

Visions of an Incurable Rationalist: Leonard Woolf's *Stories of the East*

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Leonard Woolf opened *Imperialism and Civilization* (1928), his “most thorough and lengthy anti-imperialist statement” (Edmonds and Luedeking 37), with the epigraph “men moralize among ruins.” The ironic distance this quotation cast over his political treatise shadowed Woolf’s career. In fact, the ironic, sometimes sardonic, rationalist humanist pose Woolf adopted in his works transmuted and occasionally vitiated an otherwise anguished protest against the western, particularly the British, imperial system. Stressing this rational approach to social change, Woolf’s political theories, in the final analysis, were troubled in their attempts at transforming imperialism because a “scientific” rationalism has been one of the tools used to justify European imperialism. As well, rationalism is a weak weapon against imperialist and capitalist self-interest, and it leads to what Edward Said famously called a “sterile,” “contemplative,” “formal irony,” or “paralyzed gestures of aestheticized powerlessness” (*Orientalism* 222–23). Woolf himself gestured to this point when he spoke of John Maynard Keynes’s Memoir Club essays: “in one important point he is, I think, wrong. It is true that he and his generation believed in the efficacy of reason, but it is not true that any of us believed in the rationality of human nature” (“Beliefs” 993). Woolf understood the often ineffective nature of relying on reason, musing that “even in politics, where reason is so suspect and so unwelcome, I have an absurd, pig-headed feeling that one ought to use one’s reason” (*Downhill* 88).¹

However, while Woolf’s work and writings are reflective of the specific problematic imperialist discourse of his time, they also participated in and reflected a political modernist project which made it possible for certain aspects of his time to have erupted (however partially and abortively) into possibility and change. It is true that, through his position

as a colonial servant in what was then Ceylon,² Woolf participated in something Said defines as a corporate Imperial drive to “formulate the Orient, to give it shape, identity, definition with full recognition of its place in memory, its importance to imperial strategy, and its ‘natural’ role as an appendage to Europe” (*Orientalism* 86). Nonetheless, Woolf also spent most of his life lobbying the Labour government, in and out of power, to decolonize Britain’s territories and colonies. He was for twenty-seven years Secretary of the Labour Party’s Advisory Committees on International Affairs and Imperial Questions. Woolf’s anti-imperialist work was a precursor to much academic anti-imperialist work today and also an important source of current United Nations policies. Thus, Woolf’s work needs to be read in light of Said’s contention that a “huge and remarkable adjustment in perspective and understanding is required to take account of the contribution to modernism of decolonization, resistance culture, and the literature of opposition to imperialism” (*Culture* 293). The following extended reading of Woolf’s early “Ceylonese” work, *Stories of the East*, analyzes the troubled and partially resistant nature of the text through this late-Saidian lens.

Although written earlier, the three tales contained in *Stories of the East* (“A Tale Told by Midnight,” “Pearls and Swine,” and “Two Brahmins”) were published by Hogarth in 1921. The title later changed to *Stories from the East* when these stories were reprinted with Woolf’s official *Diaries in Ceylon* (originally written when he was employed as an Assistant Government Agent in Ceylon in the early part of the twentieth century). The stories had not been widely available until this document was published, nor have they been widely available since (though they are recently reprinted in two editions with introductions by Victoria Glendinning and Christopher Ondaatje).³ Mervyn de Silva, in his 1963 introduction to this reprint of the stories and diaries published in Sri Lanka, noted the stories’ “curious ambivalence” (liv) and suggested that “One’s final impression . . . is that of a mind deeply conscious of its confrontation with a strange, disquieting and alien element and striving hard to wrestle with and master it” (liv).

