Getting a Hold on Haddock: Virginia Woolf's Inks

by Ted Bishop

Figure 1: gall nuts and gum arabic, author photo.

I want to thank Elizabeth Willson-Gordon for inviting me, and the whole committee (Claire Battershill, Nicola Wilson) for their superb organization. It's wonderful to be back at the University of Reading, an institution that invests in archival research and chooses a Vice-Chancellor who writes with a fountain pen. Since I was last here my work has taken me in new directions, both literal and literary—to Texas, Italy, and James Joyce for *Riding with Rilke: Reflections on Motorcycles and Books*, from the ballpoints of Buenos Aires to Uzbekistan and the Quran for *The Social Life of Ink*—but both books open with an episode from my Virginia Woolf research. I was a young Virginia Woolf scholar working in the British Museum Library, and,

> I found myself reading a letter I had read in print dozens of times before. Anybody who works on Woolf practically knows it by heart, it's reprinted so often. It begins:
>
> > *Dearest, I want to tell you that you have given me complete happiness. No one could have done more than you have done. Please believe that. But I know that I shall never get over this: and I am wasting your life. It is this madness…*
>
> I felt a physical shock. I was holding Virginia Woolf's suicide note. I lost any bodily sense, felt I was spinning into a vortex, a connection that collapsed the intervening decades. This note wasn't a record of an event—this was the event itself.
>
> I turned the sheet over.

> There Leonard had written in green ink the date: 11/5/41. This detail set off an unexpected aftershock. I had seldom thought of him, of how he had had to wait twenty-one days before the body was found. Three long weeks, answering questions from *The Times*, taking calls from friends. Then a group of teenagers, throwing rocks at a log in the river, found it was not a log at all and dragged what was once Virginia Woolf ashore. (*Riding* 34–35)

The episode taught me about the impact of the material text, but what I hadn't considered was that I was responding to ink. Ink testifies to the presence of a body in a particular place at a particular time, a fact more vivid to us today in the non-space of the internet.

Woolf's was a life lived in ink (as are many of ours) yet ink is a substance so ubiquitous we don't see it, we see through it. I began my academic life immersed in Woolf's style, with no concern for the materialities of her texts. I spent hours transcribing the *Jacob's Room* manuscript but when Elizabeth Willson-Gordon asked me over coffee the other day about ink blots I couldn't remember any—I never looked *at* the ink. Yet Anthea Callen, writing about the Impressionist painters, insists, "Any work of art is determined first and foremost by the materials available to the artist, and by the artist's ability to manipulate those materials" (Ball 5). Today I want to consider the substrate of her work, the actual stuff it's made of. I'm going to talk about three kinds of ink that defined Woolf's life: (1) iron gall ink—the ink of official documents; (2) printers' ink, the ink of the Hogarth Press; and (3) writing ink, the ink in which she created.

[I pointed to the hammer, jars, and bags of material laid out on the table and warned the audience that in a few minutes they would be conscripted as ink-making apprentices.]

Iron-gall ink

On that August day in 1912 when Virginia married Leonard at the St. Pancras Registry office her transition from Steven to Woolf would have been consecrated in iron-gall ink. This was the ink used for birth, marriage, and death certificates, for house deeds and court documents. Iron-gall ink is the medium of history. The writers of the Dead Sea Scrolls wrote with it, Leonardo da Vinci drew with it, Bach composed in it, and Shakespeare punned on it (in *Twelfth Night* Sir Toby urges Sir Andrew, "Let there be gall enough in thy ink…" combining rancour and pigment), as would Virginia Woolf in *Orlando*. Gall nuts are not nuts, they are pathological growths, "vegetable antibodies," produced by oak trees in response to eggs laid by gall wasps in the soft tissue of the tree. For permanence there was nothing better than gall nut ink. Its virtue is that it does not sit on the surface, it reacts with the collagen in parchment or the cellulose in paper, forming a chemical bond, so that it cannot be altered. The dark side of this power to bond is that it can destroy what it seeks to preserve, leaving brown-haloed holes where once were musical notes, poetry, or deal-sealing signatures. This is because, if you don't have the proportions right, one by-product of the reactions between the iron sulphate and the tannic acid of the gall nuts is sulphuric acid (Bishop, *Ink* 245).

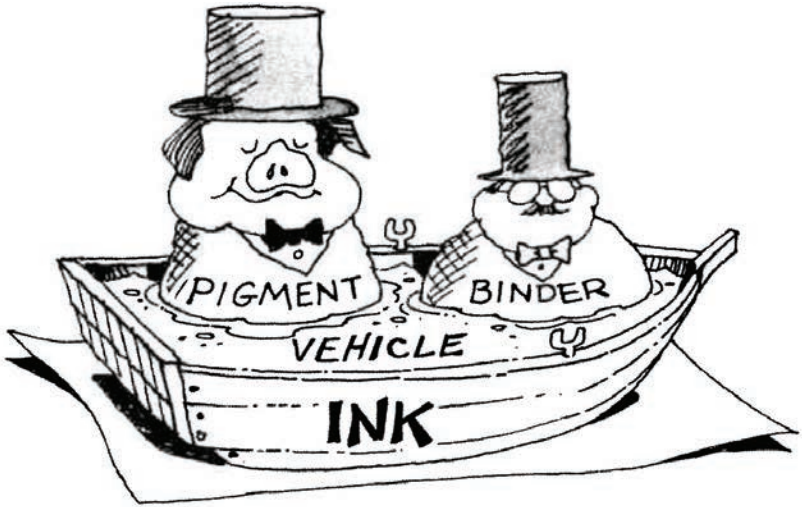


Figure 2: Ink ingredients, Cobb.

