

Eros and Beauty Already Involving the Sublime: *To the Lighthouse* and *Orlando: a Biography*

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I. New Aesthetic Categories Suitable for Experiences in Woolf's Novels

Aesthetic categories should no more remain abstract theory. Aesthetic categories are, as Sianne Ngai says, “part of the texture of everyday social life, central at once to our vocabulary for sharing and confirming our aesthetic experiences with others” (29). There has been quite a bit of recent scholarly effort aiming to amend the aesthetic categories rigidly classified since the eighteenth century. This study attempts to apply the result of these recent researches to analysis of the protagonists’ aesthetic experiences in Virginia Woolf’s novels. In order to describe properly their complicated aesthetic feelings, we need our new “vocabulary for sharing and confirming” their aesthetic experiences “with others.” This study is to show that for Woolf’s characters, the experience of Beauty and

Eros always involves the experience of the Sublime; in other words, the experience of the Sublime is already inherent in the experience of Beauty and Eros. Evidently, the precise description of their experiences requires the new definition of aesthetic categories.

In fact, many critics have observed that Woolf's writings dramatize "ambivalence" and inner "contradictions" Woolf herself experiences, which is closely related with her redefinition of subjectivity, and that her "uncertainty" and "indeterminacy" can be deemed her political aesthetic (Kaivola 18-21; Matz 176). In Woolf's fictions, every quality implies its opposite (Transue 167), for example: love could be inseparable from hate (Kaivola 21), which is her important writing strategy. Therefore, for elucidating exactly the conflicts and complexities in the aesthetic experiences of Woolf's characters, my study adopts new attempts to break down the boundary between two aesthetic categories of the beautiful and the sublime classified in a dichotomous way and instead, claim there are the kinship and continuity between the two aesthetic feelings.

This paper particularly draws on Jacques Rancière's idea that there is "no rupture between an aesthetics of the beautiful and an aesthetics of the sublime" because the experience of the Sublime already lies at the core of the experience of Beauty in that the experience of Beauty is "already characterized by the double bind of attraction and repulsion" just like the experience of the Sublime (97-98). This study suggests discussions of the kinship and continuity between an aesthetics of the beautiful and an aesthetics of the sublime contribute to the exploration of exquisite experiences in Woolf's novels and the description of these complicated, elusive aesthetic feelings in a more proper way.

We cannot stress enough how concurrently, how simultaneously two conflicting sensations about the same object occur in a protagonist's mind in Woolf's novels. For instance, in *To the Lighthouse*, Lily Briscoe, though feeling grateful for her friendship with William Banks, finds out herself critically perceiving the flaws in his character as well as his good personality "simultaneously" (TL 29). She feels "the load of her accumulated impressions of him" pours down "in a ponderous

avalanche" (29). Literally just like a ponderous avalanche, the various impressions pouring in upon her are something fearful, unbounded of great magnitude arousing a feeling of pain, which is the Sublime experience. Two contradictory feelings of liking and disliking about the same person simultaneously rush to her, so following her thought is "like following a voice which speaks too quickly to be taken down by one's pencil" (29). This is an intense aesthetic experience in which both feelings of agreement and discord coexist. These conflicting sensations can neither be mastered nor represented. This emotional explosion arising from the experience of the Sublime is "frightened, effusive, tumultuous" (30).

Likewise, with respect to Eros of Paul Rayley and Minta Doyle, which is the archetype of the passionate love of a man and a woman, two opposite emotions rise in Lily's mind. She finds the heat of Paul's Eros contains its horror, its cruelty. She feels that his love is "so beautiful, so exciting," and yet it is also "inhumane," and "the most barbaric of human passions" (*TL* 111-12). Thus, suddenly Lily sees a vision of "a reddish light" (190) seeming to burn, issuing from Paul. The ambivalence of Eros is represented very sensuously and fearfully by means of her vision. In this hallucination, Lily hears the roar and the crackle of the fire, which repels her "with fear and disgust" (191). Paul's fire, Eros is splendid and destructive at once. Similarly, it seems very appropriate in a prophetic sense that Orlando in *Orlando: a Biography*, calls the beloved woman "Sasha," the name of a white Russian fox which was "a creature soft as snow, but with teeth of steel" (31) and bit him so savagely when he was a boy. Since the loved one looks sweet and beautiful, but always hides something sublime which can violently frustrate the lover, as it soon proves.

In this manner, Woolf's novels imply there are the continuity and identity between every experience of Love and the experience of the Sublime, due to the lover's alienation from the beloved's irremediable alterity, its heterogeneity. Woolf's characters become aware that the rapture of agreement and harmony always contains the discontent of discord and contradiction, and the Sublime sentiment already lies at the core of the experience of Love. In Woolf's novels

there is no rupture between an aesthetics of the beautiful and an aesthetics of the sublime.

