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The New Old Woman of the 1930s: Aging and Women's History in Woolf, Sackville-West, and Holtby

Glenn Clifton
Sheridan College

ABSTRACT
In the decade following the victory of the Franchise Act of 1928, Virginia Woolf, Vita Sackville-West, and Winifred Holtby all wrote novels representing older female protagonists as active, vital, critical thinkers. Working against the backdrop of the over-determined meanings of youth and age created by both the progressive discourses of the suffrage movement and the backlash against them, these authors represent older heroines positioned in alliance with younger women. The novels respond to a cultural hostility towards older women and spinsters, but they also use older protagonists to represent an element of women's history, positioning them as critical sifters of the traditions of the past who have something essential to contribute to the future of the women's movement.

KEYWORDS
British Modernism, Aging, Suffrage Movement, Women's History, Virginia Woolf, Vita Sackville-West, Winifred Holtby

Whatever the ages of the actual women who participated in the suffrage campaign and related feminist movements of the modernist era, the historically new "New Woman" was generally not imagined as an old woman. Generational conflict had been an element of the suffrage movement in England as early as the 1890s (Caine 132). The much-discussed debate concerning the "Revolt of the Daughters" in the journal *Nineteenth Century* in 1894 cast the new possibilities for women in terms of the rebellion of the young, whom their attackers imagined as selfish (Crackenthorpe 23-31). This generational imaginary lasted well into the twentieth century. After 1928, when British women were granted the vote on the same terms as men, one understandable habit of mind was to focus on the future of the young women who would enjoy new freedoms and opportunities. But this habit had its negative side; Margaret Morgonroth Gullette has written about the backlash against older women in early twentieth-century British and American culture pointing out that a combination of factors, including a dropping birth rate and "the feminist idealization of the advanced young woman of the era," contributed to a certain hostility towards the postmaternal woman (Gullette 222). The postmaternal woman was imagined as declining, leisured, and—via birth control—as having given up on the duties of mothering too early. Gullette claims that feminists unwittingly participated in this narrative:

> As moderns and self-identified "daughters," writers of all ages who envisioned young (often college-going) readers as their ideal audience represented the young as a progressive category; they locked themselves into contrasting the not-young of the same class as inhibited and unchangeable. (Gullette 236)

The risk of dismissing older women and their experience is woven into the model of temporality imagined by the suffrage movement as a progressive discourse. As Rita Felski has documented, a connection between gender and narratives of progress was forged during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as the suffrage movement claimed gender equality as the vital, even inevitable next step in the forward march of history (145-55). Many women in Virginia Woolf's circle felt the claims of the women's movement were profoundly generational;

as Hermione Lee notes, because Woolf's mother opposed the idea of women voting, Woolf experienced campaigning for women's rights as a part of killing "The Angel in the House," and thereby taking distance from the domineering, elderly face of her Victorian parents (Lee 85; 279-80).[1] Karen Chase argues that later Victorian society tended to identify with the aging Queen Victoria, coming to imagine itself as elderly in its endurance and authority: "the nineteenth century became 'Victorian' when it became old, that is, when it described its attributes from the position of age" (Chase 157). In setting oneself against such traditional cultural authorities, it was easy to imagine that it was the elderly themselves that had to be rejected. That doesn't mean, of course, that the young women who were to inherit new options and possibilities weren't an even greater source of cultural anxiety. Billie Melman offers an overview of the discussion of the younger woman in the first decade of the interwar period as an object of fantasy and suspicion. Melman notes that younger women were a hot topic in the 1920s, when millions of women between 21 and 30 did not yet have the vote but might soon get it; the Equal Franchise Bill of 1928 was referred to as the "Flapper Vote" (Melman 1).

In the years after the Equal Franchise Bill, working against the backdrop of these over-determined meanings of youth and age, several important women writers turned to narratives of old age and more specifically to the representation of older heroines positioned in alliance with younger women. Cynthia Port has written about the increased obsession with female youth in the period as a way of distracting women from professionalization and maturation; she argues that in the Britain of the 1920s and 30s, "the anxieties about aging projected by early twentieth-century culture served to deflect women's attention from the personal and professional development that began to seem within reach after World War I" (Port 139). This pressure to appear young naturally pitted younger and older women against each other. Conversely, positioning older and younger women as co-conspirators allowed female authors to resist the market value of female youth and establish the possibility that the next generation could draw on the continuity of maturation and experience. In focusing on such a continuity, the authors

examined here not only responded to the cultural hostility towards older women and spinsters, but also used older characters as components of their representations of women's history. Diana Wallace notes the popularity of the genre of women's histories (written by women, finally) after the Franchise Act: "It was a moment that seemed to call for a kind of stock-taking, looking back at the past in order to measure the distance come, and to assess the distance still to travel" (220). I argue that a similar stock-taking is performed by several British novels of the 1930s about aging women: Winifred Holtby's *South Riding,* Virginia Woolf's *The Years*, and Vita Sackville-West's *All Passion Spent*. In writing about the progress of women and the historical configurations under which women had operated and did operate, a glance towards the past was an important portion of clarifying what had been and might be. Looking forward was intertwined with a taking account of what had been lost or repressed in the past. Writing about older women in the present could act as a way of assessing the legacy of the strict gender norms of the Victorian period, but positioning these norms in relationship with younger protagonists also served as a way of demonstrating that the new attitudes and aspirations of young women were grounded in a tradition and could claim a history of their own. Situating younger characters as the beneficiaries of inter-generational alliances with older women allowed some of this representation of the autonomy of spinsters to be extended forward into the next generation.

