

“BUT THIS IS WHAT I SEE; THIS IS WHAT I SEE”: RE-IMAGINING GENDERED
SUBJECTIVITY THROUGH THE WOMAN ARTIST IN PHELPS, JOHNSTONE, AND
WOOLF

by

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ABSTRACT

Since the publication of Laura Mulvey's influential article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in which she identifies the pervasive presence of the male gaze in Hollywood cinema, scholars have sought to account for the female spectator in her paradigm of gendered vision. This thesis suggests that women writers have long debated the problem of the female spectator through literary depictions of the female artist. Women writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—including Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Edith Johnstone, and Virginia Woolf—recognized the power of the woman artist to undermine the trope of the male gazing subject and a passive female object. Examining Phelps's *The Story of Avis* (1877), Johnstone's *A Sunless Heart* (1894), and Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) illustrates how the woman artist's active vision disrupts Mulvey's "active/male and passive/female" binary of vision. Phelps's painter-heroine Avis destabilizes the power of the male gaze not only by exerting her own vision, but also by acting as an active object to manipulate the way she is seen. Johnstone uses artist Gasparine to demonstrate the dangers of vision shaped by either aesthetic or political conventions, suggesting that even feminist idealism can promote the objectification of its heroines. Finally, Woolf redefines the terms of objectification through painter Lily Briscoe, whose vision imbues material objects with subjectivity, thereby going beyond the boundaries between male and female to blur the distinction between subject and object. Through their novels, Phelps, Johnstone, and Woolf suggest that depictions of human experience need to be radically re-thought in order to adequately represent the complexity of subjectivity.

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INTRODUCTION

Such she often felt herself—struggling against terrific odds to maintain her courage; to say: ‘But this is what I see; this is what I see,’ and so to clasp some miserable remnant of her vision to her breast, which a thousand forces did their best to pluck from her. (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 19)

Lily Briscoe’s protestations in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* succinctly illustrate the problem of being a woman who sees. As Lily’s desperation suggests, the turn-of-the-century woman faced many virulent forces attempting to pluck away her vision—including deeply ingrained gender ideology, limited opportunities for women outside the domestic sphere, the all-consuming demands of marriage and motherhood, and culturally-conditioned dismissal of women’s artistic activity. Long configured as the passive object of the male gaze, women have sought to create a place for themselves as viewers, rather than the viewed. Yet Laura Mulvey suggests that gendered politics of vision persist in modern Hollywood film in her well-known essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” Describing the roles assigned to men and women in film, Mulvey explains that in her interpretation, woman “stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning” (19). Mulvey’s dichotomous discussion of the gaze can help explain the panic Lily Briscoe expresses in the epigraph; if the only plausible position for women to take is that of “passively inspiring muse” (Heilmann 160), then the creative woman necessarily feels her vision threatened.

Female vision presented a fraught topic of discussion long before Mulvey wrote her analysis, yet Mulvey’s work provides a useful framework for examining how the “active/male and passive/female” dynamic of visual pleasure occurs in literature as well as film (19). The

figure of the female artist complicates this formulation—most obviously by acting as an active subject of the gaze, but also, as I will demonstrate later, by reclaiming and redefining her role as an object. In this thesis, I examine the way that subjectivity is interrogated and problematized through the role of the woman artist in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *The Story of Avis* (1877), Edith Johnstone's *A Sunless Heart* (1894), and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927).

Mulvey is frequently criticized for not accounting for the role of the female spectator, a problem evidenced by her neglect of the disruptive force of the woman artist in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. While Mulvey analyzes the way that Kim Novak's character Madeleine is isolated and fetishized by the male gaze, she neglects to discuss the problematic position of Jimmy Stewart's sidekick Midge when she attempts to exercise the gaze for herself. Having noticed Stewart's character Scottie paying especial attention to a painting at a local museum, Midge reproduces the painting, inserting herself as the female figure. Upon first sight of the painting, Scottie recoils in horror, ostensibly because of Midge's gross misinterpretation of his fascination with the painting. Scottie's true horror, however, seems to arise from several realizations: one, that Midge, despite being a woman, is capable of being an active subject of the gaze; two, that he, despite being a man, is vulnerable to becoming an object of the gaze; three, that Midge is not a passive, but rather an active object of the gaze; and four, that she can act as both object and subject simultaneously.

Midge's uncanny replication of the painting reveals that she had at some point gazed at Scottie while he was looking at this portrait, thus leaving him with the unsettling feeling of having been watched without his knowledge. Midge's transposition of her own portrait for the female figure's also suggests her ability to manipulate the way that she is seen. Her humorous

substitution of her own face forces Scottie to realize that the object of one's gaze is not necessarily fixed and passive, but rather can be malleable and active. She destabilizes his understanding of visual power by both undermining his role as the sole subject of the gaze and by subverting his notion of his control over what he sees. By simultaneously seeing and choosing how she is seen, Midge abruptly unhinges Scottie's monopoly over the visual realm. Seemingly punished for her deviant exercising of the gaze, Midge conveniently disappears from the narrative of *Vertigo*—and Mulvey almost facilitates her disappearance by excluding her from her discussion.¹

Mulvey's influential critique of the way in which "cinematic codes create a gaze" (25) has facilitated myriad critical discussions of the way gendered vision has been constructed, and her ideas have been applied not only to cinema, but also art history and literature. Feminist film theorists Mary Ann Doane, Teresa de Lauretis, E. Ann Kaplan, and Jackie Stacey all address the politics of the gaze, each asking a version of Doane's question, "what, then, of the female spectator?" (77). Doane resolves this problem by observing two options for female viewers: a masochistic masculinized viewing position, or a narcissistic masquerade of femininity.² De Lauretis unites these two experiences by suggesting that the female spectator experiences a "double identification" with both the active male viewer and the passive female object. Mulvey herself addresses the role of the female spectator in a later article, suggesting that just as the male audience member identifies with the male protagonist in film, so does the female viewer become

¹ While other scholars analyze *Vertigo* in order to deconstruct Mulvey's argument, they too eliminate Midge from their discussions, either ignoring the subversiveness of her vision, or dismissing her as an asexual mother figure (Keane, Modleski, Wood).

² Susan Gubar also offers a performative femininity as a possible outlet for the creative woman, but she seems more pessimistic than Doane about its potential for creating agency.

“masculinized” (“Afterthoughts” 29). While this addendum may begin to address the problem of the female spectator, Mulvey nevertheless maintains the assumption that the act of gazing is gendered male.³ Kaplan questions this assumption by wondering, “is the gaze *necessarily* male?” (24), a thought that Stacey echoes by noting that “feminist film criticism has, on the whole, failed to address the possible homoerotic pleasures for the female spectator” (27). As Stacey observes, scholars have examined film’s disorienting potential in inviting female viewers to identify with the male gaze, but critics have not fully explored the implications of a female viewer who takes pleasure in looking at other women. In discussing the role of the female spectator in film, these scholars engage in a long-standing debate about female subjectivity that traces back far before Mulvey’s essay was published.

Art historians engage in this debate over female subjectivity as well, demonstrating the gendered politics of the gaze not in film, but in paintings. Griselda Pollock recognizes that “there is, of course, an active/passive division within the economy of the visual.” She qualifies this statement by suggesting, “the problem is that we too easily map that division absolutely on to masculine and feminine positions which are then equated with social men and women” (“The Gaze and the Look” 113). As a way of questioning gendered viewing positions Pollock analyzes a sketch by Degas that depicts a woman peering directly at the viewer through a pair of binoculars. Stephen Kern also questions Mulvey’s dynamic of active/male and passive/female, suggesting that Mulvey’s argument oversimplifies the gendered politics of vision and “cannot be supported by the evidence of art history” (14). Male artists depict female eyes with added detail,

³ Other scholars posit a similar explanation for the female spectator’s experience, including Kenneth Mackinnon and Linda Huf. Conversely, Tamar Garb argues that Victorian audiences experienced anxiety not over the masculinization of the female artist, but rather over the implicit feminization of the male model through his passive role as the object of the female artist’s gaze (619).

Kern argues, making female subjectivity central to the composition of the painting, and granting the female model more power than traditional theories of the male gaze would allow. While Kern perhaps allots too much power to the women in the paintings (after all, how much agency can a frozen model or a framed image ultimately have?), he engages in an important discussion about the limitations of Mulvey's thesis.

A painting by Emily Mary Osborn proves a frequent site of discussion for scholars to analyze gendered constructions of vision and artistic production. Osborn's painting *Nameless and Friendless* (1857), which depicts a woman artist showing her canvas to a male gallery owner, visually represents the female artist's vexed position as both subject and object of the gaze. Marsha Meskimmon explains, "the meaning of the work relies on the paradox of woman as subject and object; viewers must at once be aware of the central figure as an object seen (of the dangerous and unpleasant objectification of woman) and as a subject who sees, a creative female agent, an artist" (75). Dennis Denisoff elaborates on the central figure's paradoxical position, suggesting:

the heroine, by entering the public art world, has invited their exploitation of what Laura Mulvey famously dubbed women's "to-be-looked-at-ness." It is as if, by demonstrating agency, the character has proclaimed no need for the protective cover of bourgeois respectability, thereby demanding to be viewed as an "unnatural" woman, a woman with masculine attributes of ambition, confidence, and self-determination. (27)

Denisoff extends Mulvey's theory of masculinization from the gaze to the artist, demonstrating that the Victorians conceived of the artist as a necessarily male occupation. Interestingly,

however, the female artist's assumption of a male role does not mean that she is no longer an object of the gaze; rather, she becomes even more explicitly an object of fascination because of her choice to ignore prescribed gender roles.⁴ However, as I will argue later, the woman artist's recognition and manipulation of this status as an object can become a form of agency.

Mulvey's paradigm is problematized by female spectators in literature as well as art history, and Midge's dangerous visual agency finds its precedent in characters such as George Eliot's Gwendolyn Harleth in *Daniel Deronda* (1878), who is punished perhaps even more severely than Midge for her subversive sight. Deronda's discomfort with Harleth's bold, unapologetic gaze that meets his in the opening of the novel, his professed vulnerability under its power, and his vilification of its subject reveals Victorian culture's deep-seated assumptions and anxieties about vision, gender, and power. These anxieties pervade the novel, which explores what Kate Flint describes as the "sexualised energy and exchange involved in the act of men and women looking at each other, assessing each other, acknowledging the workings of fascination and compulsion and curiosity when eyes meet or the directions of their looking fail to coincide" (252). When Gwendolyn Harleth returns Deronda's gaze, she refuses to play the role of the passive female, and the hegemonic power of male vision is subverted, leading Deronda to conclude that it must be "evil genius" that he sees in her eyes (3).⁵

Gwendolyn Harleth is not the only female figure in literature to be accused of having evil genius in her eyes, however. Because she critiques the passivity of the female model in a

⁴ See Deborah Cherry (78-81) for a continued discussion of Osborn's painting.

⁵ See Beth Newman for a more extended discussion of vision and subjectivity in *Daniel Deronda*. She suggests that in the novel, acknowledging one's position as an object of the gaze is empowering because it makes one aware of "positions unavailable to oneself." Thus, she argues, the gaze "involves a disruption of the subject's sense of self as a whole, centered on its own consciousness, and grounded in the certainty exemplified by 'I think, therefore I am.' It activates the sense of lack already constituting subjectivity" (11).

painting of Cleopatra, Lucy Snowe of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853) is also often cited as a subverter of the male gaze. Deborah Cherry argues that in the novel, "Charlotte Brontë locates the activities of spectatorship and the practices of visual representation securely within the social production of difference," and she explains that "the novel can be located in the considerable debates around *woman's look*" (113). Female vision may have been a particularly troubling topic for Victorian culture, but this problematization of the gazing woman is not limited to nineteenth-century England. The dangerous female viewer traces her heritage to ancient Greece and Mesopotamia; in the Old Testament, Lot's wife is turned into a pillar of salt as punishment for her wandering eyes when she looks back at the destruction of Sodom and Gomorra (Gen. 19.26). In Greek mythology, Cassandra's power of prophetic vision is deflated by Apollo's curse that she never be believed. Perhaps the most potent and ubiquitous image of subversive female vision, however, is that of Medusa, whose Gorgon gaze turns men to stone. The nineteenth-century imagination intentionally invoked the image of Medusa, according to Linda Lewis, who explains that "among nineteenth-century British women writers the Medusa is a recurring figure, as is the fascinating woman whose 'identity' is created by the male gaze" (204). As a metaphor for female artistic production, the Medusa myth suggests that "the female artist affirms her sexual power but also smites her male admirer, leaving him stunned, mesmerized, and impotent" (Lewis 206).

The prevalence of the Medusa myth as a metaphor for female creativity demonstrates the perceived disruptiveness of the woman artist's gaze. Antonia Losano explains, "for female writers, the figure of the female painter serves as a kind of Foucauldian 'dense transfer point' of power relations to engage with and intervene in the symbolic economies of gender" (2), and

creates “a figure for radical female subjectivity, at once engaged in the production, reception, and judgment of art” (16). This figure of radical female subjectivity may have been a powerful image for female writers, but it was also an image of subverted power relations. Denisoff explains that “the predominant conviction that men were both naturally and culturally better suited than women to artistic professions led society to configure a woman who attempted to infiltrate the hegemony as a sexually deviant, masculine threat” (19). The Medusa image then becomes a convenient way of vilifying women who dared claim the artistic gaze.

Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century women struggled not only in attempting to become a subject of the gaze, but also in their position as object of the gaze. The female artist refuses to fit neatly into Mulvey’s paradigm because she simultaneously deploys the gaze and remains an object of it. While her artwork may be an intentional object of the gaze, she herself may also become an unintentional object of the gaze, as White explains, the “commodification of the female image in the service of the marriage market subverts women’s art: the woman herself is transformed from observer to observed, from subject to object” (17).

Not only does the female artist act as both an active subject and an object, but she also gazes as both a woman and as an artist. Whereas Kern insists that the artist’s gaze is not ultimately sexual (27), the amount of anxiety surrounding the female artist suggests nineteenth-century audiences may not have so readily accepted such a distinction. The female artist’s perceived affront to masculinity—discussed by Garb and Denisoff—suggests Victorians conflated the desiring woman’s gaze with the discerning artist’s gaze. Though this generalization may trivialize female artistic achievement by romanticizing the artist’s vision, the simultaneous aesthetic and sexual power of the gaze grants the female artist a potent subjectivity. Thus, the

figure of the female artist, according to Deborah Barker, served as a compelling image for female writers because it “provided women writers with a way to represent themselves as both women and artists, rather than simply assuming that the two were, and always would be, mutually exclusive” (24). Though it may be easy—and not altogether inappropriate—to assume that writing the female visual artist was a way for women to vent their grievances about the inequality of gender roles, Losano warns that “it is an oversimplification to see the painter-heroine as a mere fictional double for the woman writer” (7). Instead, Losano argues that “descriptions of women’s paintings by women writers are rather an attempt to consolidate female power” (12).

By subverting, questioning, and destabilizing the binaries of gendered gazing, the female artist in literature forces the reader to recognize his or her role in the visual power dynamics of the text. Applying Mulvey’s ideas to the work of Eliot and Henry James, Patricia Johnson argues that “by analogy, in written narrative, the gaze can operate from a multitude of positions: narrator (camera), reader (audience), and characters. As Mulvey goes on to suggest, in film these various positions can be subordinated to one monolithic gaze or they can be broken down to operate simultaneously or in tension with one another” (3). By drawing attention to the multiple positions from which one can see or be seen, writers are able to fragment the monolithic gaze in favor of a fluid subjectivity. The gaze of the female artist, by resisting categorization and playing with the power relationships of seeing, puts the reader’s preconceptions on display. The reader is displaced from the secure, voyeuristic position as spectator and forced to confront his or her perceptions of the politics of vision.

Female writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—including Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Edith Johnstone, and Virginia Woolf—recognized the power of the woman artist both to disrupt the reader’s sense of visual control and to undermine the binary of a male gazing subject and a passive female object. Their novels follow the lives of female painters, enabling them to question essentialist views of gendered subjectivity. “Employing the *Künstlerroman* as a vehicle,” Lewis elaborates, “gifted women speculated upon whether one’s gender contributes to or detracts from art, and whether genius is sexed. . . . They wondered about the female artist’s mesmerizing power over her male audience and whether her artistry should—or could—be judged apart from her sexual charms” (249). While Phelps, Johnstone, and Woolf all respond to their contemporaries’ debates about women’s roles, their projects are not exclusively polemical; rather than simply propagating a feminist agenda, these writers attempt to reconfigure the way subjectivity is imagined, inviting readers to be conscious about the way vision mediates daily experience. Because the female artist occupies both the subject and the object position, she reminds us that gazing always takes place from many different positions simultaneously. Visual communication, then, begins to “reverberate with more than one language” (Cixous 885) as the barrier between subject and object is broken down.

As a means of further dismantling the dichotomy between subject and object, I turn to Slavoj Žižek’s discussion of subjectivity to address Phelps’s, Johnstone’s, and Woolf’s depictions of the woman artist. Reading these writers’ novels through the lens of Žižek’s analysis helps to illuminate how these women re-imagined the power dynamics of subject and object. Žižek’s work is particularly useful because he offers a possible solution to what he calls the “inescapable deadlock” of unequal subject relations (103). While projecting fantasies may be

pleasurable, Žižek suggests that realizing you are the object of them is not; he claims that terror ensues when “the subject . . . is horrified at the prospect of being reduced in the eyes of the Other to *objet a*” (92). This claim perhaps partially explains why the woman artist became such a subversive figure in the nineteenth century; her gaze was a vivid reminder that women, too, have the power to objectify. Žižek’s analysis illustrates the problem with objectification; another subject is always there to objectify you in return. He suggests, however, that if the object of love “stretch[es] out his hand towards the loving one,” through this reversal he can “subjectivize” himself, allowing for the possibility of “two loving subjects” rather than a loving subject and a loved object (103, 104). This is a possibility I believe Phelps, Johnstone, and Woolf begin to explore in order to account for female subjectivity.