In this sense, Lorraine Sim's *Virginia Woolf: the Patterns of Ordinary Experience* seems to deserve attention among remarkable recent researches on the new definition of aesthetic categories. Sim, focusing on Woolf's essay, "Evening over Sussex: Reflections in a Motor Car," claims that Woolf appreciates "a new kind of beauty created by speed, one that moves into the psychological space of the sublime" (123), and "revises the beautiful-sublime distinction" (135). Sim states "the beautiful-sublime dichotomy breaks down" and "the aesthetic categories of the beautiful and the sublime are conflated" in this essay (129). It seems clear that Woolf, interrogating the dualism central to eighteenth century aesthetic theory, attempts to amend and rewrite beautiful-sublime dichotomy, "in order to accommodate historical and cultural change" (129). Woolf acutely recognizes beautiful-sublime dichotomy is not appropriate for depiction of her protagonists' exquisite experiences.

There is currently much discussion inclined to illuminate the continuity and kinship between the two aesthetic feelings. Jean-Francois Lyotard in his book *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime: Kant's Critique of Judgment*¹⁾, emphasizing the "tension" and the "instability" that characterize both feelings, claims the "kinship between the two aesthetic feelings," and even states that "sublime feeling can be thought of as an extreme case of the beautiful" (73, 75). Lyotard reasons that pleasure in the beautiful occurs when the powers of imagination and understanding engages with each other, according to a suitable "ratio" in a kind of play, and yet the tension between the two powers is also necessarily "unstable," and it is always "a potential disturbance" in the "calm" contemplation of the beautiful (*Lessons* 73-74).

Most significantly, Rancière seems influenced by this Lyotard's idea that both of two aesthetics can be described on the basis of "tension." Lyotard in his book *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*²⁾ suggests his analysis of Kant's sublime, and

1) originally published in French as *Leçons sur l'Analytique du Sublime* in 1991.

Rancière interprets this Lyotard's reading of Kant in his book *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*.³⁾ Here Rancière asserts that in the experience of the beautiful itself, there are already disagreement, dissensus, discord, contradiction, or tension, that is, the experience of the sublime. He argues, "It is not necessary to go looking in the sublime experience of size, power or fear to discern a disagreement between thought and the sensible," because the experience of beauty already consists in "a tension" between "a charm that attracts us and a respect that makes us recoil," similar to the experience of the sublime (Rancière 97-98). According to Immanuel Kant's book, *Critique of Judgement*, whereas in aesthetic judgments about the Beautiful the mind is "in *restful* contemplation," in the Sublime "the mind is not merely attracted by the object but is ever being alternately repelled" (62, 72). However, Rancière claims that in case of not only an aesthetics of the Sublime but also the Beautiful, there is "a quickly alternating attraction towards, and repulsion from, the same Object" (Kant 72). By particularly drawing on Friedrich Schiller's analysis of Juno Ludovici in *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Rancière maintains Schiller has already declared that the experience of Beauty itself contains both "attraction" and "repulsion" just like the experience of the Sublime. In fact, we can find that Schiller describes the wonderful emotion, aesthetic state which a subject feels, facing a statue of Juno Ludovici as follows: "Irresistibly seized and attracted by the one quality, and held at a distance by the other, we find ourselves at the same time in the condition of utter rest and extreme movement" (Schiller 81). My study largely agrees that here Schiller states not only in an aesthetics of the Sublime but also in an aesthetics of the Beautiful there are both "attraction" and "repulsion."⁴⁾ Due to this "double bind of attraction and repulsion," Woolf's

2) originally published in French as *L'Inhumain: Causeries sur le temps* in 1988.

3) originally published in French as *Malaise dans l'esthétique* in 2004.

4) On the other hand, regarding this interpretation of Rancière, Ngai comments that "Rancière provocatively argues that the experience of beauty, as theorized by Kant and Schiller, partakes of the same oscillation" and "This is a bold but not a particularly convincing argument" (252). She points out that Rancière overexaggerates what Lyotard calls "agitation," and criticizes his argument for "extremely willful reinterpretation of

protagonists come to recognize the irremediable alterity of their desired object, even when they experience Beauty or Love. Yet, their ethical attitude toward others is grounded on this feeling as well.

II. The Sublime Already Inherent in the Twofold Suspension of Beauty and Eros: *To the Lighthouse* and *Orlando: a Biography*

Evidently, for both Woolf and her protagonists, Love is a very important issue. Most of all, Woolf's concept of Love and Eros is directly associated with her aesthetical view. Thus, this paper attempts to define her Love, to establish the nature of Eros portrayed in her novels, which may be very contributive to understanding of her aesthetics. First, analysing *To the Lighthouse* and *Orlando*, this study aims to demonstrate that for the protagonists in Woolf's novels, the experience of Beauty and the experience of Love are the same as a middle disposition in which sensuousness and reason are active at the same time, but negated at the same time. According to Kant and Schiller, Beauty combines the two opposite conditions of a human being, perceiving and thinking, Beauty links together sensation and thought, and therefore Beauty transports us into intermediate condition between sensation and thought (Schiller 88). In a word, aesthetic experience suspends both the law of understanding and the law of sensation at the same time (97). For Kant and Schiller, aesthetic state is characterized by "the twofold suspension," or "the double negation" which is a suspension of the power of understanding and a suspension of the power of sensibility (Ranci re 30, 91).

