Quentin's Bogey

One of Virginia Woolf's most iconoclastic gestures in *A Room of One's Own* was her description of the portrait of God the Father in *Paradise Lost* as "Milton's Bogey," a frightening figure which blocked women's "view of the open sky" and consequently was responsible for much of misogynistic British culture's suppression of women artists. Some readers believe that because later in the text Woolf refers to Milton's bogey again in the phrase "for no human being should shut out the view," that Woolf is referring to Milton himself (*Room*, p. 118). But it seems to me that it is typical of Woolf's method to attack the divinity of the Christian godhead in just such a sidelong manner, to deflate the patriarchal God into the Victorian paterfamilias who is the object of her rage in so much of her writing. He is "the large and imposing figure of a gentleman, which Milton recommended for my perpetual adoration" (*Room*, p. 39). Some of Woolf's savage irony appears to have been inherited by her nephew Quentin Bell (see "A 'Radiant' Friendship" [*Critical Inquiry* 10 (June 1984): 557-066]). For he calls me a "personage" (558) in the same tone of voice in which Woolf calls God a "gentleman." Though some feminist readers understand her attack on the poem, the poet, and its progenitor and muse as a portrait of the Christian patriarchal trinity which is the great inhibitor of women's writing, they are troubled by her earlier description of the "sublimity" of Milton's writing. It is possible, I suggest, that sublimity was not a quality she valued, for she asks, "Has any great poem ever let in so little light upon one's own joys and sorrows?"

In a famous essay, later a chapter in the classic work of feminist criticism *The Madwoman in the Attic*, called "Milton's Bogey: Patriarchal Poetry and Women Readers," Sandra Gilbert argues that "Milton's bogey" is made deliberately ambiguous by Woolf and may refer to
Milton himself, Adam, or Satan. She argues that "the allusion has had no significant development." But, of course, the previous reference to "the large and imposing figure of a gentleman, which Milton recommended for my perpetual adoration" makes it clear that Woolf's bogey is Milton's patriarchal god. That she later calls him a "human being" may be wicked and perverse, but it is a brilliant undercutting of patriarchal divinity. The allusion is also developed in several ways throughout _A Room of One's Own_, and the reader who puts the pieces together has perhaps caught the "little fish" she promises her readers in the beginning. Where Milton's bogey blocks Woolf's view of the open sky, her aunt's legacy "unveiled the sky" to her; money freed her to look at "reality" (_Room_, p. 39; and see p. 5). The second development of the figure is the phantom form of "J——H——." Jane Harrison's ghostly presence does not block the view of the open sky: "As if the scarf which the dusk had flung over the garden were torn asunder by star or sword—the flash of some terrible reality leaping." (17) Harrison herself, and her great scholarly feminist work on preclassical Greece, is suggested here as having the opposite effect from Milton's bogey. She _unveils_ reality and is held up as a model for women. The third development of the theme is the "loneliness and riot" of Woolf's vision of Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle—the writer as madwoman, "plunging ever deeper into obscurity and folly": "Evidently the crazy Duchess became a bogey to frighten clever girls with" (65; emphasis mine). Virginia Woolf had been a clever girl, and she feared mental instability. The woman writer as madwoman certainly frightened her. She saw Margaret Cavendish's mind "as if some giant cucumber had spread itself all over the roses and carnations in the garden and choked them to death." (ibid.) There is a distinct relationship between Milton's patriarchal bogey and the giant cucumber. Patriarchy covers sky and earth with phallic images preventing women's vision and growth. The woman writer's power is inhibited by Milton's version of the forbidding Christian God who suggests that writing is a male prerogative; and if that doesn't inhibit her enough, a female bogey is invented to show her the woman writer's madness and folly.
I suggest that this reading would support and strengthen the thesis of Gilbert's essay and also its brilliant successor, Christine Froula's "When Eve Reads Milton." Froula argues that Milton's success in *Paradise Lost* is based on his invocation of God the Father as his muse. She is troubled about whether Woolf means that Milton's bogey is the poem or Milton himself, since Woolf uses the words "human being." I suggest that the arrogance of Milton's patriarchal invocation of God as his authority is matched by Woolf's feminist deflation of the divinity of that figure. A bogey is not only a phantom figure of fright; "bogey" also means "imaginary partner," as in the figure of Colonel Bogey (that is how Woolf uses the word when Colonel Pargiter's mistress in *The Years* calls him "bogy.") If God is Milton's imaginary partner in *Paradise Lost*—and Froula proves that he is—the poem claims to be as authoritative as the Bible. When Woolf says that women writers think back through their mothers, and invokes Jane Harrison as muse and mentor, she sets up a feminist alternative to the patriarchal tradition.