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s artist-heroine destabilizes boundaries between subject and object in *The Story of Avis*, and, in chapter one of my thesis, I examine the way that she negotiates her position as an active object of the gaze. Avis’s self-conscious position in front of a deep red curtain at the novel’s beginning is simply one example of her manipulation of others’ gazes; she not only loves the curtain’s rich hue, but also recognizes that the curtain is “becoming.” The ambiguity of Phelps’s language signals that by posing in front of the curtain, Avis is both a “becoming” object and *becoming* a subject. Phelps’s use of ambiguous language throughout the novel, combined with the shifting perspective of her narrative, reminds the reader of the multiplicity of subject positions. Phelps highlights the importance of alternative perspectives through Avis’s struggle to balance her domestic responsibilities with her artistic endeavors, implying that nineteenth-century views of female experience do not adequately account for women’s actual experiences. Avis’s marriage and motherhood trump her abilities as

a painter at the end of the novel. However, by “stretching [her] hand out towards the loving one,” her daughter (suggestively named “Wait”) offers the promise of a future in which the woman artist’s vision will not be threatening.

If *The Story of Avis* shows the agency women can achieve by manipulating their position as an object of the gaze, Edith Johnstone’s *A Sunless Heart* shows how dangerous objectifying vision can be if women do not, like Avis, actively resist its power. In chapter two, I discuss Johnstone’s forceful eschewal of conventions, aesthetic and political. Like other *fin de siècle* New Woman writers, Johnstone registers disapproval of the contemporary “art for art’s sake” movement because its removal from life eliminates the urgency of social responsibility. She demonstrates the objectifying power of aesthetic conventions through her painter-protagonist Gasparine, whose Pre-Raphaelitized gaze prevents her from intervening when she witnesses the sexual abuse of a young girl. While New Woman writers saw their “art for a purpose” as an antidote to the detachment of the Pre-Raphaelites, Aesthetes, and Decadents, Johnstone shows that political vision can objectify as well. She demonstrates this danger through Lotus Grace, a lecturer at the local college who is adored by her students for her independence and social activism. Lotus cannot bear the weight of the fantasies that these girls cast on her; she is not simply a “black hole” into which the girls can cast their desire for a New Woman, but rather an active subject of her own life (Žižek 91). Through Lotus’s ultimate demise in a train wreck, Johnstone insists that a destructive projection of ideals will only result in a collision with another subject in the tunnel.

Whereas Johnstone decries objectifying vision in *A Sunless Heart*, Virginia Woolf redefines its terms in *To the Lighthouse*. Chapter three addresses Woolf’s revision of

subjectivity, which she accomplishes through Lily Briscoe's "eyes of love" (47). Lily affirms the validity of her own perspective throughout the novel, yet her integrity of vision requires her to recognize the validity of other perspectives as well—even perspectives that conflict with hers. Woolf's narrative technique reflects this equal distribution of subjectivity, as she uses free indirect discourse and shifting perspective to illustrate that the "little separate incidences" of life are experienced from multiple positions (47). In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf posits not just "two loving subjects," but rather a myriad of loving subjects. Lily's vision implies that even physical objects contribute a unique perspective, and she imbues the material world with subjectivity as a way of showing the means by which these objects affect our vision. Lily invests anything from a kitchen table, to a pear tree, to a salt cellar, with "thought-life"—a term I borrow from Edith Johnstone to express the sustained, internal, subjective activity that Lily engages in and shares with the material world around her (198). Through her various attributions of thought life, Lily questions the distinction between subject and object, suggesting that even objects have a life of their own.

In watching Mrs. Ramsay, Lily reflects, "One wanted fifty pairs of eyes to see with . . . Fifty pairs of eyes were not enough to get round that one woman with" (198). These figures of female creativity suggest that one pair of eyes, a singular gaze—whether male or female—is simply not enough to express the complexity of subjectivity. The female artist's roles as subject and object, spectator and spectacle, imply that vision cannot be limited to active and passive, male and female. The fraught visual relationships in the novels by Johnstone, Phelps, and Woolf force the reader to examine our own role as subject and object of the gaze, so that we too may insist with Lily, "but this is what I see."

CHAPTER ONE: “BECOMING” SUBJECTS IN ELIZABETH STUART PHELPS’S *THE STORY OF AVIS*: ENVISIONING THE WOMAN ARTIST AS OBJECT AND AGENT

“What *was* it about her?” (Phelps 3).

This perplexed inquiry creates a disorienting entrance into Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s novel *The Story of Avis* (1877), a nearly forgotten work that traces the eponymous heroine’s struggle (and ultimate failure) to reconcile her roles as an aspiring artist, wife and mother. The opening question betrays a concern with vision that permeates the entire novel; it implies the existence of a seeing subject and a seen object, but the question momentarily refuses to tell us who is doing the looking. Even once we can identify spectacle and spectator, these roles become confused and conflated. Almost the moment we identify Avis’s friend Coy as the one “perversely wondering” about her, Coy’s subjectivity ironically transforms her into an object, for the narrator tells us that “it was becoming to Coy to wonder” (3). Phelps’s connotative language highlights Coy’s simultaneous roles as the “becoming” object of the gaze and as the subject she is *becoming* in looking at Avis.

Although Avis’s artistic abilities should signify her subjectivity, we first see her as an object of Coy’s gaze. Avis, however, is no passive object either; she subverts the gaze’s power through her self-conscious performance of what Mulvey would call her “to-be-looked-at-ness” (19). Framing herself for visual consumption as actively as she frames others for her paintings, Avis silhouettes herself against a carmine curtain that “seemed to throb as if it held some inarticulate passion, like that of a subject soul” (6). Avis reveals her keen perception of the way she appears in others’ eyes, as the narrator notes that she “knew perfectly well that the curtain became her” (7). By playing the stereotypical feminine role as the “becoming” object of the

gaze, Avis, like Coy, engages in the process of becoming a subject. In this opening scene, the narrative perspective shifts with vertiginous rapidity from Coy, to the omniscient narrator, to a theology student, to Coy again, and finally to Avis, revealing that visual relations are not so simple as we might imagine. In *The Story of Avis*, Phelps challenges our assumptions about who is allowed to look, and what exactly that look means, suggesting “becoming” women can become subjects, too.

In this chapter, I argue that the simultaneous active subjectivity and active objectivity illustrated by Coy and Avis undermines Mulvey’s “active male/passive female” binary of gendered vision (19). While characters in *The Story of Avis* are, like Mulvey’s female objects, frequently “simultaneously looked at and displayed” (19), they complicate Mulvey’s thesis both by seeing for themselves and by actively manipulating the way they are seen.⁶ The male gaze, then, is not necessarily “determining,” but rather *determined* by the characters’ self-conscious presentation of themselves. Deborah Cherry also recognizes the female artist character as disruptive to Mulvey’s paradigm, suggesting that the female artist demands “a more urgent interrogation of the feminine spectator” (114). Andrea Losano echoes this idea, writing, “the problem of being looked at is of central concern to women . . . [and] even *more* of a problem if you are a woman producing art that you wish to be looked at” (13).⁷ Continuing in this line of thought, I contend that Avis’s role as an artist forces an examination of nineteenth-century culture’s myopic depictions of gendered visual power.

The instability of the novel’s viewing positions also forces a recognition that one cannot

⁶ Though Susan Gubar similarly discusses the way that characters “[deflect] female creativity from the production of art to the re-creation of the body,” her conclusion that this results in a “self-destructive narcissism” does not fully address the subtleties of a novel like *Avis* (250, 249).

⁷ See also Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference*.

objectify without being objectified in return, a recognition that, according to Slavoj Žižek, can be utterly disconcerting. Žižek claims that terror ensues when “the subject . . . is horrified at the prospect of being reduced in the eyes of the Other to *objet a*” (92). Avis’s complicity in her role as an object of the gaze creates an “attitude of non-resistance, of indifferent provocation” that signals her refusal to act as an instrument for the Other’s pleasure (93). This refusal “objectivizes” the gazer, and Žižek suggests that unless the object of love can “stretch out his hand towards the loving one” and through this reversal “subjectivize” himself, subject and object will be stuck in an “inescapable deadlock” of inequality (103). Avis’s failed career and marriage, as well as Coy’s tacit confession of nuptial troubles in the conclusion of the novel, indicate Phelps may be similarly pessimistic about the possibility of a relationship of equality between men and women. The mutability of visual power in *The Story of Avis* illustrates how discomfiting it can be to recognize others as subjects, and I suggest the novel critiques a world in which this discomfort is a norm.

The Story of Avis navigates changing definitions of domesticity, artistry and authorship, issues that were of increasing concern for late nineteenth-century women who felt limited by the prescriptive gender roles of postbellum America. Phelps joins other members of a “transitional generation” of American women writers in questioning traditional constructions of authorship (Sofer 32). Though Phelps’s work was popular during her lifetime, her writing fell out of readership for many years, and much valuable critical work has been undertaken in an effort to reclaim *The Story of Avis* from obscurity. Nina Baym’s examination of nineteenth-century American “woman’s fiction” and Judith Fetterley’s forceful advocacy for rediscovering such

writing no doubt paved the way for an increased attention to Phelps's work.⁸ Carol Farley Kessler's edited 1985 publication of *The Story of Avis* made the novel available to a new generation of readers, facilitating a renewed critical discussion.⁹ The novel's trenchant criticism of marriage's deleterious effects on women (especially ambitious, creative women) has drawn many to examine Phelps's treatment of gender roles, a provocative topic because, as Naomi Sofer argues, nineteenth-century culture "defined *woman* and *artist* as mutually exclusive" (32).

While most have acknowledged Phelps's critique of the limited options available to nineteenth-century women, few have recognized how radically Phelps reconfigures our notions of gender.¹⁰ Susan Donaldson mentions Phelps's interrogation of "all abstract ideals, even those that define the ways that we situate ourselves as men and women," and suggests Phelps accomplishes this questioning of identity through gender role reversals (108, 113). I propose that Phelps does not simply reverse roles, but rather forces us to question our ability to define male and female through the fluid subjectivity she creates in *The Story of Avis*. In her examination of Phelps's novels *The Gates Ajar* (1868) and *The Silent Partner* (1871), Lisa Long argues that Phelps shows that "the 'natural' behaviors ascribed to men and women are not natural at all" (266). Similarly, I suggest that in *The Story of Avis* Phelps shows that what we think of as "natural" ways of seeing—male as active subject, female as passive object—are not natural at all.

⁸ See Baym's critical work *Woman's Fiction*; Fetterley's article on "Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers and the Politics of Recovery"; and Fetterley's anthology *Provisions*.

⁹ For more discussion of the reclaiming of *The Story of Avis*, see also Nina Auerbach, Elaine Showalter (*A Jury of Her Peers*), Carolyn Karcher, Lori Duin Kelly, and Ronna Coffey Privett.

¹⁰ Anne Boyd discusses this idea, examining the influence Phelps's work had on Louisa May Alcott. Alcott wrote to her artist sister that she hoped she would "prove 'Avis' in the wrong" (64) in her marriage, revealing how prominently this perceived conflict between art and marriage featured in the nineteenth-century consciousness. For other discussions of this conflict in *Avis*, see also Carol Farley Kessler's *Elizabeth Stuart Phelps*, and Kelly.

Because of the parallel struggles of the female writer and the female visual artist in the nineteenth century, many critics conflate these roles and see *The Story of Avis* as Phelps's vehicle for defining female authorship.¹¹ Avis's ultimate lack of artistic success has led many to read the novel as a sort of failed *Künstlerroman*. If the novel's goal is to depict the development of the artist, then the conclusion, as many have noted, is unavoidably pessimistic. In attempting to account for the novel's unhappy conclusion, Jack Wilson demeans Phelps's perspicuity by suggesting that "a dominant sedimented ideology, largely unperceived by the author, functions to subvert the consciously projected emancipatory theme" (61). Kessler justifies the ending by emphasizing its realism, and Boyd maintains that "a happy ending would undercut the seriousness of [Phelps's] warning to her female readers" (104).¹² These readings suggest the novel's polemics preclude the possibility of a happy ending, yet such interpretations perhaps oversimplify Phelps's project. Reading Phelps's goal to be an interrogation of assumptions about gendered visual power allows us to see the conclusion of the novel as not a failure at all, but rather a continued deconstruction of gendered norms of seeing.

As discussed in the introduction, the female artist achieves agency through her visual power as a subject, yet she is also objectified—both through her explicit display of her artwork and through her inadvertent display of herself as a seemingly anomalous talented woman. Though some scholars have addressed this problem by suggesting that women become masculinized in the act of gazing, I suggest that this solution oversimplifies visual power

¹¹ See Sofer, Boyd, Privett, Christine Stansell, and Susan Harris.

¹² See also Alfred Habegger and Susan Williams.

relations.¹³ In *The Story of Avis*, the woman artist's capacity to manipulate her position as an object, combined with her active vision, complicates models of subjectivity that exclude female experiences.

While critics have had difficulty escaping the binary of gendered vision articulated so persuasively by Mulvey, Patricia Johnson attempts to look beyond this dichotomy in her discussion of the closing scene of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. Dorothea's looking, she suggests, "offers the reader momentary access to a utopian, democratic vision that can represent women and men, and indeed the world, without reducing them to objects" (54). Johnson suggests that Dorothea's position as "neither spectator nor object of the gaze" allows for this utopian moment of democratic vision, yet I would argue that Avis's role as *both* spectator and self-conscious object of the gaze enables the novel to move beyond "a narrowly-gendered subjectivity" (54). Phelps's shifting network of seeing subjects in *The Story of Avis* reveals the malleability of the gaze, reminding readers we are all "becoming" subjects.

The opening scene of *The Story of Avis* synecdochically represents the visual tension so central to the entire novel. In this scene, members of the fictional New England collegiate town of Harmouth gather for a poetry reading. Though a young theological student is "declaiming from the second canto," no one seems to be listening, and Coy even develops "a distaste for the young gentleman as a tiresome interruption" (3). The claustrophobic proximity suggested by this fashionably intellectual poetry club creates an exaggerated scopophilic tension, for the characters are encouraged to look at one another as they take turns reading aloud. The visual interaction

¹³ See Mulvey, "Afterthoughts," Mackinnon, and Huf.

supersedes the verbal, as Phelps highlights the shifting narrative perspective more than the shifting readers.

Thus, Phelps' opening question—what *was* it about her?—initiates a pattern of complex visual relations throughout the novel, destabilizing our expectations about subjectivity. Without a referent for “her,” the reader is left to fill in the missing pieces; one might assume “she” is the heroine of the novel (which, incidentally, turns out to be true). Conditioned by the literary trope of the mesmerized man gazing from afar at an enigmatic woman, we could easily presuppose that a male subject is asking the opening question. We see this dynamic, for instance, in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, which begins with a similar *in medias res* question asked by a male subject gazing at a female object.¹⁴ However, in *The Story of Avis*, Phelps forces us to examine our assumption of a seeing male subject and a seen female object when we discover that Avis's female friend Coy is the voyeuse in this scene.

Though Coy is often recognized as the more typical representation of Victorian femininity, her less acute but nonetheless active vision implies Avis the artist is not the only one consciously negotiating her role as both subject and object of the gaze.¹⁵ Able to create meaning rather than simply acting as a bearer of it, Coy “was not ignorant,” even though she generally “left ideas to Avis” (4). Coy's “becoming” wondering reveals that even a “normal” woman can act as a subject of the gaze while manipulating her role as an object. Not only does Coy's wondering allow her to act as a subject and an object, but it also allows Phelps to exaggerate the instability of visual

¹⁴ In Eliot's novel, an initially anonymous voice wonders: “Was she beautiful or not beautiful? and what was the secret of form or expression which gave the dynamic quality to her glance?”(3). George Griffeth points out that Eliot and Phelps corresponded with one another. Phelps's letters indicate that she had read *Deronda* before the publication of *Avis*, even going so far as to call *Deronda* “sad; lonely as the Sphinx” (97).

¹⁵ While Sofer and Boyd see Coy as typical and Avis as abnormal (Sofer 40, Boyd 96), Huf recognizes the fact that Coy may be more like Avis than we initially assume (54).

relationships in the novel's early scenes. Revealing Coy to be the explicit subject looking at a clearly-defined object initially resolves the ambiguity of the opening question. However, these visual power relations shift as quickly as they have been established, and Coy soon becomes an object of the gaze herself through the very act of gazing. The narrator invites the reader to share in the voyeuristic pleasure of observing Coy, explaining: "it was becoming to Coy to wonder; she did not very often,—being a blonde, with a small mouth and happy eyes" (3). Once the narrator intervenes in Coy's musings, readers occupy the role of the powerful spectator as we look through the narrator's eyes at Coy.