In *Orlando*, the transiently suspended state of the Beautiful is well captured by the image of "Coloured balloons" hovering "motionless" in the air on the frozen river (25). Also in *To the Lighthouse* we can find out that Mrs. Ramsay, creating "beauty" (91) at the dinner table in the midst of disorderly daily life, feels that she

hangs “suspended” (116) for the moment, and Lily, reflecting the scene on the beach which contains herself, Charles Tansley and the breaking wave, believes that because of Mrs. Ramsay watching them like an artist, and saying, “Life stand still here,” the moment was suspended, and something permanent was made “like a work of art” (*TL* 175). In this aesthetic state, a long feud between Lily and Tansley, the law of the right or wrong, comes to a standstill. Even a reasonable philosopher Mr. Ramsay, appreciating his wife and son in the window like a piece of artistic work, “does homage to the beauty of the world” (42). At this moment his pursuit of the philosophical truth is suspended. His perception and thought are reconciled. As accompanying Mrs. Ramsay who visits a woman’s house for charity, and suddenly stands “motionless” for a moment against a picture of Queen Victoria, a narrow-minded philosopher, Tansley, too, feels suspended by the aesthetic state, realizing she is “the most beautiful person” he has ever seen (18).

Plato’s interpretation of Love in *the Symposium* provides a very significant ground, resting on which we could consider both Love and Beauty can be understood to be identical as intermediate condition. According to Plato, Love is the intermediate condition between sensation and reason as well. In *the Symposium* Agathon argues that Love is love of what is beautiful, and Socrates and Diotima also acknowledge Love is love of beautiful things (31, 37, 41). In a word, the object of Love is Beauty (Ficino 89-90). Eros is to desire the beautiful, Eros is longing for Beauty (Ficino 89-90; Plato 41-44). And Love is something in between mortal and immortal, Love is an intermediary between deity and humanity, and Love is always midway between perceiving and thinking (Ficino 115; Plato 38-39, 41). In Eros, sensuousness and intellect are mediated. Plato understands Eros or Beauty as the bridge connecting sensuous dimension and intellectual dimension (Kim 52, 63). Schiller also states that when we begin to “love” someone, “both the constraint of feeling and the constraint of Nature disappear” just as both the compulsion of Nature and the compulsion of Reason disappear at once in an aesthetic state (75). Herbert Marcuse in his book *Eros and Civilization* employs “the images of Orpheus and Narcissus” to express the type of persons pursuing

beauty, love, play, and ultimately freedom. Marcuse, too, clearly proclaims that Eros is closely connected with “the aesthetic dimension” by saying that the Orphic-Narcissistic images refer to the aesthetic dimension (171).

For these reasons, it seems appropriate to say that Eros as well as Beauty combine the two opposite conditions of perceiving and thinking, and Eros as well as Beauty transport a subject into intermediate condition. This paper explores how the protagonists of Woolf’s novels find the possibility of a new reality, the freedom of individuals and the liberation of the entire society in the twofold suspension of Beauty and Love. By analysing their relationships with human beings, Art, and Nature, this paper aims to clarify their experience of Love is identical to the experience of Beauty as intermediary between sensation and reason, and yet they immediately come to realize that Beauty and Eros, which they are allowed to enjoy for a fleeting moment, is forced to be followed by the experience of the Sublime. To put it more exactly, with these protagonists it even seems that the experience of the Sublime is always inherent within the experience of Eros and Beauty. Therefore, even when experiencing Eros and Beauty, these characters find out their inability to approach their beloved, their desired object, feel the powerlessness, alienation, and misery because of the alterity of the beloved. Furthermore, all of this eventually leads to the conclusion that for Woolf, the proper mission of modern literature is to testify the irremediable alterity of things through the Sublime inherent in Beauty and Love.

1. Eros and Beauty as an Intermediary between Sensuousness and Reason

An artist Lily, staying with the Ramsays, and looking at everything around her “through the eyes of love,” is also identified as a lover who is “in love with them all, in love with this world” (*TL* 27, 53). And Woolf’s important concept of Beauty and Love is well presented through this meditation of Lily: “Was it wisdom? Was it knowledge? Was it, once more, the deceptiveness of beauty, so that all one’s perceptions, half way to truth, were tangled in a golden mesh?” (57). From this

passage it can be inferred that Woolf thinks the experience of Beauty and the experience of Love are something which exceeds and transcends wisdom and knowledge, and something which suspends one's perceptions of truth. It is not knowledge but "unity" that Lily desires from her relationship with Mrs. Ramsay, not something that could be written in any language but "intimacy itself" (57). She thinks love is something which any language cannot but fail, and something in which any knowledge stops. This notion of love that Lily has, makes us guess Woolf also thinks that when a subject is in love, both the law of understanding and the law of sensation are suspended simultaneously, just as when a subject is in an aesthetic state.