Both younger women and older women may, in different senses, be cast as representatively "modern:" the younger woman may embody new possibilities for opportunity, but the older woman may embody the awareness of a long historical past that is also so much a part of being modern and modernist. And so in each of the three novels, *South Riding, The Years*, and *All Passion Spent,* older women appear as a key element of the progressive movement, with something specific and specifically modern to add to the march of women's history. The older women do not serve an elegiac function; they are not represented merely as cautionary tales about the evils of past oppressions.[2] Rather, the older female characters are active participants in contemporary social projects. The possibilities that were repressed or scorned in the past have, in

these novels, also accumulated and stored up—the frustrations of these older characters' lives have produced, in silence and under the radar, a much-needed perspective. Active and vital older characters can negotiate, sift, and even re-inherit their past. While the progress of women may harbor hopes for the young, it occurs in a decisively old modern age which is only beginning to awaken from a long past of patriarchy—and older female characters prove a valuable site for the re-imagining of the hinge between the past and the future.

SACKVILLE-WEST, INHERITANCE AND THE INTERGENERATIONAL NOVEL OF AWAKENING

Vita Sackville-West's *All Passion Spent* (1931) fits into what feminist scholars have called the *Altersroman* (Westervelt 21) or *Reifungsroman* (novel of maturity) (Waxman 16-21)—a novel of development focused on an older woman. But the novel might also be seen as an important variant of what has been called the "novel of awakening." As Susan Rosowski describes this modernist-era variant of the *Bildungsroman* (whose most famous examples include Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Chopin's *The Awakening*), the female protagonist of the novel of awakening becomes aware not of possibilities but of socially-imposed limitations; often the novel focuses on a potential female artist who is destroyed by this new awareness (Rosowski 49-68). *All Passion Spent* varies this pattern, however, by having Lady Slane awaken to the limitations that kept her from being an artist, but only once she has also arrived at an advanced age. She is therefore able to pass on her new understanding by supporting a younger woman who plans to be an artist, and who does have the opportunity to pursue this goal. The awakening—now successful—simultaneously appears as individual and historical because it operates inter-generationally.

Published when Vita Sackville-West had begun to be influenced by Woolf,[3] *All Passion Spent* tells the story of the octogenarian aristocrat Lady Slane, who finds a brief second life after the death of her husband. The very public life of Lord Slane (he had been viceroy of India) has forced Lady Slane to live a life of conformity and falsehood. When her husband dies, her

children rush in to manage the situation on the assumption that, having been ruled by her husband for so long, Lady Slane has no preferences of her own. During the initial mourning period, however, Lady Slane, as the widow, must be consulted on everything: "Nobody could have foreseen that Father, so dominant always, would by the mere act of dying turn Mother into the most prominent figure" (52). The plot of the novel is essentially a protraction of this brief period of authority, as Lady Slane asserts that she does in fact have preferences and retires to a country house, barring anyone young from visiting. Bothered by the restlessness of youth, she insists that she wants "no one about [her] except those who are nearer to their death than their birth" (68).

Sackville-West might be accused of romanticizing old age in the novel by projecting a fantasy of serene wisdom onto her elderly characters. Lady Slane easily lays aside not only all selfish striving, but also all anxiety. Lady Slane and her contemporaries, Mr. Bucktrout and Mr. Gosheron, are all equally unconventional and unhurried, the nearness of death eliminating for them all forms of small-mindedness, competition, and worry, even on behalf of other people.[4] But it is important to note that the force from which Lady Slane serenely withdraws does not seem to be youth but rather the striving of the middle of life. The novel as a whole stresses that the potentiality and dreams of youth are not so problematic as the prudent and calculated trundling of everyday middle age. Lady Slane values the ambitions of her youth, which she had to set aside in order to be married—specifically, that she wanted to be a painter but could not be one while also being the wife of a Viceroy. She revisits those dreams now and forms a kind of imaginative link between her old and young selves. Youth and old age conspire in this novel, for they value the same things:

> The coldness with which she was now able to estimate [her marriage] frightened her a little, yet it took her back in some curious way to the days when she had plotted to elude her parents and consecrate herself to an existence [as an artist] which, although conventionally reprehensible, should, essentially, be dedicated to the most severe and difficult integrity.

> *Then*, she had been face to face with life; and that had seemed a reason for a necessity for the clearest thinking; *now*, she was face to face with death, and that again seemed a reason for the truest possible estimate of values, without evasion. The middle period alone had been confused. (166-67)

This confusion is recreated in the satirized conventionality of Lady Slane's adult children, who concern themselves primarily with the small politics of who shall inherit her jewels.

The alliance between youth and old age is solidified by the ending of the novel, where Lady Slane meets with her great-granddaughter, Deborah. Deborah is also Lady Slane's name, though her position as Lord Slane's wife has so determined her she feels only that it "once was" her name (280). Young Deborah expresses her desire to be a musician, despite the conventional expectation that she marry; she appears to Lady Slane as an "other self" and the two women are united in a near-visionary passage, though Deborah, in her "young egoism" does not note the significance of what is happening to her great-grandmother (282). Young Deborah receives support from the encounter and Lady Slane dies nearly immediately. The conspiratorial alliance between youth and old age is emphasized, perhaps beyond the point of subtlety, by the two women's matched names. Middle age, burdened with the duties of running the world, is thoroughly conventional in *All Passion Spent*, which also means patriarchal. But youth and old age together have an outside perspective in that they aren't given to competition and material gain, and this perspective also allows women to pursue their desires and interests. By contrast, Lady Slane's oldest son Herbert, the most pragmatic and authoritative of her children, never permits his wife to finish a sentence.