To begin, I would like to suggest that these stories are problematic in part because the narrative vehicle used to present the stupidity of (par-

ticularly British) human behaviour distances both the reader and the subject of her reading, problematizing any simple reading of these tales. The “exotic” East seems to remain exotic and distant for, and this point needs to be emphasized, the casual reader. In “A Tale Told by Moonlight” and “Pearls and Swine,” for instance, the stories are buffered by not one but two narrators. As with the problematic frame narrative in *Heart of Darkness*, and quite likely as something of an understated parody of that work, the frame-tale narrators do not clearly enough distinguish themselves from the system under discussion, and there seems to be an entirely “outside” narrative positionality available only to a thoughtful reader who is willing to be guided by the “intent” of the texts. These stories ironically assess parts of the tales they relate but provide no *explicit* condemnation of the entire colonial system of which they are an ambivalent part. Thus, as Anindyo Roy shows, in separate readings of these two stories, the tales function as constructs which enfold the frames, so that one’s reading must take all of these things (characters, internal narrators, frame narrators, narratives themselves) and the dissonances their interactions set up into account in order to arrive at a sense of the stories’ full condemnation of imperialism. Here, then, is where much of the anti-colonialism resides, and Shirley Chew focuses on this when she states that Woolf’s stories ironically foreground the way in which “The empire was able to command the loyal service of humane and selfless administrators and made room at the same time for greedy and unscrupulous rogues” (49). In the end, the stories satirize the pretense to complete knowledge on the part of those who should “know.” As Roy suggests in both his articles, the stories likely also satirize the reader’s ability to “know.”

Briefly, in “A Tale Told by Moonlight,” an unnamed narrator relates a tale told to him by a character named Jessop, an enigmatic figure who once catalysed a romance between a white male acquaintance (Reynolds) and a Sinhalese prostitute (Celestinahami). Reynolds despairs of Celestinahami’s ability to understand or return his soul-stirring love. He leaves Sri Lanka, and Celestinahami kills herself. The “curious ambivalence” (de Silva *liv*) of the story is especially noticeable in terms of a lack of clear markers indicating who is to be pitied or envied and whether it is

Reynolds or Celestinahami who has experienced the real passion of love. While almost all the critics read the narrative as siding with Jessop (in part because they see Jessop as the Woolf-figure), the tale itself is much more ambiguous. In fact, her actions show that Celestinahami does understand that it is her “failure” to fully perform Reynolds’s desires that condemns her love as “inadequate.” Celestinahami’s dramatic gesture of killing herself in the face of Reynolds’s dirty gift of a large amount of money before he makes good his escape from a relationship he can no longer tolerate (264) does seem, however, to make her the more likely tragic protagonist in a story which completely sends up the imperialists’ presumption that love and free-will are unweighted or absolute values within the imperial system. And in this reading, Reynolds and Jessop and the internal listeners who dismiss the story of Celestinahami’s death as so much “sentimentalism” must be read as deeply ironized, even emotionally vicious, characters. Jessop, who says he really does not know if he has done the right thing and who has forgotten to feel responsible (except when telling the story), seems the sort who has not learned his lesson and would perhaps do it again.

It is true that, in this tale, the narrator rather admires Jessop, the enigmatic character who originally relates the rather sordid interlude. Jessop presents Celestinahami, somewhat contradictorily, as befits the illogic of most colonialist troping strategies, as soft, ancient, child-like, and animalistic. His story plays up the absolute tragic misunderstanding inherent in civilization’s attempt to interact with a “non-civilized” race. Even given the tale’s possible ambivalence about the nature of the tragedy, the internal narrator’s (Jessop’s) unchallenged presentation of the two “lovers” leaves the civilized/uncivilized dichotomy in place. However, other influences should probably be taken into account. For instance, one of the white women with whom Woolf became involved in Ceylon, the eighteen-year-old “Gwen” of Woolf’s autobiography, was described by him in much the same terms as Jessop uses for Celestinahami. Ian Parsons and George Spater say that “Leonard admired Gwen’s body, but he could see right through her ‘two big cow eyes which could never understand anything which one said’ even though they looked ‘as if they understood everything that has ever been, is or will be’” (53). It was

