, aristocratic, urban, and American, Lucy Honeychurch is pretty, moderately reflective, middle class, suburban, and British. Yet both are fastidiously scrupulous and passionate young women who face the challenges of courtship amid the desire for moral and social independence beyond women of an earlier generation. In developing their characters, Wharton and Forster focus centrally on the young women’s navigation of different geographical and cultural spaces—the titular room or house; the suburban or country home; the London or New York townhome; the foreign locale (Italy, France); the hotel; the garden or wood—and explore various feminine types as a foil to their heroines: the New Woman, the spinster, the divorcee, the maiden aunt, the domestic matron. We even find a curious likeness between the given names of the novels’ corresponding characters: Lucy and Lily, Lavish and Farish, Cecil and Selden.

³ Jane Eldridge Miller, *Rebel Women: Feminism, Modernism, and the Edwardian Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) 4. Miller further indicates, “Studies of fiction at the turn of the century focus on the 1890s rather than the years immediately following the ‘turn’, and usually assume that women ceased to be a dominant force in fiction after the decline of the New Woman novel. Accounts of the genesis of modernism also exclude Edwardian novels about women and feminism, in part because they give the Edwardian age itself little credence as a significant literary period; it is usually annexed as part of the late-Victorian age, or dismissed as a kind of literary draught which preceded the flowering of modernism” (1). For additional studies of the Edwardian novel, see: Samuel Hynes, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968). Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977). Patricia Stubbs, *Women and Fiction: Feminism and the Novel 1880-1920* (Sussex: Harvester, 1979). John Batchelor, *The Edwardian Novelists* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1982). Jefferson Hunter, *Edwardian Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982). Jonathan Rose, *The Edwardian Temperament 1895-1919* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1986). Ann Ardis, *New Woman, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990).

And yet, our heroines meet rather different fates. In *Lucy Honeychurch*, Forster succeeds in creating a lead character who freely moves between spaces and whose perspective of the world and herself has consequently been expanded. Wharton's novel is far less sanguine; rather than fashioning a happy ideal, her text demonstrates frustration with the need for liminal spaces and reveals the high costs of social spectatorship. Lily Bart continues to face the struggles for respectability of Levy's Gertrude Lorimer, but refuses the solutions for which Gertrude settles—and finds penury and ruin as a consequence.

The comparison of Lucy and Lily helps us to understand their relative failures and successes and to see what these failures and successes tell us about their authors' differing understanding and construction of the social world they inhabit. How can we understand Wharton and Forster's mutual rejection of but steadfast fixation on the interior female observer? And what do their respective attitudes toward the woman observer and other female types tell us about their self-positioning vis-à-vis feminism, modernism, and domesticity?

I believe examining Wharton and Forster's posture toward the interior woman observer enables us to understand their curious branch of "feminism," which has troubled and divided their critics. Critical assessments of Wharton on this front, for example, have been varied and contradictory. Wharton has made some provocative comments that have understandably roiled feminist ire, such as her statement in her autobiographical *A Backward Glance* (1933) that denounces "the 'monstrous regiment' of the emancipated: young women taught by their elders to despise the kitchen and the linen room, and to substitute the acquiring of University degrees for the more complex art of civilized

living.”⁴ In spite of this comment and others like it, in “Edith Wharton’s Challenge to Feminist Criticism,” Julie Olin-Ammentorp aptly points out that “Most feminist critics seem to imply that Wharton, though never one to ally herself with the feminist movements of her day, was a kind of inherent feminist.”⁵ Indeed, Robin Peel argues that the writer’s life choices align with feminist values,⁶ while Emily Orlando takes issue with the tendency of some to view Wharton as a misogynist, given her criticism of certain female characters, and argues this is Wharton’s attempt to reflect her era.⁷

Critics are similarly divided—or perplexed—on the question of Forster’s relationship to feminism. In her recent article “Forster and Women,” Jane Goldman surveys the history of this critical quandary and rightly points out that both Forster’s fiction and “biographical studies . . . show contradictions and paradoxes in Forster’s relationships and attitudes to women.”⁸ She writes, “While some see Forster as an anti-patriarchal ally of his Bloomsbury colleague and feminist, Virginia Woolf, others align him squarely with the homosocial patriarchy itself.”⁹ Jane Marcus and Elaine Showalter, for example, find Forster’s work patriarchal and misogynist, as do more recent feminist

⁴ Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (1933; New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998) 60.

⁵ Julie Olin-Ammentorp, “Edith Wharton’s Challenge to Feminist Criticism,” *Studies in American Fiction* 16.2 (Autumn 1988): 237.

⁶ “In an era before the emancipation of women she showed striking independence, in supporting herself through her writing, through managing and promoting her own work, through refusing to take the easy option of becoming the wife of a wealthy man following her divorce, and through the extent of her scholarship and erudition, despite having been denied a formal education.” Robin Peel, *Apart from Modernism: Edith Wharton, Politics, and Fiction Before World War I* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2005) 14.

⁷ “As one of American literature’s shrewdest realists, Wharton represents her cultural moment; she exposes and interrogates the way in which women are represented as objects rather than as agents, as voices that are secondary, not primary.” Emily J. Orlando, *Edith Wharton and the Visual Arts* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007) 9.

⁸ Jane Goldman, “Forster and Women” in *The Cambridge Companion to E. M. Forster*, ed. David Bradshaw (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 121.

⁹ Goldman 121.

critics such as Rae Stoll.¹⁰ Showalter declares that, “we must accept the fact that Forster saw women as part of the enemy camp.”¹¹ Forster has even argued that feminism’s everpresence in Virginia Woolf’s work somewhat corrupted her writing and, in *Aspects of the Novel*, discounted the notion that the women’s movement has had a role in improving the quality of literature by women.¹² On the other hand, Goldman points out that, “From his earliest critical reception, Forster has been considered . . . a women’s writer, praised by critics, adored by film actresses, for his empathetic and powerfully drawn women characters.”¹³

Perspectives on Wharton’s and Forster’s relationships to feminism are further complicated by their attitudes toward the domestic, which are also a source of debate. Critics have struggled to independently grasp and reconcile the narratives connected with feminism and domesticity in Wharton and Forster’s work, given the perceived tension and even sense of opposition between the two categories. While critics such as Aviar Singh argue that in some of his novels, Forster “rejects the demure domestic framework,” and is “anti-domestic in tone,”¹⁴ a majority of Forster’s heroes and heroines, such as Helen Schlegel and Maurice, appear to have the creation of a positive domestic space as a core aim. Wharton, too, has been called anti-domestic, which her rendition of Mrs. Peniston might imply. Amy Kaplan argues that Wharton’s drive to join the male culture of the literary market “pit[s] professional authorship against domesticity” and “posits a

¹⁰ See Jane Marcus, *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) 183 and Rae H. Stoll, “Aphrodite with a Janus Face: Language, Desire, and History in *The Longest Journey*” in *E. M. Forster: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. Jeremy Tambling (London: Macmillan, 1995) 30-50.

¹¹ Elaine Showalter, “*A Passage to India* as ‘Marriage Fiction’” in *Women and Literature* 5:2 (1977) 7.

¹² See E. M. Forster, *Two Cheers for Democracy* in *The Abinger Edition of E. M. Forster*, ed. Oliver Stallybrass, vol. 11 (London: Edward Arnold, 1972) 249. E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (1927; San Diego: Harcourt, 1955) 20.

¹³ Goldman 127.

¹⁴ Aviar Singh, *The Novels of E. M. Forster* (Forlag: Atlantic Publishers, 1996) 67.

creative realm outside of and antagonistic to the domestic domain.”¹⁵ Candace Waid similarly claims that Wharton wanted to distance herself from the domestic woman artist and to “distinguish herself from what Hawthorne called ‘the damned mob of scribbling women.’”¹⁶ And yet, it is known that in her personal life, Wharton highly valued the domestic arts. Sarah Bird Wright contends that Wharton enjoyed the hostessing role: “both her homes had domestic staffs, but she planned the meals and arranged picnics and excursions when houseguests were present” and “she frequently gave and attended dinners.”¹⁷ And Wharton’s first book was actually not a novel or even a piece of fiction, but a volume on the architecture of interior decoration, *The Decoration of Houses* (1898), co-written with the American architect Ogden Codman, Jr.¹⁸ It would be an understatement to say that she had a very different relationship to the domestic than Woolf or Levy, for example.

¹⁵ Kaplan claims that Wharton used realism to distinguish herself from “the genteel man of letters and the sentimental and domestic woman artist.” Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 73.

¹⁶ Candace Waid, *Edith Wharton’s Letters from the Underworld* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991) 7. Quoted in Hildegard Hoeller, *Edith Wharton’s Dialogue with Realism and Sentimental Fiction* (Gainesville: University of Florida, 2002) 11.

¹⁷ Sarah Bird Wright, *Edith Wharton A to Z: The Essential Guide to the Life and Work* (New York: Facts on File, 1998) 83. Wright continues, “In her vision of what women could and should achieve, Wharton was far ahead of her time. In a sense, she redefined the concept of the ‘all’ that modern American women strive to attain: it must not stop with the rearing of cultivated children or success at the office, but also include frequently extended and reciprocated hospitality, skillfully prepared food and a domestic ambience permitting an intellectual meeting of the minds between the sexes.” And, “With the exception of the war years, she divided her time between work (she wrote every morning in bed, even while traveling), domestic responsibilities (both her homes had domestic staffs, but she planned the meals and arranged picnics and excursions when houseguests were present) and social life (she frequently gave and attended dinners)” (83).

¹⁸ Edith Wharton and Ogden Codman, Jr. *The Decoration of Houses* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1898). The text was a strong seller, a reaction to Gilded Age excess that urged simplicity and conceived of “*house-decoration as a branch of architecture*,” which entails decorating “by means of those architectural features which are part of the organism of every house, inside as well as out.” (Wharton, *Decoration* xix). Some see tension between *Decoration of Houses* and Wharton’s novels, whereas I argue that there is actually a synergy here. Wright claims her tenor in *Decoration* is never resolved with her life or her fiction. Sarah Bird Wright explains that, “In this work, she plays out an expansive notion of the American woman as high priestess of the household arts that is at variance both with the fundamental themes of many of her novels and with the way in which she lived most of her own later life, neatly divided between a private morning’s writing each day and an afternoon as chatelaine touring with houseguests” (26). Wharton had the Mount in the Berkshires designed to her specifications, and she designed several gardens.

I believe the tension between feminism and domesticity is itself in part responsible for the contemporary critical disagreement over the feminist pedigree of these writers. Certainly, what Wharton and Forster envision for women is not radically different from what Levy would have claimed as her ideal. All are concerned with the marriage of young women, courtship choices, visibility and visibility in city, women's mobility. All aim for a widening of opportunities and experience for women and freedom from undue censure and restriction. And yet, while Levy was closely allied with the feminist movement, both Wharton and Forster distanced themselves from it. Indeed, Wharton and Forster's rejection of the perspective of the interior domestic observer is coupled with criticism of the mobile and independent New Woman, a stock figure in the feminist movement of their era. Given these discrepancies, how are we to understand their posture toward women's social, economic, and political advancement?

The answer lies in following the trajectory of our heroines, who play off the interior woman observer, the New Woman, and the *flâneuse* in order to chart a course of their own. Lucy and Lily are both attempts to answer the question of how one can construct the modern, independent woman and still marry her off. This becomes a key dilemma for a segment of modernist feminists who struggle to balance their value of mobility and independence with the idealization of marriage and the domestic interior held by the preponderance of women. Wharton's and Forster's responses to the interior woman observer provide an avenue to address this dilemma in ways that give credit to the nuance and circumscription of their politics.

The Interior Woman Observer

“Women like looking at a view; men don’t,” explains *A Room With a View*’s Mr. Emerson in trying to persuade Charlotte Bartlett to take his outward-looking rooms in favor of her courtyard view at their Florentine hotel.¹⁹ Emerson matter-of-factly situates the window as the uncontested station of the feminine, emphasizing the contemporary and historical universality of the association of the woman and the window vantage. It is this very universality that Forster and Wharton draw on to resist what they perceive as a limited vision of the modern young woman’s relationship to public and private space—the vision that finds women needing and wanting a view because they can’t be fully engaged in the action on the street below in the way that men can. Wharton and Forster set up their heroines in opposition to this interior woman observer.

It should be noted at the outset just how remarkable Wharton and Forster’s criticism of the interior observer is. The window watcher is so commonly explored as a rich figure by writers and artists alike that literature provides precious few instances of writers critiquing this figure. Even T. S. Eliot and Baudelaire, alike known as passionate explorers of city streets, at time positioned themselves as window watchers.²⁰ Usually, critiques of the window watcher involve negativity toward women or domesticity itself. Wallace Stevens’ “Ordinary Women,” (1931) for example, depicts women in cold dresses studying Greek “in the vapid haze of the window-bays . . . As they leaned and looked // From the window-sills at alphabets”.²¹ Though at the window, the women are not looking at life—or living life, which is contrasted to their scholarly pursuits. As I

¹⁹ E. M. Forster, *A Room With a View* (1908; New York: Vintage, 1989) 5.

²⁰ See Charles Baudelaire, “Windows,” *Paris Spleen*, trans. Louise Varese. (1869; New York: New Directions, 1970) and T. S. Eliot, “Morning at the Window” in *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1967) 16.

²¹ Wallace Stevens, “Ordinary Women” in *The Collected Poems* (New York: Vintage, 1992) 10.

explore below, Wharton and Forster's critique of the interior woman observer coincides with a different attitude toward women and the domestic. Moreover, the singularity of their critique of the woman at the window makes the fact that they rejected this figure all the more interesting and instructive about their self-positioning vis-à-vis modernism, feminism, and domesticity.

Despite all the self-serving characters in *House of Mirth*, Edith Wharton retains some of her thickest satire for Mrs. Peniston, the wealthy widowed aunt who takes Lily in and provides modestly for her needs in order to make a public display of selflessness. Wharton takes every opportunity to emphasize her stagnant, shuttered, insentient life and person. The descriptions are almost excessive. Mrs. Peniston "looked on at life through the matting screen of her verandah"; "to attempt to bring her into active relation with life was like tugging at a piece of furniture which has been screwed to the floor."²² "Mrs. Peniston had kept her imagination shrouded, like the drawing-room furniture."²³ "Mrs. Peniston was one of the episodic persons who form the padding of life. It was impossible to believe that she had herself ever been a focus of activities."²⁴ Always dressed in black with boots, Mrs. Peniston had "an air of being packed and ready to start; yet she never started."²⁵

Wharton most often refers to Mrs. Peniston as a "looker-on" at life and compares her mind (as quoted above) to a Dutch window that reflects the goings-on in the street. Here, Wharton evokes seventeenth-century Dutch genre painting, which commonly placed figures of daily life in front of the window; the domestic woman at her window is

²² Wharton, *House of Mirth* 64-5.

²³ Wharton, *House of Mirth* 181.

²⁴ Wharton, *House of Mirth* 63.

²⁵ Wharton, *House of Mirth* 159.

a stock figure in paintings from this period.²⁶ As Amy Kaplan explains, Wharton's mention of the Dutch mirrors in her account of Mrs. Peniston reveals that Wharton "rejects genre painting as a heritage for her own art, a form which Eliot advocated as a model for realism. Wharton rejects this way of painting the world, which appears solid and stable only from a safe retreat within the home."²⁷

Indeed, Mrs. Peniston is not the classic window-watching figure who delights in the interesting view on the street below. Instead, she stands at a remove from life, movement, experience, independence, and sincerity and is rather antiquated, matronly, passive, and outmoded. It is considered laughable that the window vantage allows Mrs. Peniston anything akin to "life." Unlike Levy's streetfront London garret, Mrs. Peniston's drawing room window allows glimpses of the "deserted" Fifth Avenue thoroughfare, where nothing appears to be happening.²⁸ It is similar to her general social posture, which is to enjoy hearing about life more than experiencing it. Peniston represents the nineteenth-century woman who makes the choice to stay decidedly "in"—in society, in the interior, instead of embracing life. A relic of an earlier era, she is a figure Wharton cannot abide, someone Lily simply cannot be in the modern era.²⁹

Wharton wasn't always so scornful of the window view. Her career-long focus on incorporating architectural elements into her work frequently included references to

²⁶ See, for example, Gabriël Metsu, *A Woman Seated at a Window* (ca. 1661); Johannes Vermeer, *Woman Reading a Letter by an Open Window* (1657); and Rembrandt van Rijn's *Girl at a Window* (1645). Even Vermeer's two landscape paintings are framed by the window.

²⁷ Kaplan 86.

²⁸ Wharton, *House of Mirth* 146.

²⁹ Cynthia Wolff argues in her biography of Wharton that Mrs. Peniston is a stand-in for Wharton's mother. If considered in this light, Wharton's treatment of Mrs. Peniston is especially interesting to contrast to Woolf's treatment of Mrs. Ramsay (who is known to be a stand-in for Woolf's mother) in *To the Lighthouse*. Whereas Wharton rejects the figure of the woman (mother) at the window and aims to disconnect her from the modern woman, Woolf works to outline the ties of connection between the same figures, as I will explore in Chapter Four. Cynthia Wolff, *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton* (New York: Oxford University Press) 34.

the window alongside the rest of what theorists call “the built environment.” In *Decoration of Houses*, Wharton devotes an entire chapter to windows and demonstrates the profound role that architectural elements play as integral to a private home, both functionally and decoratively. “In town houses especially, where there is so little light that every ray is precious to the reader or worker, window-space is invaluable. Yet in few rooms are windows easy of approach, free from useless draperies and provided with easy-chairs so placed that the light falls properly on the occupant’s work.”³⁰ And, “Where there is a fine prospect, windows made of a single plate of glass are often preferred; but it must be remembered that the subdivisions of a sash, while obstructing the view, serve to establish a relation between the inside of the house and the landscape, making the latter what, *as seen from a room*, it logically ought to be: a part of the wall-decoration, in the sense of being subordinated to the same general lines.”³¹

In Wharton’s fiction, too, the woman at the window is a figure that she circles around from her earliest stories. In “Mrs. Manstey’s View” (1891), Wharton tells the story of a poor, elderly widow who lives alone in a New York boarding house. Solitary and bored, Mrs. Manstey “cling[s] so fervently to her view from her window, a view in which the most optimistic eye would at first have failed to discover anything admirable.”³² The view from the window essentially replaces real relationships and experiences for the aging woman: “When her rare callers came it was difficult for her to detach herself from the contemplation of the opposite window-washing, or the scrutiny of

³⁰ Wharton, *Decoration of Houses* 20.

³¹ Wharton, *Decoration of Houses* 67. Also, “The outlook must also be considered, and the window treated in one way if it looks upon the street, and in another if it gives on the garden or informal side of the house.” “On the more public side of the house, unless the latter gives on an enclosed court, it is best that the windows should be placed about three feet from the floor, so that persons approaching the house may not be able to look in.” (*Decoration* 66).

³² Edith Wharton, “Mrs. Manstey’s View” in *Edith Wharton: Collected Stories 1891-1910*, ed. Maureen Howard (New York: Library of America, 2001) 1.

certain green points in a neighboring flower-bed . . . Mrs. Manstey's real friends were the denizens of the yards, the hyacinths, the magnolia, the green parrot, the man who fed the cats, the doctor who studied late behind his mustard-colored curtains."³³ All is well and good until the landlady next door decides to build an extension, which will blot out Mrs. Manstey's view. She is horrified. "Between her eyes and [her view] a barrier of brick and mortar would swiftly rise; presently even the spire would disappear, and all her radiant world be blotted out."³⁴ Fearing the elimination of her view, Mrs. Manstey sets fire to the area next door and watches the flames as she leans out her window in her dressing gown. She catches pneumonia and dies, smiling, as the nurse and her own landlady carry her to look at the view.³⁵

"Mrs. Manstey's View" displays Wharton's early grapplings with the looking-instead-of-living predicament. Though both characters are lookers-on at life, Wharton's treatment of Mrs. Manstey appears infinitely more sensitive than her rendition of Mrs. Peniston. Of course the class differences between Mrs. Manstey and Mrs. Peniston are profound. Spectatorship for Mrs. Manstey is a temporary solution to the loneliness and poverty that she cannot escape; for Mrs. Peniston, it is connected to the gossipy,

³³ Edith Wharton, "Mrs. Manstey's View" 3-4.

³⁴ Edith Wharton, "Mrs. Manstey's View" 5.

³⁵ Similarly in Wharton's first novella, *Bunner Sisters* (written 1892, published 1916), she parallels the character and circumstances of two aging women with a small sewing shop to the "well-washed window" of their two rooms. See also Wharton's historical work, *The Valley of Decision* (1901), about revolutionary movements in Italy from the mid-1770s through the early 1790s. Here, Wharton depicts Odo Valsecca's worldview through the limited, distant spectatorship of windows and paintings. Annette Benert writes, "Odo learns at some remove or secondhand; windows distance and alienate him from his environment, as well as flatten it out. . . . Windows like paintings imply a kind of clarified but limited perspective. They become metaphors for the characteristic stance and behavior of the privileged classes, who can choose what they see, remain at a distance from it, and frame it, interpret it, in any way they like. Windows function as a form of political control of the unenlightened poor and also of the ruling classes, lest they come too close to the oppressive foundations of their own privileged status." Annette Benert, *The Architectural Imagination of Edith Wharton: Gender, Class, and Power in the Progressive Era* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007) 78-9.

appearance-oriented culture that keeps a close watch on women's every action and defines limited options for those of Lily's generation, as I will go on to reveal.

Like Wharton, Forster sets up his heroine in opposition to the interior woman observer—here, in the form of Lucy's maiden aunt, Charlotte Bartlett. Charlotte claims to be a “woman of the world,” but Forster reveals her as dull, conventional, and focused on propriety. Though Charlotte indirectly solicits the Emersons' offer by lamenting aloud that the Signora “promised us south rooms with a view close together, instead of which here are north rooms, looking into a courtyard, and a long way apart,” she does little to enjoy the view once she has secured the rooms: “Miss Bartlett, in her room, fastened the window-shutters and locked the door.”³⁶ Charlotte Bartlett is not reminiscent of the witty and observant Gertrude Lorimer who must satisfy herself with this socially acceptable perch, but a figure who seeks the view for conventional reasons, but does not really even see it.

While Charlotte appears married to having a view out of conventional notions of what a favorable room is, Lucy, a relatively sheltered ingénue, hopes for a window view because of her desire to observe something exciting and genuinely Italian, the hotel seeming as if it might as well be London. Unlike Charlotte, Lucy embraces the view from her hotel room in Italy, repeatedly going to the window, flinging it open, and observing the scene below. When Lucy first enters her new room, she opens the window wide to smell the air and take in the view: “when she reached her own room she opened the window and breathed the clean night air, thinking of the kind old man who had enabled her to see the lights dancing in the Arno and the cypresses of San Miniato, and

³⁶ Forster, *Room 3 & 15*.

the foot-hills of the Apennines, black against the rising moon.”³⁷ Lucy’s first act upon rising the next day is also to open her window. “It was pleasant, too, to fling wide the windows, pinching the fingers in unfamiliar fastenings, to lean out into sunshine with beautiful hills and trees and marble churches opposite, and close below, the Arno, gurgling against the embankment of the road.”³⁸ Lucy watches the scene below, the men working on the river, the children hanging on to the electric tram, the officers and soldiers. Unlike Levy’s descriptions of Gertrude’s observations, Forster’s are specific and distinctly drawn. Lucy is frequently described as not looking, but leaning out the window, reflecting her desire to experience the life below.

Charlotte and the elder British hotel patrons the Miss Alans serve to pull Lucy back from the window, as well as the world outside that the window overlooks. During a rain storm one afternoon, Lucy “opened the window to inspect, and a cold blast entered the room.”³⁹ Catharine Allen instructs her that she will get a chill, while Charlotte cautions Lucy against “leaning out of the window before she [i]s fully dressed.”⁴⁰ The spinsters and the maiden aunt work to instill in Lucy the caution and interiority that they believe befits a lady. Bored, Lucy ponders, “Why were most big things unladylike? Charlotte had once explained to her why. It was not that ladies were inferior to men; it was that they were different. Their mission was to inspire others to achievement rather than to achieve themselves. Indirectly, by means of tact and a spotless name, a lady could accomplish much. But if she rushed into the fray herself she would be first

³⁷ Forster, *Room* 15.

³⁸ Forster, *Room* 16.

³⁹ Forster, *Room* 38.

⁴⁰ Forster, *Room* 17. When Lucy later ponders her kiss with George Emerson, she is instructed: “‘Come away from the window, dear,’ said Miss Bartlett. ‘You will be seen from the road.’ (86).

censured, then despised, and finally ignored.”⁴¹ Forster tells us what he thinks of this essentially “mediaeval lady,” that “She reigned in many an early Victorian castle, and was Queen of much early Victorian song. It is sweet to protect her in the intervals of business, sweet to pay her honour when she has cooked our dinner well. But alas! the creature grows degenerate. In her heart also there are springing up strange desires. She too is enamoured of heavy winds, and vast panoramas, and green expanses of sea.”⁴²

The bowered woman at the window is inherent to this vision and is symbolic here, part of the reader’s cultural encyclopedia, and Forster moves to oust her as surely as Virginia Woolf later proclaims to kill the “Angel in the House” in the similarly titled *A Room of One’s Own* (1929). For the window provides a certain kind of view, one that mediates the relationship between the inner, civilized world, and either nature or the city (which are closely related in this novel, as spaces for genuine experience)—and in this respect, the ostensibly proper way for women to interact with the world and a space Forster uses to spatialize men and women. When Lucy and George Emerson are in the process of building intimacy (which I will explore in detail in the next section), it is the window that stands in for the division between them. Lucy frets in her room as she realizes George is standing below her window: “The door-bell rang, and she started to the shutters. Before she reached them she hesitated, turned, and blew out the candle. Thus it was that, though she saw some one standing in the wet below, he, though he looked up, did not see her.”⁴³ Forster fashions the window as a place of separation, lack of connection, and distance between men and women; divided only by a pane of glass—he on the outside, notably, she indoors—they are nonetheless a world apart and unable to

⁴¹ Forster, *Room* 45.

⁴² Forster, *Room* 46.

⁴³ Forster, *Room* 91.

communicate. Lucy's journey is to transcend this separation. This is crucial because what Lucy is trying to do is to negotiate her "inside" civilized self with her "outside" self, which considers moving beyond affectation to truth and experience. The window provides a framed, constructed view and also one that is limited and at a remove—a sorry substitute for life and experience and one that both Forster and Wharton propel their heroines to move beyond.

The New Woman

Though Wharton's and Forster's pursuit of independence for Lily and Lucy leads some readers to label the writers as "feminist," *The House of Mirth* and *A Room With a View* each invoke a feminist type in the figures of Gerty Farish and Miss Lavish that Lucy and Lily (and the novels' respective narrative voices) likewise reject alongside the woman at the window. The New Woman figure in each novel clarifies the relationship between the interior woman observer and the marriageable girl and helps the reader to understand exactly what Wharton and Forster mean (or, more precisely, what they *don't* mean) when they ask for mobility, perception, and independence for their heroines.

The early twentieth century was a period of transition for women's independence and mobility; ties were loosening considerably from even a decade before, though much work remained to be done. Margit Stange outlines the evolution of the New Woman figure in Wharton and Forster's era: "By the early years of the twentieth century, the 'New Woman' who had begun to emerge in the 1880s and 1890s had staked her claim to public roles, rights, and powers that lay outside the traditional familial subjection of

woman. Middle- and upper-class women increasingly took up careers, raised their public voices, and developed their own political and educational institutions.”⁴⁴

Writers naturally took up this controversy and all of its nuance, and the depiction of the New Woman in literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries became commonplace—either through positive characters in New Woman novels like Levy’s *Romance of a Shop* (1888) or more critical accounts by those dubious of this figure. Deborah Parsons writes that, “Although the numbers of such women were relatively low, their position and ambitions were sufficiently unorthodox to provoke widespread debate and criticism. As a result, the New Woman, a social phenomenon and a literary type of the 1880s and 1890s, became a dominant preoccupation for writers of novels, essays, and popular journalism, propounded in her stereotypical form by satirical publications such as *Punch*.”⁴⁵

The New Woman that was becoming a familiar type at the *fin-de-siècle* seems the natural opposite of the woman at the window—the modern, hip, independent woman who thinks for herself and goes where she wishes. Indeed, while we view Mrs. Peniston through Lily’s eyes and are thus drawn to the differences between the elder woman and her niece, another character in Wharton’s novel is more perfectly Mrs. Peniston’s counterpart: Gerty Farish, the story’s New Woman figure. Mrs. Peniston and Lily both value wealth, fashion, and society, whereas Mrs. Peniston and Gerty appear to share almost nothing.

⁴⁴ Margit Stange, *Personal Property: Wives, White Slaves, and the Market in Women* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002) 4.

⁴⁵ Deborah Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City, and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 82.

Wharton fashions Gerty Farish as an independent woman who lives and works alone, thinks for herself, and speaks her mind. Lily comments to Selden early in the novel that Gerty “is free and I am not.”⁴⁶ Charitable and good-hearted, Gerty shows Lily how helping others can take one’s focus off oneself in a productive way, and Lily takes a cue from Gerty’s charitable nature and once gives Gerty some money to contribute to social causes; she feels greatly cheered after doing so.⁴⁷ Moreover, unlike the stern and fickle patronage of Mrs. Peniston, Gerty is a sympathetic figure and a true friend, a person Lily can consistently rely on even when others abandon her. She offers Lily shelter when she is homeless and continues to advise her on how to right her situation. In all, Wharton represents the New Woman as having many of the attractive qualities— independence, kindness, loyalty, social conscience—that are wanting in the other women of fashionable New York.