Sackville-West positions Lady Slane's subjectivity as an historical point of accumulation, a private place where the materials of the past are stored. The one child of Lady Slane's who seems to understand her, Edith, describes her as a type of storehouse: "It now dawned upon Edith that her mother might have lived a full private life, all these years, behind the shelter of her affectionate watchfulness. How much had she observed? noted? criticised? stored up?" (69).

Somewhat problematically, it is this cache of past which might be said to be "spent" in the final visionary passage, wherein Lady Slane's history is exhausted in giving itself over to a young woman with the same name who might live the life she wishes she had lived. Having passed on her historicity to a younger woman, she can perish peacefully. Her subjectivity is thereby imagined as a resource for the next generation rather than an autonomous experience of the latter part of her life.

Positioning Lady Slane as a storehouse of the past, however, allows Sackville-West to raise the issue of inheritance, of the public and private accumulations of what has been received. In Sackville-West's works, inheritance is a pervasive theme, and critics and biographers have established the roots of her strained relationship to inheritance in her reaction to the loss of Knole, the family estate which, as a woman, she was barred from inheriting. She was also heavily invested in a pastoral treatment of the landscape and of traditional agricultural landholding, which she represented with a nostalgic and elitist attitude.[5] Sackville-West's most elaborate pastoral work is *The Land* (1927), but her struggle with the theme of inheritance is most prominently on display in the novella *The Heir* (1922), a fantasy of re-inheritance that tells the story of a man who inherits and eventually comes to appreciate a country house. But as Louise De Salvo notes, in *All Passion Spent* Sackville-West engages with inheritance from an altered political angle (De Salvo 208). One of the central reasons for this shift is that in *All Passion Spent*, the political agenda is set by gender rather than by class; this change of focus might be said to have modernized Sackville-West's aesthetic priorities.[6] The impediments to Sackville-West's own inheritance were aristocratic and archaic; she was barred from inheriting Knole in 1928 by a will written in the Elizabethan period, limiting the estate to male heirs. But material inheritance had been a much more recent concern for suffrage-era feminism; the Married Women's Property Act of 1882 had been called a "Magna Carta for Women" because it terminated the law that absorbed women's property and inheritance into their husbands' legal personhood and control (Frank 111). Both before and after the passing of that Act, women in Britain could and did

inherit property. But one of the effects of the general assumption that women would eventually be provided for by their husbands (who, before 1882, would also gain legal control of their property) was that daughters were rarely left a substantial inheritance—many were left only an annuity until marriage (Frank 109). Widows, however, often inherited at least some property when their husbands died, and frequently continued to manage and expand upon it (Green 221). As a result, women who inherited property were rarely very young. When Lady Slane in *All Passion Spent* inherits her husband's estate in her eighties, she is not an atypical heir, and her belated inheritance is therefore more representative of the general relationship many women had to property than it might seem.

Because Sackville-West reconsiders inheritance from a gendered angle in *All Passion Spent*, she also associates it clearly with patriarchy, allowing her sense of "inheritance" to transcend the material and begin to encompass the cultural weight of habit and tradition. If *The Heir* is a fantasy wherein the inheritance of a country estate is restored, inheritance is positioned in *All Passion Spent* as a force to be resisted. Inheritances are figured in the text as a thing left to women by men, and therefore as a form of male control. Young Deborah is only able to break off her marriage engagement and pursue an artistic career because she is no longer an heiress (284-5). Material inheritance is villainized; in one passage, Lady Slane even justifies her donation through a critique of private property in general (276). An old admirer of Lady Slane's, Mr. FitzGeorge, leaves her his invaluable fortune of collectibles, but she donates the artifacts to a museum and the money to hospitals, noting with joy how much the relinquishing of a fortune will annoy her pragmatic children (259). Having shucked off the legacy of conventional patriarchy, Lady Slane must logically also resist the wealth that is offered by a male admirer. FitzGeorge may recognize that Lady Slane's husband has repressed her (he says "killed her"—221), but he fails to recognize that his own gift will also be repressive, leaving the elderly woman with a fabulous collection to manage. This episode thereby critiques the patriarchal elevation of women as idols, even when performed by a seemingly sensitive man. Material inheritance,

celebrated for its preservation of aristocratic privilege in *The Heir*, has now become an emblem of patriarchy. With this twinned rejection of wealth and male control, Sackville-West finds a position of resistance to associate with old age—with a subjectivity that has had time to sift its inheritance, and to see that one can be buried beneath it.

VIRGINIA WOOLF AND THE ALLIANCES OF THE UNCONSCIOUS

Virginia Woolf's *The Years* (1937) also engages with a complex overlapping of individual aging and social inheritance. Like *All Passion Spent,* the novel's final section centers on a form of alliance between an older and a younger woman, although Woolf's version of this alliance is muted and subtly drawn, built out of meaningful near-misses between two characters rather than out of perfect moments of harmony. Woolf uses this complex alliance to represent the evolution of a feminist historical perspective in dialogue with the unconscious mind.

