

Virginia Woolf's Voyaging Out: Woman, Travel, and Englishness in *The Voyage Out**

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I. Narrative of Initiation/ Narrative of Travel

Published in 1915, Virginia Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out*, a novel of courtship and engagement, strongly draws on the literary convention of the female Bildungsroman. Michael Rosenthal observes that Woolf's first fictional effort, a narrative of a young English woman's education into the ways of the world, remains under the "tyrannies of the realist form," employing "the basic conventions available to all aspiring writers of the time" (49). The novel's linear chronology, unfolded through the omniscient third-person narrator, renders the narrative of a young woman's initiation into romance "rather pallidly – and somewhat tediously" (Rosenthal 49). The self-assured commentator-narrator, a gallery of character portraits, and the dramatized sequences of events in *The Voyage Out* are often "reminiscent of Jane Austen" (Naremore 6). Yet as James Naremore aptly points

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out, the novel tends to frustrate the reader's expectations for the fictional conventions of the comedy-of-manners (6). The novel, drawn strongly on the narrative impulse of a naïve young woman into experience and maturity, turns out to be a parable of the failed *Bildung* since the initiation of the young woman into social and sexual experiences is only destined to the tragic, premature death of the protagonist. Rachel Vinrace, the central character of *The Voyage Out* who is a profoundly inexperienced girl of twenty-four at the beginning of the novel, grows out of her cloistered isolation under the liberal guardianship of her aunt, Helen Ambrose, and experiences beauty and mysteries of life including love for a young would-be novelist, Terence Hewet. As her awakening—both social and sexual—is about to culminate in her marriage, however, she suddenly dies of a fever.

The incomplete process of the social initiation in the novel coincides with the trajectory of its heroine's adventures at sea and in South America. Many critics have recognized this curious choice by Woolf of the most exotic setting and the motif of voyage in her first novel.¹⁾ Avrom Fleishman observes that Woolf modifies the novel of "personal relations among the British middle-class" by another fictional type, "the novel of tropical adventure, in vogue at the time" (1). He also notes that the river journey into the jungle in *The Voyage Out* reminds of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Gillian Beer argues that Woolf draws directly on Charles Darwin's book about a voyage, *The Voyage of the Beagle*, especially in the passages describing the primeval forest in *The Voyage out* (14). Alice Fox, observing an "extensive Elizabethan milieu" in Woolf's first novel, notes the resemblance of the plot of *The Voyage Out* to Elizabethan travel narratives, especially Richard Hakluyt's *Voyages, Travels, and Discoveries of the English Nation* (27). With all the ties to the paradigms of the journey plot, what is strikingly peculiar in Woolf's travel story is that *The Voyage Out* is a story of a female

1) Phyllis Rose finds the exotic setting and the motif of journey do "not really suit" for Woolf: "It may seem odd for our heroine to journey all the way from England to South America to find herself a young man from Cambridge. . . . The exotic setting, the adventurous voyage, are superimposed on the novel, not intrinsic" (58).

traveler. Rachel Vinrace journeys to South America on her father's ship, has new experiences within a particular social milieu of an English colony, gets betrothed, and dies of a mysterious disease contracted while exploring the Amazon, the virgin land.

The interpellation of the narrative of initiation into the narrative of voyage in Woolf's first novel is both particularly fitting and problematic. In the novel, the young woman's maiden voyage undergoes a trajectory both physical and metaphorical. The physical movement in space from the cloistered England to the exotic and mythic South America corresponds to the metaphysical initiation of the protagonist out of sexual innocence and social naïveté into the experience of the ways of the world as well as the exploration of the interior of the mind. The conflation of a movement in space and an exploration in metaphysical topoi, however, remains problematic for Woolf's inscription of the journey in *The Voyage Out* is heavily gendered. As Karen Lawrence argues in *Penelope Voyages*, the trope of travel retains its historical and discursive associations with "a Western, white, middle class and with a generally male, privileged ease of movement" (xii). In the paradigms of the journey plot including adventure, pilgrimage, and exile, women are generally excluded, serving as a "symbolic embodiment of home" or signifying as the "embodiment of foreign territory" itself (Lawrence 1). While the female traveler sets out a voyage "out" of the sheltered enclosure of domesticity at home in *The Voyage Out*, the trajectory of the narrative of courtship and engagement enforces her to expect a voyage back to "home." A schematic opposition between centrifugal and centripetal impulses is striking in *The Voyage Out*, a novel of both romance and voyage, since the narrative convention of the female Bildungsroman carries discursively the ideology of domesticity, enclosure, and 'home' while the trope of travel stipulates an adventurous movement from an inside to an outside or a passage across boundaries. Thus, the schematic opposition between adventure and domesticity collapses in *The Voyage Out*. The conflation and the collapse of the domestic placement/stability and the adventurous mobility in the novel are registered in the destiny of the female protagonist: the development of Rachel