Forster’s New Woman character strikes a different note. Miss Lavish smokes with the men, travels independently, professes radical political ideas, speaks her mind, and pens risqué novels. Alluring to Lucy and enabling her to take freedoms she otherwise wouldn’t, she also serves to initiate Lucy to Florence and independence. Shortly after arriving in Florence, Charlotte and Lucy quarrel over whether Lucy can go exploring alone—she’s so anxious to see the real Italy—and Lavish interjects that she can chaperone Lucy’s explorations. En route to the cathedral, Miss Lavish enlivens Lucy to her surroundings, encouraging her to get to know the real Italy “by patient observation.” “I will take you by a dear dirty back way, Miss Honeychurch, and if you bring me luck, we shall have an adventure.” Lavish then gets them lost, perhaps intentionally, and

⁴⁶ Wharton, *House* 23.

⁴⁷ Wharton, *House* 165 & 414.

proclaims “Two lone females in an unknown town. Now, this is what *I* call an adventure.” A caricature of the woman wanderer, Miss Lavish nonetheless forms a crucial function for Lucy by opening her eyes to the Italy beyond the tourist postcards and by giving her the push she needs to demand greater independence.

While Farish and Lavish serve to guide and initiate Lily and Lucy in various ways, Wharton and Forster are clear that these are not the models they aspire to for their heroines. Unlike the strikingly beautiful Lily Bart, Gerty Farish is not especially attractive and lives in a mean, ugly flat that Lily can barely tolerate. In Lily’s eyes, Gerty “typified the mediocre and the ineffectual. . . . Lily’s own view of her wavered between pity for her limitations and impatience at her cheerful acceptance of them.”⁴⁸ Lily indicates to Selden that Gerty is not marriageable and says “besides, she has a horrid little place, and no maid, and such queer things to eat. Her cook does the washing and the food tastes of soap. I should hate that, you know. . . . We’re so different, you know: she likes being good, and I like being happy.”⁴⁹

It is Wharton’s statement about how Gerty Farish handles Selden’s affection (which she enjoys herself, but wants to share with Lily) that is truly revelatory of what Gerty is lacking that Lily desires: “Gerty had always been a parasite in the moral order, living on the crumbs of other tables, and content to look through the window at the banquet spread for her friends.”⁵⁰ In Wharton’s estimation, despite her liberties, the New Woman is also a woman behind a pane of glass. The metaphor here is carefully chosen. Gerty is not really “in” high society, but is a part of it enough to hang on, to be allowed to attend their events, to see the glamorous women and happy couples, and she is more than

⁴⁸ Wharton, *House* 133-4.

⁴⁹ Wharton, *House* 23.

⁵⁰ Wharton, *House* 216.

content with this. She watches on, shut off from family, traditional domesticity, society, and (in many cases) wealth.⁵¹

With this statement, Wharton enacts a likeness between the New Woman and the traditional, domestic woman and defines the similarities between them, as imposed by her era. So while Gerty Farish and Mrs. Peniston seem polar opposites, they are both women behind a pane of glass—albeit a different pane of glass. Gerty has what Mrs. Peniston does not; they stand on opposing sides of the window and look at what they don't have. What is on the other side of the glass for Mrs. Peniston is life, movement, experience, independence, sincerity—all things Gerty actually has. But let us not deny what is equally on the other side of the glass for Gerty: love, matrimony, domesticity, beauty, hospitality, wealth, position. Wharton clearly prefers the sensitive, integrity-bound choices of Gerty over those of Mrs. Peniston, but she mourns Gerty's fate—to love, eat, and socialize vicariously; to live in an ugly flat.⁵²

By refusing to live with Gerty, which seems a very reasonable and logical choice given her limited options—including the alternative of living in a dilapidated boarding house—Lily refuses the New Woman lifestyle. She dabbles in it, with her charity work, but she can only engage as a wealthy patron, not a social worker. Even after Lily has lost everything, Gerty's life remains singularly unappealing to her; when Lily looks at the beauty and grandeur on Fifth Avenue, it makes her “more than ever conscious of the

⁵¹ Wharton also addresses the sacrifices the New Woman must make in *The Fruit of the Tree*. Teresa Tavares writes: “Justine is the figure of the New Woman, radically independent in her act of euthanasia, but forced to pay the price for self-reliance by losing love and home.” “New Women, New Men, or What You Will in Edith Wharton's *The Fruit of the Tree*” in *Edith Wharton Review* 21, i: 1–15.

⁵² Wharton's New Woman also serves as a living female version of Selden, as Gerty and Selden are cousins. And part of the point, too, is that while Gerty is Selden's counterpart, Gerty is behind a pane of glass in a way that Selden is not. He doesn't need beauty, domesticity, matrimony, and position in a way that a woman does because, as a man, these things do not define him in the same way. Lily's harsh judgments of Gerty are the perfect reflection of what society permits a man, but not a woman. Lily laments that she is victim to these standards, but she is also of course the bearer of them.

steepness and narrowness of Gerty's stairs, and of the cramped blind-alley of life to which they led."⁵³ For Lily, the separation from wealth, beauty, and heterosexual matrimony associated with the New Woman lifestyle is far too high a price to pay. Though Lily's posture toward Gerty seems unkind, Wharton does not direct the reader to censure Lily for her harsh and uncharitable view of Gerty. We are encouraged, rather, to concur that Lily deserves the beautiful home and wealth that Gerty does without, to desire that earnestly for our heroine.

Forster also represents the kinship between the woman behind a pane of glass and the New Woman through the unexpected friendship of Charlotte Bartlett and Miss Lavish. Miss Bartlett, whom Forster constructs as dull, develops a high regard for Lavish and confides to her. Charlotte tells Lucy, "She is my idea of a really clever woman." And, "She is emancipated, but only in the very best sense of the word . . . None but the superficial would be shocked at her. We had a long talk yesterday. She believes in justice and truth and human interest. She told me also that she has a high opinion of the destiny of women."⁵⁴ On a trip to Fiesole, Lavish and Bartlett want to be alone and banish Lucy. "We wish to converse on high topics unsuited for your ear."⁵⁵ Through their friendship, Forster works to demonstrate the ways in which the free-wheeling New Woman has much in common with the closeted spinster.⁵⁶

In fact, where Wharton is dismissive of Farish as a role-model for Lily, Forster is scathing toward Lavish. Lavish is censured by Forster for being a character who affects democratic thinking, but is really full of pretensions and lack of kindnesses. Miss Lavish

⁵³ Wharton, *House* 370-1.

⁵⁴ Wharton, *House* 57.

⁵⁵ Wharton, *House* 75.

⁵⁶ One could persuasively argue for the insinuation of a homosexual connection between the two women, though this is buried below the surface.

leaves Lucy in a most awkward position, lost and alone in a foreign city, when she abandons her at the cathedral to speak with a male friend. Lavish disregards Lucy's discomfort and tries to draw out of her the story about the murder she witnesses, in order to embellish the story for her novel. Bartlett tells Lavish about George and Lucy's first kiss, which Miss Lavish also writes about in her novel. Miss Lavish is dishonest, rude, unmannered, and self-promoting,

If there is any doubt, Forster casts his judgment on the New Woman when Lucy and her mother visit London. While it is raining, the mother and daughter seek refuge and have a talk. Lucy confesses that, as she will come into her money soon, she may want to be away from home more than in the past. "I've seen the world so little—I felt so out of things in Italy. I have seen so little of life; one ought to come up to London more—not a cheap ticket like to-day, but to stop. I might even share a flat for a little with some other girl." "And mess with typewriters and latch-keys," exploded Mrs. Honeychurch. "And agitate and scream, and be carried off kicking by the police. And call it a Mission—when no one wants you! And call it Duty—when it means you can't stand your own home! And call it Work—when thousands of men are starving with the competition as it is! And then to prepare yourself, find two doddering old ladies, and go abroad with them."⁵⁷ Mrs. Honeychurch defines the New Woman with clichés that Forster neglects to unravel. "I want more independence," said Lucy lamely; she knew that she wanted something, and independence is a useful cry; we can always say that we have not got it. She tried to remember her emotions in Florence: those had been sincere and passionate, and had suggested beauty rather than short skirts and latch-keys. But

⁵⁷ "Nothing roused Mrs. Honeychurch so much as literature in the hands of females. She would abandon every topic to inveigh against those women who (instead of minding their houses and their children) seek notoriety by print. Her attitude was, 'If books must be written, let them be written by men'" (158-9).

independence was certainly her cue.”⁵⁸ Though both figures strive for independence, Forster clearly separates Lucy and her “sincer[ity]” and passio[n]” from what he considers to be the pretensions of the New Woman: smoking, riding bicycles, living in a flat with latch-keys. He is working to provide another image for Lucy, while also indicating that the New Woman life is often what women who want independence are left to. Being a modern woman is here about freeing oneself from letting society dictate all her thoughts and actions and embracing life and making one’s own choices.

Though the New Woman had become more familiar by the first decades of the twentieth century thanks to the success of *fin-de-siècle* feminist leaders like Levy’s friend Clementina Black and countless others, Forster and Wharton represent the ways in which she also became more threatening. As Martha Vicinus points out in *Independent Women*, the early twentieth century was a time when the women’s movement was becoming more powerful and aggressive, particularly in the arena of women’s suffrage. In England, “between 1906 and 1914 over one thousand women went to prison for suffrage; thousands more were arrested.”⁵⁹ “Although some writers did stress how attractive the new independent woman was, far more common were tales of young suffragettes’ being led back to their natural course by love for a right-thinking man.”⁶⁰ Indeed, what Wharton, and to a much greater degree, Forster draw on in their depictions of Farish and Lavish is the perception of the New Woman as issuing a particular challenge to both marriage and sex. Teresa Magnum recounts this history: “Between 1880 and 1920 the British New Woman novel outraged ‘womenly women,’ inspired women’s rights

⁵⁸ Forster, *Room* 223-224.

⁵⁹ Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850- 1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985) 268.

⁶⁰ Vicinus 262.

activists, and provided grist for both radical and reactionary reviewers.”⁶¹ “The unmarried, emancipated woman was also judged in sexual terms as threatening to masculinity; either as sexually free and voracious or as asexual and androgynous.”⁶² Magnum further explains that “the New Woman narratives challenged society’s most fundamental and sacrosanct vision of Woman—her desires, her capacities, and the worlds, particularly the world of marriage, in which she might move.”⁶³

Wharton and Forster both saw having a New Woman figure as crucial to their respective points, lest their readers think that the New Woman was the ideal they sought in favor of the woman at the window. They demonstrate how the New Woman may have been negative for a sector of those aiming for women’s independence much as the *flâneuse* was for Levy. Though Wharton and Forster reject the woman at the window and the New Woman with varying degrees of antipathy—Wharton reserves her greatest scorn for the former and Forster for the latter—the upshot is the same: both figures are rejected as insufficient models for their heroines.

The Detached Spectator and the Marriageable Girl

Having rejected the shuttered interior woman and the New Woman, Wharton and Forster attempt to chart a new course for the modern young woman—one that sees them experiencing and moving between different spaces and perspectives, keen interrogators of their social environments and personal choices. Their era follows one in which the woman street wanderer is a recurring literary presence—whether Millicent Henning as

⁶¹ Teresa Magnum, *Married, Middlebrow, and Militant: Sarah Grand and the New Woman Novel* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998) 2.

⁶² Parsons 83.

⁶³ Magnum 2.

the perambulating London shopgirl in James' *Princess Casamassima* (1886), Marian Yule as the studious and self-reliant librarian in Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1891), or Gertrude Lorimer as the omnibus rider who delights in the city spectacle in Levy's *Romance* (1888). Not surprisingly, then, Wharton and Forster pursue independence for their heroines in direct relation to the street-wandering female observer and her two defining characteristics—mobility and spectatorship.

Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth* begins with a modernist dream in the form of Lily Bart at the train station—that all-important hubbub of activity and transition that captures the speed and vitality of the twentieth century. Lily is introduced as a visual spectacle, as Wharton writes in her opening line that, “In the afternoon rush of the Grand Central Station [Selden's] eyes had been refreshed by the sight of Miss Lily Bart.”⁶⁴ Lily is here a paragon of modernity and mobility—independent, walking, youthful and vigorous, an urban Lizzie Bennett (whose initials she shares) who is ready to dispense with social custom and go where she will.⁶⁵ Wharton unfolds her dynamic character through a whole host of social spaces: the train station, the street, the bachelor apartment, the summer estate, the society wedding, the relative's house, the nouveau riche dinner party, the Mediterranean ship, the New Woman flat, the hotel, the industry work-room, the boarding-house. She traverses between city and country, between interior and street, between the company of men and that of women. Lily consistently makes risky decisions—to visit a bachelor apartment unchaperoned, to make a financial arrangement with a married man, to refuse a marital proposal that she financially needs, to go abroad

⁶⁴ Wharton, *House* 17.

⁶⁵ Writing of London, Judith Walkowitz has said that, “An ability to get around and self-confidence in public spaces became the hallmarks of the modern woman.” Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 68.

for holiday when she really should resolve matters at home. She is in many ways the woman at one with the city and the world (except for the space of money-making, which is invisible to her), but maintaining the highest scruples. Lily never allows her virtue to be compromised and she never makes choices that are deceitful or unkind, even when it would serve self-preservation to do so. What Wharton desires for Lily is to maintain the ability to move in and out, both of society, spaces, and perspective and to have physical and intellectual independence—to be and fully own that modern dream we see at the opening of the novel and to triumph inhabiting this role.

With no female figure providing a role model that Lily finds suitable, she comes to find her model in Lawrence Selden, the novel's detached spectator, who successfully navigates the visuality and mobility of life in aristocratic Old New York.⁶⁶ Lily finds herself drawn to Selden, a barrister and acquaintance who travels in her social circle but who does not have the income Lily seeks in a mate. Lily marvels at his position and perspective vis-à-vis society:

He had preserved a certain social detachment, a happy air of viewing the show objectively, of having points of contact outside the great gilt cage in which they were all huddled for the mob to gape at. How alluring the world outside the cage appeared to Lily, as she heard its door clang on her! In reality, as she knew, the door never clanged: it stood always open; but most of the captives were like flies in a bottle, and having once flown in, could never regain their freedom. It was Selden's distinction that he had never forgotten the way out.⁶⁷

Lily visualizes Selden's enviable position in terms of mobility—the ability to move in and out of society's cage—and detached observation, the ability to see society critically and not become completely wrapped up in its performance. Unlike Mrs. Peniston, who

⁶⁶ At the Brys' event, Selden is again the detached observer, who "found himself, from an angle of the ball-room, surveying the scene with frank enjoyment." (192). In Monte Carlo, he is said to "feel the renewed zest of spectatorship that is the solace of those who take an objective interest in life." (262).

⁶⁷ Wharton, *House* 87.

validates society but observes it from afar, Selden both participates in and criticizes society.

Though the purview of the spectator appears foreign to her at the novel's outset, Lily follows Selden's lead and comes to embrace the role of the spectator. In the process, the barrister becomes Lily's love interest, though she appears to fall in love not so much with the man as with his perspective: "she saw that her sudden preoccupation with Selden was due to the fact that his presence shed a new light on her surroundings."⁶⁸ After glimpsing life from his perspective, Lily attempts to take it on, to see her society through his critical eye while still functioning within her social circle. "That was the secret of his way of readjusting her vision. Lily, turning her eyes from him, found herself scanning her little world through his retina: it was as though the pink lamps had been shut off and the dusty daylight let in. She looked down the long table, studying its occupants one by one How dreary and trivial these people were!"⁶⁹ It is a moment of epiphany for Lily. After this point, she never sees her society the same way again. She, too, has become a perceiver, one who thinks beyond and outside of her world, rather than just functioning in it. Selden's effect is said to be to "thro[w] her whole world out of focus."⁷⁰ She is now a different kind of spectator than the woman at the window—not simply visually observing comings and goings, but able at moments to be a thoughtful critic of the society in which she lives.

⁶⁸ Wharton, *House* 87.

⁶⁹ Wharton, *House* 88.

⁷⁰ Wharton, *House* 133.

Wharton focuses on the threshold to emphasize the frequency and significance of Lily's various movements.⁷¹ The threshold and in turn the liminal define Lily, as she is always lingering on the fringes of a society she cannot afford and is also always faced with key choices that render her closer "inside" or "outside" of that very society. When Selden says that, if it were his republic, he'd seat her on the throne, she despairs, "Whereas, in reality, you think I can never even get my foot across the threshold?"⁷² This *is* what Lily really wants and what she fights and scrapes for throughout the novel—to get her foot over the threshold to the grand house of dreams, the wealthy estate she imagines for herself. And yet, in reaching her goals, at times she appears to be her own worst enemy.

Wharton especially emphasizes the threshold in connection with Lily's movements respective to men. Her first act in *House of Mirth* is to visit Selden's apartment after he discovers her with time to spare at the train station. "On the threshold he paused for a moment, feeling for his latchkey."⁷³ By detailing this moment, Wharton underscores this as a significant spatial and social movement for Lily—going into the apartment of a bachelor, something an unmarried girl should not do.⁷⁴ The threshold is

⁷¹ Wharton also consistently defines Selden's affect over Lily in terms of spatial movement across the threshold. During most of their encounters, Lily meets Selden outside, or he ushers her there—by the wooded path at Bellomont; on the terrace at the Van Osburgh wedding; in the garden in the Mediterranean. It is a seemingly insignificant spatial movement that really signifies the profound effect he has over her and her fate. See, for example, Wharton, *House* 199.

⁷² Wharton, *House* 191.

⁷³ Wharton, *House* 22.

⁷⁴ The latchkey is noted as the signature of independence feminists aimed for during this period. And indeed, the narrative that follows bears this out. Lily openly envies Selden's independence, declaring "How delicious to have a place like this all to one's self! What a miserable thing it is to be a woman." Though Selden objects that some women have flats, Lily clarifies, "Oh, governesses—or widows. But not girls—not poor, miserable, marriageable girls!" (Wharton, *House* 22).

also noted upon Lily's departure: "He followed her across the room to the entrance-hall; but on the threshold she held out her hand with a gesture of leave-taking."⁷⁵

Whereas the threshold signifies Selden's ability to move freely between spaces and perspectives, it stands in for the conflicted and inadequate set of choices available to Lily—the moments of transition when she can go one way or the other and often makes choices that leave her out in the cold.⁷⁶ And indeed there are too many choices to navigate them all successfully, too many entrances, exits, and options to escape the notice of prying eyes. Upon leaving Selden's house, for example, she must push past a charwoman, who gives her a curious look. "Lily felt herself flushing under the look. What did the creature suppose? Could one never do the simplest, the most harmless thing, without subjecting one's self to some odious conjecture? Half way down the next flight, she smiled to think that a char-woman's stare should so perturb her."⁷⁷ What's notable here is that Lily's status as a marriageable girl is so precarious that she *is* vulnerable even to a char-woman's stare, and she will later be exploited by this very woman, who assumes Bertha Dorset's love letters are Lily's because of her indiscretion in visiting Selden's apartment.

⁷⁵ Wharton, *House* 31.

⁷⁶ The threshold is similarly emphasized in several other key encounters with men in the novel, such as her infortuitous visit to Gus Trenor's home, in which he attempts to take advantage of her. Trenor greets her at the threshold of his house, where he has lured her under the false pretense that she is coming to visit Judy (204). Hoping to take advantage of Lily as a payoff for her financial debt to him, Trenor blocks her in, since he wants to get her alone: "He squared himself on the threshold." (208). She threatens to go upstairs and get Judy, but Trenor reveals that Judy is not at home. After a skirmish, he lets her go: "He drew unexpectedly aside, letting her reach the threshold unimpeded." (208). She tells him she can't stay alone with him there at night, and he replies, clearly referring to her jaunt with Selden, "Gad, you go to men's houses fast enough in broad daylight—strikes me you're not always so deuced careful of appearances." (210). And indeed she is not—a fact that is confirmed in the next scene, as Selden observes Lily leaving the Trenor home from outside, leading him to believe false rumors of Lily's unsavory relations with the married man.

⁷⁷ Wharton, *House* 32.

Writing of Old New York at the turn of the century, in *Displaying Women*

Maureen Montgomery discusses how society columns, etiquette manuals, and periodicals focused on reminding aristocratic young women of proper social standards. Society magazines, she claims, often registered “a profound unease with the presence of women in public space, one that is expressed in explicitly sexual terms and linked specifically to commodification.”⁷⁸ Society columnists “remind women from the respectable classes that the dividing line between them and those women who were denied respect was a very thin one indeed.”⁷⁹ In keeping with this, Lily finds that she cannot pass in and out of spaces and society itself as Selden can because she is a woman—people notice, talk, and pass judgment. And though she makes scrupulous choices, they are not the right ones. The decision to enter and exit certain spaces—Selden’s apartment, Gus Trenor’s home, George Dorset’s ship—is still crucially consequential for someone in Lily’s position. As the result of her movements, Lily opens herself up to rumors that ultimately destroy her marital prospects and result in her disinheritance and eventual death. Her choices to move in and out in terms of perspective and physical movement turn out to be counter to her goals to attain the home and life that she seeks.

If Wharton’s novel begins with a modernist dream in the form of Lily Bart as the mobile, independent woman at the train station, it is a vision that the novel cannot sustain. By the end of the novel, Lily is not a “refresh[ing]” vision in and of the modern world, but a desiccated urchin of an earlier era. After rumors have left her disinherited and without marital prospects, her defining locale becomes the street, as she spends “her days in the streets, partly for her to escape from the uncongenial promiscuities of the

⁷⁸ Maureen E. Montgomery, *Displaying Women: Spectacles of Leisure in Edith Wharton’s New York* (New York: Routledge, 1998) 4.

⁷⁹ Montgomery 4.

boarding-house, and partly in the hope that physical fatigue would help her to sleep.”⁸⁰ She also occasionally must walk the streets at night, as she does in the final moments of the novel (a scene evocative of the walk of the prostitute). Of course Lily walks at earlier points in the novel, but is elsewhere noted for the grace and speed with which she carries herself, as Selden had once remarked, “How fast you walk! . . . I thought I should never catch up with you.”⁸¹ Here, again, Lily is a paragon of mobility and speed, while by the end of the novel it is questionable whether she is strong enough to “walk on a little ways” without assistance.⁸²

While mobility may appear to get Lily into trouble, it is spectatorship that ultimately destroys her. It is not as though, in her free movements, Lily finds herself led morally astray, abused by unsavory characters, or caught up in damaging activities. Like Levy, Wharton is making a point about women’s freedom vis-à-vis morality. Lily Bart, like Gertrude Lorimer, does not do anything immoral (sexually, socially), even though she has incredible freedom of mobility. She is frequently alone with men (Selden, Trenor, Rosedale), but never allows any to take the least license with her. She is, in fact, perhaps the most ethical character in the book, apart from Gerty.⁸³ While Lily is keenly principled, she suffers horrendously. Wharton suggests that freedom to be alone with men, to move about unimpeded, does not make women immoral; at the same time,

⁸⁰ Wharton, *House* 424.

⁸¹ Wharton, *House* 96.

⁸² Wharton, *House* 469. In “Walking Off the Big Apple,” Terri Tynes makes an interesting distinction between Lily’s strolling with Selden at the opening of the novel and her walking alone at the end. “As Lily falls from the world of fashion into commerce, Wharton opens up the novel to shed some light on the dark side streets of the metropolis. In Wharton’s New York of 1900, no one strolled on the streets of the 30s or 40s west of Sixth Avenue. They only walked.” <http://www.walkingoffthebigapple.com/2008/09/new-york-of-edith-whartons-house-of.html>

⁸³ She keeps back Bertha’s letters, which would vindicate Lily and reveal Bertha’s infidelity; she refuses to lie and scheme, even when she is completely down and out. She refuses to marry someone she doesn’t love.

women who have freedom put themselves open to scorn, suspicion, and gossip which can, in fact, destroy them.

When invited to Selden's house, an invitation she had solicited, she had declared blithely, "Why not? It's too tempting—I'll take the risk."⁸⁴ The novel reveals that there are unfortunately a lot of answers to the question, "why not," and these come to haunt Lily. After Lily is disinherited following Mrs. Peniston's death on account of rumors about her, Gerty tells Lily she must tell everyone the whole truth: "What is truth? Where a woman is concerned, it's the story that's easiest to believe."⁸⁵ Everything, Lily learns, is about appearances. "You asked me just now for the truth—well, the truth about any girl is that once she's talked about she's done for; and the more she explains her case the worse it looks."⁸⁶ Later, Simon Rosedale confirms this perspective when he tells Lily he cannot marry her because of what is said of her and that it matters not whether the stories are true.⁸⁷ Wharton seems to recodify the restrictions placed on women—not because there is true risk to a woman's character and honor, but because of gossip, speculation, lies, and people relying falsely on what they think they see.

However much Lily may want to become the spectator, she is from the beginning the spectated. Even Selden is confused over this—thinking her the artist, noting how everything for her is constructed and premeditated: "your taking a walk with me is only another way of making use of your material. You are an artist and I happen to be the bit of colour you are using today."⁸⁸ Selden mistakes social machinations (Lily's lot, as a

⁸⁴ Wharton, *House* 21.

⁸⁵ Wharton, *House* 319.

⁸⁶ Wharton, *House* 320.

⁸⁷ Wharton, *House* 361.

⁸⁸ Wharton, *House* 103.

marriageable woman, to contrive) for artistry.⁸⁹ The pervasive sense of women in public as objects rather than subjects has been exhaustively studied. Nina Miller has said that, “In a milieu in which masculinity and artistry were so closely identified, the pervasive notion of woman as art object served to entrench women’s exclusion from creativity,”⁹⁰ and Judith Walkowitz has emphasized that “in the mental map of urban spectators, [women] . . . were bearers of meaning rather than makers of meaning.”⁹¹

Ultimately, Lily is not an artist, and it is her lack of attention to her object status (not accepting that she is what others see, not caring enough about what they think) that is her undoing. Lily forgets her role—not observer, but observed. She forgets how closely she is watched and that she does not have the license to observe and scrutinize in the way that others scrutinize her. Recall that Selden is the original holder of perspective at the onset of the novel, as it is *his* eyes that are “refreshed by the sight of Miss Lily Bart.”⁹² Indeed, “As a spectator, he had always enjoyed Lily Bart.”⁹³ At Bellomont,

⁸⁹ Interestingly, it is as an art object that Selden and Gerty think Lily is most herself. In life, she is shackled with dresses and bridge and social niceties, but in art, she can be free of all that and appear just as herself (only in art—it’s almost a mockery of a figure like Lucy Honeychurch; the truly free, emancipated woman who is able to shake off social garb exists only in novels and portraits). The Wellington Brys hold an event in which they “induced a dozen fashionable women to exhibit themselves in a series of pictures” (190). So, they are very explicitly portraits, art objects. Lily chooses a simple setting, with a figure very much like herself, so that it seems the portrait is really of her. Selden sees this: “Its expression was now so vivid that for the first time he seemed to see before him the real Lily Bart, divested of the trivialities of her little world, and catching for a moment a note of that eternal harmony of which her beauty was a part” (196). Gerty agrees that, “It makes her look like the real Lily—the Lily I know,” to which Selden corrects her, “the Lily *we* know” (197). She is more real as an art object than in person, surrounded by the chains of “society.” Selden “was no less conscious than before of what was said of Lily Bart, but he could separate the woman he knew from the vulgar estimate of her” (221). It’s actually Mrs. Fisher who knows the real Lily: “That’s Lily all over, you know: she works like a slave preparing the ground and sowing her seed; but the day she ought to be reaping the harvest she over-sleeps herself or goes off on picnic” (269). She really doesn’t want the fruits of this work—as Fisher says, “she despises the things she’s trying for” (270). (so, she is the real Lily when she is the object, not the artist—though she is still shaping how others see her, this is all she is shaping; perceptions of her. Lily can only shake off her object status in art (her painting), not in life.

⁹⁰ Nina Miller, *Making Love Modern: The Intimate Public Worlds of New York’s Literary Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 66.

⁹¹ Walkowitz 21.

⁹² Wharton, *House* 17.

⁹³ Wharton, *House* 19.

Selden tells Lily he has come to see her “Because you’re such a wonderful spectacle: I always like to see what you are doing.”⁹⁴ Wharton points out that, as a woman, Lily is a spectacle: her dress, her manner, her beauty. “He had a confused sense that she must have cost a great deal to make, that a great many dull and ugly people must, in some mysterious way, have been sacrificed to produce her.”⁹⁵ She emphasizes her dependent object status and also raises the issue of framing. Unlike a man, “If I were shabby no one would have me: a woman is asked out as much for her clothes as for herself. The clothes are the background, the frame, if you like: they don’t make success, but they are a part of it.”⁹⁶ It is not until too late that Lily fully realizes that she’s a “highly specialized product . . . fashioned to adorn and delight.”⁹⁷ Wharton identifies what she perceives as the cruel reality of life’s plight for such women. Ultimately, Wharton emphasizes her view that the concept of the woman spectator is absurd (if it is anything more than benign window-watching). Society has cast beautiful, upper-class women as objects, to be looked at, and in her view is not ready for them to go beyond this.⁹⁸

What is most hateful to Wharton about Mrs. Peniston and the window itself are their associations with looking instead of living. Lily tries to go in the opposite direction and embrace living, while becoming a spectator of her society in the sense of thoughtful, perceptive analysis in the vein of Lawrence Selden. In the end, it is not necessarily Mrs. Peniston herself, but what she represents as the matron at the window, watching and observing all, that destroys Lily. Though the Mrs. Penistons of the world may not have

⁹⁴ Wharton, *House* 102.

⁹⁵ Wharton, *House* 20.

⁹⁶ Wharton, *House* 29.

⁹⁷ Wharton, *House* 423.

