

Virginia Woolf: O Thy Splendid Identity!

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With this essay I would like to unite some insights from Virginia Woolf's book Moments of Being in order to elucidate the relationship between society, identity and violence. I'll begin by extrapolating from some ideas in the essay "A Sketch of the Past." The second half of the paper will explore a few ramifications of this theory, which, I hope, will lend support to the theses in Andrew J. McKenna's book Violence and Difference: Girard, Derrida, and Deconstruction, and in Eric Gans' book The End of Culture. The word "identity" will have no formal definition in this discussion, but some characteristics of identity itself should become clear by the end.

I never had, and still do not have, the perception of feeling my personal identity. I appear to myself as the place where something is going on, but there is no "I," no "me."

—Claude Lévi-Strauss

At the outset, what can we make of Virginia's famous "Angel in the House," who encroaches upon Virginia's consciousness as a female writer, and "wastes her time" (Macey 404). This "Angel" was a combination of numerous forces, some cultural, others psychological and personal. Virginia's personal angel was an image of what a well-bred Victorian woman should be; that is, an unwelcome manifestation of Victorian cultural norms within Virginia's consciousness. This idea has wide implications, expounded by feminists, and we have come to understand the Angel as being one manifestation of the general Western tradition of patriarchal dominance and oppression of women. However, Virginia's reaction to oppression was complex. She did not choose to promote an attitude of anger toward men, since she felt anger was an attendant part of the problem as a whole (Briggs 82). Virginia knew that men were also trapped by Victorian convention and painfully so. Note her comments about her father, Leslie, on page 146, how "at the age of sixty-five he was a man in prison, isolated." Due in part to the "effect of Cambridge and its one sided education," and the "mutilations of extensive brain work" Leslie underwent as a writer, he had been immersed so completely in conventional society that "he had no idea of what he was." No less so her brother, George, of whom Virginia questions: "What would have been his shape had he not been stamped and moulded by that great patriarchal machine?" (153).

If we consider the complexity of the Angel in the House, we may note how the mechanism of patriarchal oppression, which initiates the Angel, has an effect on both women and men. We may also recognize how the Angel appeared in Virginia's mind and influenced her to the point that she had to actively fight it. Therefore, as will be shown, the Angel imposed on Virginia's self. Finally, we note how the Angel was personal for Virginia, but concomitant to a larger societal force, or oppression, which she resisted as a feminist woman. So, society exerted an oppressive force on men and women. Virginia recognized this force and resisted it, but Leslie and George both succumbed unwittingly, thus becoming approximations, almost caricatures of human beings (146-147, 153).

With this in mind, we turn to a telling comment about Virginia's response to a momentary feeling of nationalism:

Sometimes when I hear God Save the King I too feel a current belief but almost directly I consider my own splits asunder and one side of me criticizes the other. George never questioned his belief in the old tune that society played. (153)

We will interpret "current belief" as indicating Victorian norms, although, with the context, Virginia may have meant "current of belief" as indicating a psychological current. In any case, both interpretations amount to the same. Virginia expresses her disbelief in society, along with George's complete belief, which influences him immensely. Virginia is able to resist the strong pull of society because of her very nature as a person. Hence, by "directly I consider my own splits asunder," she is indicating a self-critical, multifaceted part of her personality (lacking in George). "Splits asunder" may allude casually to Virginia's *conception* of the self as being multiple, since it is known that Virginia's idea of the self was similar to Bergson's theory of double selves (Whitworth 160). Or splits asunder may indicate the various aspects or opposing sides Virginia finds in her personality. That is, a "dispassionate separate sense" (156) of herself that stands aloof, giving Virginia a critical purchase on her psychological response to nationalism. For example, Virginia tells of her humiliation as a young woman when she was without a partner at a dance, but that her "good friend"—her separate critical side—"upheld" her (155). Even as Virginia was being socially humiliated, part of her was standing "dispassionately" aside, taking note of the situation for future reference.