All ink is composed of three basic ingredients: a pigment to give it colour, a vehicle to make it flow, and a binder to make it stick. Up until the mid-nineteenth century, people made their own ink. It's very simple—"cottage science"—as a curator assured me.

[Here I announced that Elizabeth Willson-Gordon was going to crush the gall-nuts, and that audience members were going to grind them in the mortar and pestles (ten strokes each, then pass it on), then we would mix the powdered galls with gum arabic (the binder) and ferrous sulphate (which combines with the tannin of the gall nuts to make the pigment), and finally combine them with one of the four traditional vehicles: water, wine, vinegar, and beer. Elizabeth bashed the gall nuts in a folded-over section of the London Times, shaking the table and rattling the water glasses. "Is that good enough?" she asked. It was not. Gall nuts are as hard as walnut shells, and the smaller you can make the fragments with the hammer the less onerous the grinding with the pestle. She wacked them again.]

Printers' Ink

Iron gall ink registered the Woolf's marriage, but it was printers' ink that consolidated their union. As Hermione Lee says, "The story of the Press is, in a way, the story of their marriage….They instituted themselves as a couple on the title page of their first publication, two stories 'written and printed by Virginia Woolf and L.S. Woolf…and from then on (until 1938 [when John Lehmann became a partner]) their joint names became the sign of a marriage which was also an imprint" (362–63).

The two basic forms of ink—writing ink and printing ink—should have different names because they're as different as water is from syrup. Philip Ruxton calls printers' ink a "glutinous adhesive mass" (1), a description I like because the syllables move as slowly as a thick varnish oozing out of the jar: and it was this varnish that was the

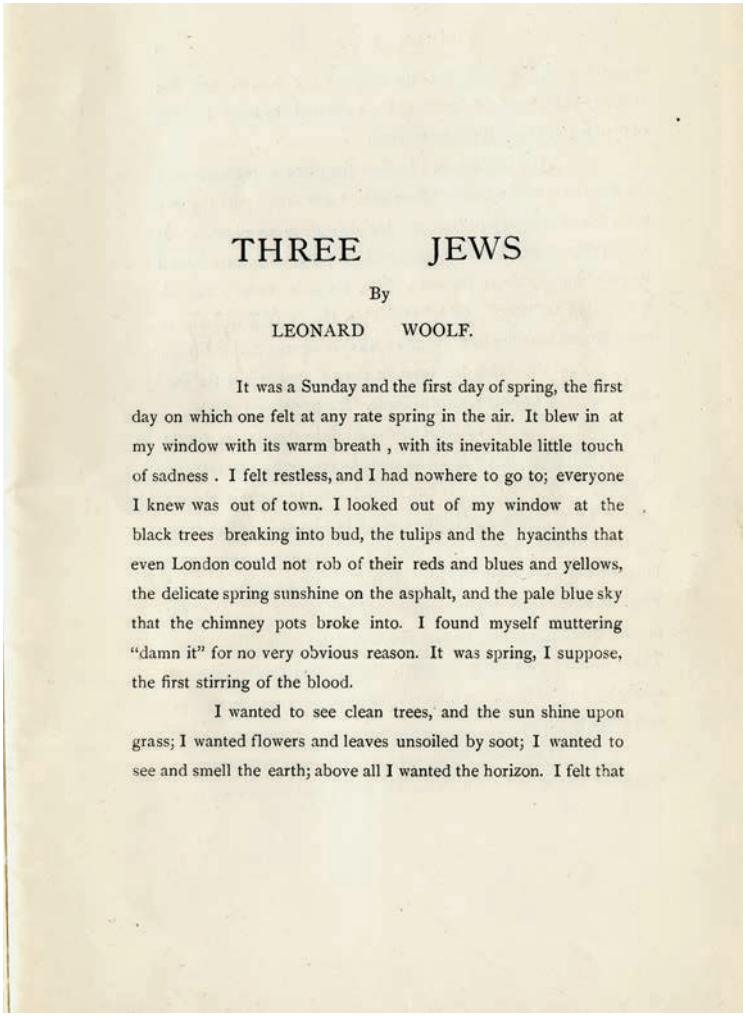
salient element in print technology. Every schoolchild knows that Johann Gutenberg revolutionized the Western world by inventing the printing press. But every schoolchild is wrong—printing presses had been in use long before, not only for block printing but, in Korea, with movable metal type. The real breakthrough was an ink that would spread evenly on and adhere to the type an ink that, unlike the thin water-based ink Asian ink, was oil based. Gutenberg boiled down linseed oil until it thickened (and often spontaneously combusted—in the years to come it would burn down printing houses, and may have started one of the great fires of London), a technique he learned from painters, who had developed the new medium of oil paint (Bishop, *Ink* 100).

[Here we passed around a can of goopy printers' ink with some thin plastic gloves so people could get a feel of it. The ink was supplied by Geoff Wyeth, who had given a fabulous typesetting tutorial the day before in the University of Reading's Printing Technology department—they have the Gutenberg press used in the BBC documentary with Stephen Fry, "The Machine That Made Us," as well as a table-top press similar to the one the Woolfs started out on.]

Figure 3: table-top press, University of Reading, author photo.

The Woolfs offer different motives for their purchase of the press—Leonard said it was to provide a calming diversion for Virginia / Virginia said she wanted something to drag Leonard away from the tiresome Webbs, who were consuming his time—but they were united in their enthusiasm. Virginia writes to Vanessa on 26 April 1917, "Our press arrived on Tuesday.…We get so absorbed we can't stop; I see that real printing will devour one's entire life" (*L*2 150). A month later her enthusiasm is unabated; she tells Vanessa "I can hardly tear myself away to go to London, or see anyone. We have just started printing Leonards story; I haven't produced mine yet, but there's nothing in writing compared

with printing" (*L*2 156). Three weeks later (now into June) she writes again to Vanessa, "We're half way through L's story—it gets ever so much quicker, and the fascination is something extreme" (*L*2 159). They are setting Leonard's "Three Jews" and still learning about spacing—note the gap-toothed title and the yawning paragraph indents:



THREE JEWS

By

LEONARD WOOLF.