The essays Woolf wrote in the 1930s articulate a complex engagement with the unconscious as a historical force. Woolf's concern with time has often been simplified down to her interest in the "moment" as something that stops time in an image of unity—the epiphany that reveals that "behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern" (*Moments* 81). The over-emphasis on the revelatory "moment" is often linked to the image of Woolf as a nostalgic elitist who retreated from political engagement. But Woolf's approaches to time are plural and complex. She took an interest in several different scales of time throughout her career, dwelling on geological time and prehistory, the evolution of genres, and the accumulation of the past in the unconscious and in language. Woolf explains a surprising range of phenomena with reference to the distant past; most famously, her feelings of shame and guilt when she is fondled by her half-brother are explained thusly: "It proves that Virginia Stephen was not born on the 25th of January 1882, but was born many thousands of years ago; had from the very first to encounter instincts already acquired by thousands of ancestresses in the past" (*Moments* 77). In the first version of *The Years*, the abandoned essay-novel *The Pargiters*, Woolf uses similar phrasing (but on

a different time-scale) to explain Kitty Malone's desire to be found attractive: "Kitty's body had been trained to send out and receive a multitude of impressions about her body and other people's bodies for generations" (*Pargiters* 129). What these formulations suggest is not the persistence of an atemporal, primordial force in the self, but rather a self that is formed out of complex set of historical processes on a variety of scales. In these passages Woolf describes the self as a sophisticated layering of historical inheritances, some of which may go back to the beginning of human life in cities, some to a particular patriarchal tradition. The Woolfian self is an accretion of many sources, and even the most ancient of them are still "historical," admitting of process and change.

Woolf's representations of historical process often involve the unconscious mind, not only in the sense that the above passages suggest aspects of selfhood may be unconsciously inherited, but also in her situation of the unconscious itself as a historically developing force. Woolf sees a form of historical life precisely in that sphere where Freud claimed there is no time whatsoever. Accordingly, she also suggests that we might become more open to the unconscious as we grow older. The motion towards an openness to the unconscious is adumbrated on both an individual and a generational time scale. In "The Leaning Tower" she expresses the hope that the next generation of writers, "with help from Dr. Freud . . . may inherit . . . a whole state of mind, a mind no longer evasive, crippled, divided" (*CE II* 178).[7] In *Orlando*, engaging with Vita Sackville-West's personal history and inheritance alongside England's, Woolf depicts a subjectivity that becomes more plural as it ages, so that Orlando can eventually lie against the oak tree and sink into the "dark pool of the mind," which is clearer by night, and survey the past (312). Woolf's hope for an increasing openness to the unconscious has an important parallel in the "guess" she makes in *Three Guineas:*

> Ease and freedom, the power to change and the power to grow, can only be preserved by obscurity . . . if we wish to help the human mind to create, and to prevent it from scoring the same rut repeatedly, we must do what we can to shroud it in darkness. (*TG* 114)

Growth, according to this formulation, only happens in darkness; the patriarchal state, by contrast, pressures everyone towards mainstream acceptability. The necessity of the "Outsider's Society" proposed in *Three Guineas* is connected to growth and development: one of the problems with the aggressive mainstream is that it stifles growth with its expectations. The plural and adventurous life of the mind occurs at the margins, where the unconscious can be experienced and neighbored.

The Years represents the need for inter-generational alliance between women in its final "Present Day" chapter, but it describes that alliance as a tenuous harmony set in the context of the development of the life of the unconscious. The difficulty of passing on an unconscious historical accumulation are figured in the inarticulacy of the novel's elderly protagonist, Eleanor, while the fears about her contemporaries Woolf expressed in *Three Guineas* are on display in the cynicism and unhappiness of Eleanor's niece, Peggy. Continuity and alliance are never simple things for Woolf, and the inter-generational alliances in *The Years* are manufactured more out of echoes and near-misses than out of moments of complete union. As a result, *The Years*, with its ambiguous and cacophonous final chapter, has not always been read as an optimistic text.[8] But the novel represents a historical movement from deception to honesty. In the opening chapter, the Pargiters' Victorian family life is dominated by an atmosphere of falsehood: Martin later reflects that it is no surprise their childhood home will not sell, for it is polluted by the fact that they all lived "boxed up together, telling lies" (163). The novel opens with a group of women stuck inside, warning each other not to be caught looking out the window at a gentleman lest they be thought lustful, while Rose is meanwhile accosted by a man who exposes himself to her on the street. That Rose knows not to tell her father about her victimization insinuates a desire for control in the father, much like what Woolf describes in *Three Guineas* as "infantile fixation" (130). The patriarchal authority associated with Abel's position and age casts a shadow of falsehood over the house; sexual matters can never be discussed by any of the children, but Abel

is himself having an affair. This false maturity is at the heart of Woolf's critique of Victorian society in the novel: the reverence for age in patriarchal forms distorts the ability to tell the truth.

This distortion does not entirely end as time passes in the novel, but it gradually loosens. Eleanor grows older and becomes a vital spinster, a reflective and active member of society. When she is around thirty, she reflects that it is others who look to her "settled, elderly, as if their minds were already made up. For some reason she always felt that she was the youngest person in an omnibus" (73-4). When Eleanor meets a gay man, Nicholas, in 1917, she reacts thusly: "For a second a sharp shiver of repugnance passed over Eleanor's skin as if a knife had sliced it. Then she realized that it touched nothing of importance. The sharp shiver passed. Underneath was—what? She looked at Nicholas" (217). In this passage we see a developing willingness to question her biases, figured as a willingness to look "underneath" the surface and towards her unconscious inheritances. Eleanor then begins a series of conversations with Nicholas about whether humans really are improving and how they can make progress if they do not know themselves. Nicholas claims that the soul wants to grow, historically: "It wishes to expand; to adventure; to form—new combinations?" (216). While Eleanor's friendship with Nicholas is itself one of these new combinations, the two of them fall into a sort of conversational dead-end, repeating the same exchange about growth for years without making progress. As in the passage from *Three Guineas* quoted above, they are "scoring the same rut repeatedly," groping for the obscurity that would allow new insight.