One may object that Virginia's awareness of herself need not imply that she has two selves, but only that consciousness has a self-reflexive aspect. However, this objection does not interfere with our argument. Whatever our interpretation, Virginia is nonetheless indicating an inviolable aspect of her nature. Virginia did not create a formal theory of the two selves, although we will later uncover a clue to why she thought as she did. Virginia expounds an idea—her “conception” of her nature as a person—that explains why her splits asunder can undermine her feeling of nationalism. This “conception” blocks her passionate rush of nationalism and also enables Virginia to stand apart psychologically from society. Leslie and George do not have this ability; yet, they have their own conceptions. In a moment we will uncover Virginia's proof for all this, but what is interesting is that, whereas Virginia's conception enables her to criticize society, the men's conceptions have been largely created by society, which can leave them “unconscious” to their own psychological motives (146).¹

To get back to our argument, we recall how “splits asunder” probably had several meanings for Virginia. It could refer to the dispassionate observer in Virginia, or more generally to her idea of the divided self. Now, part of the passage we examined should be clearer: “directly I consider my own splits asunder and one side of me criticizes the other.” If we compare the two meanings of splits asunder with Virginia's conception, we find these meanings are both bound up in the conception, that they, in fact, are the conception. On page 71, Virginia introduces the famous incident where, as a child, she found herself “paralyzed” in front of an apple tree:

I overheard my father or my mother say that Mr Valpy had killed himself. The next thing I remember is being in the garden at night and walking on the path by the apple tree. It seemed to me that the apple tree was connected with the horror of Mr Valpy's suicide. I could not pass it.

Virginia describes this sort of incident as a reoccurring theme in her life where she receives a “shock” due to the influence of some event (like a suicide). Such shocks occasion a dual effect, as they could be “hopeless” or “terrible” if Virginia felt powerless to stop them. Or if Virginia was able to understand, to reason out a conclusion about a shock, then she felt “satisfaction.” So, we find that these shocks affect Virginia beyond her control, which can feel terrible, unless she is able to rationally explain why

they happen, which gives her satisfaction. She continues, “I go on to suppose that the shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer. I hazard the explanation that a shock is at once in my case followed by the desire to explain it.” A shock “is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words” (72). On page 73, we arrive at Virginia’s “conception”—a concept that means both Virginia’s shock-receiving capacity and her need to explain the meaning behind appearances, which makes her a writer. Finally, after hacking Virginia’s smooth prose to pieces, we arrive at a proof for our conviction that Virginia’s conception is the same idea as her splits asunder. Therefore, thinking ahead, we may translate “conception” as meaning “identity.”

Again, we think of the possible meanings of splits asunder, how it implies both an active and a passive quality in Virginia’s self. The active is that dispassionate, critical “spectator” by which Virginia makes rational use of her experiences. The passive is a part of herself that seems to be “given to” (72) Virginia from without. Combined, the active and passive cause Virginia to write—to look for connections behind appearances.² This writer is Virginia’s nature as a person, but she did not choose to be that way. Here we have a clue as to why Virginia favored the Bergsonian notion of two selves, since she recognized that part of her self comes from a place beyond her control, as in the case of the shocks. It is Virginia’s nature to be shocked, yet she suffers “a peculiar horror” (72) over the shocks unless the spectator in her can explain them. There are active and passive components with-in Virginia’s personality that comprise her conception and that cause her to write. It should be clear that Virginia’s conception and her splits asunder both contain the active and passive elements of her nature as a person. These elements define Virginia’s identity. “And this conception affects me every day. I prove this, now, by spending the morning writing, when I might be walking, running a shop,” etc. (73).

Up to this point we have been scrutinizing “A Sketch of the Past” in order to translate Virginia’s thinking into our own words. Thus far we know that Victorian society was oppressive to Virginia’s self, that Virginia’s identity was incommensurate with such oppression, and also that society directly influences selves, as in the case of the Angel in the House. Let us examine one last characteristic comment that Virginia made in reference to her father. She said “that nothing is so much to be dreaded as egotism.” (147). Keeping in mind our goal to create a theory of society and identity, what relationship does this comment about egotism have to identity as

Virginia conceives it? Leslie's domineering egotism was not purely of his nature, but was heartily exacerbated by society (145-147). No one can know how much egotism Leslie would have displayed had he not identified wholeheartedly with society.