It was a Sunday and the first day of spring, the first day on which one felt at any rate spring in the air. It blew in at my window with its warm breath , with its inevitable little touch of sadness . I felt restless, and I had nowhere to go to; everyone I knew was out of town. I looked out of my window at the black trees breaking into bud, the tulips and the hyacinths that even London could not rob of their reds and blues and yellows, the delicate spring sunshine on the asphalt, and the pale blue sky that the chimney pots broke into. I found myself muttering "damn it" for no very obvious reason. It was spring, I suppose, the first stirring of the blood.

I wanted to see clean trees, and the sun shine upon grass; I wanted flowers and leaves unsoiled by soot; I wanted to see and smell the earth; above all I wanted the horizon. I felt that

Figure 4: title page "Three Jews, " Image courtesy of Bruce Peel Special Collections, University of Alberta.

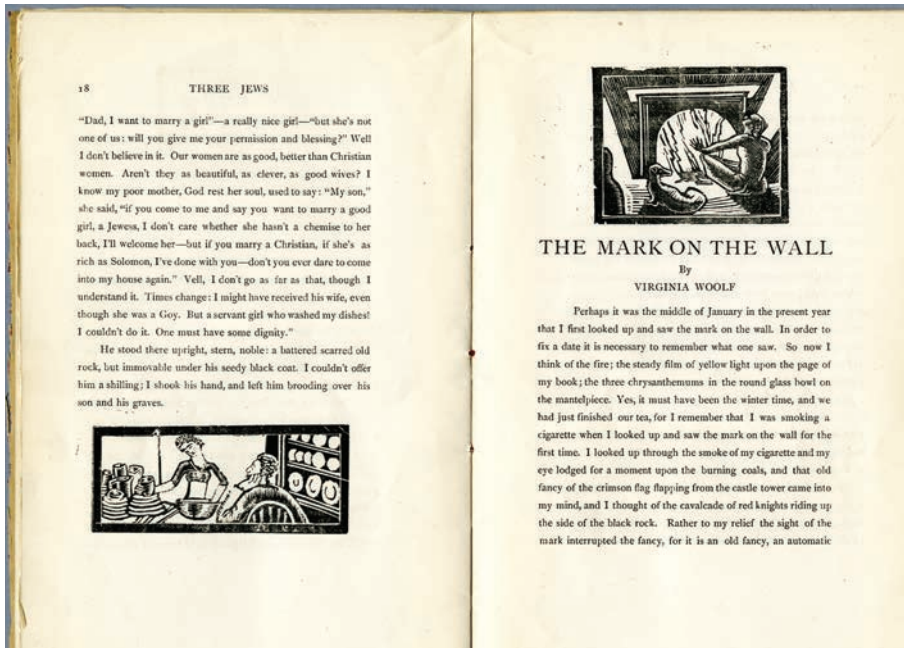
They're much better by the time they get to Virginia's story, but by this time the type for Leonard's story would have been "distributed"—put back in the cases. (We forget that even big publishers would not have enough type to set up a whole book before beginning to print). Leonard's hands shook, so Virginia did the type-setting, the distributing, and the binding. "In between each printing of a page…Virginia had to inkily distribute the type" (Lee 363).

And inky it was.

Leonard Woolf documented the steep learning curve of the seemingly simple act of transferring ink from type to page. "None of the letters printed completely black, there were tiny white dots everywhere" (172). After struggling with the page "for hours" he took a proof and walked into the shop of McDermott, the local printer.

> 'Wrong?' he said; 'it isn't on its feet, that's all; it isn't on its feet.' He explained to me that, in locking up type on the chase, you might get the whole page infinitesimally not flat on the imposing surface—it would be 'off its feet' and would not print evenly. (172)

They bonded over ink—it turned out that McDermott had worked for a large London printing firm that had printed *The Spectator*, and, Leonard writes, McDermott was "never tired of telling me stories of the editor, St. Loe Strachey, Lytton's cousin, and what a fuss he made about the 'colour'—i.e. the inking—of the paper; it had to be very black indeed, too black for McDermott's liking" (173). The encounter not only set the type on its feet but laid the foundation of a reciprocal friendship. Pressing on, they incorporated Carrington's woodcuts, and you can see that even if they're not perfectly centred they are good enough. Further, by this point the Woolfs have mastered the spacing: the paragraph indents, the spaces between the words of the title, and the space between the lines of the title (the "leading"), are all reduced, so that the whole coheres as a unit. Compare this page with the opening of "THREE JEWS."



18 THREE JEWS

"Dad, I want to marry a girl"—a really nice girl—"but she's not one of us: will you give me your permission and blessing?" Well I don't believe in it. Our women are as good, better than Christian women. Aren't they as beautiful, as clever, as good wives? I know my poor mother, God rest her soul, used to say: "My son," she said, "if you come to me and say you want to marry a good girl, a Jewess, I don't care whether she hasn't a chemise to her back, I'll welcome her—but if you marry a Christian, if she's as rich as Solomon, I've done with you—don't you ever dare to come into my house again." Vell, I don't go as far as that, though I understand it. Times change: I might have received his wife, even though she was a Goy. But a servant girl who washed my dishes! I couldn't do it. One must have some dignity."

He stood there upright, stern, noble: a battered scarred old rock, but immovable under his seedy black coat. I couldn't offer him a shilling; I shook his hand, and left him brooding over his son and his graves.