The final section of the novel represents a strained and uncertain connection between Eleanor and her niece Peggy, who seem to be continually missing the chance to connect. When Eleanor sees Peggy reading a book, she enthusiastically proclaims Peggy's life a miracle, but Peggy has in fact only grabbed a book to hide her loneliness (280). While much of the narrative energy has shifted to the next generation, neither Peggy nor her brother North seem particularly happy. The younger characters, like the women described in *Three Guineas*, have inherited

opportunities but also a cynicism and coldness; Peggy is at risk of becoming a "cripple in a cave," as Woolf describes the over-professionalized person (*TG* 72).

Peggy and Eleanor are nonetheless aligned by the fact that each of them has an optimistic moment of vision that neither is able to communicate. Peggy, having expressed considerable cynicism about civilization in general, then sees suddenly "not a place, but a state of being, in which there was real laughter, real happiness, and this fractured world was whole; whole and free. But how could she say it?" (285). She stumbles through trying to describe it and only ends up insulting her brother instead, losing her vision in her habitual cynicism. The fact that she makes her vision into an attack on North suggests a failure of maturity, in terms of Woolf's own belief in the importance of impersonality: "She had got it wrong. She had meant to say something impersonal, but now she was being personal" (286). Eleanor, by contrast, has two optimistic visions. The first is a dream. In the final version of *The Years*, Eleanor simply forgets this dream, though she feels wonderful when she wakes up, feeling that "they were all young, with the future before them" (280).[9] In the second vision, placed at the very ending of the novel, Eleanor sees a man and a woman getting into a taxicab, and says twice "there!" as if something has been resolved or finally seen (318). This final moment, which many have found perplexing and unsatisfactory (Middleton 169), has also been connected by several critics to Woolf's use of the image of a man and a woman in a taxicab in *A Room of One's Own* (*AROO* 96-98).[10] Given that *The Years* opens with a scene in which Eleanor warns her sisters not to be caught looking at a gentleman calling across the road, the vision does suggest a movement into a future of sexual satisfaction and less artificial division between men and women. Eleanor's visions are just as private and inarticulate as Peggy's; the first is forgotten, while the second is hardly communicated at all. This connection adumbrates a fuller alliance between the two women. While the dangerous corrosiveness of modern professional life may be making Peggy cynical, this connection between Peggy and her aunt suggests she may yet envision a life that combines the freedom of new possibilities with the absence of manipulative pressure her aunt experienced

growing up in the Victorian age. No final statement is made concerning whether Peggy will find a more optimistic approach to her vision, but the alliance between the women is reinforced by these visions that simultaneously redirect them towards the silence of what is unconscious and cannot be fully stated.

Perhaps the richest suggestion of what Woolf wants out of this alliance occurs in an earlier moment. When Eleanor expresses a wish to travel, Peggy responds by abruptly asking, "Was it that you were suppressed when you were young?" (245). An image of Eleanor's father flashes through Peggy's mind, reminding the reader that Eleanor did lose much of her life to caring for her father. But Eleanor responds: '"Suppressed? . . . She so seldom thought of herself that she was surprised" (245). Eleanor goes on to say that though she understands what Peggy means, she does not want her past, she wants the present (245-6). While Eleanor understands the statement, she so rarely thinks of herself that she struggles to see its application. This is a complex interaction, for Woolf is positioned on both sides of it; she repudiates the patriarchal control that has limited Eleanor's options, but she also wrote widely about how maturity involved thinking less about oneself, not remaining trapped in one's own side: "as people mature, they cease to believe in sides" (*AROO* 106). Eleanor has not so much forgiven her past as barely bothered to think of it as limiting, despite the fact that Woolf certainly believes it to have been. We might see the perspective Woolf herself would advocate as combining these two women's positions: Eleanor wants to travel out of curiosity and concern for the world, not out of personal rebellion or retribution, and yet Peggy's modern political consciousness of the way one's life can be truncated by patriarchy is also essential. A fusion of these perspectives, here associated with youth and age, would combine a critical political consciousness with a generous-minded curiosity and openness to unconscious vision; it would bring critique together with dwelling.

The visions Eleanor and Peggy experience are difficult to communicate in part because they are impersonal, and close to the communal and the unconscious; the novel as a whole has

shifted from the restrictive silence of Victorian falsehood to the silence that welcomes visions and struggles to articulate them. In the final pages of the novel, Nicholas makes a toast to the coming of age of the human race, describing a species, "now in its infancy, may it grow to maturity!" (312). Margaret Comstock has noted that the etymological sense of Nicholas' toast is highly relevant, for throughout *The Years* people are so unable to finish sentences and communicate that the human race might very well be said to be in a state of infancy—it cannot yet speak (Comstock 258). The historical accumulation of experience in the unconscious mind is only beginning to be articulated.