Now we fully understand why Virginia said her father was a man "in prison, isolated" (146), because he was psychologically imprisoned by society. However, Virginia, by her nature, that critical spectator self, managed to evade the psychological pull of society. (Although, the fact that Virginia struggled long with the Angel in the House testifies to the ever-present strength of society). Virginia also mentions that there was an age difference between herself and Leslie (147), which might be taken as evidence that age, rather than identity or psychological acuity, is the reason why Virginia was so much more aware of society. Age difference however was not notable in the case of George, who was also a "consenting and approving" Victorian (147). Thus, there was a significant difference between Virginia and the two men, which is located at the level of identity: Virginia's identity was kept separate from certain elements of society, while theirs was not. Since Virginia had to resist the influence of society, it is logical that she also refused the catharsis that accompanies conventional identity forming.³ In other words, she had to *fight* conventional identity-forming influences in order to be who she was, and she was, in a sense, living beyond society and gender. Our conclusion here should shed light on an argument in *A Room of One's Own*: "that it is fatal for any one who writes to think of their sex." (108). We can explain that sex is fatal because it means a person's identity is largely attached to an external convention, which smothers the creative will or impedes one's potential to "explore all the sources of signification" (Minow-Pinkney 164). The implication is that androgynous writing comes from an identity capable of being androgynous or "bisexual." We are of course only repeating the idea that gender refers to a psychological position instead of sex characteristics.

Just before, the word "catharsis" appeared without explanation. Rather than attempt a psychoanalytic proof, it may prove illuminating if we connect this idea to Leslie and George. First of all, Virginia and her sister Vanessa both suffered abuses due to Leslie and George's conventionality. With her father, Virginia witnessed "violent displays of rage" (146), and George would exhibit an "astonishing range of emotions" (156) if the women challenged his conventional desires. What impresses us about this is the degree to which the men's emotions and identities are contingent

upon convention. In fact, Virginia was largely aware of this contingency when she considered what it was that caused George to exhibit the above mentioned “astonishing emotions.” She wondered if George thought his “conception” was being criticized (156). Of course, if Virginia implicitly questioned George’s conventional beliefs, George would feel threatened, since he was partly and quite literally a living convention by Virginia’s observation. The misguided emotions in these men represent the degree to which they are psychically invested in their conventional identities. The reader may wonder if Virginia thought men were especially disposed toward investing their identities in society as her father and brother did, or that men are simply inept when it comes to understanding emotions. This seems doubtful however for many reasons, but primarily because Virginia had such an acute understanding of the complexity involved in personality. Also, one might cite the great pressure Victorian men faced to become particular and consistent, logical or useful, social contributors: “Every one of our male relations was shot into that [patriarchal] machine at the age of ten and emerged at sixty a Head Master, an Admiral, . . .” (153). We may also cite Bernard’s psychological acumen and self-awareness in *The Waves* as evidence of Virginia’s open mindedness toward men on this issue.

Now, to sum up, consider the following statement made by Deleuze and Guattari: “Hitler got the fascists sexually aroused” (*Anti-Oedipus*, 293). Hitler managed to win people’s identities similar to the way that Victorian society claimed Leslie and George’s, which opened the people to committing all manner of abuse. What we seem to find here is that Virginia’s nature (and identity) kept her consciously aware of her relationship to society, where her brother and father had no such awareness.⁴ As proof of this we need but recall how quickly Virginia’s feeling of nationalism dissipated under the scrutiny of her several selves. Of course, Virginia was born that way, but she also exerted a significant effort to maintain her independence from society, and precisely as an identity (or lack thereof).

It seems probable that Virginia’s identity was more flexible than most—as Julia Kristeva would say, Virginia was a “subject in process,” as we all are, but with an internally referential identity. Hermione Lee quotes Virginia: “A self that goes on changing is a self that goes on living.” (11). Jeanne Schulkind expresses a similar understanding in her introduction to *Moments of Being*. There is something unique about Virginia—the insight she gained from her shocks, which drove her to be who she was, and helped her be more aware than her father and brother were. The shocks in

themselves did not make Virginia unique in her own eyes (Schulkind 20), but the important point is how Virginia used the shocks as a groundwork for her own identity. This is what I've just called an "internally referential" identity: an identity based largely on self-knowledge that refers to internal criteria like Virginia's conception, which has to do with Virginia's nature as a person, not society. Also, we seem to have uncovered a peculiar dynamism in identity, as identity can be both controlling of a person and fostered by a person depending on who it is. In George's case identity seems to have been nearly an agent in itself, considering that he was so oblivious to it. Conversely, Virginia seems to have intentionally undermined her own identity independent of her inevitable shocks.