Similarly, regarding the rapture of a botanist Banks in love, Woolf explains that the sight of Mrs. Ramsay's reading a fairy tale to her boy has precisely the same effect as "the solution of a scientific problem" on him and he feels that barbarity is tamed just as he does when he has proved "something absolute about the digestive system of plants" (*TL* 53-54). If we refer to the idea that both Love and Beauty as intermediate condition suspend the faculty of rationality and the faculty of sensation simultaneously, as observed earlier, we can understand why his love, the beauty of his beloved make him feel precisely the same as he feels when he solves a scientific problem or proves something absolute in botanic study. Just as in the aesthetic state sensuousness and reason, the two spheres of a human being are mediated, sensation and thought are reconciled in the experience of love, too. Thus, when Banks experiences Love and Beauty, his intellect and his sensation meet each other and relieve each other, which leads him to such a rapture.

Remarkably, Mrs. Ramsay's communing with the light of the Lighthouse coming regularly across the bay, leads her to be in an aesthetic state, and in love as well. In this scene where she has a distinctive relationship with one long steady stroke of the light, she is captivated by the beautiful and the pitiless, the remorseless of the light at once. The light takes her to the aesthetic condition. Her deep affinity for the light can be understood as "the Orphic and Narcissistic Eros" (Marcuse 165), which is the experience of a sort of narcissism or homosexuality

for perfect self-satisfaction. In the Orphic and Narcissistic Eros, all the existent beings appear “beautiful” for themselves, and become “free to be what they are,” and even “the opposition between man and nature, subject and object, is overcome” (Marcuse 166). In Mrs. Ramsay’s extraordinary erotic attitude toward the light, the boundaries between subject and object, between man and nature are removed. Most importantly, her interaction with the third stroke can be construed as her free play with herself. Mrs. Ramsay sees the beautiful of herself through the beautiful of the light. The eyes of the light become “her own eyes” (*TL* 70) which enables her to discover her own beauty illuminated by her own eyes, neither by her husband nor anyone else. This erotic state as well as aesthetic state are revealed with more obvious expressions, “her needles suspended” (71). Mrs. Ramsay even finds herself turning “a bride to meet her lover” (71). This moment of suspension enjoyed by Mrs. Ramsay, is tinged with a sort of narcissism or homosexuality guaranteeing more fully liberated pleasure. She feels, watching the light with fascination, hypnotized, “as if it were stroking with its silver fingers some sealed vessel in her brain” (72). Woolf describes Mrs. Ramsay’s delight of this moment as “exquisite happiness,” “intense happiness” (72). Her erotic contact with the light allows her to experience “the ecstasy,” “pure delight” which she has never experienced even in the relationship with her husband. So when her ecstasy reaches its peak, eventually her yell of delight, “It is enough! It is enough!” (72) bursts out of her mind. Like this, Mrs. Ramsay’s intercourse with the light can be understood as the Orphic and Narcissistic Eros, and Sigmund Freud’s concept of “primary narcissism” which is the notion of “an inseparable connection of the ego with the external world” prior to the division into ego and external objects (Marcuse 167-68).

We find once again this Orphic-Narcissistic Eros and narcissism in the scene where Mrs. Ramsay reads a book in an erotic attitude, just as Roland Barthes believes that “contact with the text is in itself an erotic experience,” and the “communication of author, text and reader creates erotic pleasure—orgasm through language” in *The Pleasure of the Text* (Donnelly 386). When she has an erotic relationship with herself by reading a book, she finds her ecstasy ascending to the

climax. At the moment she is exhilarated by the Beauty of the text, she feels that she is the most beautiful to her husband as well as to her own self: "She knew that he was thinking, You are more beautiful than ever. And she felt herself very beautiful" (*TL* 134). Her state of Eros is inextricably interwoven with her aesthetic state which she experiences by committing herself to the literary work, "beautiful and reasonable, clear and complete, . . . the sonnet" (131). Surely, for the protagonists in *To the Lighthouse*, the experience of Beauty and Love is the only way by which they could seek infinite being, expanded self, and transcend the limit of reality. Among fleeting moments of her life, Mrs. Ramsay seeks eternity through the beautiful, just as Kant says the Beautiful brings with it "a feeling of the furtherance of life" (61).

Very remarkably, in *Orlando* Woolf makes the Thames River frozen by "the Great Frost" symbolize the motionless, suspended state of Beauty. This most severe Great Frost makes everything frozen and "at a standstill," but the river frozen is transformed into "a carnival of the utmost brilliancy" due to it (*O* 24). The citizens of London fully enjoy this carnival. Suddenly the frozen river is changed into the place where the experience of beauty and pleasure is spurting, the suspension of aesthetic state and erotic rapture is taking place. In this space the boundary between the Royal Court and the public becomes weakened, since the realistic order, or the performative principle which rules at ordinary times is replaced by the aesthetic dimension such as beauty, play, and eros. Certainly, this suspended state is possible only temporarily and transiently because the ice is meant to be melting and broken someday. Not only people on this ice are in an aesthetic state, but also various animate beings beneath the surface are caught in a state of ecstasy. At a depth of several feet, there could be seen, congealed, "here a porpoise, there a flounder" (25). The image of "Shoals of eels" lying "motionless in a trance" (25), embodies the state of the people enthralled by the sensual pleasure, erotic rapture. Even though this aesthetic state is sure to fleetingly pass, it seems permanent and fixed for the present. This congealed and suspended state like "the hard fixity of diamonds" (26) is characteristic of the experience of Love as well as Beauty.