⁹⁸ Compare Lily under men’s glares to Gertrude under Sidney Darrell’s glare: Gertrude initially shrinks under the power of Sidney’s glare; as a male, he has the ability to create her, to make her feel the way he thinks about her (which is as someone shabby, etc.). Later, however, when he defiles her sister, she has right on her side, and he shrinks under her glare.

been offered better options than being fixed behind a pane of glass, the prying eyes that these figures signify prevent a new generation of women, like Lily, from opportunities to experience something more. And this is perhaps the root of Wharton's hostility and lack of sympathy toward Mrs. Peniston's plight. Mrs. Peniston certainly does not have a stranglehold on judgmental spectatorship in the novel, but perhaps precisely because she is a woman who knows the plight that young women face, Wharton holds her to higher standards.

Where we first encounter Lily Bart as a vision of feminine independence at the train station, we meet Lucy Honeychurch as the woman at the window longing for an adventure with an electric tram. For, though Lucy's openness to the world at large is signified by the draw the window holds over her, Forster is clear that this vantage is insufficient for her. While Charlotte wants the view, but doesn't enjoy it, Lucy does enjoy it, but isn't satisfied with it. She wants more than life viewed at a remove: "Conversation was tedious; she wanted something big and she believed that it would have come to her on the wind-swept platform of an electric tram."⁹⁹ Lucy is drawn to this symbol of mobility and modernity over the stationery perch in her room at her stuffy hotel. Forster explains, "Lucy does not stand for the medieval lady, who was rather an ideal to which she was bidden to lift her eyes when feeling serious. Nor has she any system of revolt." However, "she would really like to do something of which her well-wishers disapproved," and exits the hotel to explore Florence.¹⁰⁰ "She oughtn't really to go at all," said Mr. Beebe, as they watched her from the window, "and she knows it."¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Forster, *Room 45*.

¹⁰⁰ Forster, *Room 46*.

¹⁰¹ Forster, *Room 44*.

Exploring the city turns out to be a crucially important act for Lucy, where she starts to experience “life” and where she begins to fall in love with a new suitor. Instead of riding the tram as she intended (she is not quite bold enough—it’s unladylike), she purchases some photographs of Italian art, witnesses the stabbing and murder of a man on the street, faints, and is suddenly “rescued” by George Emerson, whose father sacrificed their hotel rooms for Charlotte and Lucy. It is of course very interesting that Lucy’s first major transgressive move in the novel is to explore the city alone. This would seem to ally her with the street-wandering *flâneuse*, but that couldn’t be further from Forster’s intent. In fact, while exploring the city enlivens Lucy’s senses, it makes her want to embrace life and experience, not spectatorship. It is something dramatic whose real purpose is not to valorize street wandering, but rather a vehicle to awaken Lucy and to make her more observant and interrogative of her own life, back in England.¹⁰²

Indeed, a key part of Lucy’s development is her movement beyond valuing spectatorship and “the view.” The day after Lucy’s adventure on the streets of Florence, Mr. Eager, a hypocritical vicar who lives in the English “colony” in Florence, offers to take her to Fiesole for a view of Florence, but Lucy finds this uninspiring compared to what she has been experiencing of late. She realizes that “. . . an invitation from the chaplain was something to be proud of,” and “A few days ago Lucy would have felt the same. But the joys of life were grouping themselves anew. A drive in the hills with Mr.

¹⁰² *Howards End* has a similar relationship to walking as *Room*, and in that novel we see it via a man, Leonard Bast, and can identify Michel de Certeau’s distinction between the walker and the voyeur. For Bast, the crucial mode is not about seeing, but experience: Bast discovers that walking through the city is the new form of culture; whereas culture used to be focused around books, now it is centered experience, walking, adventure.

Eager and Miss Bartlett—even if culminating in a residential tea-party—was no longer the greatest of them.”¹⁰³ The view is now insufficient—Lucy desires something more.

Like Lily, Lucy chooses a different path than the woman at the window. Gradually, beginning with this first moment of rebellion in exploring the city alone, she learns to think for herself, to make her own choices, to shirk custom, to be a mobile explorer and experience different spaces. Like Wharton, Forster similarly desires for his heroine to move among and experience different spaces. Forster rejects liminal spaces (hotel, garden party) for his heroine in deference to direct experience and genuine interaction in the world at large, and Lucy feels alive in nature in the same way that she felt alive on the streets of Florence.

While Lily faces many key choices that affect her fate and considers various options for courtship and marriage, Lucy confronts only one crucial choice—between Cecil Vyse and George Emerson. A rare combination of a boor and a dandy, Cecil Vyse becomes Lucy’s fiancé through the course of the novel. Like Selden, but to an even greater degree, Cecil is a detached spectator who views women as art objects. He is excessively focused on the view—with concerns such as how to make the view from the drawing room at Windy Corner, Lucy’s childhood home, more appealing. Like a male version of the woman at the window, Cecil is passive, shuttered, interior. Lucy claims to connect Cecil not with the open air, as he wishes, but with a drawing room without a view.¹⁰⁴

A clear contrast to Cecil, George Emerson is a melancholic youth who falls in love with Lucy in Italy; he kisses her impetuously, after which Charlotte immediately

¹⁰³ Forster, *Room 58*.

¹⁰⁴ Forster, *Room 123*.

ushers Lucy away to Rome to escape the impropriety. Not of high social standing—and indifferent at that—George is not impressed by conventionality, believing it is important to speak his mind and seek the truth, and he engages in life instead of looking. When asked by Cecil whether he likes the view at Windy Corner, George says he doesn't care about the view—that “they're all alike”, only “distance and air”; that his father has told him that “there is only one perfect view—the view of the sky straight over our heads, and that all these views on earth are but bungled copies of it.”¹⁰⁵ Watching the view, here, is akin to gossipy spectatorship, and George Emerson rejects this as a matter of principle.

Where Lily comes to model herself after the detached spectator and attempts to take on his role, Lucy ultimately separates herself from him and rejects this kind of perception. And where Lily embraces being a work of art as her main function, Lucy rejects her status as a work of art. Upon being pressed, Lucy explains to Cecil her reasoning:

I won't be protected. I will choose for myself what is ladylike and right. To shield me is an insult. Can't I be trusted to face the truth but I must get it second-hand through you? A woman's place! . . . you may understand beautiful things, but you don't know how to use them; and you wrap yourself up in art and books and music, and would try to wrap up me. I won't be stifled, not by the most glorious music, for people are more glorious, and you hide them from me.¹⁰⁶

Though Cecil tries, ultimately no one shows Lucy the world in the way that Selden shows Lily; she sees through her own eyes rather than someone else's.

Where Lily sees the plate glass of the chemist's, which ushers her to her death, Lucy's sees “some feeble light . . . shining,” through the window of the church, which

¹⁰⁵ Forster, *Room* 182.

¹⁰⁶ Forster, *Room* 198.

brings her to Mr. Emerson and ultimately to awakening and truth about her love for George and the decision she must make to leave Cecil.¹⁰⁷ For Lucy, resistance to her status as an art object is as simple as choosing George over Cecil. Unlike many of the other characters in the novel, George is not a philosopher or a proselytizer of anything in specific, and he seems rather unremarkable. Forster consciously prevents us from categorizing George because his point is that, in choosing him over Cecil, Lucy is not exchanging one worldview for another—she is falling in love with an individual and in this respect, embracing the real over the conventional and expected.

Lucy's experience helps us to understand that part of Lily's downfall is that she does not reject Selden as Lucy rejects Cecil. Lucy alone branches out and finds someone who fits a different mold and thus engages in love rather than an object-subject relationship. And while the vision of Lily as a modernist dream doesn't stick, Lucy, in contrast, gets more and more comfortable in her position as an independent woman. At the same time, Lucy doesn't do anything truly risqué and thus does not open herself up to being an object of prying eyes in the same way that Lily does. Lucy becomes a perceiver, but it leads her to choices that have a positive benefit for her. She slowly gains confidence, increases her mobility, tries out different spaces, asserts herself and takes charge of her own life. It is Cecil who ultimately recognizes Lucy's transformation and says after they break up that Lucy has become "a living woman."

Where some women writers respond to the power of masculine spectatorship by giving visual power over to women, Wharton and Forster attempt to direct women's independence away from visuality entirely by negating or critiquing spectatorship itself. In doing so, the writers work to distinguish Lily and Lucy from the *flâneuse*. What the

¹⁰⁷ Forster, *Room 226*.

woman at the window and the *flâneuse* share is a fixation on spectatorship and an association with the woman artist. Their narratives incorporate and ensure that we recognize signifiers of this figure—in the opening of the novel, Lily Bart is the woman alone, idle, and aimless in the city. Lucy Honeychurch’s moment of initiation is to explore the city alone. And yet, Lucy and Lily, though they may walk the streets at times, are a far cry from the wandering, watching *flâneur*. Michel de Certeau has made a distinction between the walker and the voyeur, which is instructive here—while the act of walking in public spaces is very important to Lily and Lucy, the young women are most definitely not voyeurs. Their eyes are not closed when they wander the street, and the gaze is not under erasure in either novel as in Levy’s text, but neither heroine experiences the pleasure of the visual in the way that Gertrude Lorimer or so many other characters of this era do. Nor, for them, is there an especial fixation on the street spectacle and scene itself—the local wood has the same effect on Lucy as the Florentine streets.¹⁰⁸

While Forster is accepting of women’s presence on the street, he discounts this as a key path to women’s independence. Wharton, on the other hand, draws on this narrative to suggest its irrelevance and to recodify the upper-class woman’s unfortunate position as a spectacle. Forster suggests that it is getting women to focus on following their hearts and minds in making life choices that will make them truly independent and reveals spectatorship as ultimately ineffectual, even for men (Cecil, so focused on the “view,” ultimately does not get the girl precisely for this reason), whereas Wharton sharply critiques spectatorship, while suggesting that its profound power over women has not been diminished by their presence in public space.

¹⁰⁸ What does bring pleasure and awareness for these characters (and ruin, for Lily) is mobility, the very fact of being out of the house, of the room, moving between spaces (not necessarily urban spaces and not necessarily alone).

Wharton and Forster are working to shift the terms under which a woman is considered independent—the *flâneuse* misses the point by focusing on aspects of independence that are only relevant for a small subset of women. They remind us that the *flâneuse* is the narrow purview of the woman artist and that if we look at women as a whole, the subject-object relationship in courtship is much more powerful and far-reaching. How can independence become a reality for the marriageable girl and not just the woman artist-observer? Though both Wharton and Forster call on this familiar narrative of the woman street wanderer through the experiences of Lucy and Lily, they ultimately remind us that the woman-as-object paradigm is actually much more powerful in social relationships and structures of power and in marriage and courtship itself than in the experience of the woman street wanderer.

In their critique of spectatorship and the irrelevance with which they treat the street observer, Wharton and Forster stand out among their modernist peers, as the early twentieth century was certainly the high era of the visual. At the same time, they do not stand alone. Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) highlights the deceptiveness of the visual (people falsely believing that the soul is written on the face and that Dorian's beauty precludes evil acts) and argues that it is the spectator, not life, that art really mirrors. Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) refers to the "ineluctable modality of the visible," the ways in which the visible world is merely a distraction from the real—"close your eyes and see." Joyce questions the gap between the face of the world and the reality behind it, recognizing both the limits of perception and the ways in which what we see can actually be a liability, a distraction from what is true and right. D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* (1920) represents characters who attempt to go beyond the visual, believing that focusing

on the visual prevents people from feeling and experiencing. And African-American writers such as Nella Larsen in *Passing* (1929) will join women writers in revealing the ways in which the visual can be misleading and destructive. Together with these writers, Wharton and Forster highlight a thread in modernism that is as highly critical of visuality as many modernists are captivated by it.

The Woman at the Window Revived

As with Levy, Forster and Wharton resurrect not only the marriage plot—one successful and one failed—but also the woman at the window. For after rejecting the woman at the window and charting a new course for their heroines, what both Wharton and Forster return us to at the close of their novels is the woman at the window in revised form. It is Lily's desire to really experience and inhabit the world and to own the identity of the independent woman that makes her so scornful of her aunt, Mrs. Peniston. But in actuality, Lily is throughout the novel behind a pane of glass, peering in the window just like Gerty Farish—looking at what she doesn't have: high society, wealth, home, marriage, family, stability. So while the woman at the window is hateful and vile to Wharton, she is unable to locate successfully a viable alternative. A room without a view is ultimately Lily's fate, all she is left with, which she realizes following Carrie Fisher's advice that she must marry George Dorset or Sim Rosedale: "The light projected on the situation by Mrs. Fisher had the cheerless distinctness of a winter dawn. It outlined the facts with a cold precision unmodified by shade or colour, and refracted, as it were, from

the blank walls of the surrounding limitations: she had opened the windows from which no sky was ever visible.”¹⁰⁹

Lily cannot abide this view, so she chooses instead the perspective of the street and becomes a window watcher, looking in at the life from which she has been excluded, truly embodying the life she has been living all along (behind a pane of glass): “The walk up Fifth Avenue, unfolding before her, in the brilliance of the hard winter sunlight, an interminable procession of fastidiously-equipped carriages—giving her, through the little squares of brougham-windows, peeps of familiar profiles bent above visiting-lists, of hurried hands dispensing notes and cards to attendant footmen—this glimpse of the ever-revolving wheels of the great social machine made Lily more than ever conscious of the steepness and narrowness of Gerty’s stairs, and of the cramped blind-alley of life to which they led.”¹¹⁰ From this vantage, Lily watches in windows of others’ homes, in carriages, in restaurants—and ultimately, in the window of the chemist where she gets the potion that kills her, “her steps . . . irresistibly drawn toward the flaring plate-glass corner.”¹¹¹

Lily becomes what she most despises—the woman at the window—and, worse, her choices to transcend the threshold have firmly fixed her on the other side of the pane of glass, on the outside looking in. She has given up the possibility of even becoming the matron at the window.¹¹² Lily may seem the precise emblem of modernity at the start of the novel, but Wharton indicates that the world is not ready for a female version of this.

¹⁰⁹ Wharton, *House* 356.

¹¹⁰ Wharton, *House* 370-1.

¹¹¹ Wharton, *House* 405.

¹¹² At the end of the novel, Rosedale appraises Lily’s boarding-house looking through the “blotched glass” of the windows (421), a moment Wharton juxtaposes with an earlier moment, when Rosedale encounters Lily at Selden’s and looks up at the windows. The two moments are related. The one (Lily’s decision to visit Selden’s bachelor apartment) actually or metaphorically results in the other.

Wharton mourns that Lily cannot have it all; her options seem to be to choose between being behind different panes of glass. Instead, she chooses to cross the threshold, to wander about, to go where she wishes though she knows she should not. Though Wharton rejects the window as an insufficient portal for women to experience life, Lily's experience indicates that finding an alternative is a rather complex undertaking. The relic of the woman at the window, though completely outdated, has no one yet to replace her, in Wharton's imagination. And moreover, this figure symbolically typifies the condition of all women, even those whose choices and stations in life appear on the surface to be very different (Mrs. Peniston, Gerty, Lily). Wharton emphasizes the inevitable station of women in the gossipy, appearance-oriented culture of Old New York. Though wealthy and privileged, their situation is after all not so different from the poor and lonely Mrs. Manstey.

Forster, instead, revives the woman at the window through a positive vision of the melding of domesticity and feminist independence at the close of his novel. George and Lucy elope and escape England, returning to the Florentine Pension Bertolini. They return to the place where they met, to Lucy's very room. They are on their honeymoon, and George seeks out the view that Lucy once enjoyed: "He strolled to the window, opened it (as the English will), and leant out. There was the parapet, there the river, there to the left the beginnings of the hills. The cab-driver, who at once saluted him with the hiss of a serpent, might be that very Phaethon who had set this happiness in motion twelve months ago." George entreats Lucy to come to see the view, but she is busy mending a sock: "Lucy, you come and look at the cypresses; and the church, whatever its name is, still shows." He says to her, "Nonsense with that sock." "He carried her to the

window, so that she, too, saw all the view. They sank upon their knees, invisible from the road, they hoped, and began to whisper one another's names. Ah! it was worth while; it was the great joy that they had expected, and countless little joys of which they had never dreamt. They were silent."¹¹³ In carrying her to the window, George in a sense rescues Lucy from domesticity—from mending a sock to looking at the whole wide world. It is “The End of the Middle Ages,” as the chapter title proclaims.

This is an interesting and surprising ending from the writer who not only criticized the woman at the window at the opening of *Room*, but who also, in “Pessimism in Literature” (1906), had asserted that “We of today know that whatever marriage is, it is not an end,” and, in *Aspects of the Novel*, had derided “that idiotic use of marriage as a finale” in fiction.¹¹⁴ But, as Jane Miller points out, many of Forster's novels circle around a version of the marriage plot, reflecting, she claims, his transitional status.¹¹⁵

Forster's narrative seeking liberty and freedom from social restrictions for women in *Room* has a kinship in his desire for such freedom for homosexual men in *Maurice* (written 1914, posthumously published 1970). *Maurice* can be useful here in helping us to understand Forster's attitude toward domesticity, the window, and the interior at the close of *Room*. Lucy and Maurice are kindred spirits, both of whom must learn to follow their souls, to make choices that take them outside society and beyond the traditional interior. Both reject the liminal in favor of a rich life inside and outside.¹¹⁶ The window is presented as a metaphor related to Maurice's “predicament” as a homosexual, akin to a

¹¹³ Forster, *Room* 239-40.

¹¹⁴ E. M. Forster, *Albergo Empedocle and Other Writings*, ed. George H. Thomson (New York: Liveright, 1971) 135. Forster, *Aspects* 38.

¹¹⁵ Miller 46.

¹¹⁶ Lucy, of course, does not have to make the hard choices that Maurice does. Marrying outside of her class is, in her era, a forgivable lapse. *Room* can end, poignantly, with her on the interior—albeit an alternative interior. Maurice must relinquish society completely in favor of the wood in order to pursue his love.

similar metaphor, being “in the closet.” Lovers cannot enter through the door, seen, dignified, and socially sanctioned, but must enter and exit through the window.

Maurice’s choices in life and love are also similar to Lucy’s. At the close of *Maurice*, we see Maurice’s similar explicit refusal of compromise. As Maurice confesses to Clive his love affair with Alec: “All compromise was perilous, because furtive, and having finished his confession, he must disappear from the world that had brought him up.”¹¹⁷ His choice to refuse a life within respectable society, while hiding his romantic interests, is akin to a rejection of liminality—a sense that “halfway” is not good enough; done in darkness is insufficient.

And yet, despite Maurice’s growing awareness of the impossibility of his living a traditional domestic life, the novel finds value in the interior. Reenacting a common moment in literature of this period, Maurice discovers that life exists on the inside by looking in others’ windows. He discovers at Cambridge that “People turned out to be alive. Hitherto he had supposed that they *were* what he *pretended* to be—flat pieces of cardboard stamped with a conventional design—but as he strolled about the courts at night and saw through the windows some men singing and others arguing and others at their books, there came by no process of reason a conviction that they were human beings with feelings akin to his own.”¹¹⁸ As in *Room*, Forster reveals the interior as a place of potential authenticity, a realm of the real. Choosing a life of partnership with Alec, Maurice realizes what their fate will be: “They must live outside class, without relations or money; they must work and stick to each other till death. But England belonged to them. That, besides companionship, was their reward. Her air and sky were theirs, not

¹¹⁷ E. M. Forster, *Maurice* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971) 244.

¹¹⁸ Forster, *Maurice* 30.

the timorous millions' who own stuffy little boxes, but never their own souls."¹¹⁹

Forster's allusion to the "stuffy little boxes" contains an indictment of domesticity, but it is one tinged with longing for something that Maurice cannot have. He rejects the need to enter and exit through the window in favor of the wood, though the decision is bittersweet. Forster saw the value and allure in traditional domesticity, but as a gay man, was consistently led to seek out alternatives. He is singular in his reaffirmation of marriage and domesticity alongside his recognition of the ways in which it can be an institution of repression.¹²⁰

In *Room*, the woman at the window is initially positioned as a counterset to the modern woman, but she is ultimately the figure that we return to in revised form; she is Lucy at the close of the novel, the interior woman revived. Whereas in the beginning of the novel Lucy is at the window and George is in the street, in the end, they are both at the window. It is notable that George and Lucy's defining moment at the end is not on the street, which is a space some feminist writers during his era were trying to claim for women. This really allows Forster to separate himself from feminists and to demonstrate what it is he is truly after: life, love, and experience, which are not wholly or even mostly about public space, in his estimation. Forster proffers a moral world in which women can be independent and make choices for themselves, but in a way that embraces living and feeling, not necessarily what he considers to be New Woman pretensions. Forster rejects the room with a view for Lucy when it is simply visualizing life at a remove, but he also validates it in the end in a different way. While the view stands in for a substitute for life,

¹¹⁹ Forster, *Maurice* 239.

¹²⁰ *Howards End* similarly enacts the creation of an alternative domesticity at the estate of the same name. Helen Schlegel is a self-possessed woman who (like Lily Bart) makes her own decisions, travels freely, and lives outside the bounds of parental oversight. She becomes pregnant out of wedlock, but both money and changing social norms protect her from disaster, and she lives quietly and comfortably with her sister and her son.

and Forster makes it clear that he is not censuring the view itself, but the tendency to substitute the view for living. At the end of the novel, George and Lucy can enjoy the view because they are living and loving together; there is something real and alive going on behind the window pane. The room is where real life is in this scene, not the street outside. In this context, why not enjoy a pretty vista?

It is the desire to be modern that makes Wharton and Forster reject the window view; yet their radicality stops rather short, as what they ultimately want for their characters is the grand house of the domestic woman, as much as it is the freedom and mobility of the New Woman. Though Wharton and Forster reject the window view and other liminal sites in favor of women's presence on the street, in the wood, and in the world, it would be a mistake to read their escape from liminality as a rejection of the domestic interior (of the sort we are accustomed to seeing in texts by certain other modernists). For Lucy Honeychurch and Lily Bart both ultimately desire some form of interior matrimonial domesticity, and this desire is validated by the narrative voice in each novel. What Wharton and Forster decline for their heroines is not so much the politics of feminism as the alternative lifestyle that often accompanies it. They reveal the difficulty faced by writers in this era who want to find an alternative path for women, while rejecting a box-shelf brand of New Woman feminism, homosocial life, and the shuttered domestic woman. They struggle to figure out ways to allow strong, confident female heroines to thrive and own their confidence, mobility, morality, and visibility without having to subscribe to the London or New York flat.

While Wharton and Forster reacted against feminism as a political movement with certain defined associations, they genuinely valued certain kinds of independence

for women that feminists also sought out. Instead of rejecting the interior and the interior woman, Wharton and Forster simply want the interior and exterior to have separate functions and for women to be able to move freely between them.¹²¹ They ultimately value a woman's experience of the interior, but they want to free her from observation, remove visibility as her main function—looking and being looked at—and replace it with experience, a rich life in and out. At the same time, we also have to recognize that Wharton and Forster enact this struggle in ways that continue to value wealth, social position, material culture, and ultimately, the domestic home. The central quandary for both novelists ultimately becomes how to find a house for their heroines. Their posture toward the interior female observer reflects this ambivalence.

Indeed, both writers, particularly Wharton, ultimately highly value domesticity, and their search for women's independence continues to uplift this—a fact that is often elided or under-emphasized in feminist narratives about their work because of the retrograde politics surrounding domesticity and the interior. For Wharton, it is a way of life, about wealth and comfort, love, the heterosexual matrimonial ideal, the grand house of dreams and comfort and familiarity and domesticity (while still yearning for what modernity seems to offer but doesn't quite—more mobility, a looser moral code).

Wharton legitimates Lily's desires for love, wealth, home, family, position, and society.

¹²¹ Both writers emphasize the need for different spaces having separate functions in other contexts. Wharton indicates that spaces between interior and exterior and within a home should be clearly separated, each having its own function. "If the drawing-room be a part of the hall and the library a part of the drawing-room, all three will be equally unfitted to serve their special purpose" (*Decoration* 23). And, "the use of elaborate lace-figured curtains, besides obstructing the view, seems an attempt to protrude the luxury of the interior upon the street." (*Decoration* 72). In 1906, addressing the Working Men's College on "Pessimism in Literature," Forster offers the case of Box Hill as an example of the need to keep the city and country separate. "What was its fate in the future? London will have absorbed it. Houses will be nondescript. Motor cars will pollute the roads and aircraft will scream overhead. The inhabitants will care more for manufactured consumer goods than for the fruits of the fields" (Forster, *Albergo Empedocle and Other Writings*).

House of Mirth is ultimately about Lily's search for a home: not a "room of her own," but a beautiful, heterosexual domestic space—one of singular luxury and, as we see through her inability to relinquish Selden, to whom she feels the closest thing to love that she experiences, romantic feeling. The opening of the novel sets the stage for this quest; at the train station, Lily is in a quintessential place of mobility, movement, transition, direction, but she has found it as a location to be aimless, "wearing an air of irresolution," and not "know[ing] a soul in town."¹²² Her aunt's house is locked up, she is without a true home, solid ground—and it is this status that propels her to the home of Selden unchaperoned. In its extremity, Lily's experience highlights the condition of all women.

The domestic interior is more greatly valued by Lily than by Lucy, which partly explains their different outcomes. Lucy can satisfy herself with a room with a view in a foreign hotel, but Lily cannot. In marrying George, Lucy makes a choice that may compromise her socially, financially, familialy. In some ways, she has less to lose, as she is not as wealthy as Lily was raised to be and does not have the marriage prospects that Lily does. As well, Lucy does not value wealth to the degree that Lily does. Lucy is willing to accept her fate (hotel life, censure of parents, social scorn), whereas Lily is absolutely uncompromising. As her name indicates, Lily has been bred to be a rare flower, to be plucked by an entitled wealthy man, and she will be satisfied with nothing less. Forster indicates that people can make unconventional choices and still be happy, while Wharton aims to reveal that unconventional choices can result in great sacrifice and dishonor.

¹²² Wharton, *House* 17-19. Here, Lily is the embodiment of Michel de Certeau's statement that "To walk is to lack a place." Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) 103.

Though Forster envisions a more sanguine ending than Wharton, both fail at or resist materializing an alternative form of heterosexual domesticity that kills off the traditional woman, the angel in the house, but puts something solid in her place. Lily's endless search for a house befitting her and her intense focus on her interior surroundings reflect a desire for some version of domestic life that is never located, and Lucy's quest never materializes beyond elopement and a hotel room in a foreign locale. As with Maurice and Alec, the fate of Lucy and George remains unknown. We are led to imagine a happy fate; we have reached the moment of "love." But Forster is still unable to house this love, to find its interior. Lucy and Lily remain virginal, childless, houseless. Lucy gets her room with a view—but that's all she gets—and the house of mirth eludes Lily completely. The titles themselves signify different standards (the "room" versus the "house"); perhaps Lily's is unrealistic for a woman in her position who wants to take the liberties that she does. In some ways we can see Forster as more of an extension of Levy: the woman at the window progresses. Wharton is less patient, much less willing to be satisfied with the raw deal that women get, and far less sympathetic toward the choices women make to restrain themselves out of social necessity.

* * * * *

The window view's special significance for women in the early twentieth century is articulated more directly by Forster than by many other writers of his era. In *Room*, Beebe comments on the travel plans of the Miss Alans, " 'A really comfortable pension at Constantinople!' So they call it out of decency, but in their hearts they want a pension with magic windows opening on the foam of perilous seas in fairyland forlorn! No

ordinary view will content the Miss Alans. They want the Pension Keats.”¹²³ One might also say that Levy’s windows performed a kind of magical purpose, and in Walter Benjamin’s work, I will explore his similar concept of the “magic of the threshold.” But for Forster and Wharton, the window is instead a space of division, not one where fusion and magic occur, and overly associated with spectatorship and visibility, which they condemn. Rejecting liminality, in-betweenness, mediation—the very things that Levy valued—indicates their refusal to settle. Instead of rejecting the interior and the interior woman, Wharton and Forster indicate that the interior and exterior must have separate functions and that women must be able to move freely between them. The metaphor of the window is not an especially positive one for them because they want more than Levy settles for; and, they are not far enough removed from this figure to be able to reconceptualize her in the way that Woolf later will.

And yet, to the window they return. Wharton and Forster reveal the difficulty faced by women in the early twentieth-century who want to find an alternative path of independence, while rejecting the New Woman, the *flâneuse*, homosocial life, and the marriage of convenience. The woman at the window becomes the figure that their heroines define themselves against in their pursuit of freedom and modernity, and yet their escape from this figure comes full circle. Wharton scathingly rejects the woman at the window, but fails to provide anything workable in her place and ultimately reveals that all women are behind a pane of glass. Forster takes an individual young woman on a journey of realizing that the window perspective is inadequate, but then returns her to a renewed version of this very space. Through this process, they substantiate the

¹²³ Forster, *Room 205*.

overwhelming significance of the woman at the window as an image of the collective unconscious—inescapable, narratively and literally, even by those who seek to elude her.

In the process, Wharton and Forster reflect the struggle of modernism and feminism to find its domestic interior while vaunting the mobility characteristic of this era. While mobility is unequivocally valued, with few exceptions, by modernist feminists and other modernists, both groups struggle to develop a positive relationship to a stable domestic interior—which is in some sense antithetical to mobility, but in another sense nearly unavoidable: one has to dwell somewhere. A number of modernists settle into the Baudelairean “hate of home” and “love of wandering” without apparent reservation, but those acutely concerned with the social experience of women—and in particular the marriageable girl who idealizes the marital home—cannot dismiss the tension so cursorily. The New Woman flat comes to be one answer to the need for a feminist interior, but Wharton and Forster address the larger and arguably more vexed struggle of women to find a matrimonial domestic interior that is compatible with feminist ideals. That their answers are not altogether satisfactory or conclusive—neither of their heroines finds precisely what she wants, in varying degrees—reflects the ways in which the quandary remains largely unresolved and the struggle alive, arguably to this day.