A shift in narrative perspective abruptly interrupts the reader's power as spectator, as we are soon informed we are not the only voyeurs. The discovery that someone else is looking at Coy asks us to recognize our alignment with a more typical representation of the male gaze: the theological reader. The reader, John Rose, looks at Coy and promptly "flounder[s] into an acute embarrassment upon seeing that she blushed swiftly" (4). As an active male subject gazing at a female object, John Rose follows literary conventions of gendered subjectivity; the female object of his gaze, however, is not passive. Though Coy's blush may suggest a stereotypical feminine modesty, her blush makes not only John Rose, but also us, as fellow viewers, uncomfortable with our scopophilia. By highlighting Coy's awareness of John Rose's (and implicitly, the reader's) gaze, Phelps places us in the uncomfortable position of being objectified by the subject we gaze upon. We are thus led to the "hystericization" of realizing that the object of our gaze is not a frozen, insensate figure, but rather a changeable, responsive human being, as capable of manipulating our view as we are of looking at her (Žižek 92).

Phelps further undermines readers' roles as subjects by encouraging an identification with an object of the gaze. The swift shift from the theological reader's perspective to Coy's consciousness reveals that the reader John Rose has misread her blush: she "was not blushing about John Rose: young men are too common in Harmouth to be easily blushed about." Rather, Coy flushes at her own thoughts about Avis, and her "soul-geologist" theory that "Avis was a magnet" (4). Phelps's return to Coy's perspective places further emphasis on the fact that Coy is not simply a passive object of John Rose's gaze. The changing narrative view places readers in the disconcerting position of identifying with John Rose as subject, and simultaneously feeling ourselves watched because of our recent identification with Coy. An alignment with the theological reader also unsettles readers' authority as interpreters of the text; John Rose's misreading of Coy's flushed expression forces us to recognize that our own readings may be faulty, as well.

Despite all of the gazing during the poetry reading, Avis the artist does not see for herself until later, instead creating "a ripple of surprise when [she] came into the club that night" (5). Avis's potent visual instincts transform everything she does into an artistic act; even sitting in the corner of a room becomes an expression of her subjectivity and her active objectivity. Avis's ability to control the way she is seen proves compelling for Harmouth's dynamic new tutor Philip Ostrander, who succumbs to Avis's picturesque display. Avis's silhouette against the curtain triggers Philip's memory, and when he confesses, "I have seen you before," Avis admits to having seen him before, as well (10).

Phelps later allows us a retrospective glimpse at this first encounter during Avis's artistic training in Paris. During this episode, Phelps continues to complicate visual power relations as

Avis leaves the Madeleine cathedral and finds herself “arrested by a pair of eyes fastened upon her in the twilight” (38). Though this arrest suggests Avis has been frozen as the object of another’s gaze, she undermines the eyes’ power by matching their compelling stare. Scrutinizing the “remarkable face” that “blazed like an amber intaglio” against the background of the church, Avis seems to fetishize Philip as she sees him across the nave. She focuses on his “sensitive mouth,” “deep, unusual gold” hair, and his eyes, which are “black, with a large iridescent pupil.” Avis flushes as she feels these pupils upon her like “a burning glass,” and we are told, “if the eye of that amber god across the Madeleine had caught an artist, it had held a woman” (39). Though Avis initially seems to act as the subject of the gaze in this scene, the “amber god’s” reciprocal gaze complicates her controlling vision. Boyd reads the scene as a demonstration of “the destructive power of the male gaze,” and contends that Philip’s return of Avis’s gaze “suggests her transformation from observer (artist) to observed (woman)” (154).¹⁶ By assuming Philip is the only one exercising visual power in this scene, Boyd’s reading reveals how thoroughly conditioned our perceptions of gendered vision are. She assumes it is Philip’s subject eye catching and holding Avis in it, but she neglects the possibility that Philip’s eye could be the object of Avis’s gaze, and that his eye might be caught and held in hers.

The eye of the “amber god” metonymically represents the ambivalence of his position; Avis looks at his eye as an object, but the eye very obviously indicates his subjectivity.

Ultimately, Philip catches Avis in his eye just as much as she catches him in hers. Phelps’s evocative imagery denotes the complexity of the pair’s interaction; if Philip is an “amber god,”

¹⁶ Stansell’s reading of the novel as an exploration of “the conflict between art and womanliness” (247) also implies that the roles of woman and artist act in opposition, preventing one from acting as both a subject and an object. Similarly, Deborah Barker concludes that Philip’s gaze “transforms [Avis] from a subject looking to a subject being looked at” (75, 87).

he has caught Avis in his resin. This resin, however, acts as a medium for Avis the artist to carve her vision. Thus, while the amber threatens to consume Avis and turn her into an object, she transforms the amber into an art object through her aesthetic gaze.¹⁷

Phelps further emphasizes Avis's role as both a subject and an active object when Philip and Avis later reflect on their tense visual encounter in the Madeleine. Seeming to feel uneasy with his role as a spectator, Philip explains, "I have always felt that I owed you an apology for that stare" (48). Avis denies his gaze the sexual tension he attributes to it by responding dismissively, "Not in the least . . . I owe the making of a very satisfactory little sketch to you. I put you into sepia, on a neutral gray" (48). By setting Philip against these subdued tones, and not against the "background of the passion of carmine," Avis highlights her power as both a subject and an object. Avis can both control the way in which she is seen and control the way in which Philip is seen—but yet again her very subjectivity transforms her into an object. She observes Philip's beauty while painting his portrait, saying, "I rarely meet . . . with beauty in men. I have known several beautiful women." A shift in narration to Philip's perspective undermines the power of Avis's vision, as he notes that she speaks "with a *naïveté* which enchanted him" (54). Just as Coy's perverse wondering makes her becoming, so Avis's naïve observation makes her enchanting.

Avis's artistic vision seems devoid of the sexual desire so often associated with the gaze; she regards "the contour of a man's face precisely as a physician regards a hectic flush or a bilious eye-ball." Yet Phelps suggests Avis's gaze is not always so ascetic, indicating "it was the

¹⁷ Kessler's notes suggest an allusion to "The Amber Gods," a story by Harriet Prescott Spofford in which amber beads cast a spell on a woman. Kessler concludes, "such will be the effect of this face upon Avis" (254), emphasizing the transfixing power of the beads, and neglecting to recognize the power Avis wields by casting Philip's image in the amber.

intricate strife of the artist with the woman in her which had been the bewitchment of that look surprised in the Madeleine” (54). Once again Phelps’s language is open-ended; both were bewitched in the Madeleine, allowing for the possibility that either Philip or Avis could be the one “surprised in the Madeleine.” Phelps undermines the literary trope of the controlling male gaze in order to grant Avis agency in her matching and manipulation of Philip’s look. The “strife of the artist with the woman” makes Avis becoming, but in struggling to reconcile these roles—a process mediated by her vision of Philip—Avis is becoming a subject.

Though Avis carefully controls her vision of Philip, he threatens to disrupt her power by proving himself to be as much of a seeing subject as she is. Avis’s gaze catches Philip like a bug in amber, holding him as the frozen object of her artist’s eye. By fixing him as the subject of her artwork at whom she can (and must) look, but not touch, Avis casts Philip as the object that is “attainable only by way of an incessant postponement, as its absent point of reference” (Žižek 95). Thus, she repeatedly refuses to marry Philip and instead paints his portrait, but admits in a moment of Žižekian masochism that “I suffer . . . because I love you” (105). Avis also constructs herself as an artistic object of the gaze in order to create this sublimated state of to-be-looked-at-ness, ensuring she will be always desirable, but never attainable.

Philip’s insight into Avis’s artistic disposition enables him to see through her self-imposed distance, violating the aesthetic barrier she has created. When trekking across slippery seaside terrain, Philip marvels at Avis’s polychromatic view of the world, saying, “How like you it was . . . to tell me to get upon the *purple* rock!” Because the moment occurs early in their acquaintance, Avis inquires, “How do you know it was like me?” Alluding to the insight gained from their Parisian encounter, Philip declares, “I think I have always known what would be like

you . . . since I saw you in the Madeleine” (48). In admitting the allure of Avis’s displayed subjectivity, Philip objectifies the very agency he admires. Yet in watching Avis’s gaze, Philip gains momentary access to the “subject soul” she buries in the carmine curtain. It is not therefore Avis’s transition from spectator to spectacle that leads to her downfall, but rather her loss of her ability to control the way Philip sees her.

In an effort to reclaim her visual potency, Avis meticulously crafts an identity for herself as a subject, even through the clothing she wears. Despite her frequent and vocal insistence that marriage “is a profession to a woman. And I have my work; I have my work!” (71), Avis succumbs to Philip’s persistent advances, and they are married. No longer able to actively manipulate Philip’s gaze by framing herself as she did earlier in the novel, Avis attempts to reassert her visual power by translating the “passion” of the carmine curtain from an artistic to a domestic context. Once a color for which she felt a “fierce kinship” (7), the carmine becomes a symbol not for Avis’s aesthetic devotion, but for her devotion to her husband. Philip comments on her crimson-colored shawl, exclaiming, “It looks like a live thing.” It is unclear whether or not Philip means this as a compliment, for when Avis asks him if he likes the color, he only replies, “Like it? How should I know? You are in it.” Avis willfully chooses to read his comment as a note of approbation, demonstrating her continued desire to maintain command of her image in Philip’s eyes. She determines that “she would not wear this color except for him” (133).

Dyed with a pigment made from the “dried, pulverized bodies of females of the species *Dactylopius coccus*” (“Scale Insect”), the carmine hues suggest to Avis that they “throb with the life that has been yielded to make them” (133). The sacrifice required by the cochineal beetles to create the vibrant tones of Avis’s attire clearly denotes a parallel sacrifice on Avis’s part. Yet by

ascribing such vivacity to the curtain and the shawl, Avis allows even the pulverized beetles to act as subjects, claiming the aesthetic objects created from these insects as symbols of her own state as an active subject and object. While Avis recognizes the life emanating from these objects, she ignores the fact that turning Philip into an aesthetic object, whether an “amber god” or a sepia-toned sketch, will not prevent him from evincing some kind of life, as well—a life that may act in opposition to her interests.

Avis’s effort to control Philip’s vision of her proves increasingly futile; just as John Rose misreads Coy’s blush in the opening scene, Philip too misreads Avis. Despite his early incisive perspective into Avis’s thoughts, he begins to show his misunderstanding of their relationship, complaining about the poorly completed domestic duties that he once promised Avis she would never have to do. Though she reminds him, “you didn’t marry me to be your housekeeper, Philip!” he replies bitterly, “Yes, I remember. I don’t know what we were either of us thinking of!” (153). Philip objectifies Avis by imagining her to be capable and desirous of performing the role of the domestic housewife. This grave misreading disrupts the balance of Avis and Philip’s earlier symbiotic visual relationship. Philip can no longer catch Avis in his eye and hold her there, because the image he sees is not Avis at all. Avis’s diminishing command over the way she is seen contributes to her loss of power as a “becoming” subject.

Avis’s painting of a sphinx, commenced before her wedding to Philip, becomes a site for the couple to negotiate their roles as subjects and objects. In a hallucinogenic vision brought on by imbibing a French liqueur, Avis sees a succession of images, culminating in a “silent army” of unknown women which “vanished in an expanse of imperfectly-defined color like a cloud” before transforming into a mysterious image of the sphinx. In this final vision, the sphinx

confers a task upon Avis: “The riddle of ages whispered to her. The mystery of womanhood stood before her, and said, ‘Speak for me.’” Having had her vision, Avis is “very tired, but she had seen her picture” (83), and she commences her depiction of the “mystery of womanhood,” a painting of the sphinx itself. Though Avis’s painting shows much promise after her first few feverish studio sessions, the sphinx is soon neglected once domestic duties begin to interfere, as Avis frequently tells herself, “the sphinx could wait” (135). The silent sphinx, repeatedly pushed aside, becomes a symbol of Avis’s lack of access to her subject soul.¹⁸

In misreading the sphinx painting, Philip exposes his growing impulse to project his own desire on Avis, rather than accepting her for the subject she is. Once the painting is in its final stages of completion, Philip assesses that “it is a great picture,” yet Avis refuses to be satisfied, protesting, “the eyes baffle me” (143). Philip’s reply highlights the painting’s cryptic nature, as he effuses that the eyes “ought to baffle you; they ought to forever: else you would have failed” (143). Here, Philip invokes doubt about his feelings for Avis by expressing his affinity for the painting’s inscrutability. He apparently marvels at the painting for its function as a sort of “black hole” (Žižek 91) into which he can project his own interpretation, and one begins to wonder if he is drawn to Avis for the same reason. In this moment, though, Avis resists being reduced to a mere mystery waiting to be interpreted; she refuses to give up on her painting, explaining, “I cannot be understood till I have understood myself . . . The picture must wait—now—a while” (144). Though her painting necessarily acts as an object to be displayed, Avis imbues the sphinx

¹⁸ Sofer also comments on the painting’s function as a symbol for subjectivity. She argues that Phelps reclaims the sphinx from its typical role as the “female, silent, and the eternal object of men’s artistic vision” by allowing Avis “to make the Sphinx the speaking subject of her own art” (39). For Barker, the sphinx shows the complexity of subjectivity, acting as “a symbol that allows Phelps to represent women as a group in terms of what they have in common (their unequal status regarding social institutions), while at the same time it signifies that no single set of attributes can define women” (93).

with her own subjectivity by noting the impossibility of being understood through the painting until she herself understands the painting. Thus, Avis implies that the painting, like the carmine color she is so fond of wearing, has a life of its own.

Unfortunately for Avis, Philip has a life of his own too, and his ability to read Avis undermines her capacity to frame the way he sees her. Yet Avis persists in her struggle to manipulate Philip's gaze, reflecting that her soul seems filled with "winding corridors of fancy, closed rooms of thought, deep recesses of feeling, which she curtained from [Philip] by a lofty instinct" (133). Demonstrating almost uncanny insight, Philip intuits Avis's withholding of her feelings, and he prods her to disclose her curtained-off thoughts, asking beseechingly, "Are not your thoughts to be mine, love?" (133). Philip readily acquiesces to Avis's control of the way she is seen when it creates a picturesque image he can consume—such as the lone female artist across the European cathedral, or the budding ingénue highlighted by a scarlet backdrop. Yet when Avis places the curtain in front of her image, Philip balks at this mode of controlling his gaze; he can tolerate having his vision manipulated, but not taken away. Avis's resistance proves powerless against Philip's wheedling, and she confesses her thoughts. Though she momentarily controls her appearance by responding with the "poised, reluctant look of the fine Jacques rose" (134), her subversion of visual power proves limited, as she cannot totally remove herself from Philip's probing eyes. Philip refuses to let Avis exist by his side as a seeing, thinking subject, instead expecting her to be the submissive object of his affection whose thoughts are not her own.

In the end, the only way Avis can reclaim her role as a subject is if Philip becomes the ultimate object: a corpse. The couple's formerly idyllic relationship gradually degenerates into

bitterness, jealousy, and betrayal. Their domestic difficulties are paralleled by Philip's deteriorating health, and the two travel to Florida for the salutary tropical climate. Though Avis and Philip briefly reconcile in this histrionic episode (that involves traipsing through swampland in the middle of the night), Philip dies soon after of consumption. In their melodramatic final moments together, Philip asks Avis, who holds him in her arms, "do you remember—once—how you said that you would like to die? . . . Love, if I ask it, will *you* kiss *my* breath away?" (241). This self-consciously sentimentalized farewell scene seems to point to the absurd, untenable inequality of relationships in which one person is held and the other does the holding.¹⁹ Because Philip reduces Avis to an object by projecting his domestic ideal onto her, Philip must himself be objectified.

Žižek's analysis of relationships between equals seems especially apropos to Phelps's pessimistic conclusion, as he suggests that the "bourgeois principle of contract between equal subjects can be applied to sexuality only in the form of the *perverse*—masochistic—contract in which, paradoxically, the very form of balanced contract serves to establish a relationship of domination" (109). Because, as he implies, recognizing the existence of another subject who objectifies you in return is fundamentally unsettling, such a recognition results in violence. When Philip realizes he cannot shape Avis into any image he wants, and that she is in fact shaping the image he sees, he must do emotional violence to Avis by flirting with other women and castigating her for not living up to his unrealistic expectations. Phelps then intervenes to restore the equality of their relationship by killing off Philip, which grants Avis definitive control over

¹⁹ Phelps also signals an awareness of her own play with literary tropes early in the novel. Upon rescuing Avis from a fall, Philip observes, "I begin to understand why the people in the novels always *are* saving each other's lives. It is just another instance of the absolute naturalness of much that we are all used to call unnatural in fiction . . . nothing acquaints two people like the unconventionalities of danger" (47).

Philip's image. Avis can thus see him as she chooses, reflecting that "Philip seemed quite near, —nearer than when it had been possible to be conscious of any imperfection in himself or in their union. Only his ideal visited her heart. She was not without a strange, exultant sense that now she never could see a weakness or a flaw in him again" (242). Philip's death places Avis as the permanent subject in their relationship, and she projects her fantasy upon his memory.

Phelps's means of securing Avis's subjectivity—which, significantly, does not restore her artistic abilities—signals Phelps's skepticism about the possibility of maintaining a relationship between equal subjects. Avis and Philip may once have been "caught" and "held" in one another's eyes, but here Phelps suggests that this mutually sustained gaze cannot last.