Orlando also first meets Sasha on this frozen river.

Notably, in *Orlando* Woolf more readily admits Eros has its roots in physical instinct. After becoming a woman, Orlando feels sensual rapture at the polite words of a Captain: “a delicious tremor ran through her frame” (*O* 109). She thinks this sexual ecstasy is “the most delicious” (109). Very interestingly, Orlando, as living with the gipsy tribe, is obliged to say “How good to eat!” for saying “beautiful,” since the gypsies have no word for “beautiful” (100). Ironically this ridiculous episode symbolizes well the fact that there is similarity between the experience of Beauty and the experience of Eros as physical pleasure. Eros is physical desire which contains spiritual longing within it, or spiritual longing which appears as a form of physical desire (Ficino 93, 95; Kim 48). Thus, the experience of Beauty can be portrayed as “good to eat” as erotic desire. And Orlando, pondering on ‘Love,’ instantly recalls a specific woman she loved. Woolf comments that “love took a human shape . . . For where other thoughts are content to remain abstract, nothing will satisfy this one but to put on flesh and blood” (*O* 115). This remarks concretize Plato’s idea that all the other spiritual virtues are neither visible nor tangible, but only Beauty is clearly visible, tangible with flesh and blood, it appears in sight, in a sensual form, then only Beauty can arouse our passionate longing, that is, Love (Ficino 89-90; Kim 64-65; Plato 41-44).

However, also for Orlando as a mortal, the suspended moments of Beauty and Love are ultimately related with her pursuit of something permanent. After betrayed by Sasha, Orlando, descending into the crypt where his ancestors lie, takes a strange delight in “thoughts of death and decay” (*O* 50). Orlando, even when observing the death and decay proved by the bones of his ancestors, still seems composed. But as soon as he is reminded of Sasha, the object of his desire, he bursts into a bitter sob, since he cannot see her again. He abruptly has a veritable spasm of sobbing, “at the sight of a Dutch snow scene by an unknown artist,” and then it seems to him that life is not worth living any more. Woolf clearly reveals that Orlando, even forgetting the death and decay of his ancestors, stands shaken with sobs, “all for the desire of a woman in Russian trousers” (51). Regarding a source of great

sorrow to him, here Woolf conclusively explains, “She had gone. She had left him. He was never to see her again” (51). This scene makes it explicit that because the experience of Love and Beauty enables a subject to feel a sense of transcendence, or immortality strongly enough to forget and overcome the fear such as death and decay lurking in life, a lover, when facing the fact that he has lost the object of Love and Beauty, starts to sob uncontrollably.

Interestingly, Orlando also, admitting, “I am nature’s bride” (*O* 170), embraces Nature, similar to Mrs. Ramsay’s intercourse with the light, or a book. She is united with nature in erotic attitude, murmuring “I have found my mate” (170). It is written in a very sensual manner that Orlando picks six feathers from the grass, draws between her fingers and presses to her lips to feel their smooth plumage, when seeing “a silver pool, mysterious as the lake” (170). She has close contact with the things of nature like making love. It seems quite obvious that the sight of “A single feather” quivering in the air and falling into “the middle of a silver pool” expresses a sort of sexual intercourse between Orlando and Nature metaphorically, since at this moment “some strange ecstasy” comes over her (170). Orlando conceives of the things of nature as free and beautiful as they are, as “The Orphic and Narcissistic Eros awakens and liberates potentialities that are real in things animate and inanimate” (Marcuse 165).

Most significantly, Woolf suggests the marriage of Orlando and Shelmerdine as Eros far surpassing an inflexible union between a woman and a man. They feel entirely sympathetic towards each other. Above all, the close bond between the two could be forged since both Orlando and Shelmerdine pursue the same aim in their life. Shelmerdine’s life “was spent in the most desperate and splendid of adventures – which is to voyage round Cape Horn” (*O* 175). He has dedicated himself to reckless adventures, pursuing something useless, something rash instead of something productive, profitable. This adventure, his own free play leads him to feel the sheer ecstasy. Both Orlando and Shelmerdine live a life, primarily driven by “the play impulse,” pursuing useless beauty, play, love itself, and ultimately freedom, and letting their existence consist in the aesthetic dimension, liberated

from the principle of performance. Schiller explains that we are urged by two contrary impulses, “the sense impulse” and “the form impulse,” and he calls the impulse in which both impulses are combined, “the play impulse” (74). He states “the play impulse, in which both combine to function,” will annul both the compulsion of Nature and the compulsion of Reason and “set man free both physically and morally” (Schiller 74). And he declares that “The object of the play impulse” is “Beauty” (76). Beauty is the object of the play impulse. Shelmerdine’s whole life is driven by the play impulse, unprofitable beauty, something delicious, something good to eat. They are like children. So Orlando, watching him eating “great spoonfuls of strawberry jam,” sees a vision of “this boy . . . sucking peppermints” passionately (*O* 175). No other than this sweet taste of beauty or sensual rapture, which is the objective of the play impulse, is what Orlando herself has passionately pursued all her life.