HOLTBY'S APPROPRIATION OF TRAGIC WISDOM

Winifred Holtby's *South Riding* (1936), like *The Years*, rehabilitates the spinster figure, suggesting that unmarried women have vital things to offer the community; it also demonstrates the necessity of combining the perspectives of older and younger women.[11] Holtby, who also wrote the first book-length study of Woolf, was an exemplar of just the kind of vital spinster that Woolf described in the character of Eleanor, to whom Holtby has frequently been compared.[12] But instead of focusing on issues of inheritance, Holtby's aim in manufacturing an intergenerational alliance between her female characters is to appropriate a conservative woman's perspective into its progressive vision. *South Riding* constructs youth and differently from *The Years*; for Sarah Burton, the younger woman, is a feminist and idealist rather than a cynic like Peggy; meanwhile the older woman, Mrs. Beddows, is a resigned, conservative stoic, rather than an enthusiast like Eleanor. It is the younger, rather than the older woman, who seems closer to the author's own position in *South Riding*. And yet Holtby also emphasizes the importance of the insight of the older woman, using the structure of the novel to incorporate and appropriate aspects of a political perspective not her own into the motion of a liberal-feminist history. Holtby uses the aging female subject to represent a perspective of deep civic duty—despite the fact that the older women remain associated with a conservative political perspective Holtby

herself repudiates. The perspective that the novel advocates in its finale is a fusion of the perspectives of these two women, which are shown to be incomplete without each other.

Sarah Burton, the spinster protagonist of *South Riding*, is a woman nearing forty who starts over as headmistress of a school. But while Sarah is a vital spinster-figure and so a figure of resistance to the hostility against older women, she is also positioned as the younger woman in comparison to Alderman Mrs. Beddows. Though Sarah does fall in love in the novel, the most important combinations of perspective in the novel do not come from Sarah's romantic love, but rather from the dialogic relationship between these two women. The finale of the novel literally fuses the two women's words. Sarah begins the novel believing in the proverb that God says, "Take what you want . . . Take it—and pay for it" (161). This phrase seems at first to express a hard-headed, even cynical individualism, but Mrs. Beddows counters by asking, "But who pays?" (189). Sarah's view eventually becomes a combination of these, as by the end of the novel she comes to see that "we all pay . . . we all take; we are members one of another" (490). As Lisa Regan has noted, this dialogic exchange is itself a negotiation Holtby stages with the previous generation of feminists. The phrase, originally a Spanish proverb, is taken more immediately from the epigraph of Lady Rhondda's autobiography, *This Was My World*. Holtby suggested this autobiography was a little dated when she reviewed it, but in the novel, Sarah admires it wholly and recommends it to her students (Regan *Social Vision* 151). By depicting Sarah as an adherent of Rhondda's epigraph, whose views are in need of an emendation from the older Mrs. Beddows, Holtby reverses generational polarities, associating hard individualism not with the previous generation of suffragettes (Rhondda was born in 1883 and had employed Holtby at *Time and Tide*) but with Sarah's youthfulness. Because it is Mrs. Beddows' perspective that shifts Sarah's stance towards the communal, elderly women are incorporated instead of being superseded. Holtby suggests that what seemed at first to be a hard-headed awareness of the costs to the individual was itself naïve, because the individual can never make decisions in a vacuum.

Through this dialogic fusion, Holtby also appropriates the perspective of her own mother, who explicitly serves as the basis for Mrs. Beddows.[13] The logic of this appropriation is revealed in Holtby's *Women and a Changing Civilization* (1935). Holtby there describes how modern women, with a life of their own outside the domestic sphere, may in fact make better mothers than women of previous generations, as between mother and child "there is less possessiveness and more comradeship, less discipline and more understanding" (145). Women and children can approach each other, that is, as whole people. Holtby then claims:

> My own mother, though born over seventy years ago, is essentially "modern." As a country alderman, she finds life rich with varied and absorbing experience. I can visit or leave her without compunction, knowing that she has her life to live as much as I have mine; yet when we meet there is none of that awkwardness, that "making conversation," which I see between so many parents and children. In the future the child will be as much interested in the mother's career as the mother is in the child's, and the shared experience of two generations should be helpful to both. (145-46)

South Riding aims precisely at this "shared experience" of the two generations, joining the perspectives of a woman roughly Holtby's own age and a woman based on her mother. But in this passage Holtby also claims that her mother is already essentially modern, not because she is particularly liberal in her views, but simply because by working outside the home as a public servant she has freed herself from an identity based only on domesticity.[14] This claim is revealing in the light of Holtby's project to write a novel about local government, as she suggests that the experience imbibed by serving the local public makes one essentially modern and allied with liberal improvements, regardless of one's actual opinions.

The novel positions Sarah's progressive reforms in larger scales of temporality: Sarah sees herself as working to improve the human species, which she imagines as "a blind and stumbling race of savages, crawling up out of the primeval slime" (189). Sarah's central goal in the novel is the rescuing of a young girl, Lydia Holly, from the burdens of caring for her young

siblings after the death of her mother. The novel thus positions a third generation of women as the inheritors of the past, casting Lydia as a figure of potentiality and futurity—she reads Shakespeare and feels that "below all these present pleasures lay the lovely glowing assurance of future joy" (33). It might appear that the conservative and resigned perspective of Mrs. Beddows would be an impediment to this futurity. Mrs. Beddows claims that there is no great tragedy in a talented young woman remaining at home in a world where so many women have to do so, and asserts that her experience has shown her we must never try to do too much: "if you give too much here, another must go without there . . . We need patience" (188). This position of resignation is furthermore connected to the frustrated life Mrs. Beddows has lived under patriarchy. Her attitude is explicitly linked to her disappointments in marriage to a penny-pincher who constantly thrusts his own tiny victories in other people's faces. Sarah believes Mrs. Beddows has been wasted by marriage, giving three-quarters of her energy to "quite unnecessary domestic ritual and propitiation" (183). Though Mrs. Beddows has done public work and thereby not been devoured by the shadow of male publicity, she has also been realistically embittered by her experience of men's demands. And yet Holtby claims that even this experience of women's lives under patriarchy has a valuable contribution to make to the future of the women's movement, almost despite itself.