Avis's marriage to Philip demonstrates the couple's failure to create a relationship between equal subjects, but Avis's interaction with her young daughter offers the future possibility of such a relationship. Despite Avis's keen understanding of her appearance, she is unable to fully anticipate the destructive effects of marriage on her artistic career. Since her turn to domesticity, Avis has lost her ability to paint, bemoaning the critics' pronouncement that her "style is gone" (244). Avis cannot reproduce the success she had with her sphinx painting, but she attempts to brush off this loss of her artistic faculties by commiserating with her young daughter, Wait, saying with playful sadness, "Never mind; don't mind. We've given it up—Wait and I; haven't we, Wait?" The young Wait (named after her paternal grandmother Waitstill) refuses to accept Avis's reading of their situation, protesting with almost active, obstinate ignorance, "I don't understand you" (244). By rejecting Avis's assessment, Wait resists being misread, choosing to frame her own vision of her future rather than accepting Avis's. Yet by refusing to understand Avis, Wait also chooses not to objectify her, instead allowing her to act as

the active subject and object that she has struggled to become throughout the novel. As an unthreatening female subject, Wait is the consummation of the waiting commenced with the sphinx painting that Avis once determined must “wait—now—a while.” Avis’s previous pronouncement that “I cannot be understood till I have understood myself” (144) cements Wait’s connection to the impenetrable painting; Wait allows Avis to understand herself, and refuses to misread her.

Though Phelps paints a bleak portrait of Avis’s endeavor to mediate her roles as woman and artist, she seems to offer hope for an undisruptive female subjectivity through the character of Wait. Wait allows Phelps to articulate a call for better readers than Philip and John Rose proved to be. As Avis and Wait are poised together at the end of the novel, Wait “stood leaning a little, and stroking the back of her mother’s had with the palm of her own” (249). Here Wait literally seems to “stretch out [her] hand towards the loving one,” as Žižek discusses, escaping the deadlock of unequal relations by allowing her and Avis to act as “two loving subjects” rather than a loving subject and a loved object (Žižek 103, 104). Wait is as conscious of her appearance as Avis once was when she posed against the curtain, for the narrator notes, “if anybody had noticed this, [Wait] would have stopped; but mamma understood about such things. She did not talk and make a fuss” (249). Here, even the line between character and narrator is blurred, as Wait’s voice inserts itself into the ostensibly omniscient description of the scene with the familiarity of the appellation “mamma,” destabilizing even the all-seeing power of the narrator. The agency that Phelps allows Wait through this violation of narrative authority and through her consciousness of her role as subject offers a hopeful picture of democratized vision. Avis empathizes with Wait’s heightened sense of the way she appears to others because she possesses

this same sensitivity. Therefore she does not “talk and make a fuss,” but rather sits “with her profile towards the child” (249). In directing her eyes to the page rather than to her daughter’s face, Avis consciously manipulates her own image while allowing Wait to manipulate hers. Their shared object of attention—the book—emphasizes their coexistence as seeing, reading, becoming subjects.

Phelps enlists us in the quest for a fluid, democratized subjectivity by alerting us to our responsibility as readers. As Avis and Wait pose in this moment of mutual subjectivity, Wait asks Avis to read her a story. Speaking in a simplified, childish voice, she implores, “Read me, read me . . . read me till there is no more to read” (249). Phelps’s deliberate lack of a preposition indicates Wait’s developing grasp of grammar, but it also invites a double interpretation of the command, as Wait asks Avis to read *to* her, but also implicitly asks us to *read her*. Here, Wait acts as both a subject who exercises her imagination in listening to the story and as an object who must be “read.” Her recently described consciousness of her appearance reminds us that we are reading her, and that she is actively shaping the way she is read. Wait invites a true reading of herself, rather than a misinterpretation—as John Rose misinterpreted Coy’s blush in the opening scene, and Philip misinterpreted Avis’s domestic predilections. Instead, Wait’s plaintive request asks for a reading that will acknowledge her role as an active subject and an active object.

In depicting the unsettling effects of equalized vision throughout the novel, Phelps expresses cynicism about the possibility of sustaining this kind of egalitarian vision in nineteenth-century America—a cynicism supported by Avis’s loss of her artistic acumen. Though the novel’s multiplicity of subject positions destabilizes the active male/passive female binary identified by Mulvey, Avis’s collapse suggests there is ultimately no place for the female

spectator. In the final scene, however, Phelps demonstrates that subjects can coexist without objectifying one another, implying that though her readers must “wait” for such a democracy, an unthreatening politics of vision is possible through the active reading of “becoming” subjects. Rather than restricting female subjectivity to a set of limiting definitions, Phelps asks us to reconsider our accustomed formulations of gender, vision, and even perhaps our critical investments in texts: in the end, we must read till there is no more to read.

CHAPTER TWO: THE DANGERS OF TUNNEL VISION: AESTHETICS AND THE NEW WOMAN IN EDITH JOHNSTONE'S *A SUNLESS HEART*

Edith Johnstone, a once popular and now virtually unknown Victorian writer, announces her departure from literary tradition mid-way through her novel *A Sunless Heart*. She proclaims, “it has been, so far, the province of the novel to deal almost exclusively with lives only in their relation to the passion of love between man and woman, and the complications arising from it.” Johnstone’s New Woman novel—published in 1894 and only recently available again in print—questions such a limited view of life, and proposes a divergence from these narrow novelistic tropes. Johnstone thus makes her project in *A Sunless Heart* to show “what women may be, and often are, to one another” (90).

In this novel, formulations of gendered vision become even more complicated because men are almost removed from the visual equation entirely. While Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s shifting narrative perspective and ambiguity of subject positions disrupt our expectations about gendered vision in *The Story of Avis*, Johnstone’s cast of female voyeurs in *A Sunless Heart* further upsets Mulvey’s paradigm of gendered vision because women are substituted for men in the “active/male and passive/female” binary of the gaze (19). Throughout the novel Johnstone’s female characters play both spectator and spectacle: the aspiring painter Gasparine gazes out a window and witnesses the abuse of a young girl. Later, grieving and poverty-stricken, Gasparine is rescued from her abysmal circumstances by the equally voyeuristic intellectual Lotus Grace—whom we eventually discover is the very girl whose abuse Gasparine witnessed. College instructor Lotus finally becomes the locus of both Gasparine and her female students’ attention, acting as the paragon of the empowered, educated New Woman who contests Victorian

ideological constructs about gender. Rather than creating an egalitarian democracy of vision, however, Johnstone shows how female vision can objectify as readily as the typical male gaze. By fixing Lotus as the sole representative of the ideal New Woman, Gasparine and other female characters ignore the multiplicity of female experience. They essentialize the very figure who is supposed to stand for the diversity of female identity, denying Lotus the subjectivity they so admire through their limiting tunnel vision.

As if to demonstrate the destructiveness of this objectification, Johnstone concludes her novel by killing Lotus in a dramatic train collision in a tunnel. I would argue that Johnstone's unexpected and tragic conclusion calls into question vision—male or female—that limits another's subjectivity; Lotus is not simply a black hole upon which to project desire, but rather another subject at the end of the tunnel. I contend that Johnstone demonstrates the dangers of objectifying vision, joining other New Woman writers in criticizing the aesthetic distance promulgated by the *fin-de-siècle* decadent movement. Johnstone demonstrates how the sheer aestheticism of “art for art's sake” can obscure real social problems. But Johnstone also shows that the figure of the New Woman can be a projection of fantasy similar to the more typical passive female model. New Woman fiction offered an antidote to the Aesthetic philosophy by creating, as Ann Heilmann puts it, “art for a purpose” (48); however, Johnstone points to the fact that such “art for a purpose” has the potential to objectify as much as art for art's sake. Johnstone demonstrates the pervasive power of convention, as even her female characters cannot escape the unequal power relationships of seeing subjects and seen objects. She seems to suggest that although writing a novel about “what women may be” to one another takes readers one step

closer on the journey to an egalitarian expression of female subjectivity, we still have a long way to go.

In critiquing the limited roles nineteenth-century women were allotted, as well as favoring a fiction of social responsibility and not simply aesthetic detachment, *A Sunless Heart* places itself squarely in the tradition of the *fin-de-siècle* New Woman novel.²⁰ Although the first use of the term “New Woman” is attributed Sarah Grand in her 1894 essay “The New Aspect of the Woman Question,” most identify Olive Shreiner’s 1883 novel *The Story of an African Farm* as the first example of New Woman fiction.²¹ Carolyn Nelson explains that novels within this genre are “characterized by the representation of strong heroines who rebel against the limitations placed on their lives and demand the same education and economic opportunities as men enjoy” (*New Woman Reader* xii). Despite the common concerns addressed by women writers of the 1890s, the “New Woman” was not as unified a category as one might imagine; Sally Ledger goes so far as to suggest the New Woman “had a multiple identity. She was, variously, a feminist activist, a social reformer, a popular novelist, a suffragette playwright, a woman poet; she was also often a fictional construct, a discursive response to the activities of the late nineteenth-century women’s movement” (1). Heilmann confirms the New Woman’s mutability—in person and on the page—by noting that she stood simultaneously for both “the degeneration of society and for that society’s moral regeneration” (1). Heilmann explains this paradoxical position by suggesting that “the semantic instability of the term ‘New Woman’

²⁰ In her introduction to the recent edition of *A Sunless Heart*, Constance Harsh supports reading the novel within this context by writing, “readers with some experience of *fin de siècle* literature will find familiar elements here, most notably the touches of naturalism, the interest in exploring emotional states, and the concerns with women’s expanding roles” (9).

²¹ See Bonnell, Nelson, Ledger.

derives in part from the multiplicity of agents who had an ideological stake in constructing her” (2).²²

Ironically, in reacting against narrow definitions of Victorian femininity, late nineteenth-century writers constructed an image that had the potential to simply exchange one stereotype for another.²³ Thus, Ann Ardis emphasizes the importance of recognizing the diversity represented by the New Woman, suggesting that “a monolithic model of New Womanliness will not be substituted for the old model of the ‘pure woman’” (114). In *A Sunless Heart*, Johnstone reacts against the “monolithic model of New Womanliness” that Ardis refers to, demonstrating the destructiveness of seeing ideals rather than human beings. The degree to which Lotus Grace—educated, independent, successful college instructor—is idolized by both her female students and by Gasparine suggests that the New Woman has as much potential to promote fantasies as the Victorian “Angel in the House.” Johnstone implies that just as the New Woman was not a unified category, neither should Lotus be seen as its sole representative. Denying the diversity of women’s experiences—whether for the sake of an imagined domestic goddess or activist super woman—problematically creates an object of fantasy, rather than effecting change in the lives of real women.

Effecting change was certainly a central concern for writers of New Woman fiction, and this concern created a corresponding frustration with the unadulterated aestheticism of the contemporary decadent art movement. Alison Byerly explains the decadents’ ethos, noting that “the Aesthetes . . . did not see anything wrong with viewing landscapes or even people

²² Tamar Katz further suggests that these women’s “common cultural grid of ideas about female subjectivity” (45) allowed them to transcend their more minor ideological differences.

²³ The stereotypical New Woman soon became a subject of parody, evidenced by the satirical cartoons that appeared in *Punch* magazine and discussed by Ledger (98).

aesthetically. They were not concerned with the problem of whether the aesthetic perspective omits or distorts elements of the scene itself, because the integrity of the scene was of little consequence. Only the experience of looking at the scene mattered” (186).²⁴ Contrary to this detachment, New Woman fiction *did* see something wrong with viewing people aesthetically, and committed itself to interrogating a variety of social and political problems—ranging from women’s suffrage and education, to anti-vivisection and the prevention of the spread of venereal disease.²⁵ Marilyn Bonnell identifies Sarah Grand as one particular writer who dedicated herself to art for a purpose rather than for its own sake, explaining that Grand, like many of her contemporaries, “decided that what was needed was not a work of art, an aesthetic product with no ramifications, but a book that could effect results, a book whose publication would benefit women” (126).²⁶

Like Grand, Johnstone seems to be wary of aesthetic vision because of its potential to mask real problems, such as poverty and sexual abuse. Yet Johnstone seems to be more critical than some of her contemporaries of the potential for the New Woman agenda to solve these problems. In his recent review of *A Sunless Heart*, Nathan Waddell comments on Johnstone’s eschewal of fantasy, noting that her “uncompromising commitment to the humanity of her

²⁴ Scholars, such as Katz and Anna Maria Jones, frequently cite Walter Pater’s *Renaissance*—which posits what Katz calls an “authoritative aesthetic subject” (25)—as an example of the kind of detached aestheticism the New Woman writers were reacting against.

²⁵ The wide variety of New Woman causes provokes Elaine Showalter to describe these *fin de siècle* feminists as “fervent associationists” who “knew very clearly what they were *against*, but only vaguely what they were *for*” (*Literature* 193). The ideological diversity of which Showalter is so dismissive seems to speak not to the vague commitments of New Woman fiction, but rather to the wide array of individual women invested in social change at the turn of the twentieth century.

²⁶ For more discussion of New Woman writers’ critique of aestheticism, see Pykett and Jones. Not all women writers at the turn of the century balked against aestheticism, however, as Talia Schaffer and Kathy Psomiades demonstrate in tracing a history of female aesthetes.

subjects is both inspiring and wholly free from illusion” (250). Johnstone’s freedom from illusion can certainly be seen in her realistic depiction of human suffering, yet I would suggest she demonstrates a similar clarity in her skepticism about *fin de siècle* feminism’s ability to remedy all social ills. Johnstone illustrates the danger of simply substituting social reform for aesthetic beauty as an object of fetishistic fantasy.

Johnstone is similarly skeptical about substituting one model of romantic love for another. Even though *A Sunless Heart* offers an alternative to the conventional heterosexual courtship plot in its preoccupation with “what women may be . . . to one another,” the novel shows how relationships between women can become just as conventional as those between men and women. Like other New Woman fiction, *A Sunless Heart* challenges what Ardis describes as “the ‘natural’ inevitability of the marriage plot”; however, as Ardis notes, New Woman novelists typically replace “‘the pure woman,’ the Victorian angel in the house, with a heroine who either is sexually active outside of marriage or abstains from sex for political rather than moral reasons” (3). Instead of creating sexually liberated or politically minded heterosexual heroines, Johnstone dramatizes same-sex relationships that, according to Constance Harsh, look “a great deal like lesbianism” (9).²⁷

Harsh highlights the unconventionality of this subject for the time period, suggesting Johnstone’s depiction of relationships between women was a way for her to question contemporary gender roles. Somewhat undermining Harsh’s claim of unconventionality is Ledger’s observation that “a good number of New Woman novels feature same-sex relationships

²⁷Though the relationships between female characters in *A Sunless Heart* are clearly coded as not entirely platonic, Harsh acknowledges the limitations of applying the term “lesbian” retroactively. As Ledger notes, the term “lesbian” did not enter cultural discourse until the 1890s, when it started to become included in legal and medical documents (128).

between women.” Ledger explains how even novels featuring same-sex relationships often followed a formula, noting that “women writers of feminist New Woman fiction by and large preferred the ‘romantic friendship’ model of same-sex female relationships” (125). Elaborating on the “romantic friendship” model of female relationships in fiction, Tess Cosslett explains that in this schema, “female friendship is contained within a male-female romance structure, and operates to assimilate women to traditional womanly roles” (13). In *A Sunless Heart*, Johnstone critiques this substitution of the same-sex friendship for the heterosexual romance as a solution to the limited representations of women’s lives in fiction. Gasparine’s devotion to Lotus seems to indicate a “romantic friendship” plot trajectory, and her marriage to “the smallest and ugliest” (197) of her father’s clerks at the novel’s conclusion suggests that her relationship with Lotus did serve to assimilate her to a traditional role. However, the fact that Lotus dies in the process demonstrates quite literally the harmfulness of viewing female relationships as simply a tool to prepare women for heterosexual romance. Decrying the objectifying power of convention, Johnstone suggests that human relationships need to be re-thought more radically in order to resist the temptation to fit people into formulas.

One of Johnstone’s strategies for resisting formulaic representations of human relationships is her depiction of Gasparine as a woman artist—a strategy that many of Johnstone’s contemporaries employed, as well. If New Woman fiction was art for a purpose, then one of those purposes was imagining possibilities for women outside of the domestic sphere. Thus, many novelists questioned Victorian gender ideology by featuring heroines who were writers, visual artists, or musicians seeking outlets for their creativity in a career outside the

home.²⁸ The female artist was an especially potent symbol of the feminist cause because her disruption of gendered norms of artistic production signified a disruption of gender roles more generally conceived. Lyn Pykett notes:

in much New Woman writing the figure of the female artist is used both as a means of exploring the desire of the late-nineteenth-century women to transcend the ideological and material conditions of middle-class femininity, and (both consciously and unconsciously) as a means of demonstrating the determining power of those conditions. (148).²⁹

Heilmann elaborates on the politically fraught role of the woman artist, explaining that she “finds herself faced with the problem of having to inhabit patriarchal structures while being actively engaged in exploding them. As a woman who is also an artist, she has to contend with two mutually exclusive roles: passively inspiring muse and active creator” (160). Through Gasparine’s negotiation of these two roles, Johnstone shows that women need not be limited to playing the passive object of the artist’s gaze. However, Gasparine’s painterly vision shows not simply the promises of female artistic agency, but also the dangers this agency can present, regardless of gender.

For instance, when Gasparine watches through a window as young Lotus is abused, her inability to intervene can be attributed to her aestheticization of the scene; she sees a painting,

²⁸ Oft-cited examples of this New Woman *Künstlerroman* include Ella Hepworth Dixon’s *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894), which depicts a young painter-turned-journalist; Mona Caird’s *The Daughters of Danaus* (1894), which follows an aspiring composer; and Sarah Grand’s *The Beth Book* (1897), which features a burgeoning literary talent—or, as the novel’s subtitle boasts, a “woman of genius.”