THE MARK ON THE WALL

By

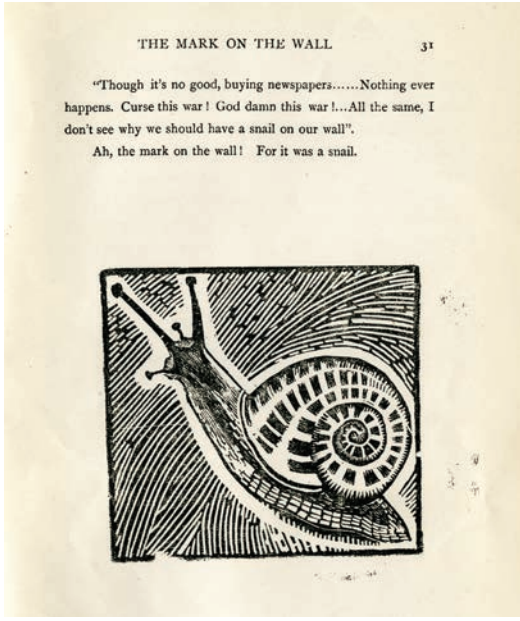
VIRGINIA WOOLF

Perhaps it was the middle of January in the present year that I first looked up and saw the mark on the wall. In order to fix a date it is necessary to remember what one saw. So now I think of the fire: the steady film of yellow light upon the page of my book; the three chrysanthemums in the round glass bowl on the mantelpiece. Yes, it must have been the winter time, and we had just finished our tea, for I remember that I was smoking a cigarette when I looked up and saw the mark on the wall for the first time. I looked up through the smoke of my cigarette and my eye lodged for a moment upon the burning coals, and that old fancy of the crimson flag flapping from the castle tower came into my mind, and I thought of the cavalcade of red knights riding up the side of the black rock. Rather to my relief the sight of the mark interrupted the fancy, for it is an old fancy, an automatic

Figure 5, title page of "The Mark on the Wall," Image courtesy of Bruce Peel Special Collections, University of Alberta.

Nonetheless, the work was still improvised. Woolf writes to Carrington in July,

> We like the wood cuts immensely.…The ones I like best are the servant girl and the plates, and the Snail" [see above, left, and below]. But there is a problem with the press and the ink: "Our difficulty is that the margins would mark; we bought a chisel, and chopped away, I am afraid rather spoiling one edge, but we came to the conclusion at last that the rollers scrape up the wood as they pass [you can see the rollers on the round plate in the photo of Reading's table-top press, Figure 3], as sometimes the impression would be clean to start with, and end with smudges. Next time we must have them cut exactly round the picture by a shop (*L*2 162).


THE MARK ON THE WALL 31

"Though it's no good, buying newspapers.....Nothing ever happens. Curse this war! God damn this war!...All the same, I don't see why we should have a snail on our wall".

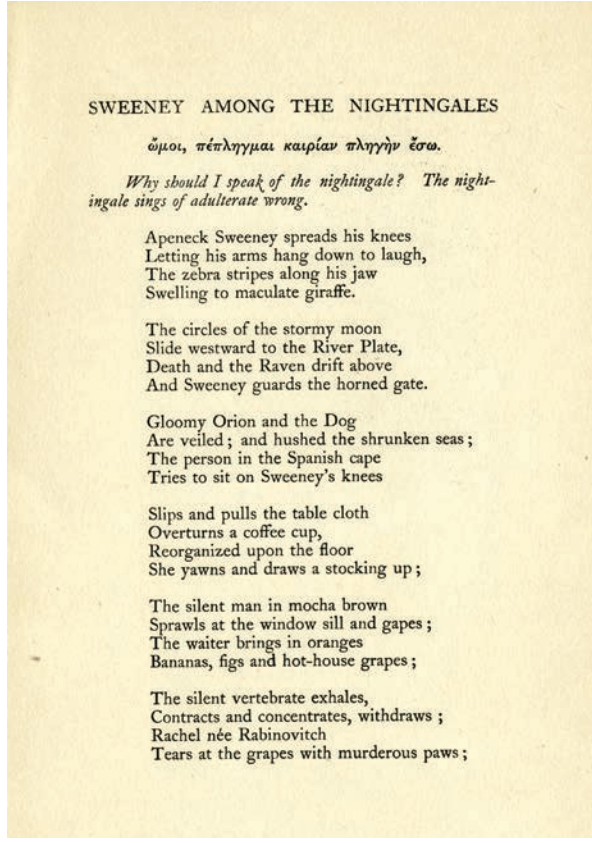
Ah, the mark on the wall! For it was a snail.

Figure 6: Carrington's snail, note the smudges, the chunks cut out of the frame; Image courtesy of Bruce Peel Special Collections, University of Alberta.

Published in July, *Two Stories* had taken them two and a half months. As Hermione Lee points out, to print 134 copies of each page of *Two Stories*, a 32-page booklet, would have involved a minimum of 4,154 pulls v.s. just over 1,000 had they been able to print four at a time, as they would three years later when they bought their Minerva treadle press (816).

"The Mark on the Wall" represents a new mark on the page for Woolf. The story, a fusion of inspiration, the materials of production, and physical labour, constitutes a shift from the more conventional Duckworth publications to the more experimental Hogarth works. "The Mark On the Wall" launches the style that would come to define Woolf, a mode called into being by the new press.