The interesting question here is, Where did Woolf get the idea to use the word *bogey* to mean god? I suggest that, like many of her most potent antipatriarchal ideas, the source was in the works of Jane Ellen Harrison, whose fleeting appearance in the text of *A Room of One's Own* represents a world of female "reality" as opposed to the phantom projections of patriarchal religion. From *Prolegomena* to *Themis* to *Epilegomena* to *Alpha and Omega*, Harrison was concerned with discovering the roots of classical Greek religion in earlier spirits created by more "matriarchal" societies. She studied the gods as manifestations of *keres*, figures she defined as spirits, demons, ghosts, gorgons, and *bogeys*. After reading Emile Durkheim, she described these ghostly spirits as projections of the collective human tribe. "Bogey" is a word which turns up very often in her books. Feminists were delighted by her descriptions of Zeus and the Olympians as a version of the Victorian patriarchal family. Woolf's description of the God of *Paradise Lost* as a gentleman bogey is merely an appropriation of Harrison's term from its ancient Greek context to the context of English patriarchal culture.
Why do I begin my response to Bell's attack on me by reference to two feminist critics? Perhaps it is a superstitious move, like scratching the initials of the Blessed Virgin Mary on my schoolgirl essays. Perhaps it invokes the blessing of some powerful figures in my own discipline on the difficult task of explaining yet again to Quentin Bell how his Virginia Woolf is different from our Virginia Woolf. His Woolf is a bogey which frightens American women readers. Our Woolf is a bogey which frightens British male readers. Perhaps the next generation of Woolf critics is sharpening even now the stars and swords which will rip away the veils and give us a real Virginia Woolf.

This is the tale of two bogeys, two phantom figures of Virginia Woolf. One figure, created by Quentin Bell in his 1972 biography, is a modern madwoman in the attic, a fragile, unstable, hysterical suicide, a minor British novelist, ranked somewhere below E. M. Forster as a writer of fiction, historically important because she was Leslie Stephen's daughter and a member of the Bloomsbury group. Quentin Bell's bogey is an Ophelia of the Ouse, a woman who is a failure as a woman, a cautionary figure who warns readers of the terrible consequences when, as Woolf said of "Judith Shakespeare," genius is "caught and tangled in a woman's body" (*Room*, p. 51). Like the Duchess of Newcastle and the cucumbers, this Woolf frightens clever girls. The Oxford English Dictionary says that a bogey is a phantom or devil invented by nurses to frighten children. Quentin Bell's bogey, the artist as mad, less than woman, frightens women readers. In "Tintinnabulations" (chap. 7, above), the essay which moves Bell to "confute" my work, I describe the biography:

Since we are all attached to our families, Bell is not to be blamed for being as a biographer less a good nephew than a good son . . .

By stressing how alien to him was Virginia Woolf's kind of femaleness and by de-emphasizing or disapproving of a lifetime of political engagement, Bell has provided two different sets of symptoms from which the literary doctors may make their diagnoses. One leads to the production of a female cult and its subsequent denunciation by a new generation of Queenie
Leavises. The other leads to her exclusion from the literary/historical canon on the grounds of “aloofness” or “having no great cause at heart,” as Forster claimed...

Bell has given her an extended family setting that branches out a bit beyond Bloomsbury. But where is that solitary, strange, antisocial woman who valued privacy so highly that she made it the first principle of her aesthetic? One sees all her nests, their furniture in detail with learned labels on every stick and straw. But where is the Virginia Woolf who wrote novels—that great blue heron of a writer, in flight, alone? She once complained that biography, like sculpture, was all head and shoulders, that one would never know from the biographies of great men “that they had a body between them.” The Bell view of Virginia Woolf is from the opposite angle and shows her only from the neck down and in the bosom of her family. This is often the trouble with biographies of great women; one never knows what kind of heads graced their feminine shoulders, and sometimes one can hardly see them at all in the family album. Much of Woolf's best writing attacked private property and the family, and she considered herself an outsider to it all.  