Forster’s and Wharton’s responses to the woman at the window are not only different from the one Levy conveyed, but also from what will come later via Virginia Woolf. Forster’s comments on Virginia Woolf’s work may be helpful in understanding the differences between his perspective on the window and her own, which will be

discussed in the next chapter. In “The Early Novels of Virginia Woolf”¹²⁴ (1925), Forster satirizes Woolf’s object-focus and her attention to the visual: “It is profoundly characteristic of the art of Virginia Woolf that when I decided to write about it and had planned a suitable opening paragraph, my fountain pen should disappear. Tiresome creature! It slipped through my pocket into a seam. I could pinch it, chivy it about, make holes in the coat lining, but a layer of tailor’s stuffing prevented recovery. So near, and yet so far! Which is what one feels about her art.”¹²⁵ And, “After this glance we can better understand her equipment, and realize that visual sensitiveness—in itself so slight a tool for a novelist—becomes in her case a productive force. How beautifully she sees! Look at ‘those churches, like shapes of grey paper, breasting the stream of the Strand,’ for instance.”¹²⁶ Here, Forster pokes fun at Woolf’s approach to fiction, while also honoring her strengths.

Unlike Woolf, Wharton and Forster were more focused on personal and social relationships than political causes. Their aim in these novels is for society to broaden its view of acceptable roles for women, but they do not position themselves as active social advocates, particularly at this point in their careers. Forster had said that he was not a fan

¹²⁴ Interestingly, at the end of Forster’s essay on Virginia Woolf, he turns to their shared image of the window to comment on her fiction. He claims that English fiction “might be compared to a picture gallery, lit by windows placed at suitable intervals between the pictures. First come some portraits, then a window with a view say of Norfolk, then some more portraits and perhaps a still life, followed by a window with a view of Persia, then more portraits and perhaps a fancy piece, followed by a view of the universe. The pictures and the windows are infinite in number, so that every variety of experience seems assured, and yet there is one factor that never varies: namely the gallery itself; the gallery is always the same, and the reader always has the feeling that he is pacing along it, under the conditions of time and space that regulate his daily life. Virginia Woolf would do away with the sense of pacing. The pictures and windows may remain if they can—indeed, the portraits must remain—but she wants to destroy the gallery in which they are embedded and in its place build—build what? Something more rhythmical. *Jacob’s Room* suggests a spiral whirling down to a point, *Mrs. Dalloway* a cathedral” (*Abinger Harvest* 114-115).

¹²⁵ E. M. Forster, “The Early Novels of Virginia Woolf” in *Abinger Harvest* (1936; San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1964) 106.

¹²⁶ Forster, *Abinger Harvest* 111-12.

of causes and would not betray a friend for a cause.¹²⁷ And whereas Levy and later Woolf are centrally concerned with finding a space for aesthetic practice, Forster and Wharton do not focus on such concerns. They subjugate art to life. The window as a portal for observation is not useful for them because they are not fixated on the artist's simultaneous need to observe and to create. Observation, in their world, can emerge as a negative force connected with gossip, whereas it is central to the framework of the others' texts, concerned as they are with the spaces and practices of the writer.

Indeed, Forster's and Wharton's critique of the woman at the window, in contrast to the accounts by Woolf and Levy, underscores just how central the window's aesthetic features are in modernist literary explorations of this figure. Forster and Wharton are able to be dismissive of the woman at the window in part because they are dismissive of the artist, a figure that is central to many serious explorations—and valorizations—of the woman at the window in literature, art, and film.

The titles of Forster's and Woolf's novels, *A Room with a View* and *A Room of One's Own*, in the context of their respective texts, encapsulate some of the crucial differences between the writers. Woolf's title is sincere in wanting women to have a room of their own, in seeing the significance of this material space. Forster's title represents something that is not worth having. It is essentially what is relinquished by the

¹²⁷ In his later career (after he wrote *Room*), Forster would find himself vocal in opposition to fascism as well as censorship, but he nonetheless maintained the primacy of personal relationships over social causes. He wrote, "Personal relations are despised today. They are regarded as bourgeois luxuries, as products of a time of fair weather which is now past, and we are urged to get rid of them, and to dedicate ourselves to some movement or cause instead. I hate the idea of causes, and if I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country. Such a choice may scandalise the modern reader, and he may stretch out his patriotic hand to the telephone at once and ring up the police. It would not have shocked Dante, though. Dante places Brutus and Cassius in the lower circle of Hell because they had chosen to betray their friend Julius Caesar rather than their country Rome.... Love and loyalty to an individual can run counter to the claims of the State. When they do – down with the State, say I, which means that the State would down me." "What I Believe" in *Two Cheers for Democracy* (1939; Middlesex: Penguin, 1970) 76.

end of the novel (the room with the view not being the point at all). For Forster, it is not about the object, but about getting past the object to “life”; fictionally, the object is just a tool. But as Woolf knew and as the next chapter will reveal, the life of the writer involves a great deal of looking instead of living, and in Woolf’s work, she takes this quandary head on even as she attends to the plight of the everyday domestic woman.

Chapter 4

Modernism and the Magic of the Threshold:

Virginia Woolf's Window in Correspondence with Walter Benjamin's Arcade

Virginia Woolf scarcely knew what an arcade was, observing on a trip to Italy in 1933 “people swarming in the streets; under the—what is the word for—I think the word for a street that has pillars is Arcade.”¹ In her casual unawareness of—but attention to—this darling object of Walter Benjamin, we find both a coincidence and a lack of conjunction that mirrors the larger relationship between the two thinkers.² Though we have no evidence of any personal or intellectual association between Woolf and Benjamin, Woolf's writing demonstrates a profound synchronicity with Benjamin's not only in its very vocabulary, but also in its fixation on a fluid, indistinct relationship between dualities—inside and outside spaces, art and life—and on a specific architectural form that embodies these dualities. While for Benjamin it was the arcade, for Woolf, of course, it was the window.

¹ Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 4, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1982) 155.

² There are differences of note between Benjamin's Parisian arcades and the Italian arcades Woolf alludes to here. M. Jeffrey Hardwick explains, “The term *arcade* has a long, complicated history. Originally, the word had been used in English in seventeenth-century descriptions of Italian arcades: it did not have a distinctly commercial connotation and was used to describe covered walkways, trellises, niches, and connected arches. . . . Throughout the nineteenth century in Europe, England, and the Americas, developers purposely applied “arcade” to large, covered urban retail structures in an attempt to conjure up the European aura of the Italian arcade.” M. Jeffrey Hardwick, *Mall Maker: Victor Gruen, Architect of an American Dream* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004) 232.

In Chapter One, I examined the synergies between the historical-critical methods developed independently by Woolf and Benjamin, as a basis for exploring the window as an image of the collective unconscious within this project. Here, I take a close look at the specific spatial objects in which these writers house their dialectical explorations to analyze what these can tell us about both the landscape of modernism and the independent project of each writer. Woolf's window and Benjamin's arcade share—to borrow one of Benjamin's terms via Baudelaire—resonant *correspondances*. While Benjamin's arcade is widely recognized as the centerpiece to his theories, Woolf's equally powerful connection to the window has gone virtually unnoticed. Yet, the window is a textually pervasive, theoretically rich site that, I argue, functions for Woolf as a multiply meaningful space of dialectical reflection. The window becomes for Woolf the essential—often nostalgic—site where she and her artist-observers can negotiate and resolve the vexed relationship of the aesthetic to the political, historical, and domestic and a crucial nexus where past meets present, where history comes face to face with modernity.

We could productively read Woolf's window in its own right, but I examine the kinship between Woolf's window and Benjamin's arcade as a key opportunity to rethink the spatial and social landscape of modernism and the dominant ideal of aesthetic practice in modernity. Reading Woolf and Benjamin together, that is, invites us to expand our notion of modernist aesthetic practice and modernism itself beyond the prevalent, street-centrist version that was promoted by notable modernist writers, has been perpetuated by modernist critics, and is still very much in currency today.

In contrast to the scorn with which many of their contemporaries treat the interior or domestic space, I argue that both Woolf and Benjamin consider interior space as central to their theoretical framework, and they work to reclaim and transform this site as distinctly modern, socially engaged, and aesthetically charged. Far from recovering interior space at the expense of the street, however, through their ongoing, structural interest in the window and the arcade, both as material sites for critical experience and as allegorical objects or images, Woolf and Benjamin focus on the crossovers and meeting points of private and public, aesthetic and political. Both writers, finally, invoke the arcade or window as a way of locating a space for productive, generative engagement with contemporary and historical reality, for a dialectical practice that's at once aesthetic and social.³ It is therefore one aim of this chapter to reconceptualize the apex of modernism (1920s and 30s) in terms of the dream, literally, spatially, and figuratively, to fuse the dichotomies that plague modern experience and aesthetic practice—and, more particularly for Woolf, the life and work of women artists and intellectuals.

With these aims in mind, after surveying the relevant critical literature in Woolf and Benjamin studies, I first turn to a brief analysis of the correspondences between the window and arcade. Next, I go on to make the case for the window and arcade as dialectical objects that each writer uses to synthesize the aesthetic with the social. Lastly, an extended reading of *To the Lighthouse* (1927) will explore Woolf's attempt to unearth the woman at the window as an image of the collective unconscious.

³ For my purposes, "social" encompasses the historical, political, personal, and domestic realms—all of those sites of experience and engagement that are outside of private, present aesthetic practice.

Benjamin's and Woolf Interiors: In Critical Parentheses

As we have read through the eyes of Baudelaire, Levy, Wharton, and Forster, modernity was an era obsessed with street sights and figures, and street-wandering has been viewed, at least since Baudelaire, as the definitive practice of the modernist artist or observer. Often implicit in the formulations of writers who idealize the street-wandering artist are the hierarchies of the street over the home and the aesthetic over the domestic.⁴ Mirroring the larger trend in modernist studies, both Woolf and Benjamin are consistently read in ways that incorporate them into this street-centrist narrative of modernism.

Philosophically and politically, Walter Benjamin is most known in literary circles for his discussion of technological reproducibility in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” for his specific reading of fascism and the aestheticization of politics, for his vexed relationship with Marxism. In cultural studies, Benjamin is most frequently cited when the subject at hand centers around the modern city and the *flâneur*, and the figure with whom Benjamin is most closely aligned in critical discourse, even among feminist writers, is undoubtedly the street-worshipping Baudelaire.⁵ This focus

⁴ Eliot's “Prufrock and Other Observations,” for example, counterposes the freedom the poet experiences in wandering through and observing the streets to an over-cultured, stifled, feminized interior. While the street leads to “overwhelming question[s],” and provocative images, the interior houses the vacant rant of women who relentlessly “come and go / Talking of Michelangelo.” Pound's *Lustra* presents a similar paradigm. Repeated images of the bourgeois woman “dying of her ennui,” of “emotional anaemia,” are contrasted to an exalted picture of a solitary male, wandering through, observing, and ruminating on the streets. The last line of the collection fittingly illustrates the poet inhabiting this ideal: “I have walked over these roads; / I have thought of them living.” For Eliot and Pound, the street is home to images that inspire the wandering artist and offer him freedom from banal domesticities and empty, trifling bourgeois society.

⁵ In a recent revisiting of the figure of the *flâneur*, Mary Gluck writes that: “Any effort to recapture the historical *flâneur* needs to begin with Walter Benjamin's monumental study of 19th-century Paris (1999). As is well known, it was Benjamin who almost single-handedly recovered the figure of the *flâneur* for 20th-century criticism, establishing the connections between *flânerie* and the urban landscape of modernity.” Mary Gluck, “The Flâneur and the Aesthetic Appropriation of Urban Culture in Mid-19th-century Paris,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 20.5 (2003): 54. Nicolas Whybrow's recent book *Street Scenes: Brecht, Benjamin and Berlin* (2005), Beryl Schlossman's article “The Night of the Poet: Baudelaire,

on the street in Benjamin's work is unsurprising, for it is through his vision of the street, indeed, where Benjamin comes alive, where he paints fiercely drawn portraits that fit snugly into the modernist paradigm and value system, through texts such as *One Way Street* and sketches such as "Naples" and "Moscow."

Critics who work on domesticity in modernity offhandedly quote or paraphrase Benjamin often enough on his account of the nineteenth-century interior, but serious and nuanced engagement with the domestic interior in criticism on Benjamin's work and in studies of the domestic interior is nearly nonexistent. Leslie Hankins articulates one view among feminist literary critics: "Despite his brilliance, the misogyny of Benjamin's work limited his analyses, especially those of the bourgeois interior and the urban experience. Feminism seems to have passed Benjamin by."⁶ While Benjamin has certainly been a critic favored by some feminist critics who focus on the urban street and the urban artist, he has been perceived as having less to say to critics who write on early twentieth-century women in other contexts and roles, meaning that a sizeable group of scholars that

Benjamin, and the Woman in the Street" (2005), and Samuel Weber's "'Streets, Squares, Theaters': A City on the Move—Walter Benjamin's Paris" (2003), among countless other texts and articles, bear witness to this focus on the street in Benjaminian criticism. In linking Baudelaire's work and Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, Anne Friedberg even goes so far as to claim that "Baudelaire's collection of poems entitled *Les Fleurs du Mal* was the cornerstone of Benjamin's massive work on modernity, his uncompleted study of the Paris arcades." Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 5. Feminist critics of the modern city have also contributed to this trend, frequently turning to Benjamin in their explorations of the urban street and that elusive explorer in modernity, the flâneuse. In her feminist exploration of spatial geographies, *The Sphinx in the City*, Elizabeth Wilson describes her own seduction by the street scenes of Walter Benjamin: "In my mid teens I was unfamiliar with the writings of Benjamin, but I intuitively identified with an urban consciousness of which his reminiscences are one of the most beautiful examples. This consciousness had been developed by the dandies and 'flâneurs' (strollers, loiterers) of mid-nineteenth-century Paris. They had relished the kaleidoscope of urban public life and had created from it a new aesthetic, perceiving a kind of novel beauty in streets, factories and urban blight." Elizabeth Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City: Urban Life, the Control of Disorder, and Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) 5.

⁶ Leslie Hankins, "Virginia Woolf and Walter Benjamin Selling Out(Siders)", in *Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, editor Pamela L. Caughie (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000) 10.

has historically been invested in writers' engagements with the domestic interior has largely dismissed or overlooked his work.

Commentary on the role of the domestic interior in Benjamin's work, when it appears at all, is generally incidental within critical analysis of Benjamin's texts and focused exclusively on his caustic discussions of the nineteenth century-interior or his account, derived from Georg Simmel, of the home as a retreat from public life. The interior makes only rare appearance, for example, in Susan Buck-Morss' landmark *Dialectics of Seeing*—primarily in lists of Benjamin's convolutes, as a synonym for “unconscious,” and in the guise of the stuffy nineteenth-century interior. Despite her in-depth discussion of *The Arcades Project* and her attempt to take on the bulk of the central components in the work, she fails to see the interior as a category worthy of any but the most terse exploration. Characteristic of her commentary on the domestic interior in Benjamin's work is her statement regarding his *Trauerspiel* study that: “. . . the abstractness of representation has the effect of sealing the reader within the text, that creates its own windowless world. As in the stuffy, upholstered bourgeois interiors of the nineteenth century, one is threatened with claustrophobia.” On the other hand, she counters, “the atmosphere of *One Way Street* has all the light, air, and permeability of the new architecture of Gropius or Corbusier,” including “the outside world of gas stations, metros, traffic noises, and neon lights.”⁷ Buck-Morss juxtaposes Benjamin's conception of the shuttered nineteenth-century interior to the work of modern architects and, notably, the openness to street sights and sounds.⁸

⁷Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989) 17.

⁸Buck-Morss' juxtaposition occurs a second time, in images—a visual comparison of Sarah Bernhardt's nineteenth-century Parisian interior with the spare, modern, and open Villa Savoye of Le Corbusier. (300-

Woolf's work has also rather frequently been implicitly validated by its valorization of the street, its reflection of a set of ideals that are presumed to mirror those of Baudelaire, Eliot, Pound, Lawrence, Joyce, and others.⁹ Though *To the Lighthouse* received the preponderance of attention in early Woolf criticism, before the writer had taken the fixed place in the modernist canon that she now holds, since the 1990s, Woolf's urban texts have received disproportionate attention. Modernist scholars who regale texts such as *Ulysses* (1922), *The Waste Land* (1922), and *Paris Spleen* (1869) have almost inevitably fixated on those Woolf texts that appear to share similar principles and ideals. Clarissa Dalloway's jaunt through London makes for easy comparison with Bloom's and Dedalus' traversing of Dublin. Eliot's version of the wandering artist, as reflected in "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" (1917), shares a kinship with Woolf's meanderings in "Street Haunting" (1930).¹⁰

Texts such as *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), "Street Haunting," and *A Room of One's Own*, with their affectionate representations of the pleasures of urban wandering, do appear to align Woolf with the characteristically modernist valuation of street observation, with worship of the practice and person of the *flâneur*, or his female counterpart. Virginia Woolf certainly enjoyed a good city stroll and dramatizes her characters' similar enjoyment of the streets of London and other cities. Taking moments

301). Buck-Morss briefly quotes Benjamin's support of Le Corbusier's ideas, but never, surprisingly, does Buck-Morss recognize the centrality of the interior to Benjamin's spatial and material paradigm.

⁹ In her work on Woolf, Jennifer Wicke, for example, aims to "point to the richness of urbanity in Woolf's writing." Jennifer Wicke, "Coterie Consumption: Bloomsbury, Keynes, and Modernism as Marketing" in Kevin J. H. Dettmar and Stephen Watt, eds., *Marketing Modernisms: Self-Promotion, Canonization, Rereading* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996) 120.

¹⁰ Texts that more fully engage the interior—such as *The Voyage Out*, *Night and Day*, and *The Years*—have received far less attention from Woolf critics. In part, this reflects the not entirely unconvincing view that these "domestic" texts are less bold, less interesting, less "successful" than Woolf's other texts, and that they reflect the Victorian methods and values that are of less interest to modernist critics than Woolf's more experimental ventures. But, these texts help us to contextualize and understand the view of the interior and the relationship between the interior and the street that Woolf brings, even, to *Mrs. Dalloway* and other street-centric novels and stories.

of street wandering in Woolf's texts in isolation, however, masks her much more complex engagement with the status of the modern artist and her/his relationship to the definitive sites of modern experience. As I indicated in the introduction to this project, far from depicting textbook *flânerie*, even "Street Haunting" focuses not only on the pleasure of rollicking through London alone, but on the fluid, synergistic relationship the narrator develops between her experiences of public and private space. The essay ends with an affirmation of the domestic: "Street haunting in winter is the greatest of adventures. Still as we approach our own doorstep again, it is comforting to feel the old possessions, the old prejudices, fold us round; and the self, which has been blown about at so many street corners, which has battered like a moth at the flame of so many inaccessible lanterns, sheltered and enclosed."¹¹ Here as elsewhere, Woolf offers the rooted, domestic-bound artist-observer who nonetheless contends with modernity, history, and the city. In her texts, the domestic is reinvigorated as a locus for the production of art, and the true *flâneur*—genuinely solitary, hater of home, lover of wandering—is irrelevant because her characters have rich private lives and are bound, if sometimes conflictedly, to home.

The street/domestic interior hierarchy is significantly less pronounced in criticism of Woolf's work than in that of Benjamin. Given the long association of Woolf with feminism, we know well of the centrality of the domestic interior to Woolf's theories and practices, and a number of critics, such as Christopher Reed and Victoria Rosner, have done important work in establishing and elaborating on Woolf's essential connection to

¹¹ Virginia Woolf, "Street Haunting," in *Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1942) 35-6.

the domestic.¹² Rosner argues that “Woolf weaves [modernism and the domestic] together as she locates modernism’s origins in the spaces of private life” and that “For Woolf, the kitchen table represents not what the modernist artist must discard but what she must transform into the basis of her work.”¹³ As well, *A Room of One’s Own* (1928) is widely considered the defining text that confronts the significance of private interior space in the life of the writer.

Yet, as in Benjamin’s case, in critical studies that do seriously contend with the interior in Woolf’s texts, the relationship between the interior and the street is rarely viewed as a central concern. That is, when Woolf’s investment in the interior is addressed in Woolf criticism, there is little attempt to reconcile the interior-focused version of Woolf with the street-centrist version or even to recognize the tension or contradiction in these accounts. In her essay in the collection *Unmanning Modernism*, Genevieve Morgan examines *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Nurse Lugton’s Curtain* to argue that “Woolf’s works argue for a poetics of domesticity” “through her recurrent depiction of domestic artists, figured alternately as the hostess and the seamstress.”¹⁴ She writes, “By creating ‘modernist’ works that not only depict the domestic realm, but are also products of this same realm, Woolf strategically rejects the public, male-identified sphere as the cradle of aesthetic vision.”¹⁵ Morgan makes apt points regarding Woolf’s investment in the domestic as a possible locus for the creation of art, but her account neglects the aesthetic inspiration Woolf envisions in the public sphere, as exemplified in texts such as

¹² Christopher Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms: Modernism, Subculture, and Domesticity* (New York: Yale University Press, 2004); Victoria Rosner, *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

¹³ Rosner 4.

¹⁴ Genevieve Sanchis Morgan, “The Hostess and the Seamstress: Virginia Woolf’s Creation of a Domestic Modernism” in Jane Harrison and Shirley Peterson, eds. *Unmanning Modernism: Gendered Re-Readings* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997) 91.

¹⁵ Morgan 93.

“Street Haunting”—or, for that matter, in the vibrancy and vitality Clarissa takes from walking through London, as opposed to the dullness of hosting her own party.

Like many others, Morgan leaves us with parallel narratives— one that emphasizes Woolf’s account of the domestic interior and one that follows the core, street-focused version of modernism. And yet, this compartmentalization virtually ensures that accounts of the interior are contained within the confines of feminist criticism or dialogue and make few inroads into shaping the larger narrative of modernism. And just as significantly, this pattern of segmentation elides a vital recognition of the intimately defined relationship some modernists, including Woolf and Benjamin alike, develop between inside and outside spaces.

The Interior and the Aesthetic-Social Predicament

The inconsistency—or avoidance—of analyses of the interior in Woolf’s and Benjamin’s work is partly, I argue, because of the vexed status of the interior in the texts of both writers. Specifically, the physical and metaphorical space of the interior is intimately connected to the writers’ own aesthetic, critical, and social conflicts. Indeed, Woolf and Benjamin experienced their own version of the aesthetic-social predicament that Levy also faced, and the interior is the site around which much of their ambivalence circulates.

Within *The Arcades Project*, the inside/outside divide is arguably the most purposeful dichotomy among many that Benjamin configures, crucially distinguishing what he sees as a realm of secluded, apolitical activity (inside, as a self-enclosed domestic interior) from a space of public discourse and engagement (outside, the street,

public and political space). Benjamin identifies this as a nineteenth-century division, writing that: “the nineteenth century interior is itself a stimulus to intoxication and dream. This mood involves, furthermore, an aversion to the open air, the (so to speak) Uranian atmosphere, which throws a new light on the extravagant interior design of the period.” He continues, providing a visual image of this domestic hermitage: “To live in these interiors was to have woven a dense fabric about oneself, to have secluded oneself within a spider’s web, in whose toils world events hang loosely suspended like so many insect bodies sucked dry. From this cavern, one does not like to stir.”¹⁶ Benjamin censures the nineteenth-century interior as a place of retreat from political events and participation in the world outside, a space that encourages the populus to maintain a “dream” state. He opposes the place of dwelling (interior) to the place of work (exterior) and argues that the nineteenth-century domestic interior is used to sustain illusions.

While Benjamin was as critical and doubtful of the nineteenth-century version of the domestic interior as writers such as Eliot and Baudelaire, calling it a “gloomy box,” critics are remiss to gloss over or dismiss the centrality of the interior to his theoretical framework and the relationship between his vision and feminist notions of space articulated elsewhere.¹⁷ To Eliot and a number of other modernists, the interior was

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999) 216.

¹⁷ Yet few critics even mention, much less seriously contend with, Benjamin’s vision of the transformation of the interior in the twentieth century and the profound inclusion of this interior in his philosophical paradigm. Only a few of Benjamin’s critics have noted his exploration of the relationship between interior and exterior as a feature of his work. Graeme Gilloch focuses some attention on the significance of the relationship Benjamin develops between interior and exterior, recognizing that in Benjamin’s sketch “Naples,” “Benjamin focuses on the shifting relationship between interior and exterior spaces, public and private life” and his ongoing interest in “the reversal of interior/exterior space.” Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996) 8 & 28. Film critic Tom Gunning gets it right when he notes that, “The arcade, Benjamin frequently reminds us, is an exterior space conceived as an *intérieur*. . . . By their very nature of enclosing an alleyway, or, rather, forcing a passage through a block of buildings, the arcades present a contradictory and ambiguous space that allows an interpenetration—not only of spaces, but of ways of inhabiting and using space.”¹⁷ Tom Gunning, “The

largely something to dismiss and to escape from, stifling for the artist and nourishing of the complacency of the bourgeois. To Benjamin, the twentieth-century interior is a centrally important category worthy of reclamation and transformation, a site of potential aesthetic and political meaning and powerfully present as an organizing tool for his theories. No one can or should deny the power and centrality of the urban street scene in Benjamin's work, but overlooking altogether his treatment of the interior neglects the heart of his argument, the very physiognomy of his philosophical and material model and his vision of public and political life in the city.

For as few have noticed, Benjamin makes a sharp distinction between the nineteenth-century interior and that of the twentieth: "The nineteenth century, like no other century, was addicted to dwelling. It conceived of the residence as a receptacle for the person, and it encased him with all his appurtenances so deeply in the dwelling's interior that one might be reminded of the inside of a compass case, where the instrument with all its accessories lies imbedded in deep, usually violet folds of velvet. . . ." On the other hand, he continues, "The twentieth century, with its porosity and transparency, its tendency toward the well-lit and the airy, has put an end to dwelling in the old sense."¹⁸ Benjamin envisions the airiness of the twentieth century as an occasion for optimism,

Exterior as *Interior*: Benjamin as Optical Detective" *boundary 2* 30.1 (2003) 105-6. Critics may use these claims for different purposes—in Gunning's case, for example, to discuss detective stories—but critics do not focus theoretically on these points or note the challenges they present to a certain version of modernist aesthetic practice. Similarly, Leslie Hankins repeatedly addresses Benjamin's critique of the bourgeois interior, but neglects how this is transformed in the twentieth century—and how this new sense of "interior" might have something more in common with Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* than she realizes. She writes, "But, of course, the bourgeois interior of Benjamin also cries out to be considered alongside Woolf's more positive depiction of a room of one's own. If the room was an anathema to reactionary male modernists or Marxists, it could be a revolutionary site for women modernists who found much less opportunity in the cafes or streets for unself-conscious *flaneries*—and this new room was invented and celebrated by feminist writers such as Woolf and Dorothy Richardson." (12). Like other critics, Hankins fixates on Benjamin's bourgeois interior, but neglects his reformed interior and how central that was to his dialectical paradigm.

¹⁸ Benjamin 221.

where the erosion of spatial boundaries and the elimination of the truly private may create the prospect of renewed participation in the public sphere for city dwellers—with the hope that people may be willing to “stir” from the cavern to experience and engage with the world outside.¹⁹

While Benjamin identifies the twentieth century interior as offering a opportunity for engagement, below the surface, we discern Benjamin’s challenge. Despite the inability of people to physically hide in the interior, as they had in the nineteenth century, it remains nonetheless genuinely difficult to draw people out of their cocoons into social and political participation. This, indeed, becomes the key mountain that Benjamin works to surmount through his work in *The Arcades Project*.

Benjamin was also highly invested in interiority in a very different sense, in terms of his own aesthetic-intellectual practices and process. For Benjamin, that is, the division between aesthetic and social was not just an abstract problem, but one intimately related to his own, personal writing process. One of Benjamin’s key struggles was to figure out how to do personal, aesthetic work and make it practically and politically relevant.

Benjamin’s exchange of letters with Theodor Adorno, in which the two discussed Benjamin’s precursors to the *Arcades Project* on Baudelaire, reveals this tension. Susan Buck-Morss writes that Adorno “vehemently criticized” Benjamin’s “The Paris of the

¹⁹ Benjamin’s reclamation of the interior falls squarely in line with his historical theory: “Modest methodological proposal for the cultural-historical dialectic. It is very easy to establish oppositions, according to determinate points of view, within the various ‘fields’ of any epoch, such that on one side lies the ‘productive,’ ‘forward-looking,’ ‘lively,’ ‘positive’ part of the epoch, and on the other side the abortive, retrograde, and obsolescent. The very contours of the positive element will appear distinctly only insofar as this element is set off against the negative. On the other hand, every negation has its value solely as background for the delineation of the lively, the positive. It is therefore of decisive importance that a new partition be applied to this initially excluded, negative component so that, by a displacement of the angle of vision (but not of criteria!), a positive element emerges anew in it too—something different from that previously signified. And so on, ad infinitum, until the entire past is brought into the present in a historical apocatastasis” (459).

Second Empire in Baudelaire” to the Institute for Social Research for its style, which he considered antithetical to genuine theoretical work. “It was the montagelike juxtaposition of images and commentary (the very touchstone of Benjamin’s conception) that Adorno considered so unsuccessful. He claimed the ‘astonished presentation of simple facts’ lacked theoretical (dialectical) mediation.”²⁰ Benjamin was deeply affected by such criticism, and figuring out how to integrate his literary style with political and theoretical rigor was a struggle that followed him throughout his career and which he works to reconcile through *The Arcades Project*.

Like Benjamin’s, Woolf’s version of the interior is closely related to her own personal and critical conflicts. Woolf identifies the interior with two distinct and sometimes counterposed personalities: the woman and the artist (which collide in the case of the woman artist). At times, Woolf focuses on the perspective of the traditional, domestic woman who spends most of her time indoors and in private interaction and longs for public life and experience, or at least a good romp in the street.²¹ In other cases, like Levy, Woolf reveals the supreme value of the interior as a space for aesthetic practice, which she counterposes not only to the public, social world, but also to domesticity itself.²² The central question in *A Room of One’s Own* centers around the

²⁰ Quoted from Buck-Morss 205. Her note reads: “Letter, Adorno to Benjamin, 10 November 1938, I, p. 1096.