Through 1918 they struggled with the printing of Katherine Mansfield's *Prelude*, setting up the type at home and taking it down to McDermott's shop where they used his big machine to print four pages at a pass. The book took nine months, from early October to Halloween to July, as they worked through new problems with press and ink (the "colour" varies widely from page to page). McDermott had been a compositor, not a printer—an important professional (and class) distinction. Compositors worked in separate rooms from printers, and did not get their hands as dirty. Thus he did not really understand the new machine he had bought, and "he was a terribly impatient, slapdash worker," writes Leonard. He frequently found McDermott "covered with oil and ink, pouring with sweat, and pouring a stream of the most hair raising language over his bloody machine. When that happened, instead of machining *Prelude* I spent the next few hours helping him to tinker at his bloody machine until I too was covered with oil and ink and pouring with sweat" (174). By the spring of 1919 they had surpassed McDermott in craft. Virginia notes crisply, "Today we finished printing Eliot's poems—our best work so far by a long way, owing to the quality of the ink. McDermott has done Murry's poem with such blots & blurs that we must at any rate reprint the title page"(*D*1 257).



SWEENEY AMONG THE NIGHTINGALES

ὤμοι, πέπληγμαι καιρίαν πληγὴν ἔσω.

Why should I speak of the nightingale? The nightingale sings of adulterate wrong.

Apeneck Sweeney spreads his knees
Letting his arms hang down to laugh,
The zebra stripes along his jaw
Swelling to maculate giraffe.

The circles of the stormy moon
Slide westward to the River Plate,
Death and the Raven drift above
And Sweeney guards the horned gate.

Gloomy Orion and the Dog
Are veiled; and hushed the shrunken seas;
The person in the Spanish cape
Tries to sit on Sweeney's knees

Slips and pulls the table cloth
Overturns a coffee cup,
Reorganized upon the floor
She yawns and draws a stocking up;

The silent man in mocha brown
Sprawls at the window sill and gapes;
The waiter brings in oranges
Bananas, figs and hot-house grapes;

The silent vertebrate exhales,
Contracts and concentrates, withdraws;
Rachel née Rabinovitch
Tears at the grapes with murderous paws;

Figure 7: Eliot, 2 faces, 2 fonts; evenly inked; Image courtesy of Bruce Peel Special Collections, University of Alberta.

The Woolfs weren't "fine printers," but Woolf used that goop you're passing around; she had an appreciation for its "glutinous adhesive mass" and the way it brought prose and poetry into being on the page. They produced thirty-four handprinted books, and Woolf never lost her interest in printing.

In a brilliant vignette for the *New Yorker* Evelyn Irons (editor, future war correspondent, and the only one of Vita Sackville-West's lovers to leave her), tells of showing Leonard and Virginia around the press room of the London *Daily Mail* in 1932. Leonard has aggressive eyebrows but Virginia evokes "the moon in the daytime sky—ethereal, bone-pale," and Irons thinks, "You might as well show these clattering presses to a ghost" (115). However it is Leonard who is bored. Virginia first impresses a printer by reading a paragraph of the upside down type, and then quizzes a linotype operator with "such a stream of complex questions that the man stopped work to attend to the conversation…. both had to shout, because of the chattering of the other linotypes" (118). When they conclude, the operator does not give her the usual tour souvenir of a slug with her name on it, for, "This had been a talk between professionals." But they're still not done. Woolf pokes among the type, "the Caslon, Cameo, and Goudy Bold, asking how many points the most sensational headlines ran to (seventy-two)," and then plunges into the room where the plates corrode in acid baths. Woolf no longer seems "wan or moth like, delicate or remote" to Irons: "Her long slender fingers were smudged with black ink, and her behavior that of a mechanically minded man" (118). "'I want to see it all,'" says Woolf. "'I'm interested in exactly how things are done here.'"

Writing Ink

the erotics of the dip pen

But what about creation? From the first, the act of composing and the act of writing were inseparable for Woolf. In the summer of 1899, just seventeen, she writes, "My pen, I must add, is rather unwell at present.…I cannot write prettily when my pen scratches & all joy in the art is lost to me. I love writing for the sake of writing, but when my pen is enfeebled it becomes a task & bother to me" (*PA* 139). In the autumn of the same year she notes, "Tomorrow at this hour I shall be in my room in London!…I write this down to see if it looks any more credible in pen & ink" (*PA* 162). The entries anticipate her famous remark four decades later about how one gets a hold on haddock by writing it down; the capacity of ink to fix reality would be a lifelong preoccupation.

The Chinese still speak reverently of the Four Treasures of the Study—ink, inkstone, brush, and paper—a tradition utterly foreign in the Western habit of ballpoints and post-it notes, but Woolf had her four treasures: pen, ink, inkpot, and writing board. For Woolf's twenty-third birthday Violet Dickinson brought her "a huge china inkpot which holds almost a jar full of ink, & is rather too large to be practicable. I must cultivate a bold hand & a quill pen…" (*PA* 227). As we learn in *Orlando*, a book about writing, inkpots are not nugatory: "Memory is the seamstress, and a capricious one at that.…the most ordinary movement in the world, such as sitting down at a table and pulling the inkstand towards one, may agitate a thousand odd, disconnected fragments" (74). Proust has his madeleine to trigger memory, Woolf has her inkpot. Inking the pen, like a calligrapher grinding ink, is part of the creative process: "Thus it was

that Orlando, dipping his pen in the ink, saw the mocking face of the lost Princess and asked himself a million questions instantly which were as arrows dipped in gall…" (74). The "gall" is of course both bile and gallnut ink, and, given that the galls come from oaks, appropriate for a novel wound about a poem called "The Oak Tree."