Vinrace's initiation into female sexuality leads into a dead end.

As the allegorical title of the novel suggests, Woolf implicates the woman's maiden voyage out into female sexuality in the trope of travel, recording the female protagonist's physical journey between two separated but also conjoined places, imperial metropolis and the exotic colony. By incorporating the narrative of female romance with the traditionally male-oriented narrative of voyage, Woolf not only rewrites established genres but also explores the interrelated issues of imperial space, gender identity, and Englishness. Woolf, born as a daughter of the prominent Victorian father, engaged herself in a highly sophisticated and refined English society—both intellectually and culturally—enough to preside over the early Bloomsbury evenings. Woolf has never hesitated to consider herself English although she disowns a claim of any nationality as a woman in *Three Guineas*. Woolf demonstrates strong concerns for the question of Englishness from the very beginning of her writing career and challenges in her writing the politics and histories through which Englishness is constructed. Woolf implicates the discursive nature of Englishness in the representation of female subjectivity and sexuality in her first written novel that at once draws on and subverts the literary conventions of the female Bildungsroman and the travel narrative. By tracing the suggestive trajectory of the young woman's voyage in Woolf's *The Voyage Out*, which introduces the very fictional archetype of her female protagonists, this paper aims to illustrate that Woolf's transgressive voyage into and out of the literary tropes posits the question of the female sexuality and subjectivity within the discursive terrain of English epistemology as well as imperial history.

II. Ideology of Sexuality/ Ideology of Empire

As Karen Lawrence points out, the topos of the journey is explicitly gendered from the beginning of *The Voyage Out* (154). In Woolf's description of the ship, the *Euphrosyne* that sets out to the sea, carrying Rachel Vinrace, a young woman

of naïveté and inexperience to an unknown, exotic place, the ship, grammatically female, fittingly figures Rachel's journey from maiden to bride: "She was a bride going forth to her husband, a virgin unknown of men; in her vigor and purity she might be likened to all beautiful things, for as a ship she had a life of her own" (25). The ship and its voyage are resonant with metaphoric significance that prefigures the particular voyage out of Rachel who falls in love and is betrothed during her travels. Considering the figurative language playing on the trajectory shared by the ship's movement and Rachel's initiation into womanhood, it is ominous to note that the novel begins with Ridley Ambrose walking with Helen on his way to the *Euphrosyne* to serve as the guardianship for Rachel during the voyage and called "Bluebeard!" by small boys in chorus (4). According to the popular fairy tale, Bluebeard is a notorious husband who murders his wives and hides the dead bodies in a secret closet. The young bride of Bluebeard is doomed to death at the expense of desiring to see what is forbidden to her and venturing into the unknown, forbidden place. Bluebeard's castle, the place of mystery and terror, filled with the treasures of gold and silver and hiding the horrors of misogynist violence, both enchants and dooms the young bride. As in the fairy tale, Rachel's voyage out into the exotic, unknown realm—both spatial and sexual—embarks in the register of desire and prohibition, mystery and fear. Once the *Euphrosyne* is at sea, Mr. Pepper, who was "condemned to pass the susceptible years of youth in a railway station in Bombay," describes "the white, hairless, blind monsters lying curled on the ridges of sand at the bottom of the sea, which would explode if you brought them to the surface" (16), reinforcing the semantic matrix of voyage: desire for an unexplored territory and peril of crossing boundaries.