“Gwen” of his desire for whom Woolf wrote “I am beginning to think it is always degraded being in love: after all 99/100ths of it is always the desire to copulate, otherwise it is only the shadow of itself, & a particular desire to copulate seems to me no less degraded than a general” (*Letters* 128). Though the stories were published over 10 years after Woolf’s time in Ceylon, certain passages of this story seem to touch on specific encounters in Woolf’s life, such as the “Gwen” episode and Woolf’s short period of living with a “burgher concubine” (*Letters* 107) in Jaffna in 1905. If one makes this type of reading, positing that Woolf is somehow represented in either Jessop or Reynolds (or some combination of the two), the story becomes scathingly ironic and, given the Bloomsbury and G. E. Moorean valorization of truth and self-awareness, self-damning. As Natania Rosenfeld suggests, in this context, this is Woolf’s “most powerful allegory of imperialism Celestinahami . . . embodies the entrapment of women and subalterns, the lies and false promises of imperialism; the story inscribes Leonard’s own departure from an arena in which he could not but exploit, despite all his efforts at sympathy and his fantasies of marriage and benevolent government” (50).⁴ Roy’s “Telling Brutal Things” also makes the Moorean ironic reading, focusing on the continual deferral of the location and definition of truth in the story. Roy reads the text’s emphasis on a sterile inability to communicate as a “persistent and often troubled questioning of the legitimacy of narrative authority derived from the power of metropolitanism and evoked in the name of the liberal state, [as well as the story’s] challenge to the deeply entrenched orientalist impulse within Bloomsbury to objectify the colony as the realm of the ‘other’” (1). Thus, Roy says, “Woolf articulates a troubling vision about the fundamental impossibility of holding on to a truly emancipatory politics while continuing to defend the standard liberal position on the empire” (“Telling” 2), a point to which I will return in a moment with an opening up of the question of the narrative purpose.

“Pearls and Swine,” the second tale, reviewed in the *Daily Mail* as “rank[ing] with the great stories of the world” (Parsons and Spater 94), is also narrated by an unnamed narrator who relates a story originally told by a colonial civil servant of some thirty years’ service. This “com-

missioner” is driven to tell his tale by his irritation with the foolish comments his fellow upper middle-class Englishmen utter while sitting about in a club. The commissioner’s story speaks of the time he supervised a pearl fishery “assisted” by a foolish young public school graduate and a rapacious, Kurtz-like figure.⁵ This Kurtz-figure, White, dies a horrible death in the throes of delirium tremens, and his death is compared to that of an Arab fisherman, which is serene and somehow noble. The generic nature of the racial appellation (White) condemns all Europeans, particularly the capitalist adventurers in foreign (“coloured”) countries.

“Pearls and Swine” is a more apparently outspoken piece than “A Tale Told by Moonlight.” The narrative stance (of both the internal and the external narrators) is quite clear. Superficially, like *Heart of Darkness*, the text is about the atrocities of the (atavistic) black heart of civilization as they become readily apparent in an “uncivilized” wilderness. “Pearls and Swine” presents a character, White, who is a vision of all that is wrong with the capitalist adventurer in the colonial space. His fever is caused by delirium tremens; the link to alcohol suggests a pre-existing moral weakness in White brought out by his sojourn in the tropics, where the governing system put in place by Britain has allowed him to behave in a manner completely without restraint. S.P. Rosenbaum does note that the “*louche* white man ‘gone under’ is a commonplace in Eastern fiction,” and he suggests that the characterization of White obviously “derives from Kurtz’s end in ‘Heart of Darkness’” (407). In “A Tale,” in a manner not seen in the description of Kurtz, Woolf takes special care to emphasize the way in which White’s atrocities are “civilized”:

There wasn’t a station where he hadn’t swindled and bamboozled his fellow white men. But it was what he had done when he got away ‘among the natives’ -- to men, and women too, away from ‘civilization’, in the jungle villages and high up in the mountains. God! the cold, civilized, corrupted cruelty of it. (qtd. in Chew 47)

Additionally, the story ironically inverts the sense of tropical infections, much discussed as a manifestation of the evil of jungles at this time;

instead, *delirium tremens* are here manifested in the place of Kurtz's tropical fever, as an external expression of White's internal evil.