At one point, Orlando mistakes “A toy boat on the Serpentine” for her husband’s brig. Orlando repeats “A toy boat on the Serpentine” and “Ecstasy” alternately, for the thoughts are “interchangeable” and mean exactly “the same thing” (*O* 199). “A toy boat on the Serpentine” is a symbol of play or the play impulse. It means exactly “Ecstasy.” “A toy boat” and “Ecstasy” are the goal Orlando’s life and arts endeavor to attain, which is Beauty, Eros, and ultimately freedom. She comes to realize again that “it’s ecstasy that matters” (200), which is free from any practical purpose. Orlando becomes assured that it’s “a toy boat” that matters. What really matters is “something useless, sudden, violent,” “something rash, ridiculous” (199), not something useful such as articles by Greene in a newspaper, bills or acts. In this sense, Eros of Orlando and Shelmerdine can be deemed as a hope of the whole of humanity. Since it is “play alone, that makes man complete,” and “he is only wholly Man when he is playing” (Schiller 79-80). At the scene of their reunion, it is written that as Shelmerdine leaps from the aeroplane to the ground, there springs up over his head “a single wild bird,” then Orlando cries, “It is the goose!”, “The wild goose” (228). With Orlando the haunting image of “the wild goose” (216) which flies past the window to sea, so

fast that she cannot catch, means her play impulse, her desire to seek out adequate words, and her adventure into Beauty and Eros. Briefly, in Woolf's novels, the twofold suspension characteristic of the experience of 'Beauty' can be equally applied to 'Play' as well as the experience of 'Love.' And all these 'Beauty,' 'Love' and 'Play' as intermediate condition offer the possibility of a new reality to these characters who crave the liberation of individuals and the emancipation of society.

2. Eros and Beauty Already Involving the Sublime

This paper uses the term 'the experience of the sublime' in a broad sense including all the "aesthetic experiences linked to overpowering confrontations with" something "that fundamentally exceeds our current perceptual and cognitive abilities to capture it" by quoting Ngai's remarks (22). I intend to describe a feeling of the sublime as a sense of 'irritation' and 'impotency,' or a feeling of 'discontent' we are meant to feel, when we are troubled by our inability to 'grasp,' 'master' and 'express' what we experience. When we face something which resists or transcends representation, it creates a feeling of shock, surprise or anxiety, and the mind momentarily feels overcome by it, then the mind strives to represent and master all that it receives (Sim 124). This is a feeling of the sublime. In my study "the sublime" indicates not only unsolved problems hidden in life and Nature, but also the ambivalence and contradiction inherent in love, or the limitations of literature, which are related with abstract knowledge and information.

In what follows, this paper explores how Woolf's characters continuously alternate between the experience of Love or Beauty and the experience of the Sublime, and what's more, even it seems that an aesthetics of the Sublime is already involved in their experience of Beauty and Eros. Thereby, this study is to clarify why these figures, even at the moment they come to the climax of sensual rapture, or get fully satisfied with a sense of complete unity during the state of Eros and Beauty, should find out their inability to approach their desired object. Yet their

accepting the beloved's irreconcilable heterogeneity is very ethical experience (Rancière 42, 94). Woolf implicitly suggests a lover should make efforts to understand the beloved and yet acknowledge the inapproachable aspect of the beloved, respect the beloved's hidden secrets which a lover cannot grasp forever.

For instance, right after feeling a state of sexual ecstasy due to his passionate love with Sasha on the ice, Orlando suddenly falls into his mood of melancholy at the thought of death. He emphatically agrees with some philosopher's saying, "nothing thicker than a knife's blade separates happiness from melancholy" and thinks "one is twin fellow to the other" (*O* 31). In this scene, the extreme happiness of Eros and Beauty which suddenly converting into a sense of powerlessness and alienation, clearly shows such two faces of life are experienced alternately, almost simultaneously. In a similar way, immediately after Mrs. Ramsay gives assurance and comfort for which Mr. Ramsay comes to her, "the rapture of successful creation" (*TL* 44) throbs through her. Yet soon she feels some disagreeable sensation, dissatisfaction, and some doubt. In an instant, her rapture of perfect harmony abruptly changes to dismal, fear, suspicion of unknown origin. She realizes that it is their relation, her discontent with her husband that discomposes her. Intrinsically, the entire joy, the pure joy is always impossible since something indeterminate, something sublime is inherent in herself as well as the one she loves. She thinks of the destiny of human relations: "it was painful to be reminded of the inadequacy of human relationships, that the most perfect was flawed" (45). Like this, these novels consistently reveal that the experience of Love and Beauty by nature, isn't sharply distinguishable from the experience of the Sublime, because a subject is forced to admit that the desired object itself, the thing itself is something which cannot be approachable, graspable, determinable after all. As Lyotard says, Thing or presence is what is not finalized, not destined, and not addressed, but simply "it exists, or rather *insists*" (*Inhuman* 140-42). The sublime sentiment points to this unavailability of presence, the irreducible presence of other being.