²⁹ For more discussion of New Woman writers’ depictions of the female artist, see Linda Lewis’s chapter on “The New Woman *Künstlerroman*.” Lewis notes that “the fin-de-siècle artist is more dispirited, less triumphant, and less successful” than woman artists depicted in the middle of the century (250).

rather than a person. Johnstone thus participates in contemporary feminist writers' critique of art that is simply for art's sake; because art without a purpose encourages people to objectify one another, the female artist's gaze can be as narrow as that of the typical male voyeur. Early in the novel, Gasparine's impoverished circumstances force her to give up her painting lessons; seemingly to compensate for this loss of artistic vision, Gasparine resorts to gazing through the window of the house she and her twin brother Gaspar share. Framing objects with the window instead of with her canvas, Gasparine imagines the "painted villa" she sees is utopian dwelling for herself and her brother. Soon, however, other people enter the scene and threaten to disrupt her fantasy. As bucolic as figures in Gasparine's sentimentalized Pre-Raphaelite paintings, two people appear: riding on a horse is "a little girl, with a brilliant light fuzz of hair," and beside her walks "a man, apparently twenty-eight or thirty years of age." Johnstone emphasizes the picturesque arrangement of the scene, showing how thoroughly Gasparine's vision is conditioned by convention by explaining, "it was a beautiful picture to Gasparine—so opulent, so protected those two seemed, pets of society, children of the law" (56).

Reading the pair's relationship in terms of her relationship with her own brother, Gasparine's tunnel vision prevents her from noticing more troubling elements of the scene at first. When the young man "playfully slap[s] the girl's arm, and pretend[s] to put her over the horse by foot and shoulder," Gasparine assumes they are brother and sister and exclaims, "how good he is to her!" (56). The implied playfulness of the young man's actions invites a more ominous interpretation as Gasparine's vision improves, and her surveillance reveals that the young man is not a brother, but rather a suitor of an older girl living in the house. Gasparine's

“close watching” (56) of the house disrupts her simplistic fantasy of idealized familial relations, which enables her to see that something is wrong with the scene.

Johnstone encourages readers to interpret the scene through the lens of literary, rather than artistic, convention by dressing the young girl in a “red cloak and hood” in an apparent allusion to the fairy tale. Scholars have interpreted Charles Perrault’s story of Little Red Riding Hood’s encounter with an ill-intentioned wolf as an allegory for sexual maturation, lost virginity, and seduction.³⁰ These more malevolent connotations of the tale seem intended to inform our reading of the scene through the window, and Gasparine reacts with the suspicion the allusion invokes: “something very striking and peculiar in [the girl’s] attitude caused Gasparine to examine her as closely as possible” (56). Again, Johnstone encourages close examination, rather than vision informed by the tropes of a fairy tale; expecting a brawny hunter or a handsome prince to come to the rescue clouds the vision of individuals capable of actual intervention.

Gasparine’s vision is informed not only by the conventions of fairy tales, but also by the conventions of popular aesthetic taste. Gazing at this picturesque heroine, Gasparine notices her burgeoning sexual maturity that seems incongruous with her girlish appearance: “The hood had fallen off, and Gasparine saw she was a girl of perhaps thirteen or fourteen, overgrown, for in her low dress Gasparine could see the figure prematurely formed.” With a continuing fascination for this young girl, Gasparine almost fetishizes her isolated features, describing, “for beauty she had a striking colouring of eyes and face, fair hair, and a peculiar grace of movement and attitude, *unconventional and exceedingly alluring*” (56, emphasis mine). In appreciating the girl’s

³⁰ See Catherine Velay-Vallantin, who argues, “for Perrault, but also for literary historians, ethnologist and psychoanalysts, there is no doubt: *Little Red Riding Hood* is the story of sexual initiation” (312).

unconventional beauty, Gasparine ironically reveals the difficulty of escaping convention, as she reproduces Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic values. Sophia Andres explains that in “transgressing aesthetic, social, and gender boundaries, the Pre-Raphaelite avant-garde gaze revealed hitherto unexplored perspectives as, for instance, unconventional beauty in conventional ugliness, feminine fragility in masculinity, and masculine strength in conventional femininity” (3). Johnstone points out the Pre-Raphaelite contradiction of creating a new convention out of the unconventional, suggesting that simply substituting one visual code for another will not help viewers to see more clearly.

As a means of revealing the failings of aesthetic detachment, Johnstone shows how Gasparine’s conventionalized vision prevents her from intervening in the tableau that soon turns from bucolic to brutal. Gasparine sees the young man, a veritable “big, bad wolf,” as he is ominously “waiting, or hiding” (57). Gasparine conveniently turns her head for a moment, and when she once more raises her head, she realizes that “something had happened meantime—what, she would never know” (57). She is able to intuit the recent action in the scene as she watches the girl struggle in resistance, before seeing the young man strike “the fair, child-like head, once, twice, and thrice, with brutal and unmanly blows. As he struck the girl seemed to shrink, till she lay on the black path a mere shapeless bundle” (57). After the violent display, Gasparine watches “the little black bundle a long, long time; it never moved. The patch of red grew black in the dusk, and the white spots that showed the bare shoulder and one little naked arm grew dim” (58). Gasparine aestheticizes her vision of the recently beaten girl, abstracting her features into swaths of red, black, and white. Earlier Gasparine transformed the girl into a

romanticized unconventional beauty plucked from a Pre-Raphaelite painting; here, Gasparine's vision evokes the gestural quality of paintings like those of Romantic artist J. M. W. Turner.

Gasparine's aesthetic distance allows her to escape any sort of responsibility for action, for although her "heart yearned to go out and take the wounded creature to her breast and warm it, or, at least, wrap the white neck and arms from the cold," ultimately, "she lacked courage" (58). Because the scene is isolated within the frame of the window, Gasparine can more easily ignore the "cruel blow" she witnesses. Despite Gasparine's inability to prevent the painful scene she witnessed, she apparently has learned something from her "close watching," for the narrator tells us that "she saw now; not even in such places was there safety or security" (58). Witnessing the young man's violence forces Gasparine to reexamine her earlier conventional reading of the scene. Johnstone's correction of Gasparine's vision suggests a parallel exhortation for readers; we, like Gasparine, are encouraged to engage in "close watching" so that we recognize the ways that aesthetic conventions shape what we see.

Through the character of Lotus Grace, Johnstone shows how the aesthetic vision that Gasparine exerts can be corrected by social action. Yet Johnstone remains cautious about this solution to the problem of conventionalized vision, illustrating how readily people can be transformed from aesthetic objects to objects of charity. In an exact reversal of the earlier scene, the benevolent public intellectual Lotus looks in the window, rather than out from a window, witnessing an utterly shattered Gasparine mourning the death of her brother Gaspar. She later watches Gasparine again as she sits isolated on a hill after her brother's funeral, paralyzed with grief. Just as Gasparine once cast a voyeuristic gaze upon Lotus, so does Lotus now cast the same gaze upon the "shapeless bundle, between a boulder and a tree" that is Gasparine (103).

Lest readers miss the repetition of language here, Johnstone intervenes with a rather heavy-handed reminder, musing, “Strange! The sentiment which you possess towards me to-day, I may possess towards you to-morrow. The position you occupy to-day I may occupy to-morrow. The hero of to-day is the victim of to-morrow!” (103). As if this were not enough to signal to readers that Lotus is the young girl whom Gasparine once gazed upon, Johnstone continues: “Once, with a yearning heart, Gasparine had watched a shapeless bundle of humanity, longing to give comfort, but lacking courage. The woman who watched Gasparine did not lack courage” (103).

Lotus’s sight of Gasparine allows her to sweep the grief-stricken girl away from her mourning; because she watches closely, she is able to take action. Here, Johnstone emphasizes the importance of looking beyond aesthetics in order to effect change; Lotus sees not simply a “shapeless bundle,” but a person in need of help. Johnstone’s “shapeless bundle” invokes what Nancy Armstrong describes as a “metropolitan picturesque” aesthetic. Armstrong explains that in the late nineteenth century, photographic images of the urban poor desensitized bourgeois consumers to the real problems of poverty and created a tendency “to reduce people to the status of objects” (101). Lotus’s intervention in Gasparine’s dire circumstances suggests that she resists this tendency to sentimentalize poverty. However, her subsequent detachment from Gasparine indicates that Lotus may see her as an object of her philanthropic, rather than aesthetic, gaze.³¹ Johnstone uses her characters’ failure to resist objectification to show how the conventions of social activism are just as damaging—and difficult to evade—as the conventions of Pre-Raphaelite art.

³¹Deborah Cherry explains that Pre-Raphaelite model and artist Elizabeth Siddall was both the object of artistic imagination and of bourgeois charity, as middle class women sought to distance themselves from her working class status by treating her “as an object of philanthropic concern who needed hospitalisation as an invalid” (189). Cherry argues that that Siddall “resisted her transformation by the aesthetic and the philanthropic gaze” through her artwork—yet in *A Sunless Heart*, neither Gasparine nor Lotus is able to entirely achieve such a resistance.

Johnstone seems to lure readers into the temptations of conventional reading in this section, only to remind us of the pitfalls of unexamined vision. Dotted with exclamation marks and almost breathless sentiment, Johnstone's self-conscious language seems slightly contrived to modern readers.³² Yet I would suggest that this tone of artificiality is not unintentional, but rather Johnstone's way of indicating the constructedness of traditional plot arcs. The novel beckons readers toward the perfect plot resolution: we know that Gasparine's knowledge of Lotus' childhood abuse must become significant in the later chapters, and we assume that somehow, the two women will jointly exorcise their sufferings and live happily ever after. Yet if we were paying attention earlier, we would remember that we should always "watch closely," rather than being seduced by literary tropes. While Johnstone seems to encourage readers to expect a predictable plot at this moment, the previous scene demonstrating the failures of conventional reading—and Johnstone's contrived tone—reminds us to check our interpretive tendencies.

The novel continues to follow an ostensibly conventional plot; Lotus plays the knight in shining armor by transporting Gasparine to her idyllic white cottage and providing sanctuary for her in an enclave of female subjects. Gasparine again reverts to projecting fantasies, idealizing the woman who rescued her from her despair. Gasparine is not the only one to idealize Lotus; Lotus is also the "favourite lecturer" at the local college, discussing such "shocking" subjects as "Socialism and Women's Rights" (75). Her female students at the college flock around her, and "Lotus was the soul of them. She teased them, flirted with them, admired or criticised their dresses, amused, entertained, or fed them, and, when they were gone, sat down to a pile of work with her weary, mournful air" (124). As a proponent of social and political action, a transgressor

³² Indeed, Harsh cannot resist a jab at Johnstone's "crazed affinity for ellipses and italics" (25).

of the boundaries between public and private spheres, and a single, independent woman, Lotus symbolizes the hope of the New Woman for the girls at the college. In idolizing Lotus's magnetism, however, these girls objectify her, and do not notice her "weary, mournful air." Yet Gasparine observes this mysterious air of resignation, which forces Gasparine to question her vision of Lotus. Because of this questioning, "she *watched Lotus now with a closeness* that allowed not a look or tone to escape" (124, emphasis mine). Once more Johnstone advocates close watching rather than reading through one's desires, and this close watching allows Gasparine to distinguish between fantasy and reality: "Her comforter, whom she had known, by sight and reputation, Miss Grace—M.A., lady-lecturer at the College, was one person; 'Lo,' who sang and laughed, talked, worked untiringly, dreamed silently, ran, sat, ordered, listened—all with that strangest air of mournfulness—was another" (124).

Gasparine's recognition of Lotus's strange air of mournfulness enables her to distinguish Lo, the human being, from Miss Grace, the New Woman superhero. This attention to Lotus's suffering seemingly allows Gasparine to avoid the other girls' limiting vision of Lotus. However, Gasparine is not able to wholly avoid sentimentalizing Lotus' mysterious suffering, as she visualizes a dramatic rescue scenario: "A perfect, unquestioning love I will give her, and save her. And to think *she*, who was my ideal, and seemed to be happy, and blessed in the mere fact of existence, should suffer!" (133). Gasparine turns Lotus's real, human suffering into a tableau to be acted out, similar to the way she aestheticized Lotus's childhood suffering. Projecting a philanthropic gaze like that which Lotus exerted earlier, Gasparine casts Lotus's current suffering as an opportunity for her to play the role of rescuer.

Gasparine's idealized portrait of Lotus persists in her mind until the real Lotus intervenes in her fantasy. Yet even this intervention cannot deter Gasparine from seeing Lotus the way she chooses to see her. At a climactic moment in the text, when Lotus is about to retell the story of her abuse, Gasparine interrupts her to profess her admiration, saying, "I think of you always as something as white—." Gasparine's sentiments are so clichéd that Lotus can predict the end of the sentence, and she cuts Gasparine off by snapping, "I know, I know . . . Don't let's have a repetition of old metaphors. . . . Snow isn't in it. Go on." Lotus resists being the object of Gasparine's imaginings, yet in spite of this resistance, Gasparine insists on articulating her snow metaphor, declaring, "As white...as snow—when it fell, trampled perhaps by busy, thoughtless, careless feet...but white, to my eyes, Lo, always" (149). Gasparine's persistence with her imagery and her ignoring of Lotus's abrupt reaction reveal that she is once again not watching closely enough, giving in to the temptations of convention.

Lotus must remind Gasparine that she is an active subject of her own life, and not simply a blank screen upon which Gasparine can project her fantasies. In order to shake Gasparine out of her starry-eyed idealism, Lotus launches into a cathartic confession of the abuse she suffered as a child. She says haltingly, "one hears so often of wrongs—so often of that . . . great wrong." Finally she reveals the mystery behind the sadness Gasparine so frequently notices, saying only: "A man once . . ." (149). Johnstone intervenes with a strategic ellipsis in an odd contrast to her earlier heavy-handed narration, so that we experience the story only through Gasparine's reaction—"a look of indescribable horror" (149). Just as Gasparine turned her head earlier in the novel at the moment of Lotus's abuse, so the reader is prevented from witnessing her retelling of the action. Though the omission tempts us to fill in the blanks of Lotus's story, rather than

allowing her to tell it herself, the blank space reminds us of our ultimate lack of control as readers. The conventions that inform our readings are very quickly laid bare by Lotus's silence, and we are forced to face the inadequacy of our own readerly predispositions.

Lotus's confession of her tale seems to be her final effort to affirm her subjectivity, yet Gasparine continues to reject Lotus's story in favor of her own. Lotus, almost cruelly frank, tells Gasparine that she entrusts her with her story because she does not love her, saying, "if I loved you, *could* love you, these are things I would hide" (159). Yet Gasparine does not accept this pronouncement, insisting on framing Lotus within her own story. Gasparine yet again interprets life in terms of literary tropes, exclaiming, "don't you know how, in the old stories, the prince in exile has always with him a fool who is faithful?. . . . let me be your fool, your fool, who asks only to follow and serve you, whose faithfulness you cannot doubt" (160). If the novel were to be read as a kind of *Bildungsroman* tracking Gasparine's development, then we would expect her to mature from her earlier shortsightedness and "watch closely" enough to take action. In this scenario, Gasparine might redeem her previous passivity and heal Lotus's trauma through an empathetic female relationship. Yet Gasparine's sentimentalizing of Lotus' story prevents her from truly seeing Lotus as the person she is; thus, Gasparine objectifies Lotus as much as we would expect a male character to do. While Johnstone disrupts typical visual power relations by having her female characters gaze upon one another, here she demonstrates that the unequal relationship of subject and object is difficult to escape. Our constructions of vision are so deeply entrenched that even female subjects cannot fully democratize subjectivity.

By the end of the novel, Lotus has become a sort of "black hole" upon which all of the characters in the novel project their fantasies (Žižek 91). Gasparine hopes Lotus will find her

“salvation” through marrying the “muscular Christian” Professor Raymond (170). Professor Raymond seems to share this fantasy of rescuing Lotus, as he tells her that “so terribly you drew me with your piteous eyes that I said I would dare all, and try if there was love in you for me” (184). Yet Raymond’s love proves empty, as he later admits to falling for Mona Lefcadio’s sensual charms. As Lotus increasingly feels herself limited by others’ ideas of her, she exhibits the need to physically escape in order to assert her own identity. Only Ladybird, a young girl known only by Lotus and Gasparine to be Lotus’s daughter, seems to invite reality, rather than a fantasy. As Lotus prepares to leave, Ladybird professes her desire for a family, explaining, “I don’t want a white angel. I want a mother, in a dress” (187). The promise of becoming a corporeal mother, who wears clothing rather than a halo, seems to offer some small hope to Lotus. She tells Gasparine that “I may come, perhaps, in three days, and *if I do, it is because I think that you can heal me*” (189). Johnstone once again invites an archetypal reading, as Lotus’s promise to return in three days suggests a fairy tale ending—but if we have learned anything from Johnstone’s novel up to this point, we should know better than to trust expectations informed by convention.

The quickly approaching conclusion of the novel blinds readers into expecting a conventional plot resolution, but Johnstone soon shocks readers out of this complacency with a destructive climax. The collected fantasies of Lotus, Mona, and the female students collapse on Lotus in Johnstone’s parting blow to objectifying vision. Lotus visits Mona to convince her to marry Professor Raymond, in spite of Mona’s frequent professions of dedication to Lotus. Lotus denies any love for Mona, and forces her to recognize “that a life with such a man is better than a life of vain regrets” (194). After a few protestations, Mona relents, and decides to marry

Raymond. Lotus departs sadly, alighting on a train, ready to return and have Gasparine “heal” her. Immediately after this resolution, the narrator intervenes abruptly to tell us: “it was in the long tunnel that the two trains rushed madly into one another, like enraged and sentient monsters. Groans of agony, piercing yells, death-cries, and the agony and darkness of eternal death filled the tunnel. No light, no salvation, no help!” (194). Lotus’s journey towards subjectivity is literally derailed; the collision in the tunnel demonstrates the destructiveness of the limiting tunnel vision with which the other characters have gazed upon her.