Holtby accomplishes this dialogic fusion through situating the virtue of humility as a more important contribution to progress than one's actual opinion. Mrs. Beddows sees Sarah's plan to save Lydia as egotistical, a desire to replicate herself in a star pupil. This is not entirely the case—Sarah also emphasizes Lydia's relevance to the broader community, as she could grow up to be a role model, a new woman with a career. And yet Sarah does eventually come to see that her original version of progressive politics, which imagined the eventual conquering of chance, was in fact willful. Whereas previously Sarah had not had "much use for the defeated" (472), she adapts a perspective arguably more appropriate for an educator: "it's no use only having a creed for the successful," as Mrs. Beddows notes (473). The more nuanced and communitarian view

that emerges from the combined perspectives of the two women—"we all pay . . . we all take; we are members one of another"—does not disrupt Sarah's reformist ambitions, but furthers them. At the close of the novel, Sarah is still committed to leftist feminism, but having lost her love interest, Carne, to an accident, she has learned she cannot master chance. (And though Carne is killed by chance, Lydia is saved by chance: her father happens to meet an old friend and lands himself a new marriage, relieving Lydia of her domestic burden.) Having been humbled by the brutality of happenstance, Sarah concludes the novel still intending to work for liberal feminist causes, but no longer believing she can actually win—or entirely approve of herself for doing so. When Sarah tells the conservative Mrs. Beddows of her attempt to seduce Carne, she expects to be condemned, but is instead only told that having given up on liking herself, she has just begun to live: "And when there's no hope and no remedy, then you begin to learn and to teach what you've learned. The strongest things in life are without triumph" (473). Sarah does not only give up on willful striving, but also on approving of herself; it seems to be a central aspect of Holtby's sense of maturity that the mature person does not really like himself or herself. As a novel that gives credibility to characters of various political viewpoints, it is central to *South Riding* that the most laudable characters, though they may not agree, are all relentlessly hard on themselves. Both the socialist Astell and the conservative Carne are merciless towards themselves for failing their respective ideals, and neither really likes himself (273-74; 288-90). Sarah is represented as joining this company, and so the shared experience of multiple generations is refigured as a progressive humility.

Associating radical humility with age and repeated failure is perhaps a conventional way to imagine the perspective of an older woman. But this maneuver allows Holtby to position herself in such a way that the frustrations and pains of older women who have lived in more restrictive times, frustrations which may not in fact often find expression in progressive views, are still brought on board with her reformist project. Mrs. Beddows is an active, competent woman, but she does not necessarily have Eleanor Pargiter's openness, tolerance, or liberalism—

as indeed, many older women of the 1930s likely did not. But Holtby is able to position Mrs. Beddows' awareness of finitude as a progressive force in a weaker sense, by using her to assist Sarah in escaping egotism and seeing more clearly the human vulnerability that reformist projects are, after all, designed to assuage. While humanity may still be crawling out of a primeval swamp, as Sarah claims, it is simultaneously a species that has long steeped in vulnerability and failure; the liberal commitment to improving the world is ultimately a product of our memory of that history. If Sackville-West's portrait of old age was problematically romantic, too willing to see the subjectivity of the elderly exhausting itself in the encouragement of the young, Holtby's is certainly realistic, allowing for the possibility of bitterness, frustration, and conservatism in older women without thereby claiming that they have nothing to offer the march of history.

Sackville-West, Woolf, and Holtby associate different qualities with their older protagonists, but they all reconfigure progressive goals through reconsidering the contributions of the past as they have been stored and transfigured in the subjectivity of older female characters. In so doing, they recontextualize progressive movements in broader scales of history while simultaneously representing the value of women's subjectivity when it is not figured merely in terms of the future-potential of youth. In the context of an era driven by a belief in progress, the elderly are often framed by what Mary Russo calls the "scandal of anachronism" (20), symbolically cast aside by the cultural energies that demand everything be up-to-date. In the modernist period, the cultural valorization of youth was already well under way. But this valorization was often rejected by modernist authors, and many of modernism's most emblematic characters, from Lambert Strether to Leopold Bloom to Marlowe and to the female protagonists examined here, in fact represent their creators' belief in the need for an older mind to navigate the modern landscape. Such a shift away from youthful potential is arguably one of the signal gestures of modernism. But this gesture was frequently overlooked by earlier generations of critics who emphasized the youthful rebelliousness of the avant-garde. The loudest and most iconoclastic movements in the modernist period certainly emphasized their

novelty, and by extension, their youth; as F. T. Marinetti bragged in "A Manifesto of Italian Futurism" (1909) "the oldest among us are not yet thirty; this means that we have at least ten years to carry out our task. When we are forty, let those younger and more valiant than us kindly throw us into the wastebaskets like useless manuscripts!" (qtd. in Howe 171). In accordance with such pronouncements, modernism was initially associated with the rejection of inheritance and the rebellious impulse to start over, and this is one way that the modernist attitude to inheritance could be framed: Allan Helpburn defines one strain of modernism as "a literary practice in which renunciation of inheritances and self-dispossession from the past allow for new, politicized identities to emerge" (19). But the same critical interaction with inheritance can be achieved without its complete renunciation, and without the symbolic position of youth that shucks off the entire past at once. In many texts, especially by female modernist writers, it is aging characters who critically sift their inheritance and become representatively modern, not in their rejection of the past wholesale, but in their ability to reconsider and transmit the past after critical consideration.