If there is a problem with the text, which there manifestly is, it involves the way in which the picture or troped foil of the "timeless" community of the Arab pearl fishermen, in contrast to White and the English "home" community which allows him to exist, is used as a stick with which to beat Woolf's complacent white readers. This technique locates "Pearls and Swine" as functioning in the Oriental Tale tradition, one which means that the story speaks most extensively to the "home" audience, particularly where its didactic intentions are concerned. In both tales, actually, the reader is plunged into an unfamiliar reality for the purpose of showing up the inadequacies of the familiar as it interacts with the unfamiliar. In "Pearls and Swine," the "commissioner" who tells the internal tale is experienced and competent; he deals humanely with the troubles caused by both "uncivilized" and "civilized" behaviour. The colonial/imperial system is shown to be based on greed and oppression. The character himself is meant to be attractive; he is a character who displays a "moral discipline" (Meyerowitz 49) also seen in the frame-tale narrator and in the Arab fishermen. The latter group, however, the narrative only views from the "outside" and their "dignity" is clearly meant to emphasize, by contrast, White's useless life and miserable death.

As noted earlier in the case of "A Tale," it is the narrative as a whole which destabilizes the reader's tendency to simple solutions. While a lack of civilized moral discipline leaves the colonial system prey to evil scavengers, and the "commissioner" speaks bitterly of the greed rampant in the home (English) government, no clear-cut condemnation of the well-meaning civil servant develops; nonetheless, his ineffectiveness is made quite readily apparent. In fact, though the civil servant's fitness to rule may be born out both through his ability to maintain order at the pearl camp and through his clear moral superiority over the raw recruit, White, and the English parlour-chair rulers to whom he tells the tale, he cannot actually rule effectively because he cannot control the British at home. While Rosenbaum says "Pearls and Swine" is "finally not so much a critique of imperialism as of some of its assumptions" (407), the narrative's critique is also of imperialism as a system. The fact that the frame's listen-

ers are oblivious to the need for “civilized moral discipline” means that the “colonial servants” are ineffective in their own setting, unable to do anything about “home” greed (and this is, after all, where the money from those pearls goes). This is what Elleke Boehmer begins to get at when she says “in Woolf’s case . . . The proximate presence of the indigenous culture cast doubt on his own significance, and as a result cast doubt too on the system of authority . . . , which he as a colonial officer represented” (“Immeasurable” 100).⁶ Roy goes further, saying that “In ‘Pearls and Swine’ Woolf . . . delineat[es] the spectacle of colonial labor as a site of the disciplinary regime of the colonial State” (“Metropolitan” 111).

Finally the ramifications associated with the title of “Pearls and Swine” itself, which refers to Matthew, Chapter 7, need to be factored into this assessment of the story’s narrative effects. This is the chapter of the Bible which begins by admonishing, “Judge not, that ye be not judged.” Verses 2–5 expand on this commandment, while verse 6:1, the verse cited in the story’s title, reads, “Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you.” Just who represents the dogs or swine here (the clubmen, White, the colonized space, the colonized) and who ought not judge what other character, space, or practice is a question left implicit and unanswered. Still, the narrator in the story obviously casts pearls before swine; and, just as obviously, the colonial system literally casts pearls before White. The aspect of divine threat is also notable, given that Woolf frequently suggests in his political writings that imperialists are certain to reap the violence they sow in colonized lands. Matthew 7:16 also contains the verse “Ye shall know them by their fruits.” The allusion surely can be seen as another comment on the commissioner’s foolish, racist, and violent compatriots. Ironically, the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:15–30) is the text usually used to support imperialist attempts to justify “colonial conquests . . . [by] demonstrat[ing] that the colonist is a better steward of the earth than the native” (Coetzee 31). Woolf, who was so opposed to religion, surely chose the text with extensive didactic intentions, which earlier readers of this story, brought up on the Bible, would have been more familiar with than current ones.