In *The Voyage Out*, Woolf postulates Rachel's maiden voyage in the conjuncture of narratives of imperial adventure and thus inscribes the story of a female subjectivity in the troubled terrain of English imperial history and discursive Englishness. The *Euphrosyne*, now out into the sea, transports a group of English men and women to South America. The ship's movement of leaving England and heading toward a mythical English colony symbolically represents Edwardian

England's expansionist imperial voyages at the turn of the century. In fact, the *Euphrosyne* is a British mercantile vessel that traces the trading route opened since the reign of Queen Elizabeth, transporting "dry goods to the Amazons, and rubber home again" (32). As Alice Fox convincingly argues, Woolf meticulously establishes the parallel between the modern seaport, called Santa Marina to which the *Euphrosyne* now floats, and the South American ports visited by Elizabethan seamen at the end of sixteenth century (24). Just as the hardy Elizabethan seafarers, with "fangs greedy for flesh, and fingers itching for gold," were drawn to the miraculous virgin land, the modern English tourists, stirred by the "stories of the splendors and hardships of life at sea," make rush to this place and marvel at a strangely beautiful place and its inhabitants. The passage of the *Euphrosyne* embodies the imperial centrifugal movement from the imperial metropole to the exotic colony, and grounds Rachel's maiden voyage in both the historical and metaphorical context of imperial adventure and exploration.

What awaits Rachel on board of the *Euphrosyne* is a voyage into womanhood and empire. Released for the first time from the confinement of the domestic life with her aunts in Richmond, Rachel is inexplicably infatuated by Richard Dalloway who proclaims the most exalted aim of life is "to be the citizen of the Empire" (57). In an answer to Rachel's question, he announces that his "ideal" is "Unity of aim, of dominion, of progress. The dispersion of the best ideas over the greatest area" (55). Richard Dalloway, a politician of forty-two who had been educated in Oxford and Cambridge, served in Parliament, and now is "in the prime of life" (65), epitomizes the British Enlightenment project and imperial ideal. The momentum of this imperial enterprise, spurred by the ideal of the "unity" of purpose, power and progress, comes with Richard's glib rhetoric of the personal campaign against women's suffrage (35, 56). In a condescending catechism with Rachel, Richard encourages her to see "the state as a complicated machine; we citizens are parts of that machine; some fulfill more important duties; others. . . serve only to connect some obscure parts of the mechanism, concealed from the public eye. Yet if the meanest screw fails in its task, the proper working of the

whole is imperiled" (57). While his progressivist ethic, on which the ideology of expansionist improvement relies, envisions for Rachel the image of London as a "vast machine, such as one sees at South Kensington, thumping, thumping, thumping," she feels difficulty to grasp his idea of gendered separate spheres that enforces women to be the Angel in the House.

Woolf tropes the image of a machine when describing Richard Dalloway's voice: "Mr. Dalloway rolling that rich deliberate voice was even more impressive. He seemed to come from the humming oily centre of the machine where the polished rods are sliding, and the pistons thumping" (38). As Vincent Sherry rightly notes, the clearly phallic imagery reinforces the nature of the masculine, progressivist, and imperial enterprise embodied in Richard Dalloway (242). Rachel, confused by the politician's masculine reason and haunted by its rhythm of mechanical, monotonous "thumping," often listens to his voice "as if in a trance" (38). Rendered with an unusual frankness, Richard's sudden passionate kiss awakens Rachel's sexuality, leading her to acknowledge "infinite possibilities she had never guessed at" (67). The kiss, exalted by her as "something wonderful," marks a very crucial event in Rachel's initiation. The infatuated and yet violent kiss not only introduces to Rachel the awakening of her own sexuality but also registers it in the "socially constructed economy of desire" (Froula 146).

The sensuous and violent kiss entails a troublesome dream in which Rachel finds herself "entrapped" and "pursued" as the object of the predatory man's desire:

She dreamt that she was walking down a long tunnel, which grew so narrow by degrees that she could not touch the damp bricks on either side. At length the tunnel opened and became a vault; she found herself trapped in it, bricks meeting her wherever she turned, alone with a little deformed man who squatted on the floor gibbering, with long nails. His face was fitted and like the face of an animal. The wall behind him oozed with damp, which collected into drops and slid down. Still and cold as death she lay, not daring to move, until she broke the agony by tossing herself across the bed, and woke crying 'Oh!' (68)

In the dream, Rachel's sexual imagination, stirred by Richard Dalloway's speech and behavior, generates the grotesque imagery of her own female sexuality. The spatial imagery in the dream renders the female sexual body as monstrous and grotesque. Rachel is entrapped in her own female sexuality in a death-like stillness with a goblin man as her jailer. The robust figure and rational voice of Richard Dalloway are distorted into the deformity of the goblin man and the incoherence of his articulation, which manifests the mechanism of Rachel's own desire: repression and expression. The exaggerated animality expresses Rachel's repressed sexual desire in relation to Richard Dalloway.