²¹ In *The Waves*, for example, Susan bemoans the physical interiority of her new domestic life, opposing it to the life she previously experienced in the outside world: “I, who used to walk through beech woods noting the jay’s feather turning blue as it falls, past the shepherd and the tramp, who stared at the woman squatted beside a tilted cart in a ditch, go from room to room with a duster.” Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1959) 172.

²² When the perspective of the artist is primary, Woolf’s definition of “interior” frequently runs counter to commonsense ideas about the division of private and public. In these cases, “inside” commonly amounts to those spaces and activities that Woolf renders most dear to the function of the artist: essentially, a room of one’s own and the aesthetic practices that take place there. The drawing room may be a private space when compared to the street, but in Woolf’s schema for the artist, the social demands of the drawing room are still “outside” and opposed to the sanctuary of the private writing space. The domestic may be a realm that largely exists inside the confines of the house, but domestic activities are often hostile to and “outside”

antagonism between the domestic and the aesthetic, exploring the need for creating a space inside the home where women writers and intellectuals can engage in quiet, thoughtful pursuit and focus—instead of writing novels in the drawing room amid chatter and teacups, as Jane Austen did. The final volume of Woolf’s diary brings home this division between the aesthetic interior and everything that is outside of it, as she quotes T. S. Eliot’s line from “Prufrock and Other Observations”, “and human voices wake us and we drown”—a phrase with which she identifies, as she at times views the social world, with its visitors and its distractions, as an annoying obligation.²³

Though Woolf intensely values the private, aesthetic interior of the writer’s room—as a feminized vantage for the artist and a space for the privacy of work—her writing insistently conveys anxiety about the separation between the aesthetic interior and the social realm. In *The Waves* (1931), Bernard, a writer, uses the window view as a metaphor for his perspective on life and his relationship to the subjects of his stories. Bernard proclaims that “I . . . have survived many of my friends . . . because it is the panorama of life, seen not from the roof, but from the third story window that delights me, not what one woman says to one man, even if that man is myself. How could I be bullied therefore? How could they make things hot for me?” Of the dictatorial Doctor at chapel, he elaborates: “I did not hate him like Neville, or revere him like Louis. I took notes as we sat together in chapel. . . . I made notes for stories; drew portraits in the margin of my pocket-book and thus became still more separate.”²⁴ Bernard claims

aesthetic ambitions and practices. The street may even be figured as “private” in comparison to the home, when it allows the individual freedom from social interaction and space to observe and think in relative anonymity.

²³ Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 5, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1984) 228.

²⁴ Woolf, *The Waves* 242.

immunity to the vicissitudes of life because he watches rather than feels, observes rather than engages. Bernard's preference for the window over the roof indicates some desire for proximity, for being near enough to his objects to observe the details of their experiences—but far enough away to remain “separate.” It is in fact the writing process itself—making notes for his stories, drawing portraits in his books—that makes him isolated. Bernard reiterates the point later, “To see things without attachment, from the outside, and to realise their beauty in itself—how strange!”²⁵ Returning to his “snug home” one day later in life, however, Bernard regrets the self-contained nature of his domicile—regrets his separateness: “Was there no sword, nothing with which to batter down these walls, this protection, this begetting of children and living behind curtains, and becoming daily more involved and committed, with books and pictures?” Woolf's rendition here is not altogether different from Benjamin's notion of the nineteenth-century interior as a place of hiding. Bernard concludes that it is “Better burn one's life out like Louis, desiring perfection; or like Rhoda leave us, flying past us, to the desert; or choose one out of millions and one only like Neville; better be like Susan and love and hate the heat of the sun or the frost-bitten grass; or be like Jinny, honest, an animal.”²⁶ Bernard desires that the walls be battered down and envies his friends for feeling and living more deeply than he. Woolf's occasional annoyance at life's intrusions into aesthetic space and practice, then, are foiled by the anxiety she expresses about the artist's removal from the experience of life, from all that is outside of aesthetic practice and observation.

²⁵ Woolf, *The Waves* 263.

²⁶ Woolf, *The Waves* 266.

We also find in *The Voyage Out* (1915) a clear articulation of the tension Woolf envisions between the aesthetic and the social. Clarissa Dalloway makes a stop with her husband on the ship that Rachel is traveling on and philosophizes: “When I’m with artists I feel so intensely the delights of shutting oneself up in a little world of one’s own, with pictures and music and everything beautiful, and then I go out into the streets and the first child I meet with its poor, hungry, dirty face makes me turn round and say, ‘No, I *can’t* shut myself up—I *won’t* live in a world of my own. I should like to stop all the painting and writing and music until this kind of thing exists no longer.’ ‘Don’t you feel,’ she wound up, addressing Helen, ‘that life’s a perpetual conflict.’”²⁷ Such anxieties become explicitly personal for Woolf, especially in the final volume of her diary; given the cataclysmic events of the Second World War, Woolf feels even more troubled about her choice to shut herself away to pursue writing than she had before. In one instance, she mentions someone who is on an education committee, “doing actual things with important real people, while we frittered our time away writing books in London.”²⁸ Woolf’s work reflects her continual struggle to reconcile these two tendencies in herself and through her characters.²⁹

²⁷ Virginia Woolf, *The Voyage Out* (1915; New York: Modern Library, 2001) 41.

²⁸ Woolf, *Diary 5*, 143.

²⁹ Woolf’s rendering of the artist-observer goes beyond the writer to include the engaged, thoughtful observing individual who must also negotiate this same relationship between that which is within and that which is without. For the artist and the thoughtful observer, this negotiation is an aesthetic problem as well as an individual or social problem. It’s not that all of Woolf’s characters are fronts for the artist: but Woolf is ever cognizant of her own aesthetic process, and as with Benjamin, this comes out loudly in her nonfiction and is also inflected more subtly in her fiction. We see frequent artist figures, and when they are absent, most protagonists have some qualities or outlets (such as close observation) that connect them with the artist.

Arcade and Window as Magical Thresholds

Benjamin and Woolf look to the arcade and window as ideal objects to resolve their aesthetic-social quandaries. In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin finds himself fascinated with the Parisian arcade precisely because of its crossings—metaphor and physical structure, public and private, interior and exterior, “house no less than street.”³⁰ Quoting from the *Illustrated Guide To Paris* (1852), Benjamin defines his ideal object for the reader: “The arcades, a recent invention of industrial luxury, are glass-roofed, marble-paneled corridors extending through whole blocks of buildings, whose owners have joined together for such enterprises.” He continues, “Lining both sides of these corridors, which get their light from above, are the most elegant shops, so that the *passage* is a city, a world in miniature, in which customers will find everything they need.”³¹ The arcades emerged in the early nineteenth century as the “forerunners of department stores,” and by the time Benjamin was writing, in the first decades of the twentieth century, Paris had a large network of arcades that was gradually vanishing, having been superseded architecturally and spatially by other forms.³² A space for shopping and spectating, of luxurious retreat from the noisy, dirty street, this nineteenth-century architectural form centers Benjamin’s expansive project on the history of modernity, providing a window on the social world of the *flâneur*, the *passante*, and all the other specimens of modernity that populate his thinking. With a structure that gives one the impression of being both indoors and out, the arcade embodies for Benjamin not only the merger of inside and outside spaces, but also the convergence of his historical, political, and aesthetic aims.

³⁰ Benjamin 10.

³¹ Benjamin 31.

³² Benjamin 3.

Woolf analogously looks to the window as an exemplary site to fuse the dichotomies of modern life and aesthetic practice that consistently sustain her attention. From the opening pages of her diary,³³ to the content of her first novel, to the ending of her last published work, Woolf engaged in an expansive, career-long exploration of the image of the window and of the woman-at-the-window in particular. *The Voyage Out* sees Rachel Vinrace repeatedly contemplating life and love at her windowsill. *To the Lighthouse*'s Mrs. Ramsay stations herself at the window with her son, James, an image of supposed maternal bliss. Clarissa throws open her French windows—"What a lark! What a plunge!"—as her first act in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Orlando uses the view from her window to craft her "Oak Tree" poem and to compare centuries, deciding "nothing has changed."³⁴ In *The Waves*, tied to domestic responsibilities, Susan only knows "whether it is summer, whether it is winter," "by the steam on the window-pane, or the frost on the window-pane."³⁵ In *Between the Acts* (1941), Isa taps on the window to gain the attention of her children, from whom she has alienated herself. The references are varied and countless, pervading every novel Woolf wrote and the majority of her short pieces.

To quantify the pervasiveness of this image in Woolf's work: the window is one of the most prevalent nouns, numerically speaking, in Woolf's body of work, making the "top ten" list in nearly every novel. In *The Waves*, for example, Woolf makes 101 references to window(s), more than any other noun with the exceptions of door(s), eye(s),

³³ Woolf notes in 1915, in the second entry to Volume 1 of her published diary, "One of the queer things about the suburbs is that the vilest little red villas are always let, and that not one of them has an open window, or an uncurtained window. I expect that people take a pride in their curtains, and there is great rivalry among the neighbors. One house had curtains of yellow silk, striped with lace insertion. The rooms inside must be in semi-darkness; and I suppose rank with the smell of meat and human beings. I believe that being curtained is a mark of respectability—Sophie used to insist upon it." Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 1, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1977) 4-5. Entry from 2 January 1915.

³⁴ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1956) 237.

³⁵ Woolf, *The Waves* 172.

life, light, man, moment, room(s), and tree(s)—many of which are associated with the window itself, as in the following passage: “Sharp-edged wedges of *light* lay upon the *window*-sill and showed inside the *room* plates with blue rings, cups with curved handles . . .” (emphases mine). Woolf mentions “window” and its derivatives more often than variations of “street” in all of her nine major novels, with the unsurprising exception of *Mrs. Dalloway*—834 instances of “window” in the novels combined, in comparison to 577 of the “street.” “Window(s)” are referenced by Woolf in her novels almost as frequently as “house” and its variants (834 vs. 838)—a surprising fact, given the many incidental references to “house” in the course of writing novels like *To the Lighthouse* and *Between the Acts*, which are staged mostly within a private home.³⁶ Remarkably, this collection of domestic window scenes in Woolf’s work has received limited recognition. Critics may lend (often passing) significance to the window image in individual moments and texts, but no study theorizes her use of the window in terms of her cultural milieu or the modernist project itself or fully recognizes the collection of images across the span of Woolf’s work.³⁷

³⁶ For these calculations, I used two online resources: The Etext resource of the University of Adelaide Library (<http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/w/woolf/virginia/>) and the Victorian Literary Studies Archive (<http://victorian.lang.nagoya-u.ac.jp/concordance/>). “Room,” with 1389 references, consistently recurs more frequently than “window”—though again, the two are closely aligned in many cases.

³⁷ Critics who study commodification and fashion have at times paid heed to the role of the shop window in *Mrs. Dalloway* and other texts, such as Elizabeth Outka’s exploration of the shop window in *Night and Day*. “The Shop Windows Were Full of Sparkling Chains: Consumer Desire and Woolf’s *Night and Day*” in *Virginia Woolf Out of Bounds*, eds. Jessica Berman and Jane Goldman (New York: Pace University Press, 2001). See also Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking* (New York: Methuen, 1985). Studies on Woolf’s individual texts, particularly *To the Lighthouse* (with its first section, “The Window”), also occasionally note the presence of the window image—such as Geoffrey Hartman’s recognition that both Mrs. Ramsay and the narrator of *A Room of One’s Own* sit looking out the window and Urmila Seshagiri’s commentary on Woolf’s 1906 journal entry in Constantinople, in which Woolf notes that the images outside are “ominous” and “ignominious” “for an English lady at her bedroom window.” Geoffrey Hartman, “Virginia’s Web” in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of To the Lighthouse*, ed. Thomas A. Volger (Edgewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970) 79. In her recent book *Modernist Women and Visual Cultures* (2002), Maggie Humm offhandedly notes the recurrence of Woolf’s use of windows in her fiction and even in her amateur photographs. Humm clearly finds their presence interesting and curious, though her concern is not to proffer analysis of the significance of the window in Woolf’s work, save a few passing

It is not uncommon in literature of any period to find a reference to a window as housing significant physical or symbolic meaning, but while writers generally use the window in only one or perhaps two specific ways (as we have seen in the cases of Baudelaire, Levy, Wharton, and Forster), Woolf far exceeds other writers in her push to collect nearly every conceivable association.³⁸ This point is brought home with potent clarity in *Between the Acts* when Mrs. Mayhew sketches how the scene at Pointz Hall might look if she had directed the pageant and includes “one window, looking east, brilliantly illumined to symbolize—she could work that out when the time came.”³⁹ While this quotation, as I have indicated, reflects the rich and various symbolic meaning of the window throughout literature, it is most revelatory of Woolf’s own work and the expansiveness with which she, in particular, consciously engages with the window.

The window that captivates Woolf’s interest shares key material and spatial properties with the arcade. Susan Buck-Morss identifies affinities between the two fixtures, noting that, “Wide spans of glass windows originated in the arcades.”⁴⁰ Both are architectural fixtures that use glass as a primary material—for the roof of the arcade and the plates of the window. The window and the arcade also provide a similar division between inside and outside spaces—the arcade between an interior of shops and the street; the window between the private home and public or outdoor spaces such as the

speculations. Maggie Humm, *Modernist Women and Visual Cultures* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003). Perhaps the most extensive exploration of Woolf’s windows is Maria-Kasia Greenwood’s short article from the 1980s, “The Window as Symbol in the Work of Virginia Woolf.” Greenwood establishes the “symbol” as an important one in Woolf’s major novels and outlines several of the ways in which it functions, including as “something to see *by*,” as “something to look *through*,” and as “the purveyor simply of a change of scene.” *Cahiers Charles V* 4 (1983).

³⁸ Benjamin’s description of the process of collection is useful toward understanding Woolf’s distinctive use of this method. Benjamin claims that collecting, the process of detaching an “object from its functional relations” and placing it in the “closest conceivable relation to things of the same kind,” is “the diametric opposite of any utility, and falls into the peculiar category of completeness” (205; 207).

³⁹ Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (1941; San Diego: Harcourt, 1969) 179.

⁴⁰ Benjamin 85.

street, the garden, and the sea. Both can also be said to provide a connection between these very spaces: an open window provides visual transparency or fluidity between inside and outside, an intermingling of light and air; the arcade, with open or absent doors, retains an inherent openness and visual transparency between the two spaces. And just as the arcade (called *passage* in German) forms a corridor between buildings, the window can in some cases also serve as a passage, a route that an individual can take in or out of the house—as, in one melancholy example, when Septimus jumps out the window to commit suicide in *Mrs. Dalloway* or when Woolf makes a failed attempt at the very same act through her own window.⁴¹ There are of course some differences in the physical properties of the window and the arcade, since the window is a fixture on a building and the arcade is itself a building.⁴² One distinguishing difference of note between Woolf's and Benjamin's use of their object that emerges in the analysis that follows is that a figure—usually a woman—at or outside the window is almost always essential to Woolf's formulation, whereas Benjamin's arcade is a more isolated site.

Perhaps the most salient similarity the window and arcade draw on is their status as a threshold or space in which transition and intermingling between opposed spheres occurs—something that was also of interest to Levy. In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin becomes highly invested in any object, person, or idea that serves as a threshold or simultaneously embodies opposites: prostitute as merchandise and merchant in one; railway station as at first and at last sight; *flâneur* and gambler as figures at the literal

⁴¹ In 1904-5, Woolf made her first (failed) suicide attempt by trying to jump out of her window; so, before she writes anything of windows, the window also has this association for her.

⁴² For example, while the window and the arcade both serve as an interstitial point that merges or divides inside and outside spaces, the arcade also has its own thresholds, the doorways that flank its entrances. Given this crossover, the window can be aptly compared to both the arcade itself and to the doorways of the arcade.

center but on the social margins of society; photography, literature, and artist himself as wavering between value and commodity. He declares in one of countless references to this space in *The Arcades Project*: “On the theory of thresholds: ‘ . . . Ah, the running board! It is the point of departure from one country to another, from misery to luxury, from thoughtlessness to thoughtfulness. It is the hyphen between him who is nothing and him who is all.’”⁴³

Benjamin was primarily interested in the threshold as it is most commonly understood—a space of exchange between interior and street. He identifies modernity as an era in which “the street becomes room and the room becomes street,” where the “*flâneur* goes for a walk in his room.”⁴⁴ While the domestic interior may remain closeted until the twentieth century, Benjamin reveals how notions of the interior came to be represented and reflected in nineteenth-century urban public spaces. He considers arcades, museums, winter gardens, panoramas, factories, casinos, railroad stations, and wax museums as “the dream houses of the collective,” in that they are public spaces that mimic the qualities of the private dwelling.⁴⁵ He writes, for example, that “the inside of the museum appears as an interior magnified on a giant scale.”⁴⁶ Likewise, Benjamin discovers instances in which interior spaces like Parisian wine cellars are divided into and named after Parisian streets.⁴⁷ Where, on the one hand, “flânerie can transform Paris into one great interior—a house whose rooms are the quartiers, no less clearly demarcated by

⁴³ Benjamin 93.

⁴⁴ Benjamin 406. These statements which find their counterpart in Woolf’s rendition in *Night and Day* of Mary Datchet watching Ralph Denham “taking his turn, closely buttoned in an over-coat, and so lost in thought that he might have been sitting in his own room.” Virginia Woolf, *Night and Day* (1920; San Diego: Harcourt, 1948) 160.

⁴⁵ Benjamin 405.

⁴⁶ Benjamin 407.

⁴⁷ Benjamin 91.

thresholds than are real rooms,” on the other “streets are the dwelling place of the collective.”⁴⁸

For Benjamin, the arcade becomes the threshold with a capital “T,” the highest embodiment of the larger cultural interpenetration of interior and street in modernity. He writes that: “The arcades were a cross between a street and an *intérieur*,”⁴⁹ reflecting “the intoxicated interpenetration of street and residence such as comes about in the Paris of the nineteenth century.”⁵⁰ He identifies some of the properties that make the Parisian arcade so theoretically rich as a threshold object, noting that in modernity, there exists a: “Remarkable propensity for structures that convey and connect—as, of course, the arcades do. And this connecting or mediating function has a literal and spatial as well as a figurative and stylistic bearing.”⁵¹ Though Benjamin never specifically attaches each of these descriptors to a function or attribute of the arcade, from his notes we can begin to discern his meaning. As a pathway or passage, the arcade literally provides a connection from one street to another, from the street to the shops, and between inside and outside spaces. The arcade also bears an interesting theoretical relationship to space itself, since, as Benjamin claims, the arcade is neither fully inside nor outside. It is a covered space, a shelter, but is not fully enclosed, housing a hazy relationship to “inside” and “outside.” As both interior and street, it mediates inside and outside spaces and opens theoretical questions about spatial boundaries and permeability. As a figurative mediator, the arcade stands in for that which is “in between” public and private, a public space that mirrors the qualities of a private dwelling. For Benjamin, the arcade is a relative “drawing room” or

⁴⁸ Benjamin 422-3.

⁴⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 1983) 37.

⁵⁰ Benjamin 423.

⁵¹ Benjamin 125.

“dwelling place of the collective,” for, as he explains, “The collective is an eternally unquiet, eternally agitated being that—in the space between the building fronts—experiences, learns, understands, and invents as much as individuals do within the privacy of their four walls.”⁵² Given that the arcade provides shelter in a space decorated to look like a domestic interior, “More than anywhere else, the street reveals itself in the arcade as the furnished and familiar interior of the masses.”⁵³ What Benjamin means by “stylistic” connection or mediation is more difficult to figure, likely relating to his interest in the different architectural and decorative methods with which structures of modernity are physically constructed and with which their various parts are connected—in the case of the arcades, though glass and iron, which have symbolic and stylistic import as distinctly modern materials in the nineteenth century.⁵⁴

Woolf also frequently invokes the concept of the threshold, as when she imagines in *Three Guineas* (1938) “the educated man’s daughter, as she issues from the shadow of the private house, and stands on the bridge between the old world and the new.”⁵⁵

Similarly, the window functions for Woolf as the crucial material and theoretical meeting point between the dichotomies that pervade her novels, diaries, and essays.⁵⁶ In Woolf’s essay “Reading,” (1919)⁵⁷ the window serves as the model setting for the titular process

because of its capacity to mingle opposed spheres or practices: “One drew the pale

⁵² Benjamin 422-3.

⁵³ Benjamin 423.

⁵⁴ We may think of Benjamin’s definition of the interior-become-street as strategic, in that by suggesting the publicity of the private, he gains political access to the guarded domestic interior. If maintaining an interior akin to that in the nineteenth century is now impossible, residents no longer have this escape as an option. They must also work, as Benjamin does, to define, articulate, experience, and work through the interdependent relationship between interior and exterior spheres.

⁵⁵ Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1966) 16.

⁵⁶ There is continuity, rather than disjunction, in Woolf’s treatment of the window through her novels, diaries, and essays. The window highlights and resolves tensions for both her characters and herself. My intent is not psychoanalytic, but I do move between these texts without considering them as constitutionally distinct, even though they are derived from different genres and traditions.

⁵⁷ Written in 1919 and published posthumously.

armchair to the window, and so the light fell over the shoulder upon the page. The shadow of the gardener mowing the lawn sometimes crossed it, as he led his pony in rubber shoes up and down . . .”⁵⁸ Through the shadow of the gardener on the page of the book, Woolf identifies the window as a space where the outside world literally can enter into the aesthetic process of reading (and by implication, writing or creating) within the private room, a conjunction that is fully realized when Woolf proclaims that, “the windows being open . . . instead of being a book it seemed as if what I read was laid upon the landscape not printed, bound, or sewn up, but somehow the product of trees and fields and hot summer sky.”⁵⁹ Through the course of the essay, Woolf renders the window a venue through which the everyday mingles with high art and the bygone era of knights and ladies with the present, where the gardener stands “by the side of . . . dead poets.” As critics have almost universally recognized, oppositions of this kind saturate Woolf’s work, including the important spatial-social divides of home vs. street, private vs. public, aesthetic vs. political, feminine vs. masculine, art vs. domesticity. A single, concrete figure whose recurrence spans her entire oeuvre, a site of some of her most provocative self-representations, the window as a material object straddles these divides, inviting us to confront the essential metaphoricity of their informing terms and to better understand how that metaphoricity generates Woolf’s stance, embodied and writerly, for negotiating modernity’s spaces and challenges.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Virginia Woolf, “Reading” in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 3, ed. Andrew McNeillie (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1988) 141.

⁵⁹ Woolf, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 3, 142.

⁶⁰As with the notion of dichotomy, the threshold in Benjamin’s work has largely been accepted at face value or, more commonly, untheorized or unnoticed by critics. There has been some limited recognition of the place of the threshold in Woolf’s work, though not necessarily in a spatial-social context. In a 2004 issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* devoted to Woolf and centering around the question, “what is between us?”, Laura Doyle identifies the threshold as “one way of summing up Virginia Woolf’s questions. For Woolf lingered, it seems to me, in a tingling, Brownian zone of encounter between self and other; she

In this passage in “Reading” and many more instances, Woolf traffics in what Benjamin calls, in another context, the “magic of the threshold.”⁶¹ In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin identifies the pervasive compulsion to mark the “mysterious thresholds” of both public spaces and the bourgeois home: “At the entrance to the arcade, to the skating rink, to the pub, to the tennis court: *penates*. The hen that lays the golden praline-eggs, the machine that stamps our names on nameplates and the other machine that weighs us, slot machines, the mechanical fortuneteller—these guard the threshold.” He continues, “They are generally found, it is worth noting, neither on the inside nor truly in the open. They protect and mark the transitions.”⁶² Benjamin notes the presence of this phenomenon in the private home as well, claiming that, “Of course, this same magic prevails more covertly in the interior of a bourgeois dwelling. Chairs beside an entrance, photographs flanking a doorway, are fallen household deities, and the violence they must appease grips our hearts even today at each ringing of the doorbell . . .”⁶³ Benjamin’s choice of the word “magic” to describe the threshold evokes the fantasy-dream properties with which both he and Woolf invest this liminal space. The physical and symbolic function of the threshold is not something either is able to clearly define or

sought to register the force fields of this ‘between’ where we meet.” The issue explores various “charged threshold(s) between Woolf and others.” Laura Doyle, “Introduction: What’s Between Us?” in *Modern Fiction Studies* 50.1 (2004): 1;4. As well, writing of Woolf and Strachey’s accounts of their childhood homes in her chapter “Thresholds,” Victoria Rosner “focus[es] on the threshold and examine[s] how this space figures as an unsettling intermediary in the otherwise black-and-white world of separated spheres.” For Rosner, the threshold is the “bridge between two discrete rooms” within the home, rather than a space between the inside and outside of the house (Rosner 63). Her analysis is apt, but unnecessarily restricted to a commentary on the domestic—she does not see the more far-reaching sense in which the threshold conceptually animates Woolf’s writing, nor does she take this analysis outside of the confines of the house: “Woolf and Strachey reject what they see as the Victorian preference for the public, the exterior, and the world of action and turn toward private life in several forms: the domestic sphere of the home, the inner life of thoughts and emotions, and the intimate details of embodiment” (62). Even while examining the liminal space of the threshold, Rosner, like Genevieve Morgan, focuses entirely on Woolf’s investment in the domestic, denying her celebrations of street life and culture.

⁶¹ Benjamin 88.

⁶² Benjamin 88.

⁶³ Benjamin 214.

delineate; it is a space of magic—enchanted, unexplained, mysterious, and indistinct—where inside flows into and becomes outside, where distinctions can be collapsed or erased.

Arcade and Window as Sites of Synthesis

The valorization of the arcade and window that Benjamin and Woolf reflect is in service to a distinctive drive for literal, spatial, and figurative unity (meeting points, or dialectical “flash[es] of lightning”) of and fluidity (crossovers) between the aesthetic and social, as reflected in the magic of the threshold itself. The hazy spatial identity of the threshold, as Benjamin describes it, accounts for the fact that both *unity* and *fluidity*, seemingly incompatible terms, are equally appropriate to the conceptual frame of their work. The arcade and window literally allow free visual and physical movement between and interpenetration of inside and outside (or, *fluidity*). But each architectural fixture is also rendered a symbolic unifier of dualities. By simultaneously embodying and unifying opposing elements (or what Benjamin calls the thesis and antithesis) in fantastical fashion, the arcade and window becomes paragons of possibility, enacting the shared fantasy that defining tensions can ultimately see resolution.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ While long considered the center of Benjamin’s work, the arcade has not always been recognized as the locus for the synthesis that Benjamin idealizes. In *The Dialectics of Seeing*, Susan Buck-Morss suggests that Benjamin “thought in coordinates,” that “his unfolding of concepts in their ‘extremes’ can be visualized as antithetical polarities of axes that cross each other, revealing a ‘dialectical image’ at the null point.” She argues that this “pattern of coordinates functions as the invisible structure of the *Passagen-Werk*’s historical research, enabling the project’s seemingly disparate, conceptual elements to cohere.” (210). While Buck-Morss extensively develops this system of coordinates, plotting each antithetical pair, she does not consider the arcade itself as a site for the “null point,” the threshold between dichotomies. Indeed, she fails to fully recognize the intimate connection between the spatial and material qualities of the arcade and the system of antithetical pairs that she identifies as Benjamin’s philosophical building blocks. Her comment on Benjamin’s logic in selecting the arcade reflects this lapse: “The covered shopping arcades of the nineteenth century were Benjamin’s central image because they were the precise material replica of the internal consciousness, or rather, the *unconscious* of the dreaming collective. All of the errors of the bourgeois consciousness could be found there (commodity fetishism, reification, the world as

The very words “synthesis” and especially “unity” are uncomfortable terms for contemporary critics because they are associated with very formalist, traditional notions of art and criticism—the very reason that a second generation of Woolf critics rejected them. Likewise, postmodernism has succeeded in conceptually dismantling “unity” as a legitimate concept. But, I believe we are just as biased if we reject these concepts outright and refuse to notice the writers’ own investment in them as we are if we hold all art to these standards as the ideal. As critics, we need to cease with picking those aspects of modernism that are attractive to postmodern or twenty-first century readers (political radicality, urban pleasure, blurring of genres, ambiguity) and eliding those that seem provincial (a steadfast belief in truth, the ability of synthesis to triumph against fragmentation).

“Unity,” while arguably out of favor at present, is a far from novel concept in readings of the modernist era. James McFarlane, in the seminal *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930*, has written that: “The very vocabulary of chaos—disintegration, fragmentation, dislocation—implies a breaking away or a breaking apart. But the defining thing in the Modernist mode is not so much that things fall *apart* but that they fall *together*. In Modernism, the centre is seen exerting not a centrifugal but a

‘inwardness’), as well as (in fashion, prostitution, gambling) all of its utopian dreams. Moreover, the arcades were the first international style of modern architecture, hence part of the lived experience of a worldwide, metropolitan generation” (39). Buck-Morss identifies some of the important reasons that the arcade was useful to Benjamin, but her formulation neglects the overarching spatial and material significance of his object of study. What Buck-Morss does not adequately emphasize, that is, is the material way in which the arcade functions much like her system of coordinates—as a crossing of axes for the meeting of dichotomies, as between interior and exterior. I argue that the arcade itself is the “null point,” the site of synthesis, and the quintessential dialectical image that Benjamin offers to his readers, a material object that itself variously unites the disparate factors of his work.

centripetal force; and the consequence is not disintegration but (as it were) superintegration.”⁶⁵

I would suggest that McFarlane offers an overly optimistic, too-neat picture of the relationship between fragmentation and unity in modernist texts. Harmony is not achieved so readily, nor is the consequence “superintegration” more than it is “disintegration.” Benjamin, for example, describes the moment of synthesis as a “lightning flash,” emphasizing its transitory quality, and Woolf’s sense of unity is likewise limited, circumscribed, and found only in flickers, as Lily Briscoe notes that, “The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark”⁶⁶ and Clarissa Dalloway thinks through the phenomenon whereby “people fee[l] the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them.”⁶⁷ In the constant back and forth between inside and outside, unity itself only comes in flashes, in moments.⁶⁸ And yet, it is the ideal that is consistently sought by Woolf, Benjamin, and many of their contemporaries.