To complete this reading of the *Stories of the East*, I will now turn to “The Two Brahmans,” which, as I indicated earlier, has been thoroughly neglected. As a representative example, in an otherwise quite extensively mapped out localization of the variant positionalities of Woolf’s voices on and in Ceylon, Douglas Kerr spares this tale little attention, saying, “‘The Two Brahmans’ is a rather uninteresting third-personal [sic] tale that satirizes the operations of the caste system in Ceylon” (274). Rosenbaum similarly dismisses it in a short paragraph, without even mentioning the tale’s title, as a “slight, non-realistic satire” (404). Kerr is right in saying that, like the other tales, “The Two Brahmans” is told by a third person narrator, but it is not uninteresting. Briefly, it relates the tale of two Brahmans who pollute their caste, one by fishing (for the joy of the activity) and one by carrying earth on his head (for miserly reasons, not wanting to pay someone else to do the work) while digging a well. The caste-based persecution they receive as a result of these actions passes down through the generations and a marriage between their descendants is prevented by parental greed which finds expression, on the part of both families, in accusations of caste pollution.

“The Two Brahmans” does initially seem the simplest of these three tales. However, as a simple moral tale focusing on the Ceylonese caste system and published in the same book as “A Tale Told by Moonlight” and “Pearls and Swine,” the story provides another, allegorical possibility. While the story does not explicitly deal with the British legal entrenchment of the caste system, it does show the way in which, under the conditions by which the British assumed sovereignty in Ceylon, the colonial rulers supported the chiefs who had surrendered that sovereignty in the first place:

The chiefs exercised an authority and exacted feudal services inconsistent with British ideas of the rights of subject peoples, for under their ancient laws and customs which the [1815 Kandyan] Conventions sought to preserve, these feudal overlords held jurisdiction over the people and decided lawsuits and other disputes according to [traditional] notions of caste and social status. (Zeylanicus 89)

Further, the “moral” about inflexibility and the stupidity of the way in which people cling to caste or class-based beliefs while they destroy lives is meant to be read in terms of the other two tales and to say something about the British socio-political system. Woolf elsewhere discussed the similarities between the British and Indian caste systems: “Only a person who has lived among the four great castes of India can fully appreciate how much stronger the caste system is in Richstead,”

and the caste system alone explains the existence of The Poor Dear Things. . . . Now obviously you cannot try to do good to your own castes or to castes higher than your own without insulting them; and the really low castes, which form the great lower classes, are so curiously constituted that they are inclined to resent any attempt of the wives and daughters of the lower and middle middle-class to enter their homes and do good to them. (*Wise Virgins* 116–17).

In this way, “the three short stories . . . reveal aspects of Eastern culture, but also emphasize the role of the British in the East and the effects of class and caste barriers, common to both British and Ceylonese society, on human behaviours” (Meyerowitz 44).

Thus, it is likely that, though a less intrinsically ironic tale from the point of view of Woolf’s own style than the other two tales in *Stories of the East*, “Two Brahmins” is a more complex piece than has been acknowledged, and I would like to tease out some of the complexity through an extended comparison to Manel Ratnatunga’s much later revision of Woolf’s original tale, included in her 1979 collection *Folk Tales of Sri Lanka*.⁷ Ratnatunga says she rewrote Woolf’s story as “Two Brahmins” because “it was such an incisive comprehension of our Jaffna Tamils by an alien that I wanted to preserve it as a folktale. . . . The Jaffna [Woolf] wrote about, the Brahmins and their way of life, all that is no more” (unpublished correspondence). Through comparing this folk-tale with the original, I want to suggest that Woolf’s story creates unintentional dissonances because it actually attempts to see the events of the tale from within the culture it depicts, but the frame narration

which speaks outside that context fights against any such readerly movement to the side of the characters themselves.