That "dipping" is not innocent. He "…he approached the inkhorn, fingered the quill, and made other such passes as those addicted to this vice began their rites with" [73], an action prefigured by the "rather fat, rather shabby man" the young Orlando catches turning "his pen in his fingers, this way and that way." Gill Lowe in her insightful paper for this conference, "Penning and Pinning," links this to masturbation, and in fact Woolf had written to Vita Sackville-West about the genesis of the book: "[I]dipped my pen in the ink, and wrote these words, as if automatically, on a clean sheet: Orlando: A Biography. No sooner had I done this than my body was flooded with rapture, and my brain with ideas…" (*L*3 428). As Lowe says (citing John Irwin through Gilbert and Gubar), writing is an auto-erotic act, part of the whole scheme of pleasure that, as Orlando finds, surrounds the consumption and producton of words: "For once the disease of reading has laid hold upon the system it weakens it so that it falls an easy prey to that other scourge which dwells in the inkpot and festers in the quill. The wretch takes to writing" (71). Orlando takes to hiding himself "in the cupboard behind his mother's bedroom…an inkhorn in one hand, a pen in the other," at one point so worked up over Sasha that he "plunge[s] his quill so deep into the inkhorn that the ink spirted [sic] over the table" (72, 74). (Though the Hogarth Press had published *The Ego and the Id* in January of this year, we hardly need Sigmund Freud to gloss this. The perpetually saucy Jane Goldman stopped me in the hallway here to point out the most loaded double-entendre in a novel full of them: "The Queen had come" [21].)

Ink is suffused not just with the personal and the erotic but the social and the political, and Orlando discovers that "the transaction between a writer and the spirit of the age is one of infinite delicacy" (239). In the nineteenth century the "damp" permeates everything: "…it gets into the inkpot as it gets into the woodwork—sentences swelled, adjectives multiplied, lyrics became epics, and little trifles that had been essays a column long were now encyclopaedias in ten or twenty volumes" (207). More than that, it seems ink will not be controlled and the pen has a mind of its own: "Again she dipped her pen and off it went….Nothing more repulsive could be imagined than to feel the ink flowing thus in cascades of involuntary inspiration (214). She wonders, "What had happened to her?" It is what hasn't happened to her: she needs a wedding ring. Once that is in place and decorum assured, "she plunged her pen neck deep in the ink. To her enormous surprise, there was no explosion. She drew the nib out. It was wet, but not dripping. She wrote. The words were a little long in coming, but come they did" (238). Female rapture, brought under strictures but still possible.

Gill Lowe notes the clitoral pen and the unequivocal orgasmic associations, and indeed Vita would write to Virginia, "My (once) Virginia, You said I was a fool not to write to you when my pen wriggled to do so. Well, it wriggles now. I write from the pink tower, which you like" (VSW/VW 404. In writing to Vita even the paper is eroticized: "By the way (but this'll need a new sheet, and theyre double bed sheets, there, fit for Long Barn on a summer's night….)"; the postscript adds, "I have not the face to write another double bedded sheet. Do you really love me? Much? passionately not

reasonably?" (*L*3 569, 570). But the larger concern for Orlando is the intersection of, the negotiation between, the corporeal and the social. The writer cannot escape the zeitgeist, which threatens to spread the ink in spite of one's intentions, but s/he is also grounded in the body: Orlando discovers, "We write not with the fingers but with the whole person. The nerve which controls the pen winds itself about every fibre of our being, threads the heart, pierces the liver" (219).

the respectability of the fountain pen

The notion of pens writing on their own may seem fanciful, but we see it echoed in the *Diary*, voiced in her life-long aversion to fountain pens. As early as 1918 she writes, "The degradation of steel pens is such that after doing my best to clip & file one into shape, I have to take to a Waterman, profoundly though I distrust them, & disbelieve in the capacity to convey the nobler & profounder thoughts" (*D*1 207). It is only the dip pen that will convey life with precision. Here she is the next year: "Having smashed my ink pot, I have recourse to safety pots again & purple ink I see dwells in this one; but I can't use with any effect the muffled respectability of a fountain pen" (*D*1 250). Did the Duckworths use fountain pens? Because "muffled respectability" is what Woolf would be working beyond in her own prose.

Her vehicle would be a dip pen with a good nib: "Here I am experimenting with the parent of all pens—the black J. *the* pen, as I used to think it, along with other objects, as a child, because mother used it; & therefore all other pens were varieties & eccentricities" (*D*1 208). The terms can be confusing because although in later diary entries "pen" refers to the whole instrument, in the early twentieth century "pen" still referred to the nib, which was held in a pen holder. The J-pen referred to in this 1918 entry was a common nib, often black. She tried a fountain pen in 1922. "Perhaps the greatest revolution in my life is the change of nibs—no longer can I write legibly with my old blunt tree stump—people complained—But then the usual difficulties begin—what is to take its place? At the present moment I'm using Blackie [*a fountain pen*] against his nature, dipping him, that is to say. I should be reading the last immortal chapter of Ulysses…" By the end of the long entry she has switched back to a dip pen. "I am galloping on, astride a J pen now, not very compactly.…Yes, on looking at the pages, I think the balance is all in favour of a steel nib. Blackie too smooth; the old blunderbuses too elephantine. Look how neat this is" (*D*2 196–98). So the male fountain pen is rejected in favour of the J-pen, her mother's nib. "We think back through our mothers if we are women…," she writes in section four of *A Room of One's Own*, then returns to the line in section six and flips it: "…a woman writing thinks back through her mothers" (97). The thought was grounded in her practice—with the J-nib Woolf was both thinking and writing back through her mother.