Notes

[1] In the context of Woolf's childhood, authority figures were coded as "old." Alex Zwerdling notes the extent to which the individual contexts of Woolf's childhood combined to create an atmosphere of reverence for old age: Queen Victoria seemed to have been in power forever, but also Woolf's father was old enough that she felt he was more accurately described as her grandfather (Zwerdling 150).

[2] Gullette notes that this is one way some feminists depicted older women at the time, with a sympathy for those who suffered the strictures of the past that also restricted agency (235).

[3] The majority of the scholarly interest in Vita Sackville-West since the 1970s has stemmed from her relationship with Woolf. It is often claimed that some of Woolf's creative energies were liberated by her relationship with Sackville-West; conversely, the majority of scholars seem to feel that the best of Sackville-West's works are those she wrote after being influenced by Woolf's style and political ideas (*All Passion Spent, The Edwardians, Seducers in Ecuador*). The influence of Woolf upon *All Passion Spent* is palpable, and the novel is accordingly regarded as one of Sackville-West's best novels, and certainly as her most feminist and politically liberal one. De Salvo regards *All Passion Spent* as an "outgrowth" of Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (211). On the converse influence of Sackville-West on Woolf, see De Salvo (199); Lee (499).

[4] Joss West-Burnham reads the novel as a projection of Sackville-West's own selfhood into old age as a way to negotiate its contradictions (39-42). Sackville-West's biographer positions the

novel partially in terms of Vita's torn feelings about the simplification of life, pointing out that while the novel's "fierce simplicities" inspire many, Sackville-West herself never gave up any of her jewels (Glendinning 237).

[5] Sackville-West has often been criticized for the elitist politics implied in her pastoral works; Raitt reads Sackville-West's first two novels as "eugenic" fantasies, written as condemnations of the working class (41-61).

[6] It could be argued this shift began slightly before the writing of *All Passion Spent* (1931); Sophie Blanch reads *The Edwardians* (1930) in terms of a complex fantasy renegotiating inheritance to create a "feminine inheritance" which allows women to interact without the mediation of patriarchal laws (77).

[7] This quotation is only a small part of Woolf's complex negotiation with Freudian thinking; Woolf certainly did not think that Freud presented a completely accurate assessment of the mind, and not only because he saw the unconscious as timeless. Though Woolf makes no explicit mention of reading Freud until relatively late in her life, this may not mean that she read none at all before that point; Elizabeth Abel demonstrates how thoroughly Woolf must have been exposed to the tenor of Freud's thought even before reading him (Abel 13-29). Abel argues that Woolf uncovers feminist modes of casting the narrative of psychoanalysis, and so develops an alternative to Freud's patriarchal model.

[8] The feminist rehabilitation of the novel in the 1970s rescued it from being seen as a cynical failure or a portrait of resignation. Guiget (309) and Bazin (167-191) provide examples of earlier critics claiming the novel fails to convey its vision successfully. But Jane Marcus' important 1977 essay on *The Years* as a *Gotterdämmerung* was instrumental in locating the patterns in the novel that led feminists to its re-evaluation (Marcus 36-56). Jane Wheare catalogues 30 pages worth of such subtle patterns (140-71). The argument for an optimistic movement in *The Years* towards a less authoritative, more feminist vision of society has been made by Patricia Waugh (121-3) and Susan Squier (177-9). Caughie argues that the novel does not end with optimism or pessimism but with uncertainty, making the text more amenable to postmodern strategies of reading (106). DuPlessis presents the version of this argument closest to my own, as she sees the ending of the novel in terms of a movement from the growth of the individual ego to a "collective *Bildung*" (163).

[9] In the manuscript version of the novel this moment was described as a much more intimate connection between the two women (Radin 104).

[10] The connection to *A Room of One's Own* is noted by Naremore (260); Bazin (176); Dowling (196). Holtby, in her book on Woolf, makes much of the taxicab image, appreciating its dissolving of divisions but also hinting at some difficulties with it (*VW* 161-85).

[11] Holtby made a campaign of defending spinsters from the charge of frustration—which she saw as Freudian in its origins. Lisa Regan notes that Holtby opposes this Freudian-derived model of spinster psychology with an Adlerian model based on the importance of "self-esteem" ("Inferiority Complex" 194-218). Adler's psychology, with its emphasis on the roots of one's self-image in the opinion of the broader community rather than the child-parent relations, is particularly suitable to Holtby's vision. On the Freudian elements of the attack on spinsters, see Oram.

[12] Marion Shaw notes that both Eleanor Pargiter and Holtby claim their lives have been "other people's lives" (*Years* 269; *Clear Stream* 253). Elsewhere, Shaw notes that Holtby may have served as an inspiration for the physical description of Kitty Malone in *The Years* ("Rewriting" 43).

[13] Holtby makes this clear in her introduction to the novel, while at the same time claiming that Mrs. Beddows cannot be completely identified with her mother. This was unfortunately not enough to keep Alice Holtby from feeling that she and other political figures in Yorkshire had been publically embarrassed (*Clear Stream* 43).

[14] As Shaw notes, Holtby's mother also remained "staunchly conservative" (*Clear Stream* 34).

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Glenn Clifton holds a PhD in English from the University of Toronto. His scholarly research examines modernist representations of aging as engagements with history and temporality. His research articles have appeared in *Journal of Beckett Studies*, *Henry James Review*, *SHAW: The Annual of George Bernard Shaw Studies*, and *ELT*. He teaches literature and creative writing at Sheridan College, and is working on his first collection of stories. **Email: glenn.clifton@sheridancollege.ca**