The moment Orlando falls in love with Sasha, the first thing he does, is to seek for the images, metaphors fit for her, or adequate definition, exact identification of

her. However, Orlando fails to define Sasha with any metaphor, any words: "Ransack the language as he might, words failed him. He wanted . . . another tongue" (*O* 32). Orlando feels in her speeches and behaviors there is "something hidden," "something concealed" (32). He is attracted by her and repulsed by her at once. About her he feels loveliness and awe at once. His Eros already contains both attraction and repulsion. Their love which looks fixed like the frozen river on the surface, carries something sublime like a raging torrent inwardly. He suffers from a sort of her indeterminacy, the impossibility of exact identification of her, in a word, "the disaster" (43). With Lyotard, "the dissensus" in sublime experience is named "disaster" (*Inhuman* 136). The discord and alienation a subject encounters in the sublime experience can be called "disaster." Orlando is distressed at Sasha's real self inaccessible to him, her absolute Otherness. So figuratively, Orlando's emotional "disaster" (43) brought out by the irreconcilable alterity of Sasha, the shock of the sublime sentiment arising from her betrayal, is juxtaposed with a sight of the Flood he meets on the banks of the Thames, namely, a real natural "disaster." The most disturbing events of two kinds in his whole life—the Sublime of Eros and Nature harboring terror and destruction—take place concurrently. It turns out that a whole gay city on the ice, the site of beauty and Eros, which looked solid, has not lasted long. The state of Beauty and Eros, the suspended moments prove to be so transient, since all of a sudden, all transforms into "riot and confusion" (44), which is literally the sublime situation.

However, Woolf, saying "The river had gained its freedom" (*O* 44), emphasizes that the river is by nature free, because this movement, dynamics, fluctuation are originally inherent in the river. The merciless flood and the human impotence in such a natural disaster evidently symbolize Sasha's power of irreconcilable heterogeneity which seems almighty, and Orlando's mind which is humiliated and violated by the absolute heterogeneity of his beloved. Woolf indicates a state of suspension in the experience of Eros is so unrest, so unstable, and so volatile as Love is "double faced" (81): Love has "two faces," "two bodies," "each one is the exact opposite of the other" but "so strictly are they joined together that you cannot

separate them" (82).

Woolf's protagonists feel incapable of grasping the desired object, but their ethical attitude is grounded on this sublime feeling. Mr. Ramsay and Mrs. Ramsay, admitting that in their Eros, disagreement and tension undeniably always lurk, respect the alterity of the other. When Mr. Ramsay sees Mrs. Ramsay totally absorbed in communing with the light of the Lighthouse, he becomes uncomfortable with her aloofness, and remoteness: "It saddened him, and her remoteness pained him" (*TL* 71), but "He would let her be, and he passed her without a word, though it hurt him that she should look so distant, and he could not reach her" (72). At this moment, he suffers his misery towards his wife as an absolute Other. It seems very impressive that such a sublime experience enables him to acknowledge her irreconcilable alterity which he strives in vain to master. Mrs. Ramsay also, hiding her secret intercourse with the light, thinks "they could not share that," "they could not say that" (75). Both of them accept this discord as part of their relationship. They sustain their relationship by calmly enduring this "disaster" with respect and understanding. It is apparent that Woolf proposes a lover should let the beloved simply "exist," instead of determining him or her. Lily also thinks that Mrs. Ramsay, as her loved one, is indefinable, unapproachable presence: "She was like a bird for speed, an arrow for directness" (55). In this regard, Mrs. Ramsay's crumpled glove in the corner of a sofa stands for the irreconcilable alterity of Mrs. Ramsay, and "the glove's twisted finger" (56) stands for "the essential thing" (55) of her spirit which Lily could never approach forever. Lily deals with her own sublime sentiment in a very ethical manner by respectfully considering the hidden secrets of Mrs. Ramsay's spirit as "the chambers of the mind," and "the treasures in the tombs of kings, tablets bearing sacred inscriptions" (57).

In the relationship with Nature, too, these characters experience the aesthetics of the beautiful and the sublime consecutively and simultaneously. Orlando, while speeding up as a motorcar driver, and looking at the scenes passing rapidly, alternates between the experience of the beautiful and the sublime more quickly than ever. Yet such an exquisite experience in which two aesthetic feelings of the

beautiful and the sublime are intermixed, can be discovered in the Nature of Turkey by Orlando, too. "From the mountain-top," she beholds far off, "across the Sea of Marmara, the plains of Greece" and the Acropolis, then looks down "the red hyacinth, the purple iris" (*O* 100). Although she, fascinated by the majestic and limitless view of the Nature, feels "her soul expanded," she is in ecstasy and rapture at the "the beauty of nature" simultaneously (100). In this scene the pleasure of the beautiful and the sublime sentiment are mixed. Very interestingly, the Nature of Constantinople brings Orlando to the aesthetic state of the beautiful and the sublime coexisting, on the contrary, the splendid entertainment in the conferring of the Dukedom brings the natives to the aesthetic state of the beautiful and the sublime coexisting. For both the Turks and Orlando, the intermixed aesthetics of the beautiful and the sublime which they experience through radical otherness eventually leads to subversion.