When she was in her 50s she gave the fountain pen another try. She writes to Elizabeth Bowen the summer of 1934, "Excuse this illegible scrawl which I have now made all one blot, the result of writing lying down with what is called a fountain pen" (*L*5 303). A week later she wails to Ethel Smyth, "…how can you ever write with a fountain pen? This is fountain pen, now writing. Disgusting, slippery, false, yet convenient" (*L*5 304). She notes in her diary for 18 May: "I write this with a gold Waterman, & have some thoughts of supplanting steel Woolworth" (*D*4 220). We hear no more of

the Waterman, but on 6 July she records, "I went out and bought a pen with which I write, a Swan pen, on a broiling hot day…." Advertised as "thoroughly English," and a combination of "beauty and utility," a major feature was that you could change your nib for free as long as it was returned in perfect saleable condition.

Figure 8: Swan Pens.

But after less than a week she complains, "I don't like this pattern [?] any better I think; but no matter. L. says all Swans have soft snub noses. And this feels so but less taut.[?]" (*D*4 224). And ten days later she notes, "A new nib…I have just finished, the other pen continues, though very provisionally, the first truth telling chapter…." (*D*4 227), which suggests she has gone back to the dip pen, though she is perhaps still trying to use the Swan for "The Truth Tellers," which became "Phases of Fiction." By Christmas, however, the experiment is over. On 11 January 1935 she notes, "I have made a very clever arrangement on the new board that L. gave me for Christmas: ink, pen tray & c. I never cease to get pleasure from these clever arrangements" (*D*4 273). She would not need to have an ink bottle if she were using a fountain pen; we hear no more of the Swan.

Inks were important to Woolf, though she was not pretentious and would have scorned today's expensive designer inks (I hope some young paleographer will find receipts—perhaps in the Reading archives—that will tell us precisely what inks she used). She wrote to Dorothy Brett in 1923: "This ink is Waterman's fountain pen ink. Cheap, violet, indelible. (Which sounds as if I were paid to write their advertisements)" (*L*3 18). Lewis Carroll used purple ink because it was cheap and Christ Church Oxford gave it to faculty to mark student essays (see Reif). The medium was not only inseparable from the message but from the writer's identity: she entreats Edward Sackville-West, "But do write again in your verdant ink" (*L*3 459); she teases Vanessa Bell, "Dearest, You will be sickening of the sight of the Wolves purple ink…" (*L*3 497); she assures T. S. Eliot, "My dear Tom, I was very glad to see your pencil again…" (*L*3 203). In the last year of her life she wrote to Vita Sackville-West, "I must buy some shaded inks—lavenders, pinks violets—to shade my meaning. I see I gave you many wrong meanings, using only black ink. It was a joke—our drifting apart. It was serious, wishing you'd write….And one pang of wild jealousy seized me, inopportunely, dining at Sibyls. No, no, I must buy my coloured inks" (*L*6 461–62). Shades of ink, shades of meaning. Woolf might have liked Noodler's Red Black. Serious and formal with passion round the edges. She used purple printers' ink for "On Being Ill" and even saw it reflected in the natural world: "A violent storm—purple ink clouds—dissolving like blots of ink in water…" (*D*5 177). For Woolf ink was an aspect of meaning.

the rigidity of the typewriter:

So why didn't she type? She was a skilled typist, typing for others. When she was only fifteen she recorded in her diary, "I type wrote Dorothea's poems which arrived last night—very long, watery effusions, with which she is going to invade the magazines" (*PA* 111). In late January of 1914 while recovering from a breakdown she writes to Lytton Strachey, "to ask you whether you have any manuscripts that want type-writing. I should very much like to do them if you have, supposing that you are not in a great hurry and it would save you 10d. a 1000," and a week later, "I shall be delighted to do [type] Esmeralda—and anything else chaste or otherwise" (*L*2 38).

Typing was part of her own literary process from the outset. In 1905 she writes in her diary, "I finished the Note [for Fred Maitland's biography of Leslie Stephen], which fills 34 pages of hand writing: it is corrected for typing, which I must now do, & then I shall be better able to judge…."(*PA* 225). The pattern of writing with pen in the morning and then typing up that work, to assess with a cold eye, in the afternoon would stay with her all her life.

However, typing was not writing, even to friends. If she has to use the typewriter it's only as a last resort, and she apologizes through the decades:

to Ottoline Morrell, 25 September 1922: "Please excuse this hard faced typewriter—but my hand has given up making letters clearly" (*L*2 562);

to Dorothy Brett, 8 July 1933: "My dear Brettt, (forgive the typewriter which has already converted your name into another—but my hand is grown cursed and crabbed)" (*L*5 201);

to Mary Hutchinson, 10 February 1941: "I have been trying to write this letter in hand writing, but my hand is like the cramped claw of an aged fowl: so I turn to type. Please forgive. An odious habit" (*L*6 471).

> Quentin Bell receives her most eloquent diatribe against the machine:
>
> The truth is I cannot write on a typewriter; I make enemies whenever I do; ladies are insulted; gentle men furious: old friendships are broke off…. It is very odd how it rigidifies the mind; as if ones hands were half numb. This is the reason why instead of being ablaze with brilliance, wit, profundity, news, of every kind, it is flat as a charwoman's back. One cant correct, thats it. Also it pecks one along like a hen. (*L*3 507)

The mind and the hand are inseparable: if the one is numbed the other is rigidified, and brilliance reduced to hen pecks. And the typewriter is duplicitous, conniving, the mask of the erotic. She sneers in jealous pain at Vita's secretary Audrey le Bosquet "Le Boski writes to say how much she misses you. And then you pretend the woman is all typewriter within! all wires and ribbon, for writing your business letters on. No—Next month she will be flinging herself on your hearthrug" (*L*3 570).[1]

[Here I passed out the bag of gum arabic and asked the audience to add a chunk about as big as my thumbnail to the gall nuts. The crystals of gum arabic shatter easily and only needed a few strokes of grinding.]

haptics, space, and labour

Neuroscience supports Woolf's impressions. In "Digitizing literacy: reflections on the haptics of writing," Anne Mangen and Jean-Luc Velay, a pair of scientists from Norway and France, explore the physicality of writing with a pen rather than a keyboard. On a keyboard there's a "decoupling"—not only are you working with two hands, your attention is split into two distinct fields: the visual field of the screen and the motor field of the keyboard. With a pen you use one hand, and your visual attention is concentrated at the tip of the pen, where the ink flows. Also, unlike typing, with handwriting you have to produce a different graphic shape for each letter. So when writers talk of the "kinetic melody" of handwriting and the "visual melody" of the text, of the "sculptural pleasure" and the sense of "craft" that comes with using a pen, they may sound romantic or nostalgic, but they may be getting at something scientists are beginning to explore: the corporeal nature of knowledge (391).