"Internal referentiality" is a term I first encountered in Anthony Giddens' book *Modernity and Self-Identity*; however, the term does not have the same meaning. For Giddens, one's internally referential identity is still contingent upon external criteria like "lifestyle" or society, in order to form a "narrative" of the self (see pages 80-82). However, as in Virginia's case, the internally referential identity is grounded primarily on one's own nature (for instance, the "shocks"), which problematizes any narrative of the self. Virginia, rather than falling back on a self-restrictive narrative of who she was, instead approached situations open-endedly and self-critically, as she did with her nationalism. We might venture to say that because Virginia did not have many definite ideas of who she was, she was, as a result, more open to seeing things for what they were. This is because Virginia didn't need always to affirm her own identity against all other identities—and identity itself was problematic.

The most interesting result of our theory, thus far, can be formulated as a question: is a fixed (narrative), externally referential identity to be associated with abuse? or, with violence?

Part II: No Difference to Her

[. . .] there being literally no place for violence to exercise its sovereignty over subjects [. . .] who no longer exist. (115)

—Andrew J. McKenna

Now we have a theory that shows how people whose identities are (arbitrarily) contingent upon external variables may be predisposed toward abusiveness. The strength of this theory lies in Virginia's observations, and

our absolute conviction that we have not botched our own reasoning. Let us compare our conclusions with an argument by Andrew J. McKenna in his book *Violence and Difference*.

McKenna argues that there is a structural parallel between René Girard's theory of sacrificial violence and Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction and the "victimary status of the letter" (37). This structural parallel is realized by examining how a violent sacrifice is paramount in both theories. In Girard there is a literal human sacrifice (of the scapegoat), whereby mimetic desire is interrupted in primitive societies by the miraculous appearance of the sacred. In Derrida the letter is sacrificed, creating a "differance," which makes logocentric philosophy possible. Regarding this sacrifice, McKenna reasons that "The effect on human bodies is disproportionate to that on dead letters—indeed, incommensurate—but the structure of the operation is the same. If this is not mere coincidence, a fluke, it is a warrant for the victimary hypothesis as a unified theory of cultural institutions, philosophy among them" (37). McKenna ventures that if the structure of the sacrificial "operation" is the same in both Derrida and Girard, then the resulting "unified theory" could explain cultural institutions and philosophy. But what is this structural affinity? As an example McKenna uses Molière's comedy "Le Bourgeois gentilhomme," which portrays both mimetic violence (Girard) and the inclusion of philosophy into the mimetic phenomenon, which indicates that philosophy partakes of a sacrificial violence of the letter. The scene proceeds thus: Three men are arguing about the worth of their respective professions until a philosopher is entreated to resolve which profession is properly the highest. The philosopher declares that reason is the highest faculty; thus, he proclaims himself the man with the highest profession and reduces himself to the level of the other men by mimesis. Having been insulted, and conforming to Girard's theory of mimetic desire, the three men attack the philosopher.

The philosopher became both the physical example of Girard's theory of violence and the symbolic example of philosophy's violence on the letter. The structural affinity between theories is evident in the fact that in both instances there was a "mystified expulsion" (33) of the scapegoat, where the philosopher physically became the scapegoat (subject of violence) and philosophy became the symbolic scapegoat. "Philosophy presumes to speak from outside a difference within which it is compromised; it is but a mark within what it claims to demarcate; the claims of consciousness and order

are prey to the unconscious, destructuring violence of mimesis" (5). What concerns us here is the way in which humans' mimetic nature is offered as the cause of violence in Molière's play. Rather than outlining a theory of mimesis, we may simply note that Girard's theory rests on a concept of mimetic, metaphysical desire (22) and Derrida's theory rests on textual analysis. From these theories we are led to derive conclusions about how Molière's play is thoroughly aimed at deconstructing difference.