Rachel's bizarre dream visualizes not only the awakening of her own sexuality but also of the sexual economy of imperial masculinity. When she awakes, she felt herself "pursued": "A voice moaned for her; eyes desired her. All night long barbarian men harassed the ship; they came scuffling down the passages, and stopped to snuffle at her door" (68). As Christine Froula notes, the "barbarian men" harassing the ship in pursuit of Rachel's female body ironically recall the earlier description of the ship as "a bride going forth to her husband, a virgin unknown of men" (147). The dream, instigated by Richard Dalloway, a pillar of the Empire, inscribes Rachel's female body and sexuality in the rhetoric of imperial desire and colonial savagery. The sexual encounter between Rachel and Richard takes on the dynamics of physical violence that is symbolically associated with imperial masculinity. Rachel's sexual encounter is preceded by the ship's encounter with warships of the Mediterranean Fleet, which provides a sinister edge to the experience. The subconscious realization of perilous female sexuality is ensued by Rachel's sudden acknowledgement of the socially structured male appropriation of female sexuality. Recalling Richard's kiss and determined to "find out exactly what it does mean," Rachel connects the kiss with the prostitutes in Piccadilly and with marriage itself. While she frankly and audaciously encounters her newly awakened sexuality as she confesses "I liked being kissed" (73), she is able to understand "why [she] can't walk alone!" and to envision her own life, perhaps as a "Tory Hostess" as her father wishes, to be only a "creeping hedged-in thing, driven

cautiously between high walls, here turned aside, there plunged in darkness, made dull and crippled for ever" (72). The trajectory of female initiation in her maiden voyage leads Rachel only into the prospect of the enforced enclosure of domesticity.

In *The Voyage Out*, Woolf suggests that there is a close association between imperialism and Englishness—both male and female. The encounter of the Mediterranean Fleet ignites zealous patriotic exultation from the passengers of the ship, particularly Clarissa Dalloway's ardent remark, "Aren't you glad to be English?" (60). She identifies the valor of the British navy with the English gentlemanliness of Richard who, educated in Oxford and Cambridge and serving the country in Parliament with aims to achieve "the unity of dominion" and "the dispersion" of English ideas over India, Africa, and South America, now presents himself valiantly in the prime of his manliness: "D'you know, Dick, I can't help thinking of England. . . One thinks of all we've done, and our navies, and the people in India and Africa, and how we've gone on century after century, sending our boys from little country villages—and of men like you, Dick, and it makes one feel as if one couldn't bear not to be English! Think of the light burning over the House, Dick!" (42). Proud of the English imperial enterprise of which Richard is a devotee, Clarissa provokes a vague idealization of "what it means to be English" while secretly despairing not having a "son" who will carry out the English imperial enterprise (42). Serving as a looking-glass that magnifies Richard's imperial masculinity, Clarissa also celebrates the discursively constructed English gentlewomanliness, the feminine counterpart of the authentic English masculinity. She is quick to discern the quality of "restraint" in the voice of Helen, Rachel's aunt and guardian in South America, which she considers "the sign of a lady" (33). Together, Richard and Clarissa Dalloway install Rachel into "the social order of British family and empire" (Friedman 108).