Yet in these final agonizing moments, Lotus finds the salvation that Gasparine thought she could find for her. In what Harsh describes as an “unambiguously sensual” (23) description, Johnstone writes, “in the darkness, [Lotus] felt a mouth touch hers, and two wet hands groped over her body” (195). Mona appears, as if from nowhere, and proclaims, “did you think, beloved, that I was so easily driven away? Ah, no, love, no! I meant to follow you, . . . have I not dreamt of this for years?” (195). Clasped together in mutual affection amidst the shrapnel of the train wreck, Lotus and Mona seem to evince the type of relationship between equal subjects that Žižek describes. Lotus confesses hope that they will see the morning, explaining it is “because you did not leave me. Now I have faith in love” (196). Yet this moment of democratized subjectivity is short-lived, for Lotus cannot allow Mona to see her for who she really is. In their dying moments, Mona wonders who Ladybird’s mother is. Lotus responds with feigned nonchalance, “ah, yes! the little girl Ladybird? Her mother? No, I do not know. . . .” (196). Lotus’s refusal to confide in Mona recalls her earlier admission to Gasparine that “if I loved you, *could* love you, these are things I would hide” (159). The fact that she hides her past from Mona suggests that

she does indeed love her, yet this secrecy also implies that in Lotus's mind, love must always be a relationship of inequality.

The novel concludes with a final enshrinement of Lotus's subjectivity in the form of a painting. While Lotus's journey ends before she arrives at her destination, Gasparine reaches her destination of becoming a successful artist by the end of the novel. However, it is at the expense of Lo's subjectivity, which exists only as a painting that critics call "the most powerful presentation of thought-life, of the subjective, that had ever yet been given, for in the eyes of the strange face one seemed to see all that the cloud could tell" (198). In the end, female subjectivity can only be truly represented through an aesthetic object—a idea made more ironic by the fact that Johnstone herself is creating an object to be read. The novel's journey toward female subjectivity thus seems as abortive as Lotus's train ride, ultimately implying that the New Woman must be not a single projected fantasy, but rather a multitude of real, seeing, subjects.

CHAPTER THREE: SEEING THE WORLD THROUGH THE EYES OF LOVE: LILY BRISCOE'S SUBJECTIFYING VISION IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *TO THE LIGHTHOUSE*

They became part of that unreal but penetrating and exciting universe which is the world seen through the eyes of love. The sky stuck to them; the birds sang through them. And, what was even more exciting, she felt, too, as she saw Mr. Ramsay bearing down and retreating, and Mrs. Ramsay sitting with James in the window and the cloud moving and the tree bending, how life, from being made up of little separate incidences which one lived one by one, became curled and whole like a wave which bore one up with it and threw one down with it, there, with a dash on the beach. (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 47)

Reflecting on the variability of life, the intensely introspective painter Lily Briscoe begins to resolve the problem of objectifying vision in Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927) by seeing the world "through the eyes of love." In her observation quoted above, not only does Lily acknowledge the separate experiences of Mrs. Ramsay, her son James, and Mr. Ramsay, but she invests physical phenomena with consciousness as well, using the wave as a symbol of embodied subjectivity, and intertwining the Ramsays' experiences with those of the sky, the birds, the cloud, and the tree. Lily's "eyes of love" differ from the potentially objectifying gaze of the artist because her eyes recognize other subjectivities, at times even imbuing material objects with subjectivity as well. Lily presents an even more dramatic reconfiguration of Mulvey's thesis than Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *Avis* and Edith Johnstone's *Gasparine* because she forces us to reconsider the terms with which we define subjectivity. Rather than "taking other people as objects," as Mulvey writes in explaining Freud's concept of voyeurism, and "subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze" (16), Lily seems almost to take objects as people. Just as *Avis* believes the carmine curtain "throb[s] as if it held some inarticulate passion, like that of a subject soul" (6), so does Lily allow anything from a wave, to a

pear tree, to a kitchen table, to a salt cellar, to evoke what Woolf describes in “Modern Fiction” as the “uncircumscribed spirit” of life (106).

Thus, Woolf shows the problem not only with taking people as objects, but with taking anything as an object, using both Lily’s artistic perspective and the form of the novel to articulate her critique. Just as Lily allows other subjectivities to coexist with hers, so does Woolf allow multiple subjectivities to coexist within the content of her novel. Scenes are viewed from multiple perspectives that frequently overlap and bleed into one another, so that the boundary between self and other becomes as blurred as the drops of water in the curling wave Lily describes. Woolf’s use of free indirect discourse emphasizes individual experience, and redistributes the power of the omniscient narrator to her characters themselves. By depicting scenes and objects through the eyes of characters, rather than attempting to render the novel in photographic detail, Woolf forces readers to recognize the existence of other subjectivities, and become aware of the influence of our own consciousness in negotiating the text.

Woolf asks readers to examine the effect of our own subjectivity not only in *To the Lighthouse*, but also in her discussion of film. In her essay “The Cinema,” Woolf explores film’s capacity to heighten viewers’ awareness of their own consciousness, but ultimately concludes that film does not have the same emotive potential as literature.³³ Writing about her impression of the way that film affects vision, she suggests that we behold the objects on the screen “as they are when we are not there. We see life as it is when we have no part in it. As we gaze we seem to be removed from the pettiness of actual existence.” Woolf sees the imaginative potential in this aesthetic removal, because it allows us to realize that “this beauty will continue, and this beauty

³³ For a more thorough examination of Woolf’s interest in film, see David Trotter.

will flourish whether we behold it or not” (269). Unlike Mulvey—who suggests that cinema involves the viewer in the film by encouraging an alignment between the viewer’s gaze and that of a male protagonist (19)—Woolf believes that cinema reminds the viewer of his or her separateness from the action on the screen, reinforcing both the temporality of existence and the life that objects possess outside of our own experiences. Yet Woolf maintains that literature accomplishes this effect in a way that cinema cannot. Quoting Robert Burns’s famous poem, she writes, “even the simplest image ‘My luv’e’s like a red, red rose, that’s newly sprung in June’ presents us with impressions of moisture and warmth an the glow of crimson and the softness of petals inextricably mixed and strung upon the lilt of a rhythm which is itself the voice of the passion and hesitation of the lover. All this, which is accessible to words, and to words alone, the cinema must avoid” (271). Though Woolf expresses optimism about the future of the then-nascent medium of film, she remains insistent on the evocative power of words—a power she explores in *To the Lighthouse*. Not only does she highlight tangible objects that have all the connotative possibilities of Burns’s red rose, but she also shifts narrative perspective to remind readers that “this beauty will flourish whether we behold it or not.” While many novels encourage a readerly alignment with a male spectator, *To the Lighthouse* intentionally thwarts narrative verisimilitude in order to prevent total alignment with any character’s gaze. Instead of being implicated in voyeuristic vision, we are invited to see the world through the eyes of love, and reminded that our own view is but one of the “little separate incidences” that make up the curling wave of life.

Woolf encourages an acknowledgement of the diversity of human experience in *To the Lighthouse*—yet scholars often emphasize only her individual experience in their interpretations

of the novel. Virginia Woolf's inarguably fascinating personal life, documented in her letters and diaries, has led many to read her work through the lens of her biography.³⁴ *To the Lighthouse* particularly encourages these kinds of readings, not only because Lily the artist seems such a clear parallel to Woolf the writer, but also because Woolf herself suggested a connection between the Ramsays and her parents.³⁵ The fact that Woolf's sister Vanessa Bell was a painter also proves irresistible for critics; despite Marianna Torgovnick's caution that "each fictional woman . . . is a composite of autobiographical imperatives, the remembered attributes of more than one person, and sheer invention" (118), Torgovnick goes so far as to suggest that "Woolf's uses of the visual arts reflect both her love for and envy of her painter sister" (123).³⁶ Certainly Woolf's personal history had some repercussions in her fiction, but if we read her work solely through her biography, we are in danger of producing a singularity of vision that Woolf herself works against in *To the Lighthouse*. Attempting to create a correlation between Woolf's characters and people in Woolf's life constrains our interpretive possibilities, and prevents the multiplicity of subjectivity that Woolf herself pursues in *To the Lighthouse*.

Just as scholars tend to privilege Woolf's biography over other interpretations of the text, so are they wont to privilege Lily's experience over that of the other characters, despite the fact

³⁴ Rachel Blau du Plessis, for instance, emphasizes the influence of Woolf's mother on her fiction; Jane Augustine highlights Woolf's much-discussed ambiguous sexuality; Elliott and Wallace discuss the impact of the Bloomsbury Group (and Woolf's consequent separation from contemporary female avant-garde groups) on Woolf's gender ideology .

³⁵ See Randi Koppen (375) and Roberta White (90, 92).

³⁶ White, Henry Harrington and Diane Gillespie also hypothesize about Bell's personal and aesthetic influence on Woolf's work.

that Woolf decries creating hierarchies of subjectivity in the novel.³⁷ Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay become particular objects of denigration, seen as obstacles in the way of Lily's journey to artistic self-discovery. Blau du Plessis, for instance, suggests that Lily must "renounce the polarized parents as models and reject the system of heterosexual bonding and the division of emotional labor that these parents uphold" (95).³⁸ Mrs. Ramsay's creative abilities are often subordinated to Lily's; she is read as an "'artist' of domestic life" from whom Lily must distance herself in order to achieve her artistic vision (White 92-93).³⁹

While Mrs. Ramsay's Victorian version of femininity is seen as detrimental to Lily's artistic project, Mr. Ramsay's masculine objective logic is frequently blamed for frustrating Lily's efforts. Crater, for example, suggests Mr. Ramsay represents the "silencing presence of the Law-of-the-Father" (122), and Bassoff and Anita Tarr are similarly critical of Mr. Ramsay as a symbol of patriarchal hegemony. I would argue, however, that the text itself does not encourage such judgments of the Ramsays. Conditioned by the traditional *Bildungsroman* plot, we tend to read Lily as an autonomous, isolated heroine who struggles against all odds, and consequently we cast all others as foils or foes. Lily's battle to maintain her artistic agency against historical and cultural conditions only adds to the temptation to read *To the Lighthouse* as a proto-feminist fairy tale. Granted, the Ramsays often provide a source of conflict for Lily; she does not fully understand Mr. Ramsay's philosophies, and refuses to marry in spite of Mrs. Ramsay's matchmaking attempts. In spite of these differences, however, Lily accepts the

³⁷ White excuses her focus on Lily by explaining, "to highlight Lily and her art is, of course, to neglect the delicate balance of characters and images that constitutes the structure of Woolf's novel" (87), yet she does not acknowledge the critical tendency to value Lily's perspective over others.

³⁸ See Bruce Bassoff and Theresa Crater for similar arguments.

³⁹ See also Torgovnick.

experiences of other characters, even when their views threaten her own. Through Lily, Woolf illustrates her notion that subjectivities are interdependent, and should not be subordinated to one another.

Scholars often turn to gender in order to address Woolf's more egalitarian view of subjectivity. Goldman notes that "in Lily's painting, and Woolf's novel, both the subject and object of the artist's gaze is feminine" (169), and Lewis contends that this "offers a way of analysing a desirable viewing position for the female spectator that does not rely on Mulvey's active/passive/transvestite mode of viewing" (163).⁴⁰ Woolf's investment in the female spectator has led many to discuss her work as depicting a female mode of expression, similar to the *écriture féminine* discussed by French feminist theorists.⁴¹ Yet these readings not only threaten to reproduce the gender binaries they purport to question, but they also underestimate the degree to which Woolf destabilizes the boundaries not between male and female, but between subject and object. As Pamela Caughie observes, "the point of Woolf's many portraits of the woman artist is not to find the distinctive conventions of a female aesthetics, but to resist the rigid stigmatizing of conventions, the tendency to turn certain narrative forms into abiding formulas" (372). Like Edith Johnstone, Woolf demonstrates that even supposedly liberating feminist agendas can result in a limited view of the world; as William Handley suggests, "Woolf is suspicious of all forms of objectification, especially of the manner in which human subjects frame other subjects as objects for political ends" (17). Though Lily has arguably been made into an icon of female creativity,

⁴⁰ Emily Dalgarno also discusses the politics of vision in Woolf, suggesting that it is not a character, but a position that is gendered. She invokes Lacan in discussing a "dialectic of eye and gaze" (21) that is engaged through painting in *To the Lighthouse*.

⁴¹See Crater, Goldman, and Patricia Laurence. In one of the more radical readings of bodily experience in Woolf's work, Patricia Moran discusses the central line in Lily's painting as a ruptured hymen.

her vibrant and highly idiosyncratic vision preserves her subjectivity, preventing her from becoming simply a passive object.

Scholars frequently explore the influence not only of Woolf's political commitments, but also of the philosophical and aesthetic climate in which she wrote. Ann Banfield attributes Woolf's fascination with time and memory to the epistemological interests of Cambridge philosophy and to the aesthetic interests of fellow Bloomsbury group members such as Roger Fry ("Time Passes"). Fry's aesthetics are often identified in Woolf's fiction, and many discuss the way that his postimpressionist emphasis on form and design are translated into Woolf's work.⁴² These readings, however, seem to encourage an aestheticization that Woolf herself does not entirely espouse, taking her novel as simply an aesthetic object rather than recognizing the life it evokes. Woolf herself critiques overly formulaic art in *To the Lighthouse* when Lily insists on painting with deeply saturated colors, "fashionable though it was, since Mr. Paunceforte's visit, to see everything pale, elegant, semitransparent" (18). In reading the novel as simply an application of Roger Fry's aesthetics, critics neglect Woolf's eschewal of convention that she depicts through Lily Briscoe.

Working against formalist tendencies in criticism, others discuss Woolf's divergence from Bloomsbury aestheticism, debating her stance on the relationship between art and life. While Fry privileges art over life, Penelope Ingram posits, Woolf demonstrates that the two are inseparable; in *To the Lighthouse*, Ingram suggests, "art is realized through life as life is realized through art" (82).⁴³ Koppen, however, questions critical assumptions that "the aesthetics of Fry

⁴² See Allen McLaurin, Jack Stewart, Thomas Matro, and White.

⁴³ Other scholars who discuss Woolf's departure from Bloomsbury aesthetics include Christopher Reed and C. J. Mares.

and Woolf (*qua* modernist) exhibit a typical modernist division between ‘life’ and ‘experience’ on the one hand, and the world of text and trope on the other” (376).⁴⁴ Highlighting the centrality of bodily experience in the novel, Koppen suggests that Lily solicits “not simply inspiration, a moment of inspired aesthetic vision. She is waiting for the manifestation of the emotional form in the natural form, and that is a physical manifestation, something that is offered up, not created independently by the artist’s gaze” (385).⁴⁵ Here Koppen briefly alludes to the power that material objects have in Woolf’s text, a point upon which I would like to elaborate in my own discussion. Koppen begins to show the equal distribution of subjectivity in the novel through the way that objects somehow “offer up” emotions, and I would argue that Lily goes even further, investing objects with subjectivity in order to redefine objectification. In *A Sunless Heart*, Gasparine achieves a similar effect with her painting of Lotus, because the painting’s “powerful presentation of thought-life, of the subjective” evokes Lotus’s life through a tangible object (198). Because of this parallel, I am appropriating Johnstone’s term “thought life” to interpret the active, internal reflection that Lily both engages in and ascribes to the material world. Lily’s gaze attributes thought life to objects around her, and her recognition of the effect the objects have on the viewer’s gaze prevents such objects from being labeled as strictly passive. Woolf uses Lily’s subjectifying vision to make readers more aware of the way our gaze affects what we see, as well as how what we see affects our gaze.

⁴⁴ Katz expresses a similar dissatisfaction with dichotomous readings of Woolf’s work, writing that “the categories of the social and the abstract, indeed the gendered and the abstract, cannot be simply distinguished as cultural opposites in modernism” (196).

⁴⁵ Katherine Stelmach also discusses bodily experience in Woolf, suggesting that she employs ekphrasis to make her readers’ experience with language more corporeal, “at once revealing the redemptive power of mutual aesthetic vision and the inherent multiplicity of interpretation that will follow” (323).

A preoccupation with material objects is certainly not unique to Woolf; Wallace Steven's "Anecdote of the Jar," William Carlos Williams' "The Red Wheelbarrow," and Ezra Pound's "petals on a wet, black bough" (351) speak to the modernist interest in relics of quotidian life. Though many modernists seem to appropriate objects for their aesthetic purposes, Woolf allows her objects to evoke a life beyond their material existence. Connecting Mulvey's discussion of visual pleasure to the pleasure of looking at art objects, Korsmeyer suggests that "aesthetic objects are assigned the passive role of being-looked-at rather than active looking; they are objects presented for the tasteful scrutiny of the perceiver" (56). In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf imagines an alternative to this unexamined aesthetic gaze through Lily's "eyes of love" that acknowledge multiple subjectivities, and even attribute subjectivity to aesthetic objects themselves.⁴⁶ Bill Brown observes a similar phenomenon in Woolf's short story "Solid Objects," discussing "an extraordinary dangling modifier" that "suddenly shifts the burden from the unnamed narrator to the possessions themselves" (12). Brown finds meaning rather than error in Woolf's sentence, which reads: "Under the stress of thinking about Isabella, her room became more shadowy and symbolic." In a compelling interpretation, Brown suggests that "it is as though the object world, by concerning itself with human subjects, becomes both more and less legible, clearly significant but indecipherable" (13). I would posit a similar animation of material objects in *To the Lighthouse*; through these objects, Woolf accomplishes a reconfiguration not simply of gendered experience, but of subjectivity itself.