Yet, where does our own theory (Virginia's theory really) fit into this entanglement about difference, mimesis and violence? Well, the three men in the play were initially experiencing "appropriative" mimesis during their argument as each claimed "ascendancy." Then, the philosopher was pulled into the mimetic flow by his own desire, whereupon the mimetic "crisis of indifferentiation" caused all four men to get violent. What happens with mimesis is the loss of difference or identity (35). Therefore, our theory may prove useful in demonstrating why mimesis and violence are linked, since our suspicion is that abusive or violent actions can result from a person's need to maintain a separate identity. Our conclusion here is that the encultured self experiences an egoistic fear over losing its identity, which finally brings Girard's mimetic process to violence, since indifferentiation prompts violence and the appearance of the sacred (15).⁵ Violence, in turn, reestablishes difference among a group of people or within a society by expelling the scapegoat. We will say the "encultured self" to designate a self that emerges after "representation," in keeping with McKenna's argument, since we don't want to say that identity is the motivation propelling mimesis itself, only that identity emerges later (in the symbolic order) as a motive for cultural participants. For example: "the self, ego, or self-consciousness, as the consciousness of a self that desires (Gans, *The Origin* 50), is not at the origin of representation, but is its by-product" (78).

The notion of mimesis here dominating a conversation may seem fantastic; however, the idea is not new. For instance, Makiko Minow-Pinkney essentially stated the connection linking identity and mimesis when she related Virginia's use of rhythmic repetition and her "bisexuality" to psychoanalysis: "The compulsion to *repeat* is an ungovernable process in the unconscious" (italics mine, 165), which opens us to all the possible "sources of signification" (164). We will return to this point later, but it is essential to note that Virginia sets mimetism to use in *The Waves*, where she "gives the reins to the 'discourse' of the unconscious" (166).

The process that leads from humans' mimetic nature to both actual and symbolic violence goes like this: three men are arguing about the superiority of their respective professions, where each man is being unconsciously duped by mimesis in such a way that the men's identities are threatened by the argument. Thus, what began as a mimetic crisis of indifferentiation literally becomes an argument about which man is the true man—the one who exists within the cultural or linguistic circle of meaningful identity. Then a philosopher enters the scene who is expected to hold the key to identity, since he is the man of reason. However, the philosopher is equally drawn into the crisis, whereupon it becomes evident that he is no different than the others. (This is a mimetic crisis or a crisis of indifferentiation.) Finally, the three men attack the philosopher, expelling him as the victim outside the circle of meaningful identity. The three men regain their place in identity by perpetrating an act of violence on the philosopher by victimizing him and relegating him to the realm of non-meaning. In sum, because the men identified with their professions, their identities were directly threatened when a mimetic crisis deconstructed the difference between their professions. Perhaps this is what McKenna was getting at when he noted that, "Here the unconscious is structured not, as Jacques Lacan avers, like a language, with its differentiating functions, but rather, as Philippe Sollers quips in *To Honor René Girard*, like a lynching (192)" (5). That is, unconscious mimesis deconstructs differences that identities depend on—we might call them ego identities, of a sort that are contingent upon binaries like inside/outside or true/false. Mimesis indifferentiates differences that the ego depends on. Hence we have an unconscious lynching, the ultimate result of which is violence.

Let us bring Virginia's story back now for a comparison. We recall how Leslie would be regularly provoked into "violent displays of rage" and George would "run through an astonishing range of emotions" over such inane things as parties. We determined that these unfavorable, rather abusive emotional reactions were inextricably tied to Victorian conventionality. What this has to do with ego identity or attachment is evident in Virginia's descriptions. For instance, Leslie's rage "was never indulged in before men" (145). Virginia continues:

Why then had he no shame in thus indulging his rage before women? Partly of course because woman was then (though guilt with an angelic surface) the slave. But that does not explain the histrionic element in

these displays; the breast beating, the groaning, the self-dramatization. His dependence on women helps to explain that. He needed always some woman to act before; to sympathise with him, to console him (“He is one of those men who cannot live without us,” Aunt Mary whispered to me once. [. . .] Why did he need them? Because he was conscious of his failure as a philosopher”) (145).