Woolf further demonstrates that the new concept of femininity, redefined with the emergence of feminism and the "new woman" at the turn of the nineteenth century, is also strongly associated with empire and its territorial expansionist

discourse. Resistant against the concept of gendered “separate spheres” that emphasizes the private, domestic role of women, Evelyn Murgatroyd, a young woman who joins the group of English tourists at the hotel in Santa Marina, glorifies British military and imperial heroism: “If I were you. . . I’d raise a troop and conquer some great territory and make it splendid” (124). Evelyn’s invocation of empire reflects not only the Elizabethan adventures and exploitations in the past but also the new imperial militarism revived in the late nineteenth century. Evelyn’s strong longing for the role in the empire-building recapitulates the ideological roots of Baden-Powell’s Girl Guides, the female equivalent of the Boy-Scouts. Baden-Powell, the founder of the Boy-Scouts, inspired by public anxiety about the moral and physical deterioration of the British race after the Boer War, formulated the principles of the Boy-Scouts from his adventurous military experience in India and Africa (Mackay and Thane 213-15). The Girl Guides movement plays upon girl’s jingoistic patriotism and desire for adventure in an attempt to reconcile new female aspiration with a predominantly domestic role for women, which is captured in Evelyn’s imperial heroism in the novel. The fact that Evelyn turns out to be the “pretty young lady” ardently courted by more than one man, with all her wish to be “like one of those colonists,” ironically reflects that the aims of the Girl Guides movement are only to make use of the girl’s desire for the unwomanly role and sugarcoat domestic science that assigns women to be the guard of “the English Home” and the breeder of the “British race.”

III. Ideology of Home/ Ideology of Voyage

The irony of *The Voyage Out* lies in that Rachel’s voyage out of England to the unknown, unfamiliar place only takes her at the heart of Englishness. As Linden Peach argues, the voyage takes Rachel “not only into her own sexuality but elements of her country of which she is not aware” (49). Clarissa unwittingly remarks on the ideological imperatives that the voyage of the *Euphrosyne* holds:

“Being on this ship seems to make it so much more vivid – what it really means to be English. . . it makes one feel as if one couldn’t bear *not* to be English!” (42). In scrutinizing the link between Englishness, patriarchy and imperialism in *The Voyage Out*, Woolf uses the trope of travel as a device to defamiliarize home.

As the *Euphrosyne* departs the port down the Thames for South America early in the novel, the textual descriptions of England viewed from the ship have already registered a sinister edge in Rachel’s maiden voyages. England, viewed from the ship that voyages away from the imperial center, is portrayed through a distinctive rupture in the ways to imagine the imperial homeland (Montgomery 44). The narrator provokes a familiar landscape of England, an idyllic England composed of village churches, gardens full of blooming flowers, and the domestic contentment of the polite society:

[T]he whole of England, from bald moors to the Cornish rocks, was lit up from dawn to sunset. . . In thousands of small gardens millions of dark-red flowers were blooming, until the old ladies who had tended them so carefully came down the paths with their scissors, snipped through their juicy stalks, and laid them upon cold stone ledges in the village church, Innumerable parties of picnickers coming home at sunset cries, ‘Was there ever such a day as this?’ ‘It’s you,’ the young men whispered; ‘Oh, it’s you,’ the young women replied. All old people and many sick people were drawn, were it only for a foot or two, into the open air, and prognosticated pleasant things about the course of the world. As for the confidences and expressions of love that were heard not only in cornfields but in lamplit rooms, where the windows opened on the garden, and men with cigars kissed women with grey hairs. (24)

The pastoral idyll of England, however, violently clashes with another description of England as a prison: “The people in ships, however, took an equally singular view of England. Not only did it appear to them to be an island, and a very small island, but it was a shrinking island in which people were imprisoned” (24). England, the metropolitan center of the empire, is envisioned now as a “shrinking island”; its population is imprisoned in the island over which a disastrous

catastrophe is looming. The genteel English people of the refined society are “swarming about like aimless ants, and almost pressing each other over the edge”; the intimate utterances and sensuous communions between young men and women are now figured as “a vain clamour, which, being unheard, either ceased, or rose into a brawl.” The voyage of the *Euphrosyne* defamiliarizes the pastoral nationscape of England, which is discursively familiarized in many of the nineteenth-century female Bildungsroman.

Rachel’s voyage teaches her that what she takes as natural is in fact culturally produced. Observing the social life of the small group of English men and women both in the *Euphrosyne* and Santa Marina, Rachel sees the fossilized arbitrariness in the English social system of class and belief: “Out here it seemed as though the people of England must be shaped in the body like the kings and queens, knights and pawns of the chessboard, so strange were their differences, so marked and so implicitly believed in” (89). The view of the “infinite sun-dried earth” in extreme red, purple and green, the colors that are absent in the English landscape, invites Rachel to meditate on her life at home, built up by the rhythm and rules of the domestic, which leads her to the sudden recognition of her frustration in “being a young woman” (202).