Though many have identified the urge toward unity in modernist texts, this has not yet been transferred to a spatial-social context. That is, despite a recognition of the

⁶⁵ Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930* (London: Penguin, 1991) 92.

⁶⁶ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 161.

⁶⁷ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1981)184. With Woolf, distinct oppositions themselves are more readily apparent and pervasive than is her vision of their synthesis and integration—likely because Woolf’s engagement with social and spatial dichotomies is closely tied to the politics of gender and female subjectivity. She is less sanguine than Benjamin about the possibility of synthesis because her perspective is usually filtered through the lens of gender, and her reality bespeaks of sustained and resilient division between spatial-social domains for many women.

⁶⁸ Indeed, it is difficult to speak of Benjamin’s fixation on thesis-antithesis without moving on to discuss synthesis, since this is what is ultimately of interest to him. When referencing oppositions, he nearly always evokes permeation, interpenetration, and simultaneity: “The city appears now as a landscape, now as a room” (21), “In the final analysis a person of the greatest individuality would turn out to be the exemplar of a type.” (22). “The new is permeated with the old” (4), “the city dweller . . . attempts to bring the countryside into the town” (6).

modernist urge to disqualify oppositions, critics have largely accepted the opposition between the spatial-social categories of “interior” and “exterior” as a division that modernist writers are content to accept. Observations of harmony and unity in the modernist era are rarely if ever applied to the antithetical categories of the home and the street—and yet, this is exactly what we find in Woolf’s and Benjamin’s work.

Benjamin and Woolf are invested in the spatial-social oppositions embodied in the arcade and window and their ultimate synthesis as a means to resolve their aesthetic, critical, and social conflicts. Among them, given limited space, I’ll address only the following, which grow from slightly different motivations, but are closely connected in substance: for Benjamin, the arcade provides a resolution to the question of how to draw the reclusive, private individual into participation and engagement in the public realm; and, how to do literary-historical work and make it practically and politically relevant. For Woolf, the window resolves the quandary of how to be an artist who does private, interior, aesthetic work, but remains socially, politically, and historically engaged.

While the arcade is Benjamin’s quintessential threshold space, his selection of his ideal object is not based solely on its embodiment of the physical and metaphorical interpenetration between inside and outside—for as Benjamin points out, a number of objects and spaces exemplify this liminality. The arcade is more than a threshold: it is dialectical. Benjamin’s conception of the dialectical, which forms the critical basis of his work, is closely tied to his more pervasive fixation on the magic of the threshold, in its seizure of the moment when opposites meet.⁶⁹ Benjamin writes that, “The dialectical image is that form of the historical object which satisfies Goethe’s requirements for the

⁶⁹ Benjamin did not invent the concept of the “dialectical,” but as with many of his key concepts (allegory, history, the collective unconscious), he developed his own version of it. Thus, I treat it as a distinct, Benjaminian notion, rather than one universally agreed-upon among his peers.

object of analysis: to exhibit a genuine synthesis”⁷⁰ and that the position of the dialectical image “is naturally not an arbitrary one. It is to be found, in a word, where the tension between dialectical opposites is greatest.”⁷¹

The dialectical is defined by its transitory nature; it is the “momentary mutual recognition and illumination of past and present,” or as Benjamin critic Graeme Gilloch puts it, “a pause, a moment of interruption and illumination, in which past and present recognize each other across the void which separates them.”⁷² Benjamin contends that dialectics, in standing still, makes an image: “It is not that the past casts its light on the present or the present casts its light on the past: rather, an image is that in which the Then & Now come into a constellation like a flash of lightning. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill.”⁷³ “For,” he continues, “while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent.”⁷⁴ Benjamin’s concept here is abstract and difficult to paraphrase, but it is clear that dialectical image, for Benjamin, is like a snapshot that captures the exact moment when past and present meet one another. When past and present meet one another, we have the possibility of awakening, of “lightning flashes” of knowledge.

⁷⁰ And ironically, it is the very synthesis that Benjamin valorizes that most eludes the *Arcades Project*—which, as a jumbled assortment, strikes the reader as anything but balanced and complete.

⁷¹ Benjamin 474-475.

⁷² Gilloch 113.

⁷³ On the notion of image and the dialectical, Benjamin also writes: “Outline the story of *The Arcades Project* in term of its development. Its properly problematic component: the refusal to renounce anything that would demonstrate the materialist presentation of history as imagistic in a higher sense than in the traditional presentation” (463). And, quoting Rudolf Borchardt, “Pedagogic side of this undertaking: ‘To educate the image-making medium within us, raising it to a stereoscopic and dimensional seeing into the depths of historical shadows’ (458).”

⁷⁴ Benjamin 462.

Key to Benjamin's use of the arcade as his primary dialectical image is the arcade's status as a discarded object. Parisians began to abandon and destroy their network of arcades in the early twentieth century, because of, Benjamin hypothesizes, "widened sidewalks, electric light, ban on prostitution, culture of open air."⁷⁵ The imminence of the discarded status of the arcade is essential to Benjamin's use of the dialectical because he argues that only at the precise moment when an object loses its current caché—when its power is past, but still close at hand—can it become dialectical, something we can awake from and interrogate, as we awake from and interpret a dream.

While in the nineteenth century, the arcade became the "dream house of the collective," sheltering desire for luxury, progress, and the vitality of modernity, its decline in the early twentieth century provides a moment of opportunity for reflection on the power it once held: "Every presentation of history" must "begin with awakening," and "this one . . . deals with awakening from the nineteenth century."⁷⁶ At the moment of awakening, "the historian takes up, with regard to that image, the task of dream interpretation."⁷⁷ By seeing and recognizing the recent past, manifest through a collection of objects and details, readers are put in an optimal position to be able to awake from it.⁷⁸ Benjamin explains the connection between the dialectical and his aims in rewriting history: "Given that the realization of dream elements, in the course of waking up, is the paradigm of dialectical thinking, it follows that dialectical thinking is the organ of historical awakening."⁷⁹ As still-existent but virtually-abandoned casings for

⁷⁵ Benjamin 88.

⁷⁶ Benjamin 405; 464.

⁷⁷ Benjamin 464.

⁷⁸ As quoted in Chapter One, Benjamin writes that, "We construct here an alarm clock that rouses the kitsch of the previous century to 'assembly'" (205).

⁷⁹ Benjamin 898.

fading desires and experiences, the arcades become for Benjamin “structures in which we relive, as in a dream, the life of our parents and grandparents.”⁸⁰ By demythologizing and rendering transparent these collective wish images, which house dream content that perpetuate passivity and the absence of reflection and action, Benjamin aims to arouse his readers from the slumber of the past.

What these dialectical flashes of knowledge or awakening look like for Benjamin is not explored in any depth within *The Arcades Project*. One can easily extrapolate concrete, historical specifics from Benjamin’s intimations and relate dialectical process in *The Arcades Project* to a critique of fascist ideology. Benjamin’s opposition to fascism and his frustration with the lack of individual political consciousness in the face of this system of governance is no doubt one of the major impulses for this project. However, the scope of *The Arcades Project* is more ambitious than this, in that his collection of material on the arcade provides a method and framework that can be useful at any moment in history, by fundamentally enabling and urging individuals to more fully perceive and engage with the present, rather than moving through time in a dreamlike state of political acceptance and passivity.

As both a metaphor rife with allusion and a physical, historical artifact, the arcade also resolved a tension for Benjamin as a political-cultural critic who wanted to find a way to do his historical work with a formally engaged, literary-aesthetic approach. Benjamin did carry out extensive revisions to his work on Baudelaire at Adorno’s impetus, but despite such criticism, Benjamin persisted in his endeavor to relate the dichotomous realms of aesthetic and social through his stylistic choices in the *Arcades*

⁸⁰ Benjamin 106.

Project.⁸¹ Indeed, within this piece, he transfers his own process onto the cultural product, the text, by dramatizing both the writing process itself and the personal meanings and associations that he has with his chosen object. Benjamin elucidates in his description of his intended process in *The Arcades Project*:

Say something about the method of composition itself: how everything one is thinking at a specific moment in time must at all costs be incorporated into the project then at hand. Assume that the intensity of the project is thereby attested, or that one's thoughts, from the very beginning, bear this project within them as their telos. So it is with the present portion of the work, which aims to characterize and to preserve the intervals of reflection, the distances lying between the most essential parts of this work, which are turned most intensively to the outside.⁸²

In keeping with this, in the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin dramatizes his own thinking, wrestling, and questioning as he engages in the writing process. His asides include:

“The influence of commercial affairs on Lautreaumont and Rimbaud should be looked into!”⁸³ “Now, it would be important to know: What is the dialectical antithesis to boredom?”⁸⁴

The arcade as an object fits Benjamin's aim to dramatize the writing process because his view of the arcade's ability to define the urban experience gives him a platform for describing his extensive personal feelings about and reflections toward the city itself, as conveyed in Benjamin's more narrowly literary and narrative projects, such as his city sketches and *One-Way Street*. Benjamin writes that: “We teach that, in the stratification of the dream, reality never simply is, but rather that it strikes the dreamer.

⁸¹ Despite Benjamin's literary aims, aesthetic space or practice is not the category on which binaries turn for Benjamin, as they often do for Woolf. The artist is a now-and-then subject for Benjamin, but the artist is only one of a long cast of characters in *The Arcades Project*—including the *flâneur*, the gambler, the prostitute, the rag-picker—and Benjamin is not as centrally concerned with the practice of the artist, per se, as is Woolf. As well, while aesthetic is opposed to historical-political for Benjamin, as it is for Woolf, aesthetic is not as tightly associated with the “inside” for him as it is for her.

⁸² Benjamin 456.

⁸³ Benjamin 37.

⁸⁴ Benjamin 105.

And I treat of the arcades precisely as though, at bottom, they were something that has happened to me.”⁸⁵ Deep within the body of the *Arcades Project*, he provides context for the writing process itself, with decidedly “literary” or even flowery language:

These notes devoted to the Paris arcades were begun under an open sky of cloudless blue that arched above the foliage and yet was dimmed by the millions of leaves from which the fresh breeze of diligence, the stertorous breath of research, the storm of youthful zeal, and the idle wind of curiosity have raised the dust of centuries. The painted sky of summer that looks down from the arcades in the reading room of the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris has stretched its dreamy, unlit ceiling over the birth of their insight. And when that sky opened to the eyes of this young insight, there in the foreground were standing not the divinities of Olympus—not Zeus, Hephaestus, Hermes, or Hera, Artemis, and Thana—but the Dioscuri.⁸⁶

For Benjamin, describing the genesis of and thought process in his project is part of making the *Arcades Project* personal and aesthetic. Astute, learned, and intensively theoretical, the *Arcades Project* nonetheless refuses to be overly academic and detached.

Taking his cue from Proust, Benjamin renders individual, private thoughts, experiences, and aesthetic-intellectual processes regarding the arcade as vital to the ultimate public product, the text itself. For example, Benjamin personalizes the experience of being in the arcade: “The whispering of gazes fills the arcades. There is no thing that does not, where one least expects it, open a fugitive eye, blinking it shut again; and should you look more closely, it is gone.”⁸⁷ He tells quintessentially Proustian personal anecdotes in high literary form, including such personal asides as, “And, in fact,

⁸⁵ Benjamin 908.

⁸⁶ Benjamin 884.

⁸⁷ Benjamin 878.

[the afternoon] ended with the story of the discovery of an arcade, a story that is too *berlinish* to be told just now in this Parisian space of remembrance.”⁸⁸

He might have easily chosen a different urban object, but in Benjamin’s schema, the arcade comes to embody the quintessence of the urban experience, its practices and characters: walking, spectating, the *flâneur*, the prostitute, commodification, interiority, labor, iron construction, exhibition, fashion. Indeed, Benjamin’s penchant for repeating the quotation that “the arcade is a city, a world in miniature, in which customers will find everything they need” indicates the degree to which he locates in the “world” or “city” of the arcade all of the personal, aesthetic, and public elements he needs for his treatise on modernity.⁸⁹ As such, the arcade functions to stabilize the precarious balance between the aesthetic process as a private enterprise and as a social act or product; for Benjamin, it ultimately synthesizes not only interior and exterior, the past and the present, but also the aesthetic and the social.

Deeply invested in the relationship of private, aesthetic practice to the social world beyond the writer’s room, Woolf similarly uses the window to forge a liminal space that connects these binaries—a site of synthesis between the aesthetic and social realms. The window emerges in Woolf’s texts during her own and her characters’ most crucial, self-reflective moments. Looking out the window becomes associated with locating oneself in the world panorama by negotiating one’s most personal and individual practices, thoughts, and feelings with politics, history, and social and familial relationships. At the window, we witness the thoughts of many different kinds of women: the ingénue contemplating her future and her role in the world (Rachel Vinrace

⁸⁸ Benjamin 174.

⁸⁹ Benjamin 873.

in *The Voyage Out*), the self-assured matron who sits with her young child (Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*), the young mother who is struggling with a new life of domesticity (Susan in *The Waves*), the ambitious social do-gooder who wants to change the world (Mary Datchett in *Night and Day*). The window scenes involving these characters are not negligible moments in these texts, but contemplative, nostalgic moments in which the women consider and rework the past, as well as imagining their role and presence in the future. They are moments of engagement and consciousness. Through Woolf's expansive collection of window scenes, she binds women of the past together with those in the present, showing both the significance of the past in the present and how the present can help us to understand the past.

I will explore Woolf's use of the window in these capacities through an extended reading of *To the Lighthouse*. But first, given the overwhelming presence of this image within Woolf's work, I want to offer a few brief examples of how Woolf's urge for synthesis between aesthetic and social through the window appears in her other texts. In *Night and Day* (1919), social activist Mary Datchett consistently turns to the window as a site to ponder larger questions about the state of the world and her own possible role in contending with social problems and questions, to consider how the actions and perspectives of the "public" align with and depart from her own. In one instance, while at her office, she draws her chair to the window: "She saw to the remote spaces behind the strife of the foreground, enabled now to gaze there, since she had renounced her own demands, privileged to see the larger view, to share the vast desires and sufferings of the mass of mankind."⁹⁰ Woolf describes this scene with the statement that, "Mary Datchett

⁹⁰ Benjamin 261-2.

was undergoing this curious transformation from the particular to the universal.”⁹¹ Mary is able to use the window view to effectively connect the personal-aesthetic with the social, her private existence and experience with the outside world. Though Mary’s career is social activism, she is nonetheless a version of Woolf’s artist-observer, trying desperately to reconcile her life and feelings within with the world without, a struggle that is consistently expressed in this novel in spatial terms. Mary stands out in that many characters in the novel are not able to make this level of connection with those on the other side of the threshold. The window serves as a space of social division between “them” and “us,” for example, for the activist Mrs. Seal, who declares: “The cause of women d’you say? I say the cause of humanity. And there are some”—she glanced fiercely at the window—“who don’t see it!” Or, from Mrs. Hilberry: “Isn’t it odd,” she mused, standing at the window and tapping gently upon the pane, “that for all one can see, that dear old thing in the blue bonnet, crossing the road with her basket on her arm, has never heard that there was such a person [as Shakespeare]?”” Woolf’s counter examples underscore the rare and fleeting nature of the synthesis that Mary achieves at the window.

By seeing the “real life” inside another’s window, the most private of moments, Woolf also reveals how the observer is able to transcend her own individual existence and connect with the social world beyond herself, an aesthetic experience by definition, given how closely it is associated with the observing artist. This is brought to bear perhaps most poignantly in the last few pages of *Mrs. Dalloway*—a novel in which Woolf extensively plays with the window image, from the shop windows on Bond Street to the palace windows of Buckingham. Here, Clarissa takes a moment apart from the

⁹¹ Benjamin 262.

party for which she has been preparing all day to stare through her window into the window of an old woman across the way, whom she often observes.⁹² Interested at first in looking at the sky, Clarissa:

. . . walked to the window. . . . She parted the curtains; she looked. Oh, but how surprising!—in the room opposite the old lady stared straight at her! She was going to bed. . . . It was fascinating to watch her, moving about, that old lady, crossing the room, coming to the window. Could she see her? It was fascinating, with people still laughing and shouting in the drawing-room, to watch that old woman, quite quietly, going to bed. She pulled the blind now. The clock began striking. The young man had killed himself; but she did not pity him; with the clock striking the hour, one, two, three, she did not pity him, with all this going on. There! the old lady had put out her light! the whole house was dark now with this going on, she repeated, and the words came to her, Fear no more the heat of the sun. She must go back to them. But what an extraordinary night! She felt somehow very like him—the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it, thrown it away.⁹³

Here, window watching forms Clarissa's attempt to access real life, instead of the "show" that comprises her own world. Clarissa finds herself more captivated by this woman's daily movements than by her party. Watching what goes on through the window, into another window, forms for Clarissa a more real version of life than her own world as a socialite—her party just a facade, an indignity in which one is bound to "see sink and disappear here a man, there a woman, in this profound darkness, and she forced to stand

⁹² See, earlier in the novel: "Had she ever tried to convert any one herself? Did she not wish everybody merely to be themselves? And she watched out of the window the old lady opposite climbing upstairs. Let her climb upstairs if she wanted to; let her stop; then let her, as Clarissa had often seen her, gain her bedroom, part her curtains, and disappear again into the background. Somehow one respected that—that old woman looking out of the window, quite unconscious that she was being watched. There was something solemn in it—but love and religion would destroy that, whatever it was, the privacy of the soul. The odious Kilman would destroy it. Yet it was a sight that made her want to cry" (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 126).

⁹³ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 185-186.

here in her evening dress.”⁹⁴ Clarissa’s observation of the old woman through her window is wrapped up in her processing of Septimus’ death via the window and her realization that she must return to her party; this is what Clarissa has instead of what she calls the “embrace in death”⁹⁵—to watch the lives of others and attempt to connect over the threshold. Clarissa’s connection to Septimus and the old woman as she looks out the window is a crucial moment of both aesthetic-intellectual reflection and essentially social connection with other individuals. In the novel, Woolf uses this moment at the window to proffer a space of unexpected connection in the face of so much disconnection in traditional relationships (parent-child, husband-wife).

The window simultaneously embodies for Woolf two figures that modernism traditionally opposes, as a space that relates equally to the modernist artist and the modern and historical woman. It is a genuine vantage, that is, for Woolf as a writer and for the countless everyday women who form the subject of many of her writings. Indeed, the window’s presence in the writing process is at the heart of Woolf’s investment in this site throughout her texts. In *A Room of One’s Own*, which circulates around the writing process itself as a means to convey Woolf’s message about the economics of the artistic and academic process for women, we see her own fascination with the window as a writer and how she incorporates this into the narrative of her essay: “I must ask you to imagine a room, like many thousands, with a window looking across people’s hats and vans and motor-cars to other windows, and on the table inside the room a blank sheet of

⁹⁴ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 185.

⁹⁵ “Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded, one was alone. There was an embrace in death” (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 184).

paper on which was written in large letters Women and Fiction, but no more.”⁹⁶

Throughout the essay, Woolf repeatedly reminds her reader of her place at the window, watching the scene below. After declaring that women have, for generations, let men think that they are twice their actual size, she writes: “Under the spell of that illusion, I thought, looking out of the window, half the people on the pavement are striding to work.”⁹⁷ Later, after exploring accounts of women throughout history, she writes: “It was tempting, after all this reading, to look out of the window and see what London was doing on the morning of the twenty-sixth of October 1928.”⁹⁸ The language here underscores the degree to which Woolf’s thought emerges from and is contiguous with the window and the scenes it provides. Like Benjamin, Woolf transfers her own personal, aesthetic-intellectual practices and thoughts onto the cultural product, the text, by dramatizing both the writing process itself and the personal meanings and associations she has with the chosen object.

Woolf’s 1929 diary entry upon making an offer to purchase a new home, the villa La Boudard, exemplifies the degree to which Woolf identified with the window as her personal space: “I have become, almost, a landowner. A window owner, anyhow.” Woolf details a long list of what owning the villa will entail, including: “a great deal of cheap wine & cigars; new alliances, with Currys, Cruthers, & other anomalous oddities—all this my engagement to make three windows at Boudard means to me.”⁹⁹ Woolf equates an entire home with a set of windows, which indicates how she primarily uses the home—as a space for writing. In Woolf’s diaries, we also get a more concrete picture of

⁹⁶ Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* 25.

⁹⁷ Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* 36.

⁹⁸ Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* 95.

⁹⁹ Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 3, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1980) 232. 15 June 1929.

how her writing practice is wrapped up in the window, its scenes frequently inspiring her work. Upon finishing *The Waves* Woolf mentions the scene that gave her the original inspiration for the book, from her window: “I mean that I have netted that fin in the waste of waters which appeared to me over the marshes out of my window at Rodmell when I was coming to an end of *To the Lighthouse*.”¹⁰⁰

Through her career, Woolf frequently uses objects in her writing space as a catalyst for her work, such as in “The Mark on the Wall” (1917). But the window is the object that, for Woolf, takes on the most profound status in this capacity. In “Solid Objects” (1920)¹⁰¹ which I discussed in detail in Chapter One, Woolf provides a crucial glimpse into why the domestic window garners an important place in her work, beyond its ability to provide a physical portal to the outside world that forms the subject of her stories. She reveals that for John, the glass “served not only as an excellent paperweight, but also as a natural stopping place for the young man’s eyes when they wandered from his book.” “Looked at again and again half consciously by a mind thinking of something else, any object mixes itself so profoundly with the stuff of thought that it loses its actual form and recomposes itself a little differently in an ideal shape which haunts the brain when we least expect it.” As a fixture ever-present in her writing space, the window and the scene from the window naturally take on this function as a “natural stopping place” for the writer’s eyes, and, ultimately, “an ideal shape which haunts the brain.”

Woolf systematically conveys how the window is not only an actual space, but also an ideal metaphor for the writer’s essential connection to the outside world. Writing in her diary of her new house in Tavistock Square, Woolf conveys the window’s role in

¹⁰⁰ Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 4, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1982) 10. 7 February 1931.

¹⁰¹ Woolf started the story in 1918.

negotiating the idealized relationship she envisions between aesthetic and social space: “I must break off to go to the post, down that wonderful lamplit street, which has become more lovely more unreal through my double windows. And I sit shielded within. This house is now perfect. The studio the best study I’ve ever had.”¹⁰² Woolf here describes her ideal writing space—one that provides a scene from her window, but that shields her from the activity below, enabling the artist at work simultaneously to remain closeted and to engage with and observe the world beyond the windowpane. Woolf’s is not a version of private work that shirks the outside world, the culture of and on the street, but one that hopes to directly engage with it in her own terms. In *Orlando*, for example, Woolf treats the window as threshold that mediates the writer’s complex relationship to the outside world. After running into the poet Nick Greene at one point in the novel, Orlando returns inside, pulls a chair to the window, and thinks over some puzzling questions about literature. “Orlando, having come to [a] conclusion, stood looking out of the window for a considerable space of time. For, when anybody comes to a conclusion it is as if they had tossed a ball over the net and must wait for the unseen antagonist to return it to them. What would be sent to her next from the colourless sky above Chesterfield House, she wondered?”¹⁰³ In Woolf’s schema, the window provides a space for conversation between the writerly space and the world outside. It is a point of nexus, a “net” through which the writer can throw something out to see if it works, have a theory and test it against reality.

At its height, the window actually becomes for Woolf a space of synthesis between the artist and her subject, the everyday woman. In good company within her

¹⁰² Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 2, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1978) 317. 17 October 1924.

¹⁰³ Woolf, *Orlando* 291-2.

oeuvre, Woolf's early short story "Sympathy" (1919) playfully enacts a skirmish between the classic dichotomies, art and life. In this story, as Woolf struggles to visualize her character, Celia, it is when Celia "comes to the window" in Woolf's imagination that Woolf is able to proclaim: "Now I see her more distinctly. The colour has come back to her cheeks; but the bloom is gone; the film which made her glance gentle and vague has been rubbed from her eyes; the stir of life sounds harsh to her, and standing by the open window, she contracts and shrinks together."¹⁰⁴ Woolf claims the ability to visualize Celia more clearly when Celia is at her window, though Woolf is not anywhere near a place that would actually allow her to see Celia's window. Woolf is, however, at her *own* window, as she eventually reminds herself: "But it's all fancy. I'm not in the room with her, nor out in the wood. I'm in London, standing by the window, holding *The Times*."¹⁰⁵ By imagining Celia in her own physical space, Woolf enacts a slippage here between writer and character, observer and observed, with the window as the crucial space of slippage. "Sympathy" decisively reflects how the window simultaneously embodies for Woolf a space of aesthetic practice and everyday femininity.¹⁰⁶

What all of these examples, fictional and non-fictional, reveal, is that Woolf is invested in the window threshold in part because it is a space to forge what she sees as a healthy relationship between artistic production and the social realm. She is wary of retreating into a mode of aesthetic practice that is too removed from political, historical,

¹⁰⁴ Virginia Woolf, "Sympathy" in *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf* (1921; San Diego: Harcourt, 1989) 109.

¹⁰⁵ Woolf, *Complete Shorter Fiction* 109.

¹⁰⁶ We can imagine the same sort of slippage at work when Woolf sits in her room, at her window, and writes of Mrs. Ramsay at her drawing room window or of Clarissa Dalloway watching the old woman across the way dressing at her party. Though of course in the case of Mrs. Ramsay, Woolf heightens the sense of the window as a space of connection and fluidity between the artist and the domestic woman by placing Lily on the other side of the window pane, as she paints her from outside, framed just like so many of the representations of women at windows that we have throughout visual art.

and social realities. None of these elements is present in her private working space, and she urges that art must remain in touch with these spheres. Woolf at many times seems to want to shut herself away, to do her work, but she recognizes that a writer writes about life, and complete separation from life is not desirable. The window becomes the site of compromise, the key vantage through which Woolf can shut herself away, to do her work, while at times overcoming and transcending anxieties about the seclusion of aesthetic practice from the world at large, such as those expressed by Clarissa Dalloway in *The Voyage Out*.

While both Benjamin and Woolf were deeply invested in finding a space for productive encounter between the aesthetic and the social, they come to the same nexus from opposing vantages. Benjamin was a political-cultural critic who wanted to find a way to do his historical work with a formally engaged, literary-aesthetic approach; Woolf, a writer who wanted to find a way to make her literary-aesthetic projects advance her social ideals. Still, I do believe we can accurately say that Benjamin's notion of the dialectical takes literary expression in the windows of Woolf's fiction and essays.

As an architectural fixture enduring for centuries both materially and through image, Woolf's window provides a distinct connection between the present and the past, between modern women who sit at their windowsill and those who have done so throughout history. Woolf brings all of her associations with the window to bear during a distinct historical moment, as the window was in Woolf's day at risk of becoming an object discarded by or on behalf of modern women. You will recall, in *The House of Mirth*, Wharton's depiction of Mrs. Peniston at her window, watching the world outside go by, as engaging in a pathetic escape from real life; or Forster's illustration of Lucy

Honeychurch at her window, longing for experience in the street below. Woolf had carefully read both *The House of Mirth* and *A Room With A View*, reviewing each in its year of publication. In her reviews, she sympathizes with the plights of Lily Bart and Lucy Honeychurch, in their quests to subsist or flourish within societies that narrowly dictated their proper behavior. That she read these novels indicates that Woolf, as one would expect, was versed in earlier narratives of women's struggle to negotiate the frequently vexed relationship between public and private, with the impediments that kept women from freely wandering the streets, while maintaining a stable relationship with family and well-bred society. And she was familiar with recent accounts that scorned the window view as a paltry substitute for real experience and engagement with life.

It is both surprising and completely appropriate that Woolf would take up a full exploration and reclamation of the window space or image on the heels of the moment when writers such as Wharton and Forster were discarding it. Leaving the restrictions of Levy's era behind (restrictions that still lingered as Wharton and Forster were writing), Woolf engages the window as an image just as solitary women were, en masse, spilling out onto and relishing their presence on the street, as she depicts in *A Room of One's Own*, "Street Haunting," and *Mrs. Dalloway*. Given their free access to the street, the window, for independent and artistic women, is at this time on the verge of being a discarded object, a space of abandonment similar to Parisians' abandonment of the arcade. Windows obviously continue through Woolf's day and our own as central architectural fixtures in homes and commercial buildings, and artists in Woolf's era and well into the present day continue to focus on the image of the window or the woman at the window, particularly with a child, as one of richness and import. But the window was

in decline in a very specific way—as the main route for women artists and observers to have access to the street—a moment that provides the nostalgic climate that is Woolf’s central point of departure for interpreting the window. Benjamin’s commentary on the dialectical stages he uses to address the arcade is useful here: “First dialectical stage: the arcade changes from a place of splendor to a place of decay. Second dialectical stage: the arcade changes from an unconscious experience to something consciously penetrated.”¹⁰⁷ Wharton dramatizes the first dialectical stage, as the window becomes, for the interior woman observer, a place that is outmoded. Woolf takes up the second dialectical stage, of consciously penetrating the cachè of the window space in both past and present time, which I will explore in detail in my analysis of *To the Lighthouse*.¹⁰⁸

The Window in *To The Lighthouse*

In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf explores the image of the woman at the window in its full complexity. Woolf’s other texts—earlier and later—mirror portions of what she does here. The novel, I argue, is centrally concerned with making explicit the reality and

¹⁰⁷ Benjamin 907.