To begin with, Ratnatunga's version, because it is functioning within the more traditional form of the folk-tale, departicularizes the tale of "Two Brahmins," setting it within a generic "frame," while Woolf set it in a particular place. Ceylonese folk-tales, says Ratnatunga, begin with a "once upon a time" phrase: "Once in a certain country, it is said" (91) or "Once in a certain country there lived, it seems" (5). They do not begin, as Woolf's story does, by invoking a specific Tamil town in "the north of Ceylon" (280). In fact, Ondaatje indicates that Yalpanam "is actually the Tamil name for Jaffna," and that "Woolf gives the compounds and cadjan fences of Jaffna a literary existence" (90). Neither do such tales discuss the way in which the particular town in question has "slept and grown" in its unchanging way for centuries (280). Woolf's version of the story gives scenic descriptions of "dusty roads" and "palms and orange and lime trees" (280), descriptive matter helpful for the western reader. As well, the introductory paragraphs incorporate extensive ethnographic description of the social interactions and history of the Brahmin caste. This description has the effect of foregrounding the "difference" of the story's Brahmins, who "did no work, for there was no need to work" (280), and who live in an unfamiliar tropical setting, though clearly parallels could be drawn here with any number of "upper class" sections of any number of societies. This exoticizing buys, at least initially, into stereotyped views of "natives" as lazy and "primitive," and I am reminded of Said's discussion of the "'false consciousness' of colonialists unwilling to accept that the natives' refusal to work was one of the earliest forms of resistance to European incursion" (*Culture* 307). Woolf's added suggestion that "quite suddenly one of the gods, or rather devils, laid a spell upon" (281) the compounds of the main characters completes a narrative setting which both distances and paradoxically provides some sympathetic links between the "superstitious," "irrational" villagers and the "rational" western reader who holds the characters in her/his mind. Oddly, the main characters' understandable drive to actually perform physical labour works against this exoticizing.

Ratnatunga's revision halves Woolf's brief tale, largely through the removal of psychological narration. By this term I mean narrative dealing with the feelings and thoughts of characters, explication of motive and character. Woolf's Chellaya has a wife who is "too talkative and ha[s] a sharp tongue" and a neighbour "who [is] on bad terms" with him and "whom he hate[s]" (281). The everyday irritants of Chellaya's life are contrasted to the "unruffled" waters of the lagoon and "gently" moving fishers (281), and he is thus given some motivation for his action. He is a much more contemplative character than Ratnatunga's Chelliah. As with his novel *The Village in the Jungle*, Woolf seems to have been concerned with offering the point of view of the "native"; the attempt is obviously problematic, largely because of the narrative distance which Woolf's ironic relation to the caste system and human frailty in general (as noted in his sarcastic assessment of Richstead quoted above) did not quite let him get beyond.

Still, Ratnatunga's "Two Brahmins" foregrounds "flat" human frailties in a more clear-cut way than does Woolf's original because, as with most folk-tales, it does not open sympathetic, psychologically-based resonances between reader and character. The tensions between castes and pure human stubbornness and greed are pointed up in Woolf's version, while it is greed and stupidity only which seem Ratnatunga's focus, possibly because her intended readership did not need a "frame." While the 1978 version suggests only that "the village got to know. Chelliah was fishing" (93), Woolf includes a paragraph about the reaction of the villagers:

Very soon a strange rumour began to spread in the town that the Brahman Chellaya had polluted his caste by fishing. At first people would not believe it; such a thing could not happen, for it had never happened before. But at last so many people told the story, -- and one man had seen Chellaya carrying a net and another had seen him wading in the lagoon -- that everyone began to believe it, the lower castes with great pleasure and the Brahmins with great shame and anger. (283)

