

Beginnings: Virginia Woolf's *Melymbrosia* and Rebecca West's *The Sentinel*

Kathryn Laing

“[I]f only one could begin things at the beginning, one might see more clearly upon what foundations they now rest” (*Melymbrosia* 39).

“A painstaking woman who wishes to treat of life as she finds it, and to give voice to some of the perplexities of her sex, in plain English, has no chance at all” (*LI* 381). Soon after she wrote those words in January 1909, Woolf began work on *Melymbrosia*, one of the many versions of her first novel that was finally published as *The Voyage Out*. In the same year, Rebecca West, ten years Woolf's junior, began her own first extended attempt at writing fiction, in which she too set out to explore the emotional, sexual and professional lives of young women. West never finished *The Sentinel*, a novel that focused on suffragette activism and sexual politics, although she returned to its themes and subject matter in another incomplete version, *Adela* and finally in *The Judge*, published in 1922. [1]

Melymbrosia/The Voyage Out [2] and *The Sentinel* mark the beginnings of writing lives and are about beginnings - the voyages of discovery and self-discovery of two young women, Rachel Vinrace and Adela Furnival, during the early part of the twentieth century. In Woolf's narratives, Rachel, overprotected by her aunts and father, uneducated and naïve, sets out on a voyage to a British Colony in South America. Rachel's aunt, Helen Ambrose, undertakes to educate Rachel, as do two young Cambridge men and a variety of passing voyagers. Rachel falls in love, becomes engaged and then, confounding conventional expectations of marital closure, becomes ill and dies. In *The Sentinel*, Adela's schoolgirl seduction comprises the shorter first half of the two-

part novel. In the second part, Adela, now ten years older, is based on many of West's suffragette heroines at the time, by studying to become a science teacher at Leeds University before embarking on life of self-sacrifice and dedication as a suffragette. Adela's political and sexual education through feminist activism, is furthered through experiences of torture and imprisonment. The possibilities of a romance narrative are introduced and then thwarted in *The Sentinel*, with Adela refusing to admit her love for a socialist MP, and the novel is abandoned without any resolution of its conflicts between feminist self-sacrifice and romance.[3]

Both novels present, in widely divergent and yet uncannily similar ways, the possibilities for and constraints on a young middle class woman growing up at the-turn-of-the-twentieth century. On one level, these novels inhabit different ends of a spectrum of opportunities for this kind of heroine. Adela is much more of a "New Woman" than Rachel, who does not know that she wants to be a New Woman until her "voyage" is well underway. Adela is the creation of a young and passionately involved feminist and socialist, whose rebelliousness and impulsiveness is reflected in the unevenness of the writing and its overt challenges to literary and social conventions. Rachel is shaped and reshaped by a more mature writer who has reservations about "movements" of any kind and who has high hopes for herself and her work, believing that she might be able to "reform the novel and capture multitudes of things at present fugitive, enclose the whole, and shape infinite strange shapes" (*L I* 356).

From the perspective of feminist genetic criticism,[4] both *Melymbrosia* and *The Sentinel*, as early versions of novels published many years later, have much to tell about the development of Woolf and West as writers and feminists, and about the writers they

were to become. A full comparison of the transformations of *The Sentinel* into *The Judge* and *Melymbrosia* into *The Voyage Out* has even more to tell, but only a selective sample of these comparative, even dialogic possibilities, can be given here. Read together, Woolf's and West's first attempts at novel writing resemble a kind of conversation, a series of convergences and intersections between two young apprentice writers then unknown to each other. *Melymbrosia* has been seen by some feminist textual critics as the repressed, censored version of Woolf's final published version, *The Voyage Out*. [5] *The Sentinel*, as the work of a younger and more extrovert writer, creates another layer, giving voice to what sometimes lies submerged in the early and final versions of Woolf's texts - "the skeleton beneath" (TVO 12). It is on some of these intersections and their submerged, skeleton themes [6] that I wish to concentrate: the mutual preoccupation with awakenings in the novels in relation to reading; the theme of prostitution and death; and images of the sleeping woman.

Susan Stanford Friedman has shown how "the narrative of *The Voyage Out* is fundamentally pedagogical, motivated by the protagonist's education into the ways of the adult world," and how "[reading] functions in the novel as a trope for education" (Friedman, "Virginia Woolf's Pedagogical Scenes of Reading" 101). Adela in *The Sentinel* is also characterized by her reading. In fact, the reading programme on which Rachel and Adela embark provides specific insights into the making of the modernist/feminist/socialist thinkers and writers that Woolf and West were to become. In the first part of the novel the schoolgirl, Adela, is portrayed as a disgruntled reader of popular fiction in need of new and stimulating material. Joining the women's militant movement in her mid twenties initiates her into a new world of politics, socialism and

feminism, feminist activism and campaigning, and it also introduces her to new and exciting texts – Nietzsche, William Morris and George Bernard Shaw. Reading contributes to the process of enlightenment of the two young heroines, whose journey of self-discovery in the *bildungsroman* mode that both writers adopt and try to adapt, consists of a series of awakenings.