It should be reasonably clear how Leslie was using certain women in his life for the scapegoat—reminiscent of the victimized philosopher. In order for Leslie to feel secure in his identity, especially given his philosophical failure, he needed to banish certain Others, certain women from the realm of meaningful identity, so that he might continue to “be” one who is, to be himself. And this would work when the women “sympathized” with him and “consoled” him, thus effectively accepting their feminine role as “other.” These women suffered a sort of violence literally, but also symbolically regardless of whether or not they agreed to play the role of victim.

As Virginia well knew, the place of woman in society was to be the victim, a cultural (symbolic) victim; woman was “the slave.” We should not however confuse this victimization or scapegoating with Girard’s anthropological “originary victim,” which is quite a different matter that came temporally prior to the victimization in Virginia’s story. In keeping with McKenna’s thesis, we find that the “economy” of symbolic victimization, which Virginia described, has its origin in Girard’s anthropological theory of violence. This economy then continues to function culturally according to Derrida’s theory of symbolization (in conjunction with Eric Gans’ theory of representation). Thus, the violence McKenna describes, both literal and symbolic, manifested in the persons of Leslie and George, with their egotistical self-involvement and their arbitrary (violent) enforcement of the I/other binary at the level of identity. In Virginia’s example, Leslie literally expelled women from identity as cultural victims because he was insecure about his own identity. Women however were not cast out of identity altogether, as they too held a position within society, albeit a rather ambiguous one. Thus, women were not exempt from scapegoating either. What we are describing here is what McKenna calls an economy of symbols, where language functions to defer real violence within a society by establishing difference (93, 97). Put simply, we can interpret Leslie and George’s selfish egotism under a structural framework: society functions by

virtue of difference and symbolic violence. To insure their positions within society as meaningful identities, Leslie and George felt compelled to act out difference largely by scapegoating women.

Our conclusion about Leslie and George is quite relevant if we compare the consequences of that theory with those of McKenna's thesis. Consider, for instance, McKenna's statement that nuclear war is the ultimate result of "mimetism," which is "the key to cultural interpretation" (109). McKenna's argument is that mimetic desire is channeled into language, since language makes difference and identity proliferate. However, mimetic rivalry is not ended, only deferred by language, and "As this rivalry intensifies, violence itself becomes the object of desire" (McKenna paraphrasing Derrida, 108). This is the mechanism by which we find ourselves today threatened by nuclear war. Mimetic rivalry then is the cause of human history (109), which ultimately reduces to violence rather than the search for peace: "Peace among men, it is important to note, is not the object of desire, not by any stretch of the historical, political, or sociological imagination. Nothing unites a community, with all the good fellowship and cooperation one can imagine, like the external threat of a common enemy" (131). By "enemy" McKenna means scapegoat. The relevant idea we are to grasp here is that mimetism causes violence and the need for identity; culture serves to maintain identity, but it does not eliminate violence. McKenna introduces Derrida's analysis of Rousseau (67) to show how Rousseau's attempt at "original self-definition" is linked to "definitive violence" on his part (68). Furthermore:

Rousseau's inflated imagination of himself as sacrificial victim and foundation of social cohesion strongly suggests that his skewed ontology, as analyzed by Derrida, recapitulates Girard's sociology. This is not surprising, for Rousseau's undisputed contribution to theory is the ethical superiority he claims for the victim. (82)

McKenna uses the discussion of Rousseau to show how Rousseau imagined himself the victim of society, and yet he went on to claim ethical superiority for himself and to enact a definitive violence through his writings, claiming identity as uniquely his own. What he didn't realize was his own violence—his mimetic nature and the symbolic violence his identity depended on. Rousseau was heir to the very violence that victimized him; yet he denied it (113). This is what Girard says the "modern mind" still

cannot grasp about itself—notably in the fact that religion took the blame for a violence that belongs to us all: “[Sir James] Frazer, along with his rationalist colleagues and disciples, was perpetually engaged in a ritualistic expulsion and consummation of religion itself, which he used as a sort of scapegoat for all human thought” (317).