⁴⁶ *To the Lighthouse* is not the only novel in which Woolf experiments with depictions of subjectivity. According to Craig Smith, Woolf's novel *Flush: A Biography* succeeds in making "a substantial gesture toward crossing the gulf of understanding between human and nonhuman subjects" (360). In this novel, Woolf attributes thought life not to material ephemera, but to a dog.

Much like the opening scene of *The Story of Avis*, the initial section of *To the Lighthouse* shifts perspective from one character to another with dizzying rapidity, emphasizing the ultimate multiplicity of experience. Very little actually happens in this scene: Lily Briscoe sits working on her painting, and Mrs. Ramsay poses for her in the window while overseeing her son James cutting pictures out of magazines. William Bankes watches both Lily painting and Mrs. Ramsay in the window; then Lily and Bankes go on a walk and run into Mr. Ramsay. Woolf makes up for the relative lack of physical action in this first section of the novel with a superabundance of thought life, refracting each moment into the fragmented impressions of individual characters. The fluidity with which one character's impression melts into another reinforces Woolf's revised vision of subjectivity. Because the shifting perspective and lack of an omniscient narrator prevents the reader from settling into a single fixed viewing position, we are not only made to recognize the diversity of experience, but also to recognize the way that our own experience shapes the way we see. Additionally, by linking the perspectives of Lily, William Bankes, Mrs. Ramsay, and Mr. Ramsay to physical objects, Woolf further blurs the distinction between subject and object, suggesting that subjectivity is not so discretely parceled out as we like to imagine.

Woolf re-imagines subjectivity most clearly through Lily Briscoe, whose insistence on seeing honestly requires her both to remain true to her own vision and to allow the vision of others to coexist with hers. The opening scene of the novel depicts Lily's difficulty in reconciling contradictory thoughts, as she admits that she feels herself "struggling against terrific odds to maintain her courage; to say: 'But this is what I see; this is what I see,' and so to clasp some miserable remnant of her vision to her breast, which a thousand forces did their best to pluck from her" (19). One such force working against Lily's vision is the pressure of convention,

which she confesses to as she appraises a cluster of flowers and a wall, reflecting that despite the fashion of painting in Mr. Paunceforte's "pale, elegant, semitransparent" tones, she "would not have considered it honest to tamper with the bright violet and staring white, since she saw them like that" (18). Lily refuses to abandon her "bright violet" and "staring white" because of her commitment to the honesty of vision, as she later emphasizes, "she could have done it differently of course; the colour could have been thinned and faded; the shapes etherealised; that was how Paunceforte would have seen it. But then she did not see it like that" (48).

Lily's aesthetic integrity parallels Woolf's literary commitments that she discusses in "Modern Fiction." Woolf expresses a feeling like Lily's that a thousand forces are attempting to pluck her vision from her; she personifies these forces into "some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant who has [the writer] in thrall, to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability embalming the whole." Yet Woolf wonders, "is life like this? Must novels be like this?" (106). She too does not consider it honest to tamper with the complexities of life by forcing them into a narrow formula; thus, she writes with a shifting stream of consciousness, destabilizing narrative control in order to represent the nuances and contradictions of existence. While I am not attempting to make a one-to-one correspondence between Woolf and Lily—as many scholars have—I am suggesting that Woolf uses Lily as her vehicle for reconfiguring the way we think about vision, representation, and subjectivity. Lily herself ponders the meaning of subjectivity, wondering about Mrs. Ramsay, "how did she differ? What was the spirit in her, the essential thing, by which, had you found a crumpled glove in the corner of a sofa, you would have known it, from its twisted finger, hers indisputably?" (49). In Lily's question, I believe we begin to find Woolf's answer. As she wonders what makes Mrs.

Ramsay distinct from any other subject, Lily shows how she herself differs by associating identity with a crumpled glove. The glove somehow betrays evidence of Mrs. Ramsay's presence, evoking life and actively informing Lily's vision even as an inanimate object.⁴⁷

Throughout *To the Lighthouse*, Lily grounds subjective experience in material reality in this way; because objects become symbols of thought life, the boundary between subject and object begins to blur. Through Lily, Woolf is able to sanction objectification because by her definition, objects are not really objects at all.

In perhaps the most apparent example of this equation of subjective thought and objective reality, Lily takes Mr. Ramsay's philosophies from the abstract to the concrete in a resistant reading of his work on "subject and object and the nature of reality" (23). Lily expresses a certain reverence for Mr. Ramsay's scholarship, for when William Bankes begins to speak disparagingly of Mr. Ramsay, she protests, "Oh, but . . . think of his work!" Yet in her reverence for Mr. Ramsay's work, Lily undermines the singularity of his position as a scholar by showing how one's thoughts are subject to others' perceptions, as she admits to herself that "whenever she 'thought of his work' she always saw clearly before her a large kitchen table." This association is the result of Andrew Ramsay's explanation of Mr. Ramsay's work; because Lily does not understand what "subject and object and the nature of reality" means, Andrew tells her, "think of a kitchen table then . . . when you're not there." Taking Andrew's interpretation perhaps a little too literally, Lily reflects that "now she always saw, when she thought of Mr. Ramsay's work, a scrubbed kitchen table" (23). By transforming his subjective thought into a piece of furniture, Lily inadvertently critiques ways of seeing that objectify. Lily even seems to

⁴⁷ Woolf's image of an almost animated glove calls to mind symbolist artist Max Klinger's 1881 series of etchings that trace the travels of a lost glove. In the etchings, the glove almost literally comes to life.

imply that abstract thought has the potential to objectify because it strips life of the concrete idiosyncrasies that make daily experience so diverse. Yet Lily's translation of Mr. Ramsay's work also shows that even objectifying vision is subject to multiple interpretations; both Andrew and Lily change Mr. Ramsay's ideas in their interaction with them, but the ideas change Lily and Andrew in return. While Banfield suggests that the scrubbed kitchen table is "washed of all human agency," I would read the table as a representation of the interdependence of these characters' consciousnesses, so that the table acts not just an object, but as a symbol of thought life (*Phantom Table* 50).

Lily excuses Mr. Ramsay's tendency to the abstract, even as she subtly critiques it, by considering, "naturally, if one's days were passed in this seeing of angular essences, this reducing of lonely evenings, with all their flamingo clouds and blue and silver to a white deal four-legged table (and it was a mark of the finest minds so to do), naturally one could not be judged like an ordinary person" (23). The vivid detail with which Lily describes the "angular essences" and "flamingo clouds," contrasted with the starkness of the "white deal four-legged table," suggests Lily privileges her way of seeing over Mr. Ramsay's. The mock-serious tone of her pronouncement gently pokes fun at the asceticism of Mr. Ramsay's academic endeavors; Lily cannot understand why he would choose to take a world of vivid colors and make it monochromatic. Handley too remarks on the seemingly ironic tone here, noting that "Woolf's sardonic repetition of the word 'naturally' betrays how the philosopher's presumed 'natural' frame is precisely not natural but constructed" (23). Woolf may indeed be critiquing the artificiality of Mr. Ramsay's vision here; however, Lily's earlier reverence for Mr. Ramsay's work complicates this interpretation. Lily seems to realize that if forced to see the world through

her eyes, Mr. Ramsay would protest, “but this is what I see!”, just as she protested earlier against Mr. Paunceforte’s puerile paintings. Protecting Mr. Ramsay from the panic that she has felt in having her vision questioned, Lily accepts the fact that he is simply painting the world as he sees it. She inducts Mr. Ramsay’s thoughts into her catalogue of images, using the kitchen table to signify this negotiation of multiple subjectivities.

The kitchen table persists as a symbol of subjectivity as Lily superimposes its image onto a pear tree during her walk with William Bankes. Lily attributes subjectivity to both the table and the tree, and then blurs these two objects into a sort of eruption of thought life in order to once again represent the multiplicity of experience. On the walk with Bankes, Lily sees the kitchen table “lodged now in the fork of a pear tree” (23). The kitchen table and the pear tree collide, and the subjectivity they evoke washes over Lily: suddenly “the load of her accumulated impressions of [Bankes] tilted up, and down poured in a ponderous avalanche all she felt about him. . . . Then up rose in a fume the essence of his being.” Bankes’s presence seems to emanate from the pear tree, but that presence is inextricably linked to Lily’s own vision. Thus, even as she examines Bankes’s “essence,” she simultaneously examines herself, feeling herself “transfixed by the intensity of her perception” (24).

Lily feels empowered by her own potent vision, but this potent vision also allows her to see Bankes for who he really is, without objectifying him, as she thinks, “I respect you (she addressed silently him in person) in every atom; you are not vain; you are entirely impersonal; you are finer than Mr. Ramsay; you are the finest human being that I know.” Though Lily obviously recognizes and values Bankes as a fellow subject, her pronouncement seems uncharacteristically hierarchical here, as she values Bankes’s subjectivity more than Mr.

Ramsay's. Yet Lily checks her judgment in order to acknowledge Bankes's flaws as well as his virtues: "simultaneously, she remembered how he had brought a valet all the way up here; objected to dogs on chairs; would prose for hours (until Mr. Ramsay slammed out of the room) about salt in vegetables and the iniquity of English cooks" (24). Lily's earlier superlative language almost idealizes Bankes—particularly her breathless assertion that "praise would be an insult to you; generous, pure-hearted, heroic man!" By recognizing Bankes's foibles, Lily avoids projecting her fantasy onto him, and instead sees him from multiple perspectives simultaneously. Somehow the pear tree facilitates this multiplicity, for as Lily stands,

apparently transfixed, by the pear tree, impressions poured in upon her of those two men, and to follow her thought was like following a voice which speaks too quickly to be taken down by one's pencil, and the voice was her own voice saying without prompting undeniable, everlasting, contradictory things, so that even the fissures and humps on the bark of the pear tree were irrevocably fixed there for eternity. (24)

Lily's voice becomes almost indistinguishable from the fissures on the bark of the tree in this radical blurring of subject and object. If objects, as Woolf suggests in "The Cinema," remind us that beauty will continue without us there to behold it, then Lily attempts to establish a certain permanence of vision by fixing her experience of William Bankes and Mr. Ramsay to the pear tree.

Just as Lily's vision suggests multiple subject positions, so does William Bankes's view evoke more than one set of eyes, and it is the multiplicity of their perspectives that makes their gazes unthreatening. Bankes's acknowledgement of other subjectivities allows him to gaze

without objectifying, and he directs this gaze to both Lily's painting and to Mrs. Ramsay.

Watching Mrs. Ramsay in the window from afar, Bankes seems to act as the stereotypical male voyeur—yet Lily delights in his scopophilia, reflecting, “for him to gaze as Lily saw him gazing at Mrs. Ramsay was a rapture, equivalent, Lily felt, to the loves of dozens of young men” (47).

Lily equates Bankes's gaze with diversity, multiplicity, and it is because of this that he can look at Mrs. Ramsay without objectifying her.

Rather than demonstrating the kind of narcissistic love Žižek discusses in which man “projects, transfers, [his ideal self] on to another, on to the idealized woman” (139), Bankes gazes at Mrs. Ramsay and not only evokes the love of “dozens of young men,” but also inadvertently extends that love to both Mrs. Ramsay and to Lily (for it is Lily who feels the “rapture” of his gaze). Žižek claims that love is “cowardly and treacherous not only in relationship to man himself but also, and above all, in relationship to its object—it utterly disregards the object's (woman's) true nature, and uses it only as a kind of empty projection screen” (140). Yet Bankes's love does not disregard the true nature of its object; he exhibits a kind of purified love, according to Lily, that is “distilled and filtered; love that never attempted to clutch its object; but, like the love which mathematicians bear their symbols, or poets their phrases, was meant to be spread over the world and become part of the human gain” (47).

Comparing Bankes's love for Mrs. Ramsay to the love mathematicians bear their symbols hardly seems to elevate Mrs. Ramsay above the status of a mere object, yet Lily recognizes that without their symbols and their phrases, mathematicians and poets would not be able to do their work.

Thus, these symbols and phrases—like Lily's own catalogue of images, such as the kitchen table and the pear tree—acquire a kind of life of their own. The interdependence of the mathematician

and her symbol, or the poet and his phrase, is illustrated by the relationship between Bankes, Mrs. Ramsay, and Lily: Lily watches Bankes as he looks at Mrs. Ramsay, who watches them as she poses for Lily's picture—each of them acting alternately as a subject and an object.

Bankes extends his loving gaze not only to Mrs. Ramsay, but also to Lily's painting. Even though Lily is extremely protective of her painting—keeping “a feeler on her surroundings lest some one should creep up, and suddenly she should find her picture looked at” (17)—she allows Bankes to see it because he views it not as an aesthetic object, but as a symbol of her subjectivity. As he approaches her, “she did not, as she would have done had it been Mr. Tansley, Paul Rayley, Minta Doyle, or practically anybody else, turn her canvas upon the grass, but let it stand. William Bankes stood beside her” (17-18). Lily becomes a participant in Bankes's examination of her painting by actively choosing to let him see it; thus, she resists objectification, instead facilitating their mutual subjecthood as she and Bankes discuss her painting. When Bankes asks “what did she wish to indicate by the triangular purple shape, ‘just there’?”, Lily anticipates his reaction to her answer that it was Mrs. Ramsay reading to her son: “she knew his objection—that no one could tell it for a human shape. But she had made no attempt at likeness, she said.” Rather than dismissing Lily's answer as the eccentric whim of the artist, Bankes asks, “for what reason had she introduced them then?” Lily's surprisingly formalist answer once again demonstrates her capacity to attribute life to objects, as she replies, “why indeed?—except that if there, in that corner, it was bright, here, in this, she felt the need of darkness” (52). Lily quite literally objectifies Mrs. Ramsay and James, using them to balance her composition; however, her refusal to depict them in a strictly representational manner encourages multiple interpretations, and creates a space for other subjectivities.

A slight narrative shift from Lily's perspective to Bankes's perspective indicates that the painting has accomplished its goal in instigating thought life. Bankes finds Lily's explanation provocative, thinking, "simple, obvious, commonplace, as it was, Mr. Bankes was interested." Recognizing the subjective power of Lily's objectifying vision, he reflects, "mother and child then—objects of universal veneration, and in this case the mother was famous for her beauty—might be reduced, he pondered, to a purple shadow without irreverence" (52). Because of Lily's painting, Bankes reconsiders traditional/typical modes of representation; his tangent about Mrs. Ramsay's famous beauty suggests that an idealized, iconic depiction of the mother and child might actually be more irreverent than a simple purple triangle. Bankes recognizes that rather than painting Mrs. Ramsay through the eyes of convention and limiting her to a single representation, Lily paints her through the eyes of love, allowing the purple triangle to stand in for the countless "little separate incidences" that constitute her life.

While Lily avoids objectifying Mrs. Ramsay by investing the purple triangle with her subjectivity, Mrs. Ramsay resists being objectified by actively performing for Lily's gaze, framing herself within the window in order to participate in Lily's act of creation. Significantly, it is her own vision that reminds her of her role as an active object: she sees Lily through the window, and "the sight of the girl standing on the edge of the lawn painting reminded her; she was supposed to be keeping her head as much in the same position as possible for Lily's picture" (17). Like Avis—who positions herself against the carmine curtain because she knows it is "becoming"—Mrs. Ramsay acts as an active object of Lily's gaze, showing her awareness of the way she is seen in others' eyes. By allowing us to experience Mrs. Ramsay's perspective, Woolf reminds us that she is not simply the static object of Lily's painting; Mrs. Ramsay, like Lily and

William Bankes, is an active subject, even though she expresses her subjectivity in a different way. Just as Lily simultaneously recognizes Bankes's faults and virtues, so does Mrs. Ramsay examine Lily with ambivalence, thinking, "one could not take her painting very seriously; she was an independent little creature, and Mrs. Ramsay liked her for it; so, remembering her promise, she bent her head" (17). Despite the fact that Mrs. Ramsay thinks Lily's painting has little merit, she chooses to facilitate its creation. In doing so, Mrs. Ramsay resists being a passive model, but she also seems to subjectify Lily's painting, valuing it as a symbol of Lily's thought life and not as a mere aesthetic object.

Not only does Mrs. Ramsay pose for Lily's painting, but she also helps her son James cut out images from a magazine, facilitating both of their creative acts and showing the interdependence of their subjective experiences. While sitting in the window, Mrs. Ramsay helps her son James create a collage, searching through catalogues for specific images: "all she could do now was to admire the refrigerator, and turn the pages of the Stores list in hope that she might come upon something like a rake, or a mow-machine, which, with its prongs and its handles, would need the greatest skill and care in cutting out" (15). Even the static images of material objects in the catalogue offer the opportunity for expressing creativity, and just as Lily imbues the kitchen table with Mr. Ramsay's thought life, Mrs. Ramsay imbues the refrigerator with James's subjectivity. Yet again Mrs. Ramsay seems to value the process of creation over the actual object created, for she searches for images that will allow James to practice his scissor skills.

James, too, seems to invest the cutouts with his subjective experience; when Mrs. Ramsay tells him that they may be going to the lighthouse the next day, James is so full of

excitement that his catalogue cutouts begin to evoke his emotions, as he “endowed the picture of a refrigerator, as his mother spoke, with heavenly bliss. It was fringed with joy” (3). Later, when Mr. Ramsay determines that the weather is too unpleasant to go to the lighthouse, Mrs. Ramsay worries about James’s disappointment, thinking that “he will remember that all his life” (62). She reiterates this thought as she assembles James’s collage—an act which seems an attempt to salvage some of James’s joy: “No, she thought, putting together some of the pictures he had cut out—a refrigerator, a mowing machine, a gentleman in evening dress—children never forget” (62). Mrs. Ramsay’s gesture suggests that it is not the actual visit to the lighthouse that matters, but rather the emotions called up by such experiences—for they are what one remembers. She memorializes James’s “heavenly bliss” by putting together the images that he “fringed with joy,” so that he will remember his moment of elation and not his disappointment. In doing so, Mrs. Ramsay, like Lily, demonstrates the power of tangible objects to evince subjectivity.