My analysis is perhaps unjust; certainly, from Bell's point of view, it is unjust. But I would argue, to use Woolf's words—written of a critic who praised Ivan Turgenev at the expense of Honore de Balzac—that my criticism of Bell is “necessarily and sincerely unjust.” It is unfair, I admit, to wish that Quentin Bell were Richard Ellmann. But Woolf scholars envy Joyce scholars; for, however much Joyceans may quarrel with Ellmann's interpretations, he has written an intellectual biography—Joyce the artist and Joyce the thinker are inextricably intertwined. A portrait of Joyce in the bosom of his family, a Paris exile and modernist, which measured him according to an abstract notion of true manhood, which judged his masculinity as related to, say, his loss of sight—Joyce as son, husband, and father—would certainly not do justice to his genius. A biographer who wished to make a portrait of the artist as an emotional cripple could paint Joyce the man in his relations with people. An equally intellectual and more
political Woolf can be found in recent essays and books by American critics. Brenda Silver's edition of Woolf's reading notebooks, for instance, goes a long way toward helping scholars recreate Woolf the thinker. But this book is a tool; it has none of the seductive storytelling power of Bell's official narrative. It is modest and unassuming and does not claim that the portrait of the intellectual, the voracious reader, the original thinker, the autodidact with a chip on her shoulder, which emerges from her well-researched pages, is meant to supplant Bell's bogey-woman.

When Woolf was attacked from the left by Dmitri Mirsky in the 1930s and branded an elitist, she wrote to her nephew, perhaps even then imagining him as her future biographer, asking him to sculpt her as a "great flaming goddess." I read this request as both playful and serious. Knowing his interest in politics, she was asking for an image of herself that would emphasize her socialism, feminism, and pacifism, would recognize the devastating critiques of capitalism and imperialism in her novels and essays, and would separate her from the upper-class, elite Bloomsbury Mirsky condemns. The image of Woolf as frigid snob, invalid lady, or mad witch, which Bell sculpted in his elegantly written book, is a political statement of his rejection of Woolf as a political writer.

Marcus' bogey, that "marxist," mystical, and feminist Virginia Woolf created by the so-called lupine critics, myself among them, obviously frightens Bell as much as his ice sculpture of the Snow Maiden frightens us. If he were to accept Marcus' bogey, he would have to revise his version of his own life as well as his versions of his parents and Bloomsbury. Mr. Bell knows perfectly well that my use of the word marxist to describe Woolf as a triple-thinker and to compare her to Walter Benjamin is meant to describe her mind and her fiction, not, as the word is used in his culture, to denote a card-carrying member of a Communist party. He has had ample space in the *Virginia Woolf Miscellany* to chastise me for my grammar and usage. Bell announces another word which waves threateningly at him from the shores of America, a white flag next to the red one of "marxist." That word is mystical. What will he think of Madeline Moore's book *The Short Season between Two Silences*, which is subtitled *The Mystical*
and the Political in the Novels of Virginia Woolf? What will he make of Catherine Smith's study of Woolf's relation to the history of British women mystics, especially Jane Lead, included in my third collection of essays on Woolf? Given the contempt with which he dismisses Woolf's Quaker aunt, Caroline Emelia Stephen, in his essay, what will be his response to my long study called "The Niece of a Nun: Virginia Woolf, Caroline Stephen, and the Cloistered Imagination" in *Virginia Woolf: A Feminist Slant*? Not only do I believe that Caroline Stephen was an important Quaker philosopher, I also believe that she and Violet Dickinson between them shaped the young Virginia, despondent after her father's death, into a serious professional writer and that, by helping to get her reviews published in the *Guardian*, they set her on course. Not only was the legacy of her aunt, which "unveiled the sky" to the narrator of *A Room of One's Own*, a financial gift which assured her of income while trying to write; it was a female spiritual legacy which profoundly affected her writing. In my essay I argue as well that Woolf took her famous lighthouse image from an essay written by her aunt.

Bell's objections to these feminist readings are that they put women at the center of Woolf's life. Woolf, in *A Room of One's Own*, is, to my mind, the first modern socialist feminist critic. She articulates in that work a feminist aesthetics of social commitment. And in her statement, "We think back through our mothers," if we are women writers, she argues a theory of women's influence on women which applies equally well to herself (p. 79). That feminist critics are following her example in analyzing Woolf upsets Bell. Why is he so upset?

As a biographer, he is somewhat justified in disliking a portrait contradictory to his own. But he is more than a biographer. He is the owner of the Virginia Woolf Literary Estate. He owns, with his sister, as unearned income, a lifetime of Woolf's literary labor. He controls what will be published or not published, and when. He chooses the editors of her work. He and her publishers collect fees for the quotation of her words. Not only does he own and control the literary labor of his aunt, he also, to some extent, owns and controls the labor of his aunt, he also, to some extent, owns and controls the labor of
aunt, he also, to some extent, owns and controls the labor of literary critics, who must ask him for permission to quote from Woolf’s works—and some, though not all, must pay for the use of those words. That this ownership shapes scholarship is undeniable.