One of the key moments of awakening in both texts relates to sexuality and sexual desire – Richard Dalloway suddenly kissing Rachel and Adela’s schoolgirl seduction by Neville Ashcroft, the architect working for her aunt. In both novels the women’s sexual initiation and their awareness of the consequences of their own sexuality are connected directly with reading: “‘How jolly to meet again,’ said Richard. ‘It seems an age. *Cowper’s Letters?* ... *Bach?* ... *Wuthering Heights?*’” (75). Soon Richard Dalloway is prescribing Burke to Rachel before seizing and kissing her passionately in *The Voyage Out*. In the more explicit *Sentinel*, Adela’s youth, “exquisite with the perfume of awakening sex” (17-18), affects not only the decadent Neville Ashcroft who later seduces her, but also her cousin’s fiancée, who, on the pretext of borrowing an encyclopaedia, clearly has other things in mind. The descriptions of Richard Dalloway’s and Neville Ashcroft’s overwhelming attraction to the young and innocent heroines suggests a common source too – the popular romance, the sensation and gothic novel. [7] “‘You tempt me,’ [Richard] said. The tone of his voice was terrifying. He seemed choked in fight. They were both trembling” (TVO 76) and in *The Sentinel* “‘But – be careful, be careful, Adela! You’ve got a power over me, you’ve got a power –“ They both swayed, both helpless –” (18). These moments of awakening for the heroines at an early stage in both novels, connected to fiction and the reading of fiction in various ways, also haunt

the remainder of the narratives – Rachel has nightmares whereas Adela’s more clearly stated sexual confusion manifests itself in her refusal to commit herself later to the man she loves.

Of particular significance in these novels are the connections they make between the women’s growing awareness of sexual desire and the recognition of the meanings of prostitution. Rachel, after discussing Richard Dalloway’s kiss with her aunt Helen, has another realisation about the reasons for certain constraints in her life: “So that’s why I can’t walk alone!” By this new light she saw her life for the first time a creeping hedged-in thing, driven cautiously between high walls, here turned aside, there plunged in darkness, made dull and crippled for ever” (*TVO* 82). In *Melymbrosia* Woolf is more outspoken and Rachel more angry: “I’m furious to think that that’s at the bottom of everything. That’s why we can’t go about alone” (96), revealing, as Celia Marshik points out, how “Prostitutes are key to Rachel’s Bildungsroman because they encourage her to question the organization of social space around her” (859). [8] West’s text is even more overt about prostitution, fleshing out further Woolf’s “skeleton theme”. Following her seduction early in the novel, Adela describes herself as “the sentinel” who “should have guarded [her] citadel until the voice of the spirit told me to surrender. I obeyed a baser call” (23). That West gives her novel the same title highlights its centrality to the narrative. As a suffragette, Adela thinks back to this period and links her lost virginity specifically with her discovery of the nature of prostitution and its meaning for her own self-definition:

As a young girl she had pressed through the black dusk to the peril she did not know: even then she was more virgin in her ignorance than most women

inviolable. She was a girl of 18 before she discovered the meaning of the slim bodies that quivered in the shadow of the trees between the pools of lamplight, the meaning of those eyes, glazed with appeal, and the damp relaxed lips; before she discovered that the thing to which she had been allured by the sweetness of spring and the undivined treacheries of the body, was forced in its most brutal form, with no anodyne of physical passion, by the pangs of hunger and cold on soft, gentle women. [...] Her first year [at university] was blackened by hatred – hatred of the women who had chosen shameful life rather than death. Hatred of the men who forced women to this, hatred of the women of her own class who acquiesced in this, hatred of herself, the treacherous sentinel (52).

The shock that turns Rachel's dreams into nightmares becomes angry and passionate drama in West's novel, which affects the overall outcome of the novel. Adela is unable to resolve the conflicts that arise between some feminist doctrines of purity, her own sense of defilement and thus connection with women of ill repute, and her own very real desires. The theme and issue of prostitution is never far from the conversations and experiences of the suffragettes in this novel. While Evelyn Murgatroyd, the would-be social reformer in *The Voyage Out* wants to round up the women in Piccadilly and tell them not to be beastly (249), West presents a more compelling and indeed propagandistic image of the suffragette enterprise through Adela's intrepid companion Psyche Charteris who, in response to a discussion about shop girls and sexual exploitation declares "that's why men call us unsexed women – because we're going to take sex out of the markets!" (164).