III. The Impossibility of Representation: For What Literature Exists

Orlando's quest for Eros is actually the quest for poetry, and this quest for right words is indeed the quest for the truth of things. For Orlando, the question of "what love is" (*O* 70) leads to the question of 'what literature is.' Woolf here asks why literary representation cannot avoid being "untruthful" (70), why literary representation is supposed to fail, and then for what literature exists. Thus, for her the problem of the Sublime in Eros cannot be separated from the problem of the Sublime in literature. In both cases, a subject experiences the inability to approach the real nature of object, "the disaster." Sadly, every author is obliged to face the impossibility of representation, the failure of symbolic system, the indefinite deferral of adequate metaphor. Orlando's question of 'what literature is' reminds us of Lyotard's question of "what is an art . . . in the context of such a disaster?," in this situation "when presentation itself seems impossible?" (*Inhuman* 137-38).

Regarding this, Rancière comments Lyotard asserts that today the proper task of Art is “to bear witness to the unrepresentable,” and maintains an aesthetics of the sublime provides a suitable basis on which to establish the task (89). According to them, the mission of modern art is to attest the power of an irremediable alterity through an aesthetics of the sublime (Rancière 20, 42). Woolf also seems to think that the proper task of literature is “to bear witness to the unrepresentable,” instead of mere representation.

The discordance between the thing itself and the words is the reason for the first sublime sentiment Orlando as a poet experiences. In the existing system of representation, every literal description, every metaphor is utterly false. However, Woolf’s vision of new literature starts from such a deep dejection of Orlando. Woolf thinks that the truth for which the new literature exists is the very fact that the accurate representation is always deferred, the truth of the thing is unrepresentable. Orlando finds it very curious that “though human beings have such imperfect means of communication,” they would rather “endure ridicule and misunderstanding” than “keep any experience to themselves” (*O* 101-02). This suggests the right mission of authors is to attempt to share the experience with other speakable members in community in spite of the imperfect means of communication. Woolf seems to believe the real task of modern literature is to reveal the impossibility of representation, and moreover to disclose that the thing itself is indefinable, unapproachable and nevertheless to endeavor to convey experiences to readers more effectively by inventing new languages, new styles. Orlando thinks that writing poetry is “a secret transaction, a voice answering a voice,” and the most secret answer to things animate and inanimate “like the intercourse of lovers” (225). Likewise, for Woolf writing novels might be to love all the beings as they are, to respond to their real presence, and to let them simply exist, instead of dominating them. Accordingly, Lily comes to realize her attempt to approach the truth of the thing itself is precious and meaningful, even though it is “perpetual combat” (*TL* 173).

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Abstract

Eros and Beauty Already Involving the Sublime: *To the Lighthouse* and *Orlando*: a Biography

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This study suggests recent discussions of the kinship and continuity that exists between an aesthetic of the Beautiful and an aesthetic of the Sublime and how they contribute to a more proper description for exquisite, complicated experiences in Virginia Woolf's novels. For the protagonists in *To the Lighthouse* and *Orlando*, the experience of Love and the experience of Beauty are the same as a middle disposition in which sensuousness and reason are suspended at the same time. Beauty suspends both sensation and understanding simultaneously. Love also is the intermediate condition between sensation and reason. Thus, Eros, as well as Beauty, transport the protagonists into a middle disposition. Furthermore, for Woolf's protagonists there is no rupture between the experience of Beauty and the experience of the Sublime since in the experience of Beauty itself there are already disagreement, dissensus, tension, and contradiction. It even seems that the experience of Love and Beauty already involves the experience of the Sublime, in other words, the experience of the Sublime is always inherent within the experience of Eros and Beauty. Therefore, even when experiencing Eros and Beauty, these characters find out their inability to approach their beloved, their desired object, and feel the powerlessness and alienation from the irreconcilable heterogeneity of others. Yet, their ethical attitude toward others is grounded on this feeling. Eventually the question of 'what love is' leads to the question of 'what literature is.' The problem of the Sublime in Eros cannot be separated from the problem of the Sublime in words, which is the impossibility of representation, the indefinite deferral of adequate expression.

■ Key words : Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, *Orlando*, Beauty, the Sublime, Play, Aesthetics
(버지니아 울프, 『등대로』, 『올랜도』, 아름다움, 숭고, 놀이, 미학)

논문접수: 2018년 5월 15일

논문심사: 2018년 6월 9일

게재확정: 2018년 6월 14일