The excursion to Monte Rosa in South America simultaneously replicates and distances the familiar scenes of the pastoral England depicted early in the novel; a party of expedition is carefully arranged, the ladies holding parasols pleasantly and respectfully engage in conversations on commonplace things with the gentlemen with the panama hats, and the unexpected outburst of personal intimacy leads a young man and a young woman into an exclamation of love and a proposal of marriage. Exposed to “the immense space” of South America, however, they feel themselves overwhelmed and “very small” (120). As a collective noise among the party grows suddenly more “clamorous” at the discovery of a long line of ants on the table-cloth on which the picnic lunch is laid, the English men and women at the party are depicted “ignoble”: “Amiable and modest, respectable in many ways, lovable even in their contentment and desire to be kind, how mediocre they all

were, and capable of what insipid cruelty to one another!" (122). On unwittingly witnessing the ecstatic whispers and impassioned embraces between Susan and Arthur in the deep shade of the South American colonial location, Rachel experiences utter agitation and discomfort. The "confidences and expressions of love," heard not in "cornfields" or "lamplit rooms," initiate her to recognize that "[t]heir lives are now changed for ever" and "it makes one sorry for them" (24, 128). In Rachel's decisive utterance of "I don't like that," the completion of conventional courtship and engagement, achieved by Susan Warrington, not Rachel, is only experienced as a moment of crisis and resentment in a young woman's life.

After the public announcement of the engagement between Susan and Arthur, the church service at the hotel brings out for Rachel "ghosts of innumerable services on innumerable Sunday mornings at home" into the exotic place. The clergyman's sermon ironically inspires Rachel to lose her faith in Church. She sees in the clergyman's misrepresentation, the conductor's clumsy insensitivity, and, most of all, the audience's tame relapse into prayers only slavish acquiescence instead of an intense search for truth or a splendid conception of God within themselves. Rachel's incidental exploration of the "wrong side of hotel life" (238) after the service, which leads her to witness a fluttering chicken chased by an old woman and finally its head vindictively cut off, is suggestive of the violence and ugliness of what has been veiled from her—the coerced conventionality of English culture. The image of the chicken violently slaughtered is juxtaposed with the image of Rachel early in the novel as "a victim dropped from the claws of a bird of prey" (29).

The narrative of initiation and the narrative of travel, the warp and woof of *The Voyage Out*, are inextricably interwoven further in the expedition into the deep forest during which Rachel and Terence Hewet finally agree to marry each other, thus seemingly fulfilling the courtship plot. Woolf adroitly adopts the conventional rhetoric of imperial enterprise in registering the nameless hills and villages in the South American colony: "Since the time of Elizabeth very few people had seen the river and nothing had been done to change its appearance from what it was to the

eyes of the Elizabethan voyages. . . Changing only with the change of the sun and the clouds, the waving green mass had stood there for century after century” (250). Here the tropical landscape of South America is curiously at once historicized and dehistoricized. Erased of any mark of human settlement, this solitary landscape contains the primitive mystery that was only witnessed by Elizabethan adventurers as is now by the English tourists. The vast space of South America is devoid of history and language; it only invites and then baffles the European gaze and epistemology. As a steam boat, taking six English tourists including Rachel and Terence, runs against the river, they feel they are “driving into the heart of the night” that takes away “all desire for communication by making their words sound thin and small” (251). After the Conradian journey up the river into “the great darkness,” the English finds themselves in the tropical forest where the travelers walk as if “at the bottom of the sea” (256). The uncharted and unnavigated territory of the foreign wears out the conventional manners and language among the English.

With its elemental grandeur and profound silence, the depths of the South American jungle provide a liberating space for the primordial couple, Rachel and Terence. Without the painful anxiety to communicate each other only to suffer from failure, they experience a revealing moment of communication and communion as they pair off into the “vast green light.” Instead of being frightened, Rachel articulates her instinctively positive response to the invitation of the forest into the silence: “‘I like it.’ She repeated ‘I like it’” (256).

‘You like being with me?’ Terence asked.

‘Yes, with you,’ she replied.