Rachel learns mostly about prostitution through her reading in *The Voyage Out*: “Ibsen was succeeded by a novel such as *Mrs. Ambrose detested*, whose purpose was to distribute the guilt of a woman’s downfall upon the right shoulders” (127). The oblique allusion conceals a much fuller version that was not included in the published text – the story of “*Slopers Sal*.” [9] Adela actually encounters the prostitutes that haunt Rachel’s imagination during her experience in prison. The gruesome business of forcible feeding leaves Adela too weak, in the end, to clean up the resulting mess, so an imprisoned prostitute is forced to do so instead. Adela experiences revulsion, pity and a kind of self-revulsion: “yet the woman had a terrible and disturbing effect. Every time this type of defiled womanhood, of wasted material, of squandered humanity, approached her, she felt affected by loathing, pity, rage, remorse, a profound intellectual disturbance” (239).

In her discussion of *The Voyage Out*, Marshik suggests that “[b]ecause the novel’s setting resonates with tales of sex and death, and Rachel links her life so closely with that of prostitutes, it makes sense that she should fall ill shortly after the persecution of Mendoza [the prostitute frequenting the hotel] is reported” (863-864). Adela tries to resist this deadly identification by immersing herself instead in the women’s movement. But her devotion and self-sacrifice also carries the risk of death, once she begins the hunger strike. Feminist activism may or may not be, a way of escaping these deadly equations.

Woolf and West both literalize the theme of awakenings in their texts by reworking another contemporary representation of women. The image of the sleeping woman, both in fiction and in the visual arts, has consistently signified cultural preoccupations with the nature of femininity, evoking in particular the popular *Sleeping*

Beauty myth and its conventional pairing of an awakened princess and a happy ending.[10] But what Woolf and West do with this stock image is to try to rewrite it or reconfigure it, as they struggled to find a way in which to re-present their heroines. They subvert the fairytale image of the prince awakening the princess in a variety of ways in their novels. For example, a sleeping Rachel is depicted early on in the novel, but she is watched, not by a suitor but by Helen her aunt. In *Melymbrosia*, Woolf is typically more explicit about the significance of the moment: Rachel “looked like a victim dropped from the claws of some winged beast of prey. Helen thought her beautiful and unprotected. Sleep seemed to rob her of her weapons, and to expose what was covered when the eyes and lips were lively” (43). Helen feels pity when she sees Rachel’s vulnerability, ““Because you have suffered something in secret, and will have to suffer more’ she concluded” (43). The erotically charged encounter between Rachel and Helen later in the novel is not hinted at here, but West, in a similar reconfiguration, expands the possibilities of such a scene. Psyche Charteris, daughter of the leader of the militant woman’s movement (a thinly disguised Emmeline Pankhurst of course), amazes and intrigues Adela with her combination of child and “faery-like” features and fierce, warrior-like determination. Watching over the sleeping Psyche, stretched “sword-straight” in the moonlight, Adela is awakened, even aroused to an exulted understanding of what her feminist commitment means: “The aggressive act itself was a victory. The thought of her warlike future filled her with exultation; in the pleasing delirium of contented drowsiness she felt infinitely noble, heroic, picturesque, while the cool conscience of her mind recognised that in the harsh daylight her will would thrust her flinching body inch by inch to the brutality of this modern warfare” (166). Feminism

itself is eroticized in this scene, and Adela is awoken to its potential, not by a handsome prince but by a beautiful faery-warrior.

Adela is also depicted not only as gazing at a sleeping woman, but also the object of such a gaze. Exhausted by a full day campaigning, she is discovered by the socialist MP, Robert Langlad, collapsed in sleep over a pile of feminist literature. Like Helen watching Rachel, Langlad is touched by her vulnerability and inscrutability: “Disarmed by sleep of the protection her eyes and grave speech, her body was tragic. It confessed, it denounced, it appealed” (105). Langlad does not wake the sleeping Adela as convention would have it, but instead is awakened (in purple prose) in this moment to his own desire for Adela. West continues to present and simultaneously to refuse the sleeping beauty conventions, when Adela, ill and delirious after her experiences of hunger striking and forcible feeding, awakens enough to discover Langlad watching her, but she is unable to respond. “Adela screamed, seeing that she was sinking back into the waves of delirium. It seemed so cruel that, just at the one moment when her heart’s desire was given her, she should be reabsorbed into the greedy sea of her sickness” (243). West abandoned the novel before a conventional romance ending could be reached, perhaps because such an ending was no longer possible.

This melodramatic scene again opens a dialogue with Woolf’s novel where, at the end, Terence sits and watches over the semi-conscious and dying Rachel. Terence’s kiss does not revive Rachel - she barely stirs in *Melymbrosia*. “After a pause her eyes opened, first only the lower parts of the whites showed; then slowly the whole eye was revealed. She saw him for a moment distinctly” (332). The happily-ever-after plot of the traditional marriage novel is turned upside down, and instead perfect happiness is

achieved only in death. Woolf makes this point more explicitly in *The Voyage Out*: “So much the better – this was death. It was nothing; it was to cease to breathe. It was happiness, it was perfect happiness” (353).