Another example of the power of the literary estate is the fact that seven volumes of her early journals have yet to be published. In “‘As Miss Jan Says’: Virginia Woolf’s Early Journals,” Louise DeSalvo asks how the literary and scholarly world might respond to the fact that seven volumes of journals of James Joyce, written from his fifteenth year through his twenty-seventh year, which provided, among other things, a day-by-day record of a period of his adolescence during which a mother surrogate died and which documented his reading of fifty or so books that he alluded to in his maturity, in addition to thirty unpublished essays written when he was in his twenties, existed and had not yet been published.

DeSalvo answers that these documents would be considered essential to understanding the artist’s intellectual development. And in Woolf’s case, we do not have them.

Bell’s “confutation” of my work is an attempt to personalize a debate which has enough natural polarities to rage forever—male/female, old/young (well, fairly young), British/American, biographer/literary critic, English “intellectual aristocracy”/American leftist, and so on. Fortunately, I can erase misogynist/feminist from the list, for, though only a few veteran Woolf critics will notice it, Bell, between the lupine dashes, agrees that Woolf was a feminist. The reader may be perplexed by my joy at his aside. But Bell has asserted so many times that Woolf was not a feminist, that the Woolf critic who has followed his remarks is astounded at this reversal of position. (The most recent example was an interview in the Guardian where Bell and his wife, Olivier, editor of Woolf’s diaries, declared once again, “She wasn’t a feminist and she wasn’t political.”) Though Bell does not offer his change of mind as a gracious concession to a decade of Woolf scholarship on this side of the Atlantic, I will accept it as such on behalf of my sister
scholars, who will breathe a collective sigh of relief.

It is always an obstacle to creative work to be constantly arguing with an authoritative male voice which asserts as truth what you know to be false. One gets a critical crick in one's neck from straining to convince him, and standing on the literary barricades shouting across the Atlantic is beginning to get boring. We can straighten up now that one of those burdens is off our backs. But our discourse is still not a conversation between equals. Though Bell elevates me in his text to "a person of great charm and ability," and describes his pain at having to put in her place "so influential a personage," both "person" and "personage" convey the negative message: not a recognized Woolf scholar—rather, a woman intruder who invents a Virginia Woolf whose image contradicts his own factual portrait. Charm is a quality which has never been attributed to me before, thank heaven, and the word would shock my colleagues, students, and family. I hope Professor Bell will never mention it again, as it could damage my reputation and seriously compromise my next battle with the dean over establishing a women's studies program.

I could reply to Bell on his own terms as a charming and able person, a "personage" whose opinions are valued by many. Once his occupation is gone, as mine is in his text, so is the reader's respect. The reader would read "dilettante" and be done with it. But that will not close the gap. (An eye for an eye, an I for an I, a "p" for a "p," or "Here we go round the mulberry tree," as Woolf says in Three Guineas.) I could, alternatively, be polite. "The distinguished biographer of Virginia Woolf..." But he says I have written of his biography with "contempt"; so he will suspect me of being disingenuous. Oh, dear, yes, this discourse, this dialogue, must have a plot. Bell began his essay in the voice of Shakespeare—the Shakespeare of the history plays. His tale of Woolf's friendship with Margaret Llewelyn Davies is the main plot, while his quarrel with me is Falstaff's subplot. But I protest. I'm not ready for Mistress Quickly. I could have replied in the voice of his aunt's "Judith Shakespeare," but it is so obvious that much more work will have to be done by women before she "put[s] on the body which she has so often laid down" (Room, p.
I did reply as one voice among feminist critics reading Woolf reading Milton. But even that stance is problematic. Feminist criticism is now, in the United States at least, a respectable discipline, and white feminist criticism based on certain psychological, poststructural, or gynocritical models is no longer marginal. Yet socialist feminist criticism is still marginal, and I would argue that it ought to maintain its marginal status and its Woolfian outsider's “freedom from unreal localities.”