¹⁰⁸ Woolf’s work also provides some moments in which the window appears as dialectical in a more direct way. In *Orlando*, the window plays a central role as a view of history in the making, as Orlando frequently turns to the window to write, to contemplate, and to remember events that have passed. In one of Orlando’s most profound moments of contemplation, the birdseye view from the window provides the vantage for her to notice the changes in the city from the time she was a child to the present. In her bedroom one evening, Orlando looks out her bedroom window and “could not help comparing this orderly scene with the irregular and huddled purlieus which had been the city of London in the reign of Queen Elizabeth. . . . Now—she leant out her window—all was light, order, and serenity. . . . With the twelfth stroke of midnight, the darkness was complete. A turbulent welter of cloud covered the city. All was dark; all was doubt; all was confusion. The Eighteenth century was over; the Nineteenth century had begun” (223-226). This moment is dialectical in that the past (18th century) collides with the present (19th century) in the form of an image (the scene from the window). Orlando doesn’t witness a progression from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, but a suddenly emergent image, a moment when the view instantly changes. This image provides an awakening in the sense that, in Benjamin’s schema, “Awakening is the exemplary case of remembering: the weighty and momentous case, in which we succeed in remembering the nearest (most obvious)” (907). In this instant of past and present colliding, Woolf shifts focus from the literary to the historical-political realm.

mythology behind the woman at the window and with reclaiming the window as a threshold that binds the domestic woman to the artist, Woolf's mother(s) to herself.

Arguably Woolf's most critically acclaimed and widely read novel, *To the Lighthouse* departs from Woolf's urban texts by dramatizing events in the summer vacation home of the Ramsay family and their guests. The actual events in the novel are limited; the thought process of the characters, rather than plot development, drives the narrative, which is divided into three sections. In the first, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay host their children and several guests, including the artist Lily Briscoe and the scholar William Bankes, at their summer home; the second, brief section dramatizes the process of decay the abandoned house experiences in the family's extended absence; the final section involves a return visit to the home by Mr. Ramsay, Lily, and some of the children following Mrs. Ramsay's death. The novel is closely focused on the private thought worlds of Mrs. Ramsay and of Lily as the latter attempts to complete a painting of her hostess.

Based on Woolf's own family vacations at St. Ives in Cornwall, the novel has strong biographical elements and has been read as a psychoanalytic exorcising of Woolf's own mother.¹⁰⁹ Woolf's claims about the cathartic process of writing *To the Lighthouse*, as freeing her from an obsession with her mother, are oft quoted in readings of the novel.¹¹⁰ In this vein, apt parallels have been identified between Lily Briscoe and Woolf

¹⁰⁹ As Dalsimer notes in her analysis of Woolf's influences, "Her diaries and letters make clear that Woolf intended *To the Lighthouse* to be autobiographical, a portrait in fiction of her parents and of childhood summers at St. Ives in Cornwall." Katherine Dalsimer, *Virginia Woolf: Becoming a Writer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002) 2. In Woolf's diary, she had described: "This is going to be fairly short: to have father's character done complete in it; & mother's; & St. Ives; & childhood; & all the usual things I try to put in—life, death, &c." *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 3, 18-19. 14 May 1925.

¹¹⁰ See Virginia Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past" in *Moments of Being*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1985) 80-1.

herself.¹¹¹ While readings of *To the Lighthouse* certainly go beyond the psychoanalytic, attention to personal parallels has dogged analysis surrounding the connection between Lily and Mrs. Ramsay in particular. Those few analyses of Mrs. Ramsay and Lily that go beyond personal parallels seek to hierarchize one figure over the other. Feminist critics have read the novel as upholding Lily Briscoe's move beyond the patriarchal world of the Ramsays—Lily triumphs, they say, resisting Mr. Ramsay and patriarchy itself.¹¹² Katherine Dalsimer, for example, offers the writing of *To the Lighthouse* as a process by which Woolf aimed to kill the Angel in the House, to silence her mother's voice, as Lily works to cast off the burden of Mrs. Ramsay.¹¹³

In what follows, I broaden the discussion of the connection between Lily and Mrs. Ramsay to capture Woolf's rendition of the essential relationship between the artist and the domestic woman. Lily's affection for and anxiety toward Mrs. Ramsay reflect not only Woolf's personal feelings toward her own mother, but Woolf's ideas about the modern artist's connection to the domestic woman. While in *A Room of One's Own* Woolf addresses the modern woman writer's relationship to her literary "mothers," *To the Lighthouse* makes clear Woolf's investment in the artist's relationship to the familial mother, the domestic sphere, the interior woman of generations past. Crucially, Mrs.

¹¹¹ As Dalsimer notes, "At the end of the novel Lily Briscoe is forty-four years old, the age of Virginia Woolf herself when she began *To the Lighthouse*. Lily is an artist, and, like the author, she is childless. Woolf invites us to see the painter as a self-portrait, ascribing to Lily Briscoe work very like the work in which she appears as a fictional character. Lily is engaged in painting the scene that is also Woolf's subject: the mother and child framed in the window. Her painting, like the novel, is divided into three parts. And the final stroke of Lily's painting, the drawing of a line, is the final line of the novel" (Dalsimer 15).

¹¹² See Jane Goldman, *The Feminist Aesthetics of Virginia Woolf: Modernism, Post-Impressionism and the Politics of the Visual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

¹¹³ Dalsimer 24.

Ramsay is *not* Lily's mother, with whom she is often conflated.¹¹⁴ Woolf could have focused the novel on the process of a young woman artist's reconciling of her life with her mother's—or, more generally, of a “modern” woman reconciling her own choices with those of her more traditional mother. Instead, she provides commentary that goes beyond the mother-daughter relationship, as Woolf defined this relationship as one between the domestic, traditional woman and the modern woman artist.

Far from validating Lily's choices over Mrs. Ramsay's, or vice versa, Woolf works to unite the two figures through the dialectical image of the woman at the window. Woolf offers the woman at the window as an image that simultaneously confronts past and present, domesticity and art. Through the window, the novel demonstrates Woolf's push for unity of and fluidity between these opposites and her investment in the interior and the domestic as vital for the work of the modernist artist. In this respect, *To the Lighthouse* develops ideas Woolf expresses throughout her work surrounding the possibility of the threshold as an alternative to the strict binaries of modernism as it is often conceived.

Exposing the Woman at the Window as Image of Collective Unconscious

In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf penetrates into the latent mythology behind the image of the woman at the window, revealing the cultural import that this image holds. She first engages the woman at the window as an iconic image chosen for centuries as a subject for visual art. The first section of three in the novel is titled “The Window,” and the predominant image in this section is of Mrs. Ramsay sitting in the window, reading to

¹¹⁴ See Ellen Rosenman's study of the mother-daughter relationship in Woolf's works. Ellen B. Rosenman, *The Invisible Presence: Virginia Woolf and the Mother-Daughter Relationship* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986).

her young son James or looking out and pondering. Woolf's titling the first section of *To the Lighthouse* "The Window" indicates that Mrs. Ramsay's location at the window is not incidental, but central. We encounter Mrs. Ramsay sitting in the terrace window, recalling that she must keep her head bent in the same position for Lily Briscoe, who stands on the lawn painting Mrs. Ramsay from outside.¹¹⁵ "The sight of the girl standing on the edge of the lawn painting reminded her; she was supposed to be keeping her head as much in the same position as possible for Lily's picture. Lily's picture! Mrs. Ramsay smiled. . . . remembering her promise, she bent her head."¹¹⁶ The reader, then, is first led to conceptualize the figure of Mrs. Ramsay in the window as the incarnation of an image, consciously shaping herself as a subject for art. Here, Woolf draws on a long tradition in visual representation, as I explored in the introduction to this project. Woolf is sure to remind us of the historical status of this image in visual art, as Mr. Bankes and Lily discuss this as an image that Raphael had treated divinely.

Recognizing the dominance of the image in art, Woolf pushes the reader toward understanding all that the image holds for those who are tied to and repeatedly return to it. The sight of Mrs. Ramsay at the window, with and without James, becomes an image on which the other characters fixate throughout the first half of the novel: it is the source of Lily Briscoe's painting, of Mr. Ramsay's sense of security, of her children's reminiscence. By revealing the unspoken, even subconscious, thoughts of various characters about this image, Woolf shapes the reader's view of this image through an essentially allegorical process—one that Lily Briscoe effectively deems necessary, as she continues to struggle to represent the complexity of Mrs. Ramsay ten years after her

¹¹⁵ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (1927; San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1955) 17.

¹¹⁶ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 17.

death: “One wanted fifty pairs of eyes to see with, she reflected. Fifty pairs of eyes were not enough to get round that one woman with, she thought. . . . One wanted most some secret sense, fine as air, with which to steal through keyholes and surround her where she sat knitting, talking, sitting silent in the window alone.”¹¹⁷ If one wants fifty pairs of eyes, this is what Woolf reasonably attempts to provide in *To the Lighthouse*—to collect images of Mrs. Ramsay, the woman at the window, through as many lenses as her narrative will allow, in order to make explicit the unconscious associations this image holds.

To elaborate on one of many examples, the image of Mrs. Ramsay in the window with her son fortifies even the old widowed scholar, Mr. Bankes. Lily notices that “For him to gaze as Lily saw him gazing at Mrs. Ramsay was a rapture, equivalent, Lily felt, to the loves of dozens of young men.” Mr. Bankes, Woolf divines, does not even understand it himself, cannot articulate “why this woman pleased him so; why the sight of her reading a fairy tale to her boy [in the window] had upon him precisely the same effect as the solution of a scientific problem, so that he rested in contemplation of it, and felt . . . that barbarity was tamed, the reign of chaos subdued.”¹¹⁸ Woolf elaborates on the effect of the image of Mrs. Ramsay, ironically, through Mr. Bankes’ later denial of its power. At dinner, Mr. Bankes becomes frustrated with the family environment: “he thought that if he had been alone dinner would have been almost over now; he would have been free to work. Yes, he thought, it is a terrible waste of time. The children were dropping in still. . . . How trifling it all is, how boring it all is, he thought, compared with

¹¹⁷ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 198. Woolf had similarly written about her own mother, “if one could give a sense of my mother’s personality one would have to be an artist. It would be as difficult to do that, as it should be done, as to paint a Cezanne.” Woolf, *Moments of Being* 85.

¹¹⁸ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 47.

the other thing—work.”¹¹⁹ Of Mrs. Ramsay, Mr. Banks decides, “I am by way of being devoted to her. Yet now, at this moment her presence meant absolutely nothing to him: her beauty meant nothing to him; her sitting with her little boy at the window—nothing, nothing.” Mr. Banks denies the significance of Mrs. Ramsay’s image in the window as “nothing, nothing,” even though it had a profound effect on him earlier. Woolf explains, “The truth was that he did not enjoy family life. It was in this sort of state that one asked oneself, What does one live for? . . . Foolish questions, vain questions, questions one never asked if one was occupied. Is human life this? Is human life that? One never had time to think about it.”¹²⁰ Here, solitary work becomes something to distract from the true questions of life, and family and domesticity, conversely, are said to engage one with the most profound investigations. Woolf denies here the claims of some modernists about the negative effect women have on art and profound thought. In contrast to Eliot’s portrait in “Conversation Galante” (1917) in which a female companion can only muster “How you digress!” and “Does this refer to me?” to the poet’s profound observations, Woolf intimates that connection to the domestic woman fortifies intellectual work.¹²¹

Later in the novel, Woolf explores the significance of the image of the woman at the window to her children. After putting the young children to bed, Mrs. Ramsay stands at the staircase window, looking at the moon. Prue notices Mrs. Ramsay and stops to contemplate her image: “‘That’s my mother,’ thought Prue. . . . That is the thing itself, she felt, as if there were only one person like that in the world; her mother. And, from

¹¹⁹ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 88-9.

¹²⁰ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 89.

¹²¹ T. S. Eliot, “Conversation Galante” in *The Complete Poems and Plays* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1980). This forms an interesting reversal with the effect of children and family life on women, which Woolf claims elsewhere makes it difficult for women to investigate profound issues. The upshot is clearly that women and men both need freedom from domestic life for work and art, but they also need to remain connected to the domestic realm in order to invigorate their work.

having been quite grown up, a moment before, talking with others, she became a child again, and what they had been doing was a game, and would her mother sanction their game, or condemn it, she wondered.” Woolf continues, “And thinking what a chance it was for Minta and Paul and Lily to see her, and feeling what an extraordinary stroke of fortune it was for her, to have her, and how she would never grow up and never leave home, she said, like a child, ‘We thought of going down to the beach to watch the waves.’”¹²² Prue feels so captivated by the image of her mother at the window that she wants to share it with Paul, Minta, and Lily. The image returns Prue to childhood, connecting her to her own past, probably because she has been watching this image of her mother throughout her childhood. Notably, the child’s recognition of the significance of the image of the woman/mother at the window has a relatively insignificant presence in the novel. And though Mrs. Ramsay has eight children, the significance of this image is recognized within the novel by only one. It is as if an afterthought. I suspect this is because the importance of the mother to her children was well-established, and Woolf’s aim was to expand the significance of the woman of the house beyond her connection to her children. Woolf refused to reduce Mrs. Ramsay’s significance to “mother” and de-emphasized this role.

Woolf, then, renders the image of the woman at the window as one of enormous import, the ultimate symbol of middle class family life, a nineteenth century ideal. By choosing an image that is significant throughout the history of art (even Mary and Jesus at the window), Woolf emphasizes that she is not dramatizing just the significance of this woman in this family, but the significance of the image of the woman at the window to individuals throughout history—the reason, even, this image has been replicated time and

¹²² Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 116.

time again. Woolf focuses on explaining the caché this figure has historically held over men in particular and its essential relationship to work—intellectual, artistic and otherwise.

Woman at the Window and Dialectical Reflection

While some critics see Mrs. Ramsay as a critique of the domestic woman, a sort of cautionary tale that negates wifehood and domesticity, I argue that Woolf validates Mrs. Ramsay by revealing both her complexity and her importance to others.¹²³ In *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs. Ramsay is certainly no feminist. She thinks of marriage and children as the only appropriate choice for young women. She neglects to see the value in Lily's work. She fails to recognize the profound power she has over others. She does not like to feel "finer than her husband," or even for others to think that he needs her.¹²⁴ Yet, I discount accounts that envision Mrs. Ramsay as the unhappy victim of patriarchy. An interest in validating women's history meant that Woolf did not reject the traditional woman herself, so much as she resented the system that left her without choices and

¹²³ Some feel that *To the Lighthouse* is condemnatory of Mrs. Ramsay and dramatizes Woolf's criticism of patriarchy. See, for example, Jane Marcus, *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) 4. In this vein, feminist critics of Woolf's work have made bold statements, such as Jane Marcus' that "all of Virginia Woolf's work is an attack on the patriarchal family" and that "Spinsterhood, for her, is the measure of success. Her artists and reformers, from Lily Briscoe to Eleanor Pargiter, Mary Datchet to Lucy Swithin, are women without men. The virgin mothers, Mrs. Ramsay and Clarissa Dalloway, are women who refuse men, even their husbands." (Marcus 76). Marcus claims that "female heterosexuality is most often represented in Woolf's fiction as victimization and colonization. Those women who accept the ideology of female submission in patriarchal marriage are silently condemned. Mrs. Ramsay's insistence on marriage and traditional roles results in the death of her son in battle and of her daughter in childbirth; we see the unhappy results of the marriages she arranged" (Marcus 77). Further, "If the historian had only Woolf's novels from which to deduce the position of women in England, she would be forced to conclude that marriage was a primitive institution in decline; that many women perceived male sexuality as rape; that lesbianism and homosexuality were widespread; that spinsterhood, aunthood, sisterhood, and female friendship were women's most important roles; that motherhood and wifehood were Victorian relics." (Marcus 77). Rosner also writes that, "The Ramsays' domestic life is depicted by Woolf as dilapidated and pressured by modernity" (163). See Naomi Black, *Woolf as Feminist*, for a more recent and nuanced exploration of Woolf in this context. (more nuanced)

¹²⁴ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 39.

power. Rather than using Mrs. Ramsay as an example of the oppressed Edwardian mother, I argue, Woolf validates Mrs. Ramsay's role, while working to convey the nuance behind the oft-represented image.

In the first section of *To the Lighthouse*, the images that others hold of Mrs. Ramsay are juxtaposed with her private thought world. The reality of Mrs. Ramsay's thoughts and experiences depart from her use by Mr. Ramsay and Mr. Bankes as an emblem of security, beauty, and maternity. "Standing by the drawing room window," Mrs. Ramsay contemplates the larger social questions of modern life: "more profoundly, she ruminated the other problem of rich and poor, and the things she saw with her own eyes, weekly, daily, here or in London, when she visited this widow, or that struggling wife . . . in the hope that thus she would . . . become, what with her untrained mind she greatly admired, an investigator, elucidating the social problem."¹²⁵ She has real ambitions—to open a "model dairy and a hospital up here," after the children are all away at school—something her premature death obviates.¹²⁶ She has discontents: "For it was odd; and she believed it to be true; that with all his gloom and desperation [Mr. Ramsay] was happier, more hopeful on the whole, than she was. Less exposed to human worries—perhaps that was it."¹²⁷ She has real doubts about her own value system, reflecting about whether she has pushed Minta into marriage too quickly, realizing that she is driven on "almost as if it were an escape for her too, to say that people must marry; people must have children."¹²⁸ She feels relief when her children go to bed: "She could be herself, by herself. And that was what now she often felt the need of—to think; well,

¹²⁵ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 9.

¹²⁶ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 58.

¹²⁷ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 59.

¹²⁸ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 60.

not even to think. To be silent; to be alone.”¹²⁹ She ruminates as she is reading to James, speaking to her husband, managing dinner conversation. Woolf demonstrates how the traditional wife and mother finds space for reflection and contemplation while directly engaged in daily activities. As she sits down to dinner, even, we hear, “But what have I done with my life? thought Mrs. Ramsay, taking her place at the head of the table.”¹³⁰

It is at the window, the very space where other characters enshrine her as an iconic representation of maternity and domesticity, that Woolf centrally explores the complexity of Mrs. Ramsay, how this figure theorizes and shapes her own position—beyond its historical perception by others, beyond the ways in which men and artists have wittingly and unwittingly conceptualized it. Indeed, though Woolf presents the image of Mrs. Ramsay at the window as an image of significance to all involved, Woolf refuses to allow her object status to steal her power. The woman at the window, Woolf suggests, is sometimes conscious of her status as an image, and she works to construct the image that she wants others to see. After the young children have been put to bed, Mrs. Ramsay sits alone, thinking. When her husband approaches, she immediately creates a different image for him: “Had she known that he was looking at her, she thought, she would not have let herself sit there, thinking. She disliked anything that reminded her that she had been sitting thinking. So she looked over her shoulder, at the town.”¹³¹ Unlike the image of the domestic woman with child at the window, the image of the woman thinking is one Mrs. Ramsay refuses for herself, so she creates a different image.

¹²⁹ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 62.

¹³⁰ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 82.

¹³¹ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 68.

Similarly, when the evening has settled down and Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay have a moment of quiet, he looks to her to say she loves him, but she cannot do it. Instead, she constructs an image for him:

Getting up, she stood at the window with the reddish-brown stocking in her hands, partly to turn away from him, partly because she remembered how beautiful it often is—the sea at night. But she knew that he had turned his head as she turned; he was watching her. She knew that he was thinking, You are more beautiful than ever. And she felt herself very beautiful. . . . Then, knowing that he was watching her, instead of saying anything she turned, holding her stocking, and looked at him. And as she looked at him she began to smile, for though she had not said a word, he knew, of course he knew, that she loved him. . . . And smiling she looked out of the window and said (thinking to herself, Nothing on earth can equal this happiness)— ‘Yes, you were right. It’s going to be wet tomorrow. You won’t be able to go.’ And she looked at him smiling, for she had triumphed again. She had not said it: yet he knew.¹³²

Woolf grants Mrs. Ramsay agency—consciousness of her power as an image and the ability to construct the image of herself that she wants her husband to see. We see no hint of deception or artifice here. Woolf does not mar Mrs. Ramsay’s image-making by framing it as duplicitous or manipulative. Quite the opposite, Mrs. Ramsay uses her image to communicate her genuine feelings, to connect with her husband. Woolf, then, does not allow the woman at the window to be a passive, static object upon which others invest meaning and significance. She is instead active in framing her own image, invested with agency, which naturally fits in with Woolf’s feminist ideals. While the image may be unconscious to many, then, it seems that it is highly conscious of itself.

Beyond Mrs. Ramsay’s construction of her own image at the window, Woolf explores the window as a space of dialectical reflection for Mrs. Ramsay, a site through which she looks to theorize the relationship between the outside world and the world

¹³² Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 123-4.

within. Even as she dines with her family and plays the ideal hostess, she contemplates the mysteries of life and the peculiarities of the relationship between all that is in the outside world and what goes on in her dining room. As the candles are lit for dinner at the Ramsay home, “the faces on both sides of the table were brought nearer by the candlelight, and composed, as they had not been in the twilight, into a party round a table, for the night was now shut off by panes of glass, which, far from giving any accurate view of the outside world, rippled it so strangely that here, inside the room, seemed to be order and dry land; there, outside, a reflection in which things wavered and vanished, waterily.”¹³³ Here, she imagines the window as a threshold that bridges and distorts one’s perspective of the relationship between inside and outside. Mrs. Ramsay suggests that the window deforms and potentially reverses the two spaces—making the inside *seem* ordered and the outside *seem* wavering. The reader is left with a set of oppositions whose terms can’t clearly be assigned to one space or another; at the window, there is a fluidity and undecidability between them through the process of reflection.

Mrs. Ramsay uses this very fluidity of the image of the window to theorize the relationship between her domestic world and the world outside. Looking around the dinner table, having worked to create a sense of unity among her guests, Mrs. Ramsay feels for a moment a sense of “security”: “there is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change, and shines out (she glanced at the window with its ripple of reflected lights) in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby; so that again tonight she had the feeling she had had once today, already, of peace, of rest. Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that

¹³³ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 97.

endures.”¹³⁴ Here, Mrs. Ramsay conceives of family life inside as eternal, coherent, stable, and shining out into the fleeting, spectral world outside. The window bridges these two realms, serving as both a space of contemplative reflection and also a quite literal space of physical reflection. Woolf continues, further insinuating Mrs. Ramsay’s mental distance from the dinner she is hosting. She “looked at the window in which the candle flames burnt brighter now that the panes were black, and looking at that outside the voices came to her very strangely, as if they were voices at a service in a cathedral, for she did not listen to the words.”¹³⁵

How interesting that these moments of reflection, contemplation, dreaming, and doubt all come in the midst of Mrs. Ramsay’s caring for a large family and multiple guests. Like Clarissa Dalloway at her own party, Mrs. Ramsay turns some of her attention to what is outside instead of focusing wholly on what is happening within; detaching herself from the scene, she experiences it as an outsider. Crucially, this is not a longing for outside, but an engagement with and reflection upon it. When she is in her most performative and public presence as the domestic matron, she is also at her most thoughtful, and her mind is farthest from the everyday and most deeply entrenched in the worldly, ephemeral, beyond.

This rounded picture of Mrs. Ramsay is part of Woolf’s way of validating the everyday, domestic woman as important and meaningful—part of her career-long aim to authenticate the inner and outer life of everyday British women, especially women of her

¹³⁴ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 105.

¹³⁵ The passage continues as she half hears her husband reciting something: “The words (she was looking at the window) sounded as if they were floating like flowers on water out there, cut off from them all, as if no one had said them, but they had come into existence of themselves. . . . She did not know what they meant, but, like music, the words seemed to be spoken by her own voice, outside her self, saying quite easily and naturally what had been in her mind the whole evening while she said different things.” Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 110-111.

class, as a fit subject for serious analysis. Woolf conveys Mrs. Ramsay as complex and ambitious, fulfilled in motherhood, wifedom, and hostessing, but with real doubts, questions, sorrows, and sadnesses about the world. She relishes her role as a mother, but also feels the weight of her children, their everpresence, the burden of caring for them. Woolf invites us to respect Mrs. Ramsay on her own terms, while identifying the assumptions and qualities of Mrs. Ramsay that some women of Woolf's generation would consider outmoded.

Aside from Woolf herself, it is only the painter Lily Briscoe who recognizes the cleft between the reality of Mrs. Ramsay and her image, which she attempts to reveal in the painting of Mrs. Ramsay and James at the window. She decides that though Mrs. Ramsay is the "loveliest of people (bowed over her book)" she is "different too from the perfect shape, which one saw there."¹³⁶ In Mrs. Ramsay, she sees and wishes to convey something different—a parallel to Woolf's own project of representing Mrs. Ramsay as different from the image of her that is reflected in the minds of her husband, children, and guests. Looking at Lily's painting, Mr. Bankes questions what she wishes to indicate by a triangular purple shape. "It was Mrs. Ramsay reading to James, she said. She knew his objection—that no one could tell it for a human shape. But she had made no attempt at likeness."¹³⁷ Mr. Bankes is interested: "Mother and child, then—objects of universal veneration, and in this case the mother was famous for her beauty—might be reduced, he pondered, to a purple shadow without irreverence."¹³⁸ Lily endows Mrs. Ramsay with complexity, rather than perfection. Mrs. Ramsay, Lily decides, is not only the image of herself.

¹³⁶ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 49.

¹³⁷ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 52.

¹³⁸ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 52.

In Lily's choice to depict James and Mrs. Ramsay as a triangular purple shape, we see both a parallel to Woolf's own unconventional narrative style and to her attempt to discern import, authority, and meaning from this image in order to render it differently than it had been imagined before. Likewise, throughout her work, I believe that Woolf makes and remakes this image in various forms, arguably in an attempt to penetrate its reality, to expose what has been hidden and unseen. Lily's power in this respect should not be underestimated. Woolf's writings clearly demonstrate the profound value she associates with chronicling the history of everyday women. Lily uniquely possesses the interest and vision to represent the image of the everyday domestic woman at the window.

Synthesis Between Domestic Woman and Woman Artist

Given the enormous power Mrs. Ramsay commands over all characters in the novel, it is unsurprising that she captivates the attention of Lily Briscoe. Woolf tells us that as Mrs. Ramsay "sat in the wicker arm-chair in the drawing-room window she wore, to Lily's eyes, an august shape; the shape of a dome."¹³⁹ But Lily's intense need for Mrs. Ramsay surpasses that of her husband and even her children. Synthesis is sought, as Lily desires to become one with the domestic matron:

Sitting on the floor with her arms round Mrs. Ramsay's knees, close as she could get, smiling to think that Mrs. Ramsay would never know the reason of that pressure, she imagined how in the chambers of the mind and heart of the woman who was, physically, touching her, were stood, like the treasures in the tombs of kings, tablets bearing sacred inscriptions, which if one could spell them out, would teach one everything, but they would never be offered openly, never made public. What art was there, known to

¹³⁹ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 51.

love or cunning, by which one pressed through into those secret chambers? What device for becoming, like waters poured into one jar, inextricably the same, one with the object one adored? Could the body achieve, or the mind, subtly mingling in the intimate passages of the brain? or the heart? Could loving, as people called it, make her and Mrs. Ramsay one? for it was not knowledge but unity that she desired, not inscriptions on tablets, nothing that could be written in any language known to men, but intimacy itself, which is knowledge, she had thought, leaning her head on Mrs. Ramsay's knee. Nothing happened. Nothing! Nothing! as she leant her head against Mrs. Ramsay's knee. And yet, she knew knowledge and wisdom were stored up in Mrs. Ramsay's heart. How then, she had asked herself, did one know one thing or another thing about people, sealed as they were?¹⁴⁰

This oft-cited passage, clearly a key moment in the novel, has been read as an example of modernist fragmentation, of Woolf's disconnection from her own mother, of elevation of nonphysical romance,¹⁴¹ of repressed lesbianism,¹⁴² of epistemological difficulty in knowing other minds,¹⁴³ even of the incest taboo.¹⁴⁴ But I argue instead that this passage centrally concerns Woolf's own attempted merging of the domestic woman and the woman artist throughout her work. Woolf dramatizes the woman artist's intense need to know and understand the domestic woman, around whom so much of life centers. Lily is desperate to become one with this significant figure, to divine all that her mind and heart contain.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁰ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 50-1.

¹⁴¹ Julia Daggart, "Keeping the Wolves at Bay: Why Different Groups Seek to appropriate Virginia Woolf's Sexual Identity in her Life and Writings" in *Matrix* (online journal) 1:1 (1998). <http://writing.colostate.edu/gallery/matrix/index.cfm>

¹⁴² Patricia Juliana Smith, *Lesbian Panic: Homoeroticism in Modern British Women's Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

¹⁴³ Martha C. Nussbaum, "The Window: Knowledge of Other Minds in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*," *New Literary History* 26.4 (1995): 731-753.

¹⁴⁴ Jane Lilienfeld, "Flesh and Blood and Love and Words" in Bonnie Kime Scott, ed. *New Alliances in Joyce Studies* (Dover: University of Delaware Press, 1988).

¹⁴⁵ In her diary, Woolf describes this as a narrative "problem": "The problem is how to bring Lily & Mrs. R. together & make a combination of interest at the end." Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 3, 106. 5 September 1926. Relatedly, Lily struggles to unite opposing forces in her painting: "It was a question, she remembered, how to connect this mass on the right hand with that on the left. She might do it by bringing the line of the branch across so; or break the vacancy in the foreground by an object (James perhaps) so.