The closure of Woolf’s first novel and its earlier version is perplexing and bewildering for readers, just as the incompleteness of *The Sentinel* is frustrating and tantalizing. Woolf resolves her narrative through Rachel’s death, West’s heroine survives, but incognito, to be resurrected unacknowledged in later fiction. But the complexities of these endings and non-endings mark another moment of intersection, further highlighting the conundrum for women writers who wished to treat life as they found it, giving voice to “some of the perplexities of their sex” (*LI* 381). Christine Froula suggests that “Genetic texts not only document the evolution of literary works through the stages of their compositional history but [...] emphasize their interdependence with historical conditions” (513). If we extend on this, then reading these early unpublished novels in dialogue begins to develop a composite historical and literary map, where the intersections expand and enrich our sense of the difficulties and achievements of these and other pioneering women writers at the turn of the last century.

Endnotes

My thanks to Julia Briggs whose suggestions when discussing ideas for this paper were invaluable, and for sending me the first chapter of her book *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life* before it was published. Thanks are also due to Alice Staveley for her acute observations and commentary.

[1] *The Sentinel* (which remained unknown until my discovery of the manuscript, its subsequent edition was published in 2002) is at once a separate and independent unfinished first novel, but it can also be read as the first version of these later works. See my forthcoming chapter, “Versions and Palimpsests: Rebecca West’s *The Sentinel*, *Adela* and *The Judge*” in *Rebecca West Today* edited by Bernard Schweizer.

[2] Based on other critics who have read *Melymbrosia* and *The Voyage Out* as a “composite, palimpsestic text” (Friedman, “The Return of the Repressed” 144), I will refer to these novels as separate texts where necessary and also as one composite text. “Once the construct of the palimpsestic work is in place, critics can begin to read within its parameters without necessarily distinguishing between the different versions. What was once perceived as the single, integral work—the published novel—becomes multiple, intertextual” (Silver 206). See also Christine Froula, “Out of the Chrysalis: Female Initiation and Female Authority in Virginia Woolf’s *The Voyage Out*,” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 5 (1986), for a similar approach.

[3] These are the bare bones of a much more complex narrative that tries to capture as fully as possible key events and issues of the time, including references to popular culture, British politics at home and abroad, militant feminism and much more.

[4] See Brenda Silver's helpful article on the impact on Woolf studies due to the availability of Woolf's manuscripts and the impact of "the intersection of textual editing and feminist practice," "Textual Criticism as Feminist Practice: Or Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf Part II."

[5] Questions about repression and self-censorship have come to the fore for many feminist textual critics, who have shown how revision in women's writing during the modern period often involved "a sometimes conscious, sometimes unconscious negotiation between the desire to speak and the need to repress what is forbidden in their narratives of modernity" (Friedman, "Spatialization, Narrative Theory, and Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*" 126). See Louise DeSalvo's interpretation of the revisions Woolf made in the introduction to her edition, *Melymbrosia: An Early Version of "The Voyage Out"* (New York: New York Public Library, 1982) and Elizabeth Heine's reading in "The Earlier *Voyage Out*: Virginia Woolf's First Novel," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 82 (Autumn 1979). Christine Froula offers a more positive reading of the cuts and changes Woolf made as she revised *Melymbrosia* into *The Voyage Out* in "Virginia Woolf's Portrait of the Artist" (524).

[6] See Julia Briggs' chapter on *The Voyage Out* in *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*, and David Bradshaw's discussion of Woolf's "skeleton themes" in "The socio-political vision of the novels" (192-196).

[7] One of the sources of Woolf's encounters with popular fiction and themes for women would have been her own mother. As Julia Briggs suggests, "one meaning of 'the voyage out' for Virginia derived from the kind of stories her mother had passed on to her

daughters, stories in which romance led to the long voyage of marriage,” from
“Beginning: *The Voyage Out*” (*Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*).

[8] See also Julia Briggs and David Bradshaw on the skeleton themes of prostitution in Woolf’s novels.

[9] “In Chapter 15 of the later typescript [of *The Voyage Out*], the novel is described at length, on the surface as much for its social as its sexual impact,” Elizabeth Heine, ed. *The Voyage Out* (436). This is the story of Slopers Sal.

[10] “The fairy tale of the sleeping beauty, [...], inevitably came to be seen as symbolic of woman in her virginal state of sleep—her state of suspended animation and, as it were, death in life. In late nineteenth-century art representations of the sleeping beauty proliferated” (Dijkstra 61-62). See Dijkstra also on the close associations between images of sleeping and dead women. Also Elisabeth Bronfen’s *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester UP, 1992).

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