I will therefore not match Mr. Bell quote for quote. Bell asserts that since I argue that Woolf thinks like a “marxist” and also that she was influenced by several women, this should result necessarily in my finding a host of card-carrying women who influenced Woolf. One thing has nothing to do with the other. I am also puzzled by Bell’s portrait of Woolf’s friendship with Margaret Llewelyn Davies. Does he mean to show me that this is how it should be done? Though he is obviously familiar with my work, he fails to refer to two long essays in which I did at length and in detail exactly what he does here. My study of the influence of Margaret Llewelyn Davies on Woolf (along with a portrait) appears in the issue of the Bulletin of the New York Public Library devoted to revaluation of The Years; a further portrait appears in my sequel, “Pargetting the Pargiters,” also in the Bulletin of the New York Public Library. There I quote Margaret’s praise of The Years: “Of course the book would appeal to me no end on account of peace and anti-humbug and justice.” I claim that Margaret was one of the models for Mary Datchet and Eleanor Pargiter. My version of the friendship differs considerably from Bell’s. He writes with pity for poor Virginia and as if pity for the poor mad artist and friendship with Leonard were the only possible motivation for Margaret Llewelyn Davies’ concern for Woolf.

I will not bore the reader with my version of Bell’s other argument, regarding the two versions of the essay for the introduction to Life As We Have Known It. Though Bell ignores it, my essay “No More Horses: Virginia Woolf on Art and Propaganda” compares the two texts in detail. I do have a suggestion about why Leonard Woolf did not print the last, best version in Collected Essays, and the reason is not an artistic but a political one. I suggest that Leonard Woolf,
collecting the essays during the repressive 1950s, might have decided that the less political Virginia Woolf looked, the better for her reputation.

As for my concern with Woolf’s politics, I am certainly not alone: see the essays by Bernice Carroll, Naomi Black, Brenda Silver, and Laura Moss Gottlieb. In addition, Woolf is taken very seriously as a political thinker by Dale Spender. Three Guineas is becoming increasingly important in studies of women and pacifism. Madeline Moore’s new book, mentioned earlier, takes Woolf’s socialism and feminism for granted, and Susan Squier’s forthcoming Virginia Woolf and the Politics of the City takes a similar stance.

Marcus’ bogey, Virginia Woolf as the “great flaming goddess” of modern socialist feminism, may block the scholarly sky for a few years as a historical necessity. But she will fade away when she has served her purpose as the invisible companion of women writers. I do not think we have even begun to explore her complexities. I have before me three reviews Woolf wrote for the Times Literary Supplement in 1918. We know very little about the radical 1917 Club to which she belonged, but it is clear from her diary that she spent a great deal of time there. Reviewing Meriel Buchanan’s Petrograd: The City of Trouble, 1914–1918, Woolf shows a remarkable command of and interest in the historical details of the Russian Revolution—for someone who was “not political.” The editor of the Times Literary Supplement obviously thought Woolf was political enough to review these books. Woolf rebukes the diplomat’s daughter for claiming that Aleksandr Kerensky declared himself dictator and also for an unfair account of the Kornilov affair. “Unlike personalities,” Woolf writes, “politics cannot always be elucidated by the clever intuition which Miss Buchanan in her purely descriptive chapters shows herself well able to command.” She points out that the book is full of gossip and does not fulfill the introduction’s promise of a view from “the man in the street.” While she stresses the morally “earnest” tone of Ernest Belfort Bax’s socialist memoirs and compares his destructive fervor to his evangelical forebears, there is no irony in her conclusion: “He looks forward to a time when the working classes of the world
will be united in such an international society that the struggle of race with race will be forever impossible." I think this was a belief she shared with Bax, though she would have found his antifeminism as abhorrent as the lack of emotion in his socialism.

Her review of *The Village Priest*, Russian stories by Elena Militsina and Mikhail Salikov, is really an essay on the ideal of brotherhood in Russian literature and an attempt to understand why English literature has no comparable "deep sense of human suffering": "However much we may wish to follow the Russian example, we cannot say 'brother' to a stranger in England." "The truth is that if you say 'brother' you must say it with conviction, and it is not easy to say it with conviction." Bell does not believe in a mystical and political Virginia Woolf. Here in this early essay she is both, admiring the conviction of the Russians when they write of brotherhood, longing for a way to practice it herself. The Russians succeed because they believe so passionately in the existence of the soul. . . . And that alone is important: that living core which suffers and toils is what we all have in common. We tend to disguise or decorate it; but the Russians believe in it, seek it out, interpret it, and, following its aguries and intricacies, have produced not only the most spiritual of modern books but also the most profound.

As Woolf found this passionate politics in the Russians, we modern feminist readers find sisterhood and soul in her fiction and essays. I doubt, *pace* Quentin Bell, that, ingenious as we are, we would be able to find it if it weren't there. An American of my generation is perfectly capable of saying "Brother" with conviction. Let me end this response by saying "Brother" to Quentin Bell.
A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

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