He was silent for a moment. Silence seemed to have fallen upon the world.

‘That is what I have felt ever since I knew you,’ he replied. ‘We are happy together.’ He did not seem to be speaking, or she to be hearing.

‘Very happy,’ she answered.

They continue to walk for some time in silence. Their steps unconsciously quickened.

‘We love each other,’ Terence said.

‘We love each other,’ she repeated.

The silence was then broken by their voices which joined in tones of strange unfamiliar sound which formed no words. Faster and faster they walked; simultaneously they stopped, clasped each other in their arms, then, releasing themselves, dropped to the earth. Sounds stood out from the background making a bridge across their silence. . . .

'We love each other,' Terence repeated, searching into her face. . . . She said 'Terence' once; he answered 'Rachel.'

'Terrible—terrible,' she murmured after another pause. (256-57)

The scene in the forest marks the primary site of the novel as it promises both the completion of the trajectory of the narrative of romance and the arrival at the ultimate destination of the narrative of voyage.

With the anticipation of the completion of courtship, however, the primordial scene subtly marks the failure of the conflation of the conventional rhetoric of romance and travel. Rachel's "mechanical answer," only echoing Terence's "conventional romantic address," represents "no advance in the visionary project of the novel" (Sherry 249). The female adventure in *The Voyage Out*, redressing the problematic quest of understanding "what it is to be a young woman," fails at the moment of the completion of female initiation as she lapses into the repetition of the male utterance of romance and into the "murmur" close to "senseless and cruel" sounds of the exotic forest such as the "swish of the trees," "some beast croaking" and "persistent churning of the water" (257). It is ironic to witness Terence's lapse into the tepid language of conventional romance as he, an avid reader of novel and would-be novelist, scorns the conventional realist novel and ventures to write a novel on "silence." He ardently expresses his ambition to write about the "curious silent unrepresented life" of woman, not about young women's love affairs but "the lives of women of forty, of unmarried women, of working women, of women who keep shops and bring up children" (210). With the acknowledgement of the "smugness," "safety," and "compromise" that marriage is likely to bring to one's life, Terence yearns for a new language through which he can create "the extraordinary freedom" for Rachel and himself together (230). Encompassed in

profoundly universal silence and exposed to strange, senseless sounds of the foreign forest, however, the primordial couple suffers from the language burdened by the past.

It is significant that the struggle between the lovers arises when Terence *reads* a “bad” realist novel about a modern marriage while Rachel *writes* back to their friends’ letters congratulating their engagement. Instead of creating a new novel on marriage and ridding of the clichéd language of customary manners, they are still caught up and forged by the obsolete, fossilized language. In his imagination of marriage, Terence nostalgically and contentedly recedes to the familiar landscape of homeland: the English country with “English meadows gleaming with water and set with stolid cows,” “clouds dipping low and trailing across the green hills,” and “the nightingales singing in the lanes” (283). Yet the mythical landscape of homeland does not ignite an exclamatory outburst from Rachel. Vaguely dissatisfied, she relates the familiar home landscape to the sense of being “shut up all by oneself in a room”; instead of sharing the blissful vision of marriage and home, she wistfully looks at a “ship” that has just come in the bay of Santa Marina. To Terence’s disappointment and envy, she is about “to cut herself adrift from him, and to pass away to unknown places” (285). The female traveler in *The Voyage Out* desires further to venture on her odyssey to the uncharted territory of the sea, refusing to retreat to homeland, when she is about to complete her maiden voyage out into the discovery of her own sexuality structured and registered in Victorian and Edwardian English culture.

IV. Voyaging Out into Silence/ Language

The similarity between the nightmare stirred by Richard’s kiss and the delirium during Rachel’s illness near the end of *The Voyage Out* indicates that the mysterious fever and ensuing death are related to the awakening of her own sexuality. In the hallucinatory fantasy, Rachel finds herself “walking through a

tunnel under the Thames, where there were little deformed women sitting in archways playing cards, while the bricks of which the wall was made oozed with damp, which collected into drops and slid down the wall" (313). As Rachel's early initiation into female sexuality, stimulated by Richard's violent kiss, leads her into the recognition not only of her own pleasure ("I liked him, and I liked being kissed") but also the terrifying realization of "her own confinement within the masculine and imperial economy of desire" (Friedman 112), Rachel's delirious fever after the primordial experience in the jungle reenacts the fear through the passageway to the underworld of female sexuality, accompanied with the sense of entrapment and the deformity of the body, all eerily depicted earlier in the nightmare instigated by Richard's kiss. The prospect of engagement and marriage back in England throws her into the vague "hopelessness" and the painful and terrible realization of her and Terence's own impotence; "they could never love each other sufficiently to overcome all these barriers, and they could never be satisfied with less" (286).