Vivian Sobchack, in *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, goes further in documenting how the whole body is involved: "Unlike my upright posture at the typewriter or computer, when I wrote with pencil or pen, I generally curled my body forward toward the protective half-circle of my left arm….even in school, under the monitoring eyes of others, writing by hand with pencil or pen was a private, enclosed, and intimate experience of material and social emergence." Thus the space of the pen is literally a safe space. And the space itself is creative: "This bodily circumscription of a lived space made intimate…is a space that Gaston Bachelard might have described as shell-like…characteristic of the *poesis* of the shell, 'the mystery of slow, continuous formation'" (113). For Woolf the protectedness, the intimacy, and the slow formation would all have been important, and so too would have been the combination of pleasure and labour. Sobchack speaks of the computer's "frictionless electric

element," and of the callus on her finger that calls her back to the friction and resistance of pen and pencil, to the "aesthetic languor that locates its pleasure as much in the manual forging and visual sight of the letters and words as in their semantic and communicative value." Further, the "labour involved in handwriting" gives to the object "a particular *material value*" (114, emphasis in original). Writing is pleasure but it is also work. Writing is manual labour.

Woolf loved the feeling of sculpting a sentence: "How I should like, though, some time on the drive up this afternoon, to write a sentence again! How delightful to feel it form & curve under my fingers! Since Oct. 16th I have not written one new sentence, but only copied & typed. A typed sentence somehow differs; for one thing it is formed out of what is already there: it does not spring fresh from the mind" (*D*4 286). She is of course typing drafts, revising *The Years*, but the passage does suggest that a sentence cannot "form" the same way through a typewriter as it does "under her fingers."

Writing with a pen is like riding a motorcycle; writing on a keyboard is like sitting in a minivan. On a bike and with a pen you're outside the frame, unbounded, with naked metal doing the thing itself. Absorbed in the flow. Motorcycle-culture theorist Steven Alford says, "the essence of motorcycling is…the effacement of the self in an experience of 'flow'.…The rider is not travelling, he's enacting movement." If we replace "rider" with "writer" we get something like: "The essence of writing is the effacement of the self in an experience of flow.…She is not transcribing, she's enacting thought." Woolf finished *The Waves* "having reeled across the last ten pages with some moments of such intensity & intoxication that I seemed only to stumble after my own voice…" (*D*4 10). Immersed in the flow of ink, enacting thought.

For this talk I went back to the same volumes of Letters and Diaries that I'd used for my dissertation; all my pencil marks delineated passages on literary technique, nothing on ink, pens, presses, or printing. I had skimmed them the same way I had hurried over the wrangles with servants. Philip Ball, in *Bright Earth: Art and the Invention of Color* says, "This neglect of the material aspect of the artist's crafts is perhaps a consequence of a cultural tendency in the West to separate inspiration from substance" (5). Yet in Woolf's efforts to render the flight of the mind the materials of production are never far from her own mind. The issue, finally, is preservation. In her 1941 essay "Anon" she wrote, "It was the printing press that finally was to kill Anon. But it was the press that also preserved him…The printing press brought the past into existence" (384, 385); and as she said in her penultimate diary entry, "I think it is true that one gains a certain hold on sausage & haddock by writing them down" (*D*5 358). The lance against Death is the ink-filled pen.

[Here we poured the gall nuts and gum arabic, well-powdered by the audience, into each of the four vehicles. Orlando makes ink from berries and wine (133) and we used water, white wine, vinegar, and beer. I added the ferrous sulphate and we watched the brown mixture turn to black. I told them how it was important to let the beer go flat, how the first time I made ink it fizzed over the top, like a black iron-gall milk shake. The Woolfians

signed their names on sheets of acid-free paper, and I assured them that, save for fire and flood, their names would be preserved for 500 years. The Chinese have a saying: "The weakest ink is mightier than the strongest memory." In this era of bit rot and hard-drive crashes we could amend that to, "The weakest ink is stronger than the most vibrant pixel," for who among us has not faced the void of the blue screen? Centuries hence, archaeologists will find our sheets and conclude that these people must have been the most important members of the civilization, their names alone preserved from the millions dissolved in electronic impulses.]

Note

1. Jane Lilienfeld contends that the typewriter could be erotic for Woolf. In a twenty-year-old article I discovered after this talk, she declares that "for Woolf the physical act of writing was an emotional exercise, inseparable from the creation of meaning," wonders what it must have felt like for Woolf, typing out "Friendships Gallery" with a violet typewriter ribbon for Violet Dickinson, "to strike each key onto the page and see a violet mark spread out on the paper like the spreading folds of the many-hued purples of the vulva? Did the flow of ink on paper recall Woolf's haunting image of Violet's 'flowing all night long—the flame streaming like a river' (*L*1 389)?" Dickinson's gift of a "deep" inkpot was symbolic of her deep love for Virginia, and "its shape, 'a pot,' recalls the locution 'honey pot' for the vagina" (44–45).

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