Finally, McKenna argues for a philosophy and society that do not depend on scapegoating and can recognize their own inherent evil or violence without projecting violence as Rousseau did. We need a theory that “focuses on the victim as an irreducible referent” (129) coupled with a society that “defines our moral and cognitive imperative as averting scapegoating” (139). McKenna argues that we must ultimately come to recognize our own violence rather than blame it on someone else. And we will add to his case that personal identity forming ultimately depends on violence, be it symbolic or literal, as in hate crimes. The reason for this is that modern identity rests on a complex economy of signs, where personal safety is dependent on violent origins. But as we might guess from Gans’ arguments, the great ego need in modern society—the need to keep the ego safe—derives from symbolic “distribution of the desire-object” particularly in high culture (*End of Civilization*, 47), where the ego is balanced atop a complex “exchange-system.” (If we continued to appropriate Gans’ reasoning, we would need to give a historical account of the ego—how ego develops culturally as a byproduct of desire and the “need to be different”). Anyway, what we are calling “ego identity” derives from violence.

Now we are prepared to make a deep structural connection between Leslie and George’s violence and the violence of identity. These two men had an excessive need to enact symbolic violence because their identities depended on it; yet that same need for identity is what culminates in economic and nuclear competitions between nations themselves. (“Economic competition (sic) is ruled by mimetic desire” (McKenna 106).) Virginia thought World War II was a “man-made” war (Minow-Pinkney 176). Indeed, if we interpret modern war as resulting from mimetic rivalry, culminating in individual, paranoid need for distinct identity, then WWII was essentially a man’s war, initiated by men whose identities were by definition contingent upon the symbolism of their respective societies—respective “clans” might provide a better image. However, for a person like Virginia, to whom identity was not the seat of judgment, war would have been unthinkable, in fact insane. After all, Virginia was a pacifist, and “In a key passage in *Three Guineas*, Woolf links the oppression of patriarchy

with that of the fascist dictators” (Briggs 82). All this because if we do not believe in the efficacy of our society, then who are we? How should we act? What do we think? By what rationale do we conclude that killing people is the best thing to do? Regarding the relationship of this point (this indecision) to law, McKenna quoted Elizabeth Young-Bruehl’s *Hanna Arendt*, since Arendt has succinctly delineated the matter: “For conscience to work: either very strong religious belief—extremely rare. Or: pride, even arrogance. If you say to yourself in such matters: who am I to judge—you are already lost” (165). This was a real problem for Virginia during the war (Briggs 82).

The idea implicit in Arendt’s words is that justice is contingent, since it is inextricably bound up with the self. Arendt may just as well have been speaking about a logical impasse that Virginia faced because she did not believe in society. George and Leslie, on the other hand, were arrogant in their unheeding demand for personal significance, their trenchant faith in identity at the expense of personal relationships. Virginia was boggled by George’s lack of imagination; she wondered, “how could anyone believe what George believed?” (154). Illness is another example of how the self confounds rationality. Virginia described illness in terms of indecision, senselessness, and mysticism in order to evoke the paradox of illness to reason. Illness shows how the body can undermine reason, not to mention identity, since “The ill have dropped out of the army of workers and become deserters” (Lee xxvi). The ill are errant personalities who can sense a certain absurdity in the notion of “progress.” Virginia wrote in *On Being Ill* of the silence of reason with regards to the problem of illness, which is necessary considering that for reason to reign supreme, madness had to be expelled from the “cogito as language” (McKenna 48). Consider the following:

People write always of the doings of the mind; the thoughts that come to it; its noble plans; how the mind has civilized the universe. They show it ignoring the body in the philosophers turret; [. . .]. Those great wars which the body wages with the mind a slave to it, in the solitude of the bedroom against the assault of fever or the oncome of melancholia, *are neglected*. Nor is the reason far to seek. To look these things squarely in the face would need the courage of a lion tamer; a robust philosophy; a reason rooted in the bowels of the earth. (Italics mine, 5)