At a dinner party given by Mrs. Ramsay, Lily too attempts to memorialize positive emotions, grounding her thoughts in a salt cellar as a way of holding on to her vision while allowing others to express their antagonistic ideas. Lily’s integrity of vision means she must allow opposing views to exist; it would not be honest to tamper with them. Yet she must by some means hold on to her own vision as well, and the dinner party scene dramatizes her efforts to reconcile her own existence with that of others. Even Lily’s own thoughts prove contradictory, as she finds herself pitying William Bankes, in spite of her previously professed reverence for him. She corrects herself, thinking, “he is not in the least pitiable. He has his work.” Lily’s recognition of Bankes’s thought life allows her to reconcile her conflicting feelings about him; this process of negotiation also makes her aware of her own consciousness, as she remembers, “all of a

sudden as if she had found a treasure, that she had her work.” Similar to the way that Mrs. Ramsay reifies James’s moment of joy by assembling the collage, Lily erects a shrine to her remembered work by grounding her artistic agency in a tangible object—in this case, a salt cellar on the table. The memory of her work incites Lily to exercise her artist’s eye, as she sees her picture before her and thinks, “yes, I shall put the tree further in the middle; then I shall avoid that awkward space. That’s what I shall do. That’s what has been puzzling me. She took up the salt cellar and put it down again on a flower in pattern in the table-cloth, so as to remind herself to move the tree” (84-85). Like the pear tree earlier, the salt cellar is filled with Lily’s subjectivity.

Lily returns to the salt cellar as a way of clutching to her vision while others threaten it. When supercilious Charles Tansley sneers that women cannot write or paint, Lily remains surprisingly unaffected by his condescension, considering, “what did that matter coming from him, since clearly it was not true to him but for some reason helpful to him, and that was why he said it?” (86). Lily refuses to threaten Tansley’s subjectivity the way he does hers, so instead of rejecting his pronouncement outright, she tries to understand his motivation for making such a claim. Yet Lily cannot excuse away his words entirely, and they end up haunting her years later (159). Again, in order to cope with the conflict between her internal reality and the world around her, Lily returns to the salt cellar, exhibiting an almost compulsive preoccupation with the objects in front of her as she muses, “there’s the sprig on the table-cloth; there’s my painting; I must move the tree to the middle; that matters—nothing else” (86).

Lily once more relies on the table settings as a testimony to the value of her thought life when Paul Rayley laughs at her offer to help him find his fiancée Minta’s lost brooch. Paul’s

dismissive laugh “scorched her,” so Lily directs her gaze to the table, thinking, “at any rate . . . catching sight of the salt cellar on the pattern, she need not marry, thank Heaven: she need not undergo that degradation. She was saved from that dilution. She would move the tree rather more to the middle” (102). The brooch seems to serve as a symbol of Minta and Paul’s impending marriage, and Lily’s pique in being excluded from searching for the lost bauble almost suggests an equivalent annoyance for the exclusivity of marriage itself. Lily’s resistance to marriage—in spite of Mrs. Ramsay’s hope that she will marry William Bankes—suggests once more the importance of the multiplicity of life. By definition, marriage requires one to forsake all others for one’s spouse; Lily seems to view this as a kind of “degradation” because it limits one’s gaze to a single object, rather than allowing one to see the entire world through the eyes of love. Earlier, Lily expresses the importance of distributing one’s love widely; realizing that her love for Mrs. Ramsay actually spreads to a much broader audience, she thinks, “‘I’m in love with this all,’ waving her hand at the hedge, at the house, at the children. It was absurd, it was impossible” (19). Lily’s absurd, impossible love creates her uncharacteristic impulse to volunteer to look for the brooch, but when Paul’s laugh forces her to realize that not everyone views love so inclusively as she does, Lily retreats to the salt cellar to reaffirm her own vision.

Despite the frustration of managing the contradictions between her own vision and that of others, Lily seems to see this very process as a type of love, because it both resists objectifying others and makes one conscious of one’s own thought life. Lily reflects, “such was the complexity of things. For what happened to her, especially staying with the Ramsays, was to be made to feel violently two opposite things at the same time; that’s what you feel, was one; that’s what I feel, was the other, and then they fought together in her mind, as now.” Lily implies that

the only way to avoid objectifying is to see multiple perspectives at once, and she indicates that love itself exists in the contradictions of this multiplicity. According to Lily, love is “so beautiful, so exciting, this love, that I tremble on the verge of it, and offer, quite out of my own habit, to look for a brooch on a beach,” but love is also “the stupidest, the most barbaric of human passions, and turns a nice young man with a profile like a gem’s (Paul’s was exquisite) into a bully with a crowbar” (102). The brooch provokes impulsiveness in Lily and possessiveness in Paul; Lily almost transposes the image of the brooch onto Paul’s gem-like face, as if to show objects’ power to change us.

In the painting that she completes at the end of the novel, Lily attempts to create such an object endowed with the power to change those who view it. This painting becomes a testimony to the act of seeing the world through the eyes of love, imbued with many “little separate incidences” of Lily and the Ramsays’ lives. Upon returning to the Ramsays’ house after years have passed and Mrs. Ramsay has died, Lily looks at the table where she once sat and contemplated the salt cellar. This sight triggers a memory of her work, as she recalls, “when she had sat there last ten years ago there had been a little sprig or leaf pattern on the table-cloth, which she had looked at in a moment of revelation. There had been a problem about a foreground of a picture. Move the tree to the middle, she had said. She had never finished that picture. She would paint that picture now” (147). The salt cellar and the sprigged tablecloth now evoke the subjectivity with which Lily once invested them; just as James Ramsay once fringed the picture of the refrigerator with joy, Lily fringed these table settings with her artistic impetus. The fact that she experiences a renewed desire to paint upon viewing these objects suggests that in some way they have a life beyond their role as mere domestic decor.

Lily grants her painting even more subjective power by allowing it to speak when she cannot, as she attempts to comfort Mr. Ramsay for his wife's death. Mr. Ramsay pauses by Lily's side as she is about to begin her painting, and his quiet, almost inexpressible grief makes her determine to "give him what she could" (150). As he lingers by her side, hoping for some sort of reassurance, Lily can only compliment his footwear, proclaiming, "what beautiful boots!" Lily seems to have meant to reaffirm Mr. Ramsay's essence by praising his boots; like Mrs. Ramsay's glove whose twisted finger signals that it is "hers indisputably," perhaps Mr. Ramsay's boots evince some ineffable aspect of his essence that Lily seeks to acknowledge. Yet Lily's fixation with objects seems inadequate to comfort Mr. Ramsay, which she senses as she thinks, "she was ashamed of herself. To praise his boots when he asked her to solace his soul" (153). Somehow, though, the boots accomplish their task, and Mr. Ramsay's "pall, his draperies, his infirmities fell from him" as he launches into a monologue on the origin of his boots, demonstrating to Lily how best to tie their laces. Mr. Ramsay's sudden preoccupation with his boots makes him sympathetic to Lily, whose "heart warmed to him."

Lily has difficulty relating to Mr. Ramsay in the abstract; earlier, she grounded his cerebrations in the kitchen table, and now she finds his humanity in his boots: "thus occupied he seemed to her a figure of infinite pathos. He tied knots. He bought boots" (154). The boots seem almost endowed with Mr. Ramsay's identity, a reminder to Lily of his perspective. He, too, loved Mrs. Ramsay; Lily must not exclude his vision from her painting, or risk exhibiting a love that "clutch[es] its object" by not admitting multiple loving subjects.⁴⁸ Lily's decision to "give [Mr.

⁴⁸ As mentioned in other chapters, Žižek posits "two loving subjects" (104)—rather than a loving subject and a loved object—as a solution to vexed subject relations. Here, Woolf seems to suggest that we should all be loving subjects.

Ramsay] what she could” is fulfilled by the act of completing her painting; once she realizes that he has completed the long-delayed journey to the lighthouse, she concludes that “whatever she had wanted to give him, when he left her that morning, she had given him at last” (208). If we accept Harrington’s reading that the “line there, in the centre” (209) of Lily’s painting represents the lighthouse itself, then Lily has once again turned to a physical object as a mediator of multiple subjectivities. Lily plants the lighthouse firmly within her painting as a representation of her battle with—and acceptance of—Mr. Ramsay’s vision.

Considering her relationship with the material world, Lily reflects at the novel’s conclusion that “one wanted . . . to be on a level with ordinary experience, to feel simply that’s a chair, that’s a table, and yet at the same time, It’s a miracle, it’s an ecstasy” (202). Lily creates a final ecstatic consummation of object and subject in her depiction of Mrs. Ramsay. Lily’s reflections suggest that Mrs. Ramsay has sustained a life beyond her death, as the memories that surface while Lily paints force her to revise her vision. Mrs. Ramsay, Lily recalls,

brought together this and that and then this, and so made out of that miserable silliness and spite (she and Charles squabbling, sparring, had been silly and spiteful) something—this scene on the beach for example, this moment of friendship and liking—which survived, after all these years complete, so that she dipped into it to re-fashion her memory of him, and there it stayed in the mind affecting one almost like a work of art. (160)

As she paints her vision of Mrs. Ramsay, Lily recalls a moment from years ago when she and Charles Tansley suddenly started cooperating as they realized Mrs. Ramsay was watching them. The memory of this moment changes Lily’s perception of Charles; he is no longer the troll who

whispers in her ear that “women can’t paint, women can’t write,” but rather the friend with whom she shared a reverence for Mrs. Ramsay’s gaze (48). Mrs. Ramsay’s gaze is so powerful that it exerts its power, in a way, beyond the grave, so that she is not simply an “object of universal veneration” (as Bankes once suggested). Instead, Mrs. Ramsay acts as an active subject and object who cannot be understood or interpreted from a single perspective—a fact Lily recognizes when she concludes that “one wanted fifty pairs of eyes to see with . . . Fifty pairs of eyes were not enough to get round that one woman with” (198). In *To the Lighthouse*, the spectral presence of Woolf’s authorship mimics Mrs. Ramsay’s posthumous power. Woolf shows the inadequacy of looking from a singular subject position, asking readers to recognize the life imbued in her book by seeing it, too, with fifty pairs of eyes.

CONCLUSION

Though Lily Briscoe's subjectifying vision seems to offer a unique solution to the problem of the female spectator, a return to *The Story of Avis* will reveal that Lily owes more to her fictional predecessors than we might initially think. As Philip inquires about Avis's apparent state of agitation after she finishes a painting, she admits, "I am ashamed! . . . but it is a nervousness I have when a picture comes to an end. It is like the ending of a life" (62). Like Lily, Avis attributes life to her painting, but rather than realizing that the beauty of her painting "will continue, and this beauty will flourish whether we behold it or not" (Woolf "The Cinema" 269), Avis equates the cessation of her artistic activity with the death of the painting. Yet her painting of the sphinx—inspired as it was by her vision of the "silent army" of unknown women that "vanishe[s] in an expanse of imperfectly-defined color like a cloud" before the sphinx tells her to "speak for me" (83)—implies that her work bears witness to some sort of life beyond itself.

Gasparine's final painting functions similarly to Avis's, evoking Lotus's presence beyond her death as "the most powerful presentation of thought-life, of the subjective, that had ever yet been given, for in the eyes of the strange face one seemed to see all that the cloud could tell" (198). Just as Avis's painting gives voice to the cloud-like army of nameless women, so Gasparine's painting gives voice to Lotus. By suggesting that the cloud has something to tell, Johnstone grants it a presence that anticipates the way that Woolf attributes life to inanimate objects through Lily's vision. Mrs. Ramsay, like Lotus, has a life beyond her death through Lily's painting—and Lily almost allows the clouds in the sky to speak for Mrs. Ramsay when she considers her influence on her life. As she works to complete her painting, Lily wonders,

What is the meaning of life? That was all—a simple question; one that tended to close in on one with years. The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark; here was one. This, that, and the other; herself and Charles Tansley and the breaking wave; Mrs. Ramsay bringing them together; Mrs. Ramsay saying, ‘Life stand still here’; Mrs. Ramsay making of the moment something permanent (as in another sphere Lily herself tried to make of the moment something permanent)—this was the nature of a revelation. In the midst of chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing (she looked at the clouds going and the leaves shaking) was struck into stability. Life stand still here, Mrs. Ramsay said. ‘Mrs. Ramsay! Mrs. Ramsay!’ she repeated. She owed it all to her. (161)

The memory of Mrs. Ramsay affects Lily’s perception of life, and Lily strikes this moment into stability by investing the “clouds going” and “leaves shaking” with Mrs. Ramsay’s presence. Mrs. Ramsay proves such a compelling subject for Lily because she is not simply a “passively inspiring muse” (Heilmann 160), but an active participant in Lily’s act of creation—even after she is dead. Mrs. Ramsay’s unifying vision that brings together “this, that, and the other” reminds Lily of the multiplicity of human experience encompassed by the breaking wave of life.

The fictional paintings depicted by Phelps, Johnstone, and Woolf attempt to make “life stand still here,” allowing the subjects of the works—the sphinx, Lotus, and Mrs. Ramsay—to speak through them. By uniting the subjective experience of the painter, the muse, and the viewer in these life-filled paintings, Phelps, Johnstone, and Woolf show not only that the object

of one's gaze has an active presence, but also that aesthetic objects too are able to act as more than just a "black hole" upon which viewers can project their desires. Implicitly these authors indicate that their novels are not simply passive objects either, but an evocation of the life of their creators.

Through their novels, these writers attempt to portray life as they see it, and not as convention tells them to see it. The previous passage from *To the Lighthouse* seems to offer a response to the question Woolf poses in "Modern Fiction" about literary conventions: "is life like this? Must novels be like this?" (106). Through Lily's reflection, Woolf seems to suggest that no, life is not like this; the great revelation never comes, the loose threads are not tied together into a neat plot resolution. Woolf attempts to render the "daily miracles" of life through Lily's interaction with the kitchen table, the pear tree, the salt cellar, encouraging readers, too, to "be on a level with ordinary experience, to feel simply that's a chair, that's a table, and yet at the same time, It's a miracle, it's an ecstasy" (202). In experimenting with more inclusive representations of life, Woolf continues the project begun by Phelps and Johnstone, whose fiction also evinces a belief that life is not "like this." Phelps questions typical narrative trajectories by showing how damaging the expectations of marriage can be to women who imagine alternate possibilities for themselves. Her nascent depiction of fluid subjectivity comes to maturity in Woolf's fractured prose, which offers multiple perspectives of a scene from different characters' eyes. Johnstone too critiques the pressures of literary and cultural conventions, yet she shows that even alternatives have the potential to become conventional. This wariness of convention finds its parallel in Woolf's non-linear narration that refuses to follow the heterosexual courtship plot typical of earlier novels.

The similarity of these writers' commitments supports Talia Schaffer's suggestion that "we need to abandon the idea that Woolf's modernist generation arose ex nihilo, spontaneously generated from a mess of decrepit traditional forms" (16). While Schaffer traces Woolf's heritage to female aesthetes, I would suggest that Woolf owes some small debt to writers like Phelps and Johnstone as well. The fiction of these early feminists is often criticized for the unevenness of its prose, a criticism few would attempt to extend to Woolf's novels.⁴⁹ Yet Nelson shows the merit of New Woman writers' willingness to play with form, explaining that they "seldom wrote the tightly plotted realistic novels that were characteristic of the fiction of most male writers of the decade. Instead they experimented with a variety of new techniques which allowed them to represent female experience more accurately" (*Fiction Writers* 5). Re-imagining the way subjectivity is represented is no small task, and Nelson's remarks on the innovativeness of these writers' fiction imply that these women are often not given enough credit for what they were able to accomplish. Long identifies a similar inventiveness in the work of nineteenth-century American reform writers like Phelps, observing that "like the modernist writers who came after them, reform writers were compelled by explorations of subjectivity, a recognition of the inherently fragmented nature of human existence, and the insufficiency of traditional belief systems" (277). As Nelson and Long suggest, women writers were subverting gendered norms of subjectivity in both the form and the content of their work long before Woolf. In a way, just as Lily "owed it all" to Mrs. Ramsay, Woolf owes it all to previous generations of women who were not afraid to question either literary tropes or gender ideology.

⁴⁹ See Auerbach, who remarks on *The Story of Avis*'s "uneven and inchoate" plot (476), and Ardis, who notes that New Woman novels can be "as awkwardly written as they are interesting" (175).

While I am not sure if I would make so bold a claim as Žižek when he asserts that woman “is the subject *par excellence*” (143), I would suggest that these novels show how the cultural conditions against which women have had to struggle have afforded them a unique perspective from which they can question and critique dichotomous views of subjectivity. As I have suggested, these writers’ contestations of subjectivity did not come from nowhere, and the continuation of critical discussions shows that such interrogations of gendered norms will not disappear. Though Avis feels a sense of loss at the completion of her painting, these novels suggest that there is no need for her to feel so, because life can continue in some way through her work. Such a revelation may provide a consolation to us as scholars as well, reminding us that the completion of our own work is not the “ending of a life,” but rather the beginning of one.

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