The primordial experience in the jungle enacts both the fulfillment and the foreboding breakdown of courtship and marriage. Contracted with the unnamed, unidentified tropical disease on the expedition to the jungle, Rachel's own female body serves as the site in which the ideological imperatives forced by the narrative of romance are potentially subverted. Withdrawn into delirium, Rachel floats and falls "into a deep pool of sticky water, which eventually closed over her head" (322). The image of drowning is ambivalent when juxtaposed with many semantic layers of the sea and its associations in the novel. The rhetorical identification of Rachel and the *Euphrosyne* both on the maiden voyage at the beginning of the novel suggests Rachel, the female traveler, to be read as a ship, sinking slowly into the rhythm and flow of the underwater until it "curl[s] up at the bottom of the sea." In this reading, Rachel's maiden voyage is tragically and prematurely aborted. The action of sinking, however, may leave Rachel in the territory unexplored, unmeasured by the discursively structured economy of desire as her female sexuality is metaphorically compared to "the white, hairless, blind monsters lying

curled on the ridges of sand at the bottom of the sea, which would explode if you brought them to the surface” (16). Rachel remains in silence and darkness of the sea, refusing to surface up and enter into the language of female initiation burdened by the imperial and masculine economy of desire.

Woolf voyages in and out of literary tropes registered in the narrative of romance and the narrative of adventure in *The Voyage Out*, creating an imaginary discursive space—both familiar and strange—in which the female sexuality and subjectivity is ambivalently registered. Once freed from the conventionality of language, Rachel refuses to return to the world enforced by the conventional script of the narrative of romance as revealed in her withdrawal into silence and ultimately death. In her maiden voyage out, Rachel Vinrace has lost her way, suspended between home and a mythical English colony in South America. In *The Voyage Out*, Woolf’s geographical imagination charts the process of a young Englishwoman’s initiation into sexuality and subjectivity in the ambivalent space contingent on both home and its exotic other. Woolf’s textual journey to South America and its jungle, freighted with intertextual meanings associated with European imperial histories and narratives, scrutinizes the interrelated discourses of imperialism, sexuality and Englishness, defamiliarizing and hence destabilizing Englishness.

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Abstract

Virginia Woolf's Voyaging Out:
 Woman, Travel, and Englishness in *The Voyage Out*

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Published in 1915, Virginia Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out*, a novel of courtship and engagement, strongly draws on the narrative convention of voyage. In the novel, a young woman of inexperience and naïveté sets out on a voyage into South America out of cloistered domesticity in England, during which she grows into the awakening of her own sexuality as well as the ways of the world. The interpellation of the narrative of female initiation into the narrative of voyage in Woolf's first novel is both particularly fitting and problematic. As the title of the novel allegorically suggests, the young woman's maiden voyage undergoes a trajectory both physical and metaphorical. While the female traveler sets out a voyage "out" of the sheltered enclosure of domesticity at home in *The Voyage Out*, the trajectory of the narrative of courtship and engagement enforces her to expect a voyage back to "home." Thus, the schematic opposition between adventure and domesticity collapses in *The Voyage Out*. The conflation and the collapse of the domestic placement and the adventurous mobility in the novel are registered in the destiny of the female protagonist: the development of Rachel Vinrace's initiation into female sexuality leads into a dead end when she suddenly dies of a fever as her awakening—both sexual and social—is about to culminate in marriage. Noting such structural collapse of the adventurous mobility and the domestic stability registered in *The Voyage Out*, this paper aims to illustrate that Woolf's transgressive voyage into and out of the literary tropes posits the question of the female sexuality and subjectivity within the discursive terrain of English epistemology as well as imperial history.

■ Key words : woman, travel, female Bildungsroman, Englishness, sexuality, empire, *The Voyage Out*

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