We are beginning to see Virginia in a new light: she spoke from the position of the victim but, unlike Rousseau, she rejected identity and claimed no superiority. Virginia was eminently more progressive than Rousseau because to her the victim was a viewpoint rather than an identity. This partly explains why Virginia wanted to write as—to be nothing more than—a “sensibility” in *The Waves* (Minow-Pinkney 162), where the identities of her characters blur and overlap. Characteristic of “feminine writing,” Virginia was able to step outside of society in order to gain a more critical purchase on it (Briggs 83), not so much for the purpose of defining herself as for understanding what she was not. This idea coincides with the notion that feminine writing is about the other rather than the self (Sellers 118) and why Virginia left much of the meaning open-ended in her writings. For Virginia there was no absolute judgment. We might derive a principle from Virginia’s case in support of McKenna’s plea for a society that can see through the eyes of the victim (see especially pages 126-133 in McKenna): those who can adopt the victim’s viewpoint without claiming it for themselves will realize the ambiguous nature of the self, that what they are is a mystery, but what they are not is usually certain. And they will say, “I have seen what the victim sees, though, “I” am not the victim, yet sometimes I may be a persecutor.”

None of this should be taken to imply that Virginia’s morality was failing her. Virginia herself serves as an example of the moral superiority of the open identity to tradition. Just compare Virginia to Leslie, George, or, perhaps, even Joan of Arc. Why Joan of Arc? Because she went to war—but this is not meant to be a proof, only a thought experiment. Though Virginia’s understanding of her moral self was not grounded in any abstract system, nevertheless she did adhere to a sort of ethic-in-process just as we all do (see Gans 50-51). In *The End of Culture*, Eric Gans argues that ethics must be reformulated continually as an “open” system as the “exchange-system” moves beyond the limitations of ritual practice (see especially pages 50, 51, and 302). To be sure, if ethical systems are evolving, so must be the self as well.

Hopefully it is clear now that the only identity capable of maintaining contemporaneous affinity with (post)modern morality is the open, self-reflexive identity we found in Virginia Woolf. This goes back to our illustration of the active/passive situation of identity, because we find that people who are not consciously engaging with their identities are easily led to violence (including that of patriarchy). Virginia seems to have

been quite aware of this, and we are, more or less, saying the same thing that Freud said in *Civilization and Its Discontents* and Jung said in *The Undiscovered Self*; namely, that civilization is going to be in trouble if we do not start paying more attention to the unconscious. “[. . .] the inclination to aggression is an original, self-subsisting instinctual disposition in man, and I return to my view [p.69] that it constitutes the greatest impediment to civilization” (Freud 81).

Notes

¹ This is not implying that an idea (the conception) is responsible for all of a person's actions. What is unique in Virginia's case is how she makes use of her conception and the fundamentals of her nature as a person. We might say that Virginia's conception chooses her as she chooses it, which is something to keep in mind throughout the essay.

² We hear a strikingly similar self-description from pages 3-8 in (the structural anthropologist) Claude Lévi-Strauss' book *Myth and Meaning*: “Each of us is a kind of crossroads where things happen. The crossroads is purely passive” (4). “Probably there is something deep in my own mind, which makes it likely that I always was what is now being called a structuralist.” (8).

³ The reader may wish to read an entertaining discussion of this topic in Julia Kristeva's book *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, especially pages 66-68, where Kristeva explains Westerners' conviction that they can “convey the mother.” I think Leslie and George represent typical cases—of identity at all costs. Is this not one of the perennial causes of patriarchal oppression? A feeling of dread, followed by denial, of which many are unconscious. Dread corresponds to an unconscious recognition of the frailty of the symbolic order; denial corresponds to a refusal to endanger one's psychic position within the symbolic. In Andrew McKenna's argument, this is precisely what witnesses of the Holocaust must face about themselves if they are to bear honest witness to the victims (See *Violence and Difference* 137). Also, thinking along, I wonder how much Virginia's “depression” might have been due to her rational resistance of definitions and identities, which, considering her society, must have added stress to her psychic life.

⁴ Although, Virginia's father did have “moments of realization” on occasion (146).

⁵ The word “sacred” here has a dual meaning, referring to a perceived manifestation of the sacred in primitive societies and to a psychic effect of the economy of representation in advanced societies. However, for our purposes only the latter will be significant, since we are talking about modern society.

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