Lily's longing for Mrs. Ramsay reflects what Woolf perceives as the impossibility of total, genuine synthesis—of the artist and the domestic woman merging into the same person. For a woman during the early twentieth century, actually being a wife and mother and a successful artist as well was unlikely.¹⁴⁶ Though Lily insists that she desires to be alone, she experiences real tension between her desire for the single artist's life and the life of the domestic woman, anxiety that art is inferior to family life. Referring to her artistry, Lily reflects that, "But all this seemed so little, so virginal, against the other," and she is haunted by Mrs. Ramsay standing at the window, urging her that traditional family life is the only worthwhile option: "there could be no disputing this: an unmarried woman . . . has missed the best of life."¹⁴⁷ When art feels the most complicated and difficult, Lily especially wonders about family as an alternative. In the middle of Lily's rumination on the difficulty of the artistic process, she says her sense of inadequacy comes upon her, and she has to keep herself from flinging herself at Mrs. Ramsay's knee and saying "'I'm in love with this all,' waving her hand at the hedge, at the house, at the children."¹⁴⁸

As a site equally connected to the domestic woman and the woman artist, the window becomes the site through which Lily connects most closely with Mrs. Ramsay. I have already examined how Woolf establishes the window as a site of fluidity, permeability, and cohesion between inside and out in this novel, where boundaries between spaces and individuals are disrupted. In the first section of the novel, Lily and

But the danger was that by doing that the unity of the whole might be broken" (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 53).

¹⁴⁶ This is very akin to Woolf's sense, in her diary, of what her sister Vanessa (a mother) does for her. To be a writer, Woolf needs to remain connected to the family b/c it's "real," yet as a writer, she is writing instead of living.

¹⁴⁷ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 49.

¹⁴⁸ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 19.

Mrs. Ramsay occupy opposed spheres, as Lily stands outside and looks through the window to paint Mrs. Ramsay inside. That Lily is looking in the window from the outside conveys where she is positioned as an artist, vis-à-vis family life—on the outside, looking in. On different sides of the pane of glass, one lives, and the other represents that living.

Later, in the third section of the novel, Lily and Mrs. Ramsay engage in a kind of slippage similar to that in “Sympathy.” Lily has returned to the seaside cottage for a visit with the family years after Mrs. Ramsay’s death, and she wants to focus on finishing the painting she had started when she was there before. It is here that Lily tries on the role of Mrs. Ramsay as the domestic woman at the window.¹⁴⁹ She stands looking out Mrs. Ramsay’s window as she works to get the scene perfect in her mind in order to complete her painting. But, she is also faced with a romantic opportunity with Mr. Ramsay, a sense that he may want to marry her, or at least exact emotional comfort. She feels Mr. Ramsay bearing down on her, demanding sympathy and connection, and she considers whether she can imitate from images she has seen the glow and rapture of a woman in love.

But whereas Mrs. Ramsay enjoyed and fully owned her power as an image, Lily loathes it; she hates it when people look at her. During the visit, when she realizes that Mr. Ramsay is looking at her, she does everything she can to escape his eyes and ultimately turns her back to the window so that Mr. Ramsay cannot see her. It is a decisive moment clearly resonant of her decision not to give in to Mr. Ramsay’s needs and interests. Lily’s choice to turn her back on the window, that is, corresponds with her choice to turn her back to domesticity, to the traditional role of the woman, and all that

¹⁴⁹ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 201.

comes with it. Lily chooses, once and for all, to be an image-maker instead of an image-made—something Woolf presents as an either/or proposition for this woman artist, for when Lily is with Mr. Ramsay, she feels her art is directly impeded; she has difficulty seeing her vision.

Instead of Lily's direct replacement of Mrs. Ramsay, unity between the domestic woman and the woman artist at the window comes through art itself. As Lily struggles to finish her painting in the final pages of the novel, she calls up an image of Mrs. Ramsay on the beach and reflects upon her singular ability to bring everything into harmony: "Mrs. Ramsay making of the moment something permanent (as in another sphere Lily herself tried to make of the moment something permanent)—this was the nature of a revelation. In the midst of chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing . . . was struck into stability. Life stand still here, Mrs. Ramsay said. 'Mrs. Ramsay! Mrs. Ramsay!' she repeated. She owed it all to her."¹⁵⁰ Here, Woolf directly likens the work of the domestic woman to the work of the artist. Where the domestic woman at the window is the center around which work, life, and family circulate, the artist creates a permanent object that represents this figure, in an attempt to convey the mystery, the reality behind the image and to create a representation that is whole and unified.

Through this correspondence, Woolf validates Mrs. Ramsay's achievement in forming something important, stable, and unified in the social harmony that she creates as a wife and mother. And, she emphasizes that for Lily as an artist, the image of the woman at the window represents not only what she will never have as a single woman artist, but also what she must stay in touch with to be successful at representing "life" in her work. Lily must stay connected to the domestic woman, must understand this iconic

¹⁵⁰ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 161.

figure who is genuinely significant not only to her family, but because of what she represents to the larger society. Lily needs Mrs. Ramsay to make her work full; and Lily duly credits Mrs. Ramsay for this: “she owed it all to her.”¹⁵¹

More globally, I believe Lily’s revelation reflects Woolf’s attempt to authenticate the way of life of both her mother’s generation and her own.¹⁵² The novel poses the question: how can one validate and even sanctify the lives and contributions of traditional women throughout history, while suggesting that women must have the right to move beyond these roles? And, the novel offers the quandary—the very women who work to uncover and validate “women’s history” through art (or scholarship, Levy might add) must make, in their own lives, choices that run counter to those of the women they wish to validate. In *Lily*, we see this tension play out and begin to see the possibility of resolution. Lily has the freedom to choose a different path, but finds that she must remain attached to the domestic sphere, to women of a past generation. Mrs. Ramsay becomes as vitally important to Lily’s art as she is to the lives of her children and husband. The traditional home and the domestic woman—both still very much social realities during Woolf’s era, and even, to a lesser degree, during our own—are still vitally important for Lily as an artist. Woolf succeeds here in redeeming and giving voice and validation to traditional women of the past, the notorious Angels of the House,¹⁵³ *and also* silencing their hold on modern women.

¹⁵¹ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 161.

¹⁵² I don’t think the upshot of the novel bears out the narrowly feminist argument that traditional roles for women are bad, independence and “progressive” choices are good. Mrs. Ramsay has far more power over other individuals than Lily; she is more self-assured, more comfortable with herself, more certain of her choices, more happy even. Her life is full of relationships, networks, and responsibilities that she treasures and in which she shines.

¹⁵³ We see this tension in Woolf’s confession that after the deaths of her mother and her sister Stella, there lingered this feeling that, “haunted by great ghosts, we insisted that to be like mother, or like Stella, was to achieve the height of human perfection.” Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being* 53. Later, when Woolf writes

Benjamin's notion of awakening fully resonates here. He writes that, "We have to wake up from the existence of our parents. In this awakening, we have to give an account of the nearness of that existence."¹⁵⁴ For Benjamin, moving forward necessitates looking back. Woolf's corollary is that progress for women doesn't have to entail disrespect for the work of women who came before—and in fact, must involve fully reckoning with the reality and the value of their contributions, as well as their shortcomings. While Woolf dramatizes Lily's personal process of waking up from Mrs. Ramsay—recognizing both her power and her own ability to be separate from her—she also demonstrates how near she and her worldview are, how central she is to the woman artist.

Exploring the present through the past, Woolf enables us to understand the modern version of this figure through her foremother. We might also say that, in the process, Woolf traces the lineage of the modern woman writer at her urban window to the domestic matron at the country window. While in my early plans for this project, I intended to focus on the urban window watcher, it became clear to me upon re-reading *To the Lighthouse* that this is the text through which Woolf most fully addresses this figure. Almost invariably in Woolf's work, it is a young, thoughtful, intellectual, urban woman who is staged at the window. Why explore the image most deeply with a domestic matron at a seaside window? I believe Woolf is implicitly drawing a thread of connection between this earlier figure and the more urban, contemporary figures she explores, revealing connections between women of yesterday and those of today. On a

in "Professions for Women" that if she had not killed the Angel in the House, the Angel would have killed her, we can read this not as a disavowal for the role and significance of the Angel, but of the difficulty Woolf faced in making life choices different from those of her mother and women of her mother's generation.

¹⁵⁴ Benjamin 908.

biographical level, I also think it is fair to speculate that the image of her own mother at the window is a key source of Woolf's collection of window images across the span of her career—her collection evidences her attempt to demystify the power and import of an image that captivated her own attention as a child and that resonates with her own material experience as a woman writer.

Woolf's dialectical intent, quite distinct from Benjamin's, is not to demythologize the past through collection or analysis of the object, but to reinvigorate both the past and the object itself. By linking Mrs. Ramsay's image with Lily's, she aims to rejuvenate the symbolic content of history's woman at the window and to keep the image alive—to give it even more symbolic and material meaning as part of her project of recording women's everyday history. Woolf's efforts to bind the domestic foremother to the modern woman artist stands in stark contrast to Wharton's insistence on the rift between the woman at the window of yesterday (Mrs. Peniston) and the modern woman of today (Lily)—a comparison that is heightened by the fact that it has been argued that Mrs. Peniston is an embodiment of Wharton's own mother.¹⁵⁵

In validating Mrs. Ramsay while demonstrating that Lily can be right in choosing another path, Woolf also forecasts much later developments in feminism, which refuse to argue that “in” or “out” of the house is best for women, wives, and mothers, and claim instead that different choices work better for different individuals, and that every choice comes with a cost. None is a paragon. Woolf looks to the threshold of the window for the possibility of having the best of both worlds, though even so, synthesis comes in bits, pieces, and isolated moments—flashes of lightning, as it were.

¹⁵⁵ See Cynthia Wolff, *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton* (New York: Oxford University Press) 34.

* * * *

Using the window and the arcade, as spaces that literally and figuratively bridge key divides, my analysis of Woolf and Benjamin works to move beyond parallel narratives of the interior and the street—of awakening, as Benjamin would have it from the nineteenth century, from the spell of the *flâneur* and the street-centrist modernist culture that have gripped the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and have elided a full recognition of the supreme value placed on fluidity, synthesis between spatial-social oppositions, and a transformed interior in the culture of modernity. By forging a site for productive encounter between interior and street, Woolf and Benjamin trouble the very grounds of value on which many of their contemporaries think it means to write of modernity.

Throughout the personal and public writings of both of these figures, we see everywhere a drive toward combining oppositions, eliding fractures, and overcoming tensions. The drive for unity emerges through Benjamin's and Woolf's attempt to eliminate the distinctions between interior and exterior, to bring the aesthetic in relation to the social, to bring the past into collision with the present through the dialectical image, to merge a high-modernist aesthetic form of writing with serious political rhetoric and history or personal essay, to inculcate the intensely personal and individual writing process into a historical-political text, to render the text as both a private act and a public product.

Instead of accepting the tensions they envision in art and life, they attempt in their writing to force them to cohere, to combine. We see a refusal by both writers to sacrifice, to give anything up. In an attempt to have it all, they define a site/object/image where

that is possible. Like Wharton, they decline the compromises for which Levy settles. Woolf's and Benjamin's shared fantasy of unity of and fluidity between aesthetic and social, interior and exterior, though itself a distinctive response in the modernist era, then, nonetheless belongs at the height of modernism as part of the collective desire to stay the fragmentation, alienation, and division that modernist writers lament—and that later postmoderns, such as Djuna Barnes and Nathanael West, will accept as inevitable.

Epilogue

**Postmodern Windows: West, Barnes, Morrison and
the Quandary of Spatial Partition**

A 2008 editor's note in *Urbanite*, a Baltimore monthly that scrutinizes and celebrates local urban life, reflects how the window image is alive and well in both a material and metaphorical sense. David Dudley expresses his frustration about the "step loiterers" outside his home making noise as he tries to write, signifying "an unbearable violation of the thin line between street and house." But Dudley comes to understand the "proper historical relationship between rowhouse and city": "Instead of retreating from the living room or shooing the kids away, I should have planted a big fat armchair in front of the window and surveyed the streetlife from behind a painted screen, which renders the occupant all but invisible to passersby. Keeping an eye on the community to which you belong is not only a foundation principle of a healthy neighborhood, it's a sociologically correct way of realigning the watcher and the watched."¹ Dudley's contemporary window is both a space for the writer and one for active social engagement. Resurrecting the painted screen,² a popular and nearly forgotten fixture in

¹ David Dudley, "Editor's Note" in *Urbanite* (Baltimore: April 2008) 19.

² Present-day screen painter Dee Herget explains, "Long considered an indigenous form of folk art, the first screens were painted in 1913 by William Oktavek, an immigrant Czechoslovakian artist and grocer. Concerned about his wilting outdoor produce display during Baltimore's infamous hot and humid summer days, Oktavek moved his fruits and vegetables inside and painted pictures of his merchandise on the outside of his store screens to show the public what was sold inside. His customers immediately noticed that they could not see inside the store from the outside during the day, but once inside, as they looked out,

Baltimore rowhomes in the 1920s through the 1940s, Dudley reminds us of both of the material significance of the window for the urban dweller—it's not just an inert architectural feature—and how the window continues to drive us back to the past. More than ever, today, the window is a difficult space to talk about without calling on history—it is a site where the past is in force, constantly presenting itself. At the end of the piece, Dudley shifts to the metaphorical as he describes the content of this month's issue: "We'll offer glimpses into private homes, take stock of new public buildings, and generally roam the region in search of compelling human environments . . . Think of it as another opportunity to peer through your neighbors' windows, from the privacy of your own home."³

Dudley's language in this piece, so resonant of that in modernist literature, establishes the window as an object that maintains its cultural caché today. As Henri Lefebvre aptly points out in *Rhythmanalysis*, the window remains relevant and continues to provide both a real and metaphorical meaning that writers return to: "Could it be that the lessons of the street are exhausted, outdated, and likewise the teachings of the window? Certainly not. They perpetuate themselves by renewing themselves. The window overlooking the street is not a mental place, where the inner gaze follows

it was as if there was nothing on the screen at all. A few days later, one of this regulars came to him with a picture from a calendar and she asked him to reproduce that picture onto her window screens. She had also noticed that she couldn't see through the painted screen into the store and she wanted her screens painted to keep the 'bums' that hung out on the nearby corner from looking in. So he painted the windmill from her calendar onto her screens and soon the entire neighborhood had him painting their screens as well. The painted screens provided a nice decorative picture for the rowhouse dweller, and, more important, they furnished daytime privacy when the shades were up or the curtains pulled back. 'You can see out, but nobody can see in' became the catch-phrase that was heard all over the city. That's the main reason painted screens are still so popular—the unobtrusive privacy they afford. Painted screens soon spread like wildfire throughout the city. A new fad was born that developed into a tradition that still survives. You could always find someone painting screens every few blocks during their heyday from the 1920s to the 1940s. But after World War II, mostly due to the invention of air-conditioning and the rising suburban exodus, the folk art fell into decline." <http://www.screenpainter.com/index.html>

³ Dudley 19.

abstract perspectives: a practical space, private and concrete, the window offers views that are more than spectacles; mentally prolonged spaces.”⁴ Lefebvre articulates the ways in which the “teachings” of the window continuously regenerate and touches on the ways in which the space uniquely melds the mental thought process with the material view. Of course we might question whether Dudley’s reference to the window really meets the standards that Lefebvre sets by providing a renewed meaning to the window. Dudley’s language surrounding the window is as familiar—even clichéd—as it is apparently irresistible.

But in the mix with familiar contemporary reappearances of the window, postmodernity produces writers who *do* reinvent the meaning of this space, who grapple with it as an entity in a specific time and place, drawing on the past while relaying its rich and uniquely local significance in their own era. The 1930s New York novels of Nathanael West (*Miss Lonelyhearts*) and Djuna Barnes (*Nightwood*), for example, turn to the woman at the window as part of their attempt to reconstitute boundaries between interior and exterior in line with an emerging postmodernism.⁵ Within the social worlds of West’s and Barnes’ texts, the modernist illusion of the possibility of visual-spatial fluidity between inside and outside is rejected in favor of a sober acceptance of the division in conjunction with a recognition of the inevitability of having to choose sides. Gendered roles and spaces are complicated as we move toward the mid-twentieth century.

⁴ Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life* (London: Continuum, 2004) 33.

⁵ This period could also accurately be called “late modernist,” as West and Barnes are right on the precipice of postmodernism and can be claimed by either group. I prefer “postmodern” because it highlights the ways in which these writers are leaning towards a more conclusive sense of division and despair than what we commonly see in modernist texts, but which is characteristic of the postmodern. Either way, these writers are clearly transitional between the two periods.

A postmodern version of the woman writer at the window, “Miss Lonelyhearts” is the pen name of West’s male protagonist, a New York newspaper advice columnist whose story we follow for several weeks as he searches for personal meaning and purpose amidst the despair and sickness reflected in the letters he receives and the reality he experiences. In the novel, West rejects the detached view from the interior, denying both Levy’s sense of the window as a tolerable substitute for the view from the street and Woolf’s relative equation of the two perspectives. Miss Lonelyhearts is several times depicted as writing or thinking at the window, which serves as a space of confrontation between the “false,” ordered world that he sometimes craves and the “true,” disordered world that he feels he must confront. West writes, “Miss Lonelyhearts found himself developing an almost insane sensitiveness to order. Everything had to form a pattern: the shoes under the bed, the ties in the holder, the pencils on the table. When he looked out of a window, he composed the skyline by balancing one building against another. If a bird flew across this arrangement, he closed his eyes angrily until it was gone.”⁶ Miss Lonelyhearts’ obsession with order in his personal life is a response to the disorder of the social world, in which he is constantly confronted with suffering and “overwhelmed by the desire to help.”⁷ Rather than providing a safe and comfortable means of viewing the disorder on the street, the window is so uncomfortable for Miss Lonelyhearts precisely because it is a vantage at which he is simultaneously detached from disorder (inside the private home) and acutely aware of it.

Turning his back to the window altogether is not an option. While Miss Lonelyhearts is unnerved by the disorder on the street, West indicates that the domestic is

⁶ Nathanael West, *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933; New York: New Directions, 1969)10.

⁷ West 39.

in no sense a space of happy retreat or genuine order for the thoughtful and compassionate individual. Unlike Wharton's rejection of the window as part of an attempt to locate a home for her heroine and enable her to move fluidly between interior and street, West rejects the window alongside the domestic interior itself as providing insufficient balance between the oppositions of modern life. For West, the street may be a disturbing place where "chaos [is] multiple," but a life lived on the interior implies cowardice and social indifference.⁸ He ponders domesticity as a possible solution to his inner ills: "He stood quietly against a wall, trying not to see or hear. Then he remembered [his girlfriend] Betty. She had often made him feel that when she straightened his tie, she straightened much more. And he had once thought that if her world were larger, were *the* world, she might order it as finally as the objects on her dressing table." But thoughts of his sometimes girlfriend cannot pacify him. "Her world was not the world and could never include the readers of his column. Her sureness was based on the power to limit experience arbitrarily. Moreover, his confusion was significant, while her order was not." After asking Betty to marry him, "they had planned their life after marriage, his job and her gingham apron, his slippers beside the fireplace and her ability to cook." But, realizing the domestic solution is impossible, albeit attractive, "he had avoided her since." "He did not feel guilty; he was merely annoyed at having been fooled into thinking that such a solution was possible."⁹ While Miss Lonelyhearts finds the interior alluring, he recognizes its limitations and also its false promises.

⁸ Objects get lost, spilled, and refuse to obey—"The collar buttons disappeared under the bed, the point of the pencil broke, the handle of the razor fell off, the window shade refused to stay down"—so he seeks refuge outside (West 11).

⁹ West 11-12.

Though *Miss Lonelyhearts* is deeply compassionate and idealistic, the moral world West proffers is one absent idealism. Balance among virtues is not possible here. To face social reality is misery, while to seek fulfillment in the domestic interior is both artificial and illusory. West refuses the possibility of an easy, fluid relationship between interior and exterior worlds, visually and experientially. His protagonist's conflict is in facing the inevitable negotiation of inside and outside—the private domestic world versus public life—while recognizing what he deems the philosophical incompatibility of these two spaces. Whereas for Levy and Woolf, the window enables a compromise, a positive sense of balance between the domestic interior and the world outside, for West, the window is instead a reminder of the differences between these spaces as well as their essential sameness—that neither can be satisfactory or meaningful.

In *Nightwood*, Barnes, too, casts off Woolf's vision of the possibility of visual-spatial fluidity, of moving between interior and exterior perspectives interchangeably. In contrast to West, who rejects the view from a classically feminine, safe, domestic interior for an ambiguously gendered, dissatisfactory role in the outside world, Barnes represents the dissatisfaction of women seeing from both sides of the window pane. By the time Barnes is writing, women have supposedly achieved the mobility those of Levy's generation pined for. Lovers Robin Vote and Nora Flood both move between inside and outside and negotiate a relation to each, but these relations are necessarily unsatisfactory; it's not the fluid, comfortable, idealized movement that Woolf envisions. Each chooses one space over the other as definitive and faces the loss of the other side. And there is no ideal, lingering in the distance, to aim for.

Robin is in many ways a Baudelairean wanderer; she haunts the streets at night, in and out of bars looking and longing for something that cannot be found. She cannot abide the domestic life, and motherhood becomes a foray so deep into this role that she abandons her child and any semblance of being the domestic woman. And yet, Robin longs more than anything for a home, the presence of which enables her to wander. On the flip side, Nora, a writer and Robin's key romantic interest in the novel, is defined by home. Nora is described in the novel as the "mother of mischief, running about, trying to get the world home," and indeed, in New York, she houses a home for the lost and rootless, and she moves to Paris to give Robin the home she craves.¹⁰ Though Nora has no longing for the street or the night, she clings miserably to a partner who is constitutionally bound to a life of wandering. Nora comes to spend her days either watching and waiting at home or wandering the streets in search of Robin, but hoping not to find her.

The window is often the intermediary in their relationship, indicating that there's always the presence of division, the feeling of separate spheres, and the difficulty of transcending some barrier. Nora comes to spend her time peering in and out of windows at night in search of Robin, "Looking at every couple as they passed, into every carriage and car, up to the lighted windows of the houses, trying to discover not Robin any longer, but traces of Robin." At home together, instead of engaging in private life, Nora looks out into the world that Robin will soon enter: "Looking out into the fading sun of the winter sky, against which a little tower rose just outside the bedroom window, Nora would tabulate by the sounds of Robin dressing the exact progress of her toilet; chimes of cosmetic bottles and cream jars . . ." Worse than these, Nora would spend the remainder

¹⁰ Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood* (New York: New Directions, 1984) 60-1.

of the night at home, sleepless, miserable: “At times she would get up and walk, to make something in her life outside more quickly over, to bring Robin back by the very velocity of the beating of her heart. And walking in vain, suddenly she would sit down on one of the circus chairs that stood by the long window overlooking the garden, bend forward, putting her hands between her legs, and begin to cry, ‘Oh, God! Oh, God! Oh, God!’”¹¹ While Nora attempts to cope with Robin’s absence by walking (notably, Barnes does not use “pacing,” but “walking,” which associates her actions with the urban wanderer), she ultimately settles herself by the classically feminine window to wait out the night.

Barnes calls attention to the typicality of Nora’s predicament in watching for Robin, as Doctor O’Connor points out to Nora how universal across the ages it is for women to be watching longingly out the window for their beloved: “Have you thought of all the doors that have shut at night and opened again? Of women who have looked about with lamps, like you, and who have scurried on fast feet? . . . and all the windows, great and small, from which love and fear have peered, shining and in tears. Put those windows end to end and it would be a casement that would reach around the world; and put those thousand eyes into one eye and you would have the night combed with the great blind searchlight of the heart.”¹² The doctor speaks to the universality of the experience of the woman waiting and watching at the window. He associates this space with feminine observation, longing, absence, love, and watching. Here, Barnes uses the woman at the window as a way to connect modern women with women of generations past and to highlight what is particular to her era—women achieving a life that fully embraces the street or the home, but finding this empty; women dispensing with the

¹¹ Barnes 61.

¹² Barnes 93. This passage is also resonant of Francis William Bourdillon’s “Night Has a Thousand Eyes.”

confines of the heterosexual romantic relationship, but unable to transcend age-old gendered roles and divisions.

The novel tells a wrenching love story, but it is also about the impossibility of transcending barriers, for women in particular. A key moment in the novel, when Nora's and Robin's eyes meet through the window at night, is emblematic of the dissatisfaction associated with both domestic and public life for the modern woman. Nora looks out into the garden one night from the window and sees Robin outside, her body pressed to that of another woman. "Robin's eyes and hers met. So they gazed at each other. . . . Nora saw the body of another woman swim up into the statue's obscurity, with head hung down, that the added eyes might not augment the illumination; her arms about Robin's neck, her body pressed to Robin's, her legs slackened in the hang of the embrace. . . . incapable of speech, experiencing a sensation of evil, complete and dismembering, Nora fell to her knees . . ." ¹³ Barnes places women on both sides of the window sill, but both are looking and longing for what they don't have, drawn to the "other." Deeply in love and yet impossibly divided, each woman turns her back on what she has to look toward what she has not. The window is here primarily a barrier, signifying a crucial separation between inside and outside, between the domestic, home-bound life and the life of wandering or the street. Far from affording opportunity, pleasure, or possibility, the window evokes a feeling of isolation, separation, and gendered division, emphasizing a pervasive sense of loss for women in both positions.

By the mid 1930s, then, we have largely moved beyond the ideals of separate spheres of the nineteenth century, beyond the modernist ideals of fluidity, to a resigned acceptance of inside/outside divisions, which is imperfect and unsatisfactory, especially

¹³ Barnes 64.

for women. We can see women moving from pining for what they don't have (mobility, proximity to street), to envisioning the possibility of having it both ways (life in the home and outside), to accepting that this balancing act is impossible but inevitable.

For a number of writers in postmodernity and beyond (including Barnes and West), the woman at the window comes to embody not only the recognition of the impossibility of an ideal relation of inside to outside but also the impossibility of an ideal artistic perspective. Returning to a moment in the modernist period, Toni Morrison's *Jazz* (1992) is a contemporary novel that looks back on the 1920s and functions as literary criticism of the era of its setting. Through *Jazz*, Morrison works to unearth the modernist image of the woman at the window, informed and buttressed by postmodern ideas about art, perspective, and observation. She returns to this figure much as I do and offers her analysis via fiction.

For Morrison, the woman at the window is merged with the writer and continues to address the aesthetic-social divide. Instead of arguing for the window writer's unique ability to combine aesthetic and social pursuits and balance the private with the public as Woolf and Levy do, Morrison focuses on the frailty of the writer, the weakness of her art and her life. The window-watching narrator laments, after realizing that she failed to be "right" in her observations about her characters: "I ought to get out of this place. Avoid the window; leave the hole I cut through the door to get in lives instead of having one of my own. It was loving the City that distracted me and gave me ideas. Made me think I could speak its loud voice and make that sound human. I missed the people altogether." She continues, "I was so sure, and they danced and walked all over me. Busy, they were, busy being original, complicated, changeable—human, I guess you'd say, while I was the

predictable one, confused in my solitude into arrogance, thinking my space, my view was the only one that was or that mattered. . . . I was watching the streets, thrilled by the buildings pressing and pressed by stone; so glad to be looking out and in on things I dismissed what went on in heart-pockets closed to me.”¹⁴ Here, Morrison draws on the historical figure of the city-loving modernist window-watcher, who became more captivated by the urban scene than the individuals who populated it. A career window watcher, the narrator is separated from life, writing about other peoples’ lives instead of living her own. This is the nagging anxiety that Levy occasionally expressed about spectatorship (as some of her characters scorned and feared being a looker-on at life, a mere spectator), the impetus for Forster’s and Wharton’s hostility toward the window, and the perspective that gave Woolf, in her reclusiveness, such comfort.

Morrison’s narrator recognizes not only the limits of her observations, but also her own vulnerability. Referring to the subjects of her observation, she despairs:

I thought I knew them and wasn’t worried that they didn’t really know about me. Now it’s clear why they contradicted me at every turn: they knew me all along. Out of the corners of their eyes they watched me. And when I was feeling most invisible, being tight-lipped, silent and unobservable, they were whispering about me to each other. They knew how little I could be counted on; how poorly, how shabbily my know-it-all self covered helplessness. That when I invented stories about them—and doing it seemed to me fine—I was completely in their hands, managed without mercy. I thought I’d hidden myself so well as I watched them through windows and doors, took every opportunity I had to follow them, to gossip about and fill their lives, and all the while they were watching me.¹⁵

The narrator realizes that while she was watching these people and inventing stories about them, they were also watching her through her window and have her figured out;

¹⁴ Toni Morrison, *Jazz* (New York: Penguin, 1993) 220-221.

¹⁵ Morrison 221.

though she has witnessed their actions, she has never truly understood their complexity, their motivations.

Through her narrator's biting self-consciousness, Morrison cuts to the heart of the limitations of the artist-observer. Where the classic Baudelairean figure believes that he can tell everything about a person through the look and that observation is the highest, most penetrating force, Morrison evidences a recognition that people may be more complicated than their external behavior and even their personal thoughts (stream of consciousness) suggest. Morrison fully embraces the anxiety Levy expressed a century before, that looking can be a dangerous substitute for living, while also representing a new vision of the highly self-conscious artist. The window appears as a place of weakness, cowardice, and indifference to life—though redemption comes softly in the last lines of *Jazz* when the narrator points out that book itself (which aims to engender love from the reader) is nonetheless the product of the writer's reclusive observational practices.

From Amy Levy in the 1880s to Morrison in 1990s, we find that the window remains an immensely rich metaphor and material site both for the writer and the reader. Unlike many notions of the nineteenth-century that the modernists discarded, this is an evocative image that the modernists kept from the Victorians and that postmodernists continue to take up. Because the window is both a metaphor and an everpresent fixture in daily life, it can remain rich and be subject to many different interpretations. As West, Barnes, and Morrison reveal, the narrative of what the woman at the window represents in the collective unconscious is one that will continue to evolve. No doubt, well into the future visual artists will continue to represent and remake the image as part of their

dialogue with the past. Writers will continue to grapple with this space as one that reflects what may become enduring conflicts between domestic and public, aesthetic and social, and the particular challenge of women to balance the same.

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