Curiously, it may be Woolf's very attempt to render "sympathetically" a character and a way of life foreign to the western reader which gives

this tale its friable texture. It is the intimate and particularized nature of the story which allows a western reader to assume a knowledge of a “real” place with “real” characteristics. In both versions, Chellaya and Chittampalam are contrasted, but in Woolf’s version, Chellaya is a much more significant part of the action. Chellaya thus becomes not an example of a character trait (caste-breaking), but something closer to a round character who experiences a very human longing for something outside tradition. By the time one reaches the repeated motif as it expresses itself in Chittampalam, one feels that he too might be a “real” character, though he is obviously a much less sympathetic one. And the village and its hypocritical actions in “cast[ing] them out forever from the Brahman caste” while “if people of other castes talked to them of the matter, they denied all knowledge of it” (284) take on a very significant role in the tale. A certain theme of hypocrisy begins to loom large. In contrast, the village of Ratnatunga’s version is entirely Brahmin, and the folktale nowhere mentions the reactions of anyone other than the village inhabitants themselves to the “pollution.” Chellaya’s individual “protest” against the strictures which guide his life is emphasized by Woolf’s paragraph describing Chellaya’s torment and exclusion after the village’s discovery of his “pollution.” The object of his “longing” (285) is described in positively lyric terms:

All day long in the temple and in his compound he sat and thought of his evenings when he waded in the blue waters of the lagoon, and of the little islands resting like plumes of smoke or feathers upon the sky, and of the line of pink flamingoes like thin posts at regular intervals set to mark a channel, and of the silver gleam of darting fish. (284)

The reality of his predicament is driven home through Woolf’s inclusion of the idiomatic phrase “and, as the saying is, his fat went off in desire” (285).

In the dénouement of the story, Woolf’s version contains several paragraphs describing the thought processes of the great-great-grandsons of Chellaya and Chittampalam (285), the “four generations” later of Ratnatunga’s version. Not only are the fathers’ thoughts on both sides

of the doomed marriage proposal relayed by the narrator, the customs attendant on the matter are once again elaborated for the reader:

Now however that his son himself suggested the marriage, [Chellaya] approved of the idea, and as the custom is, told his wife to go to Chittampalam's house and look at the girl. So his wife went formally to Chittampalam's house for the visit preparatory to an offer of marriage, and she came back and reported that the girl was beautiful and fit for even her son to marry. (285)

The process continues and the reader learns that

As is usual in such cases the father of the girl wants the dowry to be small and the father of the boy wants it to be large, and all sorts of reasons are given on both sides why it should be small or large, and the argument begins to grow warm. (286)

In Ratnatunga's version, the stupidity of the latest generation of Chelliahs and Chittampalams is discovered quickly and without narrative elaboration. Woolf's original tale, however, makes a point of repeating the falling out:

the quarrel was healed and they began to discuss again the question of dowry. But the old words rankled and they were still sore, as soon as the discussion began to grow warm it ended once more by their calling each other "Fisher" and "Pariah". The same thing has happened now several times. (286)

This move into custom and repetition takes away from the pointed foolishness of the event itself (through the shift of emphasis onto the repetition and reported speech and away from the earlier sympathetic representation of the individuals' thought processes) and makes it seem as though the narrator actually speaks with intimate knowledge of real events. The narrative becomes what it was not, originally, gossip, rather than psychological exploration. And thus the "caste" problems of and between Ceylonese (about which Woolf might have chosen to write in

any number of ways) are subsumed to a relation of instances of stupidity and small tragic moments overlaid with “authentic” moments of description of a certain Ceylonese setting and certain traditions and modes of speech.

As well, some of the “flatness” and “slightness” of this story may be because it gives the appearance of functioning for an English audience, to explain for them a Tamil story.⁸ However, its reflection of such stories as those in the three volumes of Henry Parker’s collection and translations of *Village Folk-Tales of Ceylon*, being published in three volumes at around the time Woolf was in Ceylon (Volume 1 came out in 1910, and the three volume set was completed in 1914)⁹ means that it does not actually speak clearly to British readers, who can understand neither the general context of these tales nor the full import of the social setting. For instance, for most western readers (including those of Woolf’s time), the word Brahmin designates a high-caste group which dominates its society. However, Ondaatje points out,

in Jaffna, the Brahmins were technically the highest caste, but they had no social control. Their role was limited to well-defined ritual duties in the temples. Instead, the *vellalar* (agriculturists and landowners) exerted real social control, but as to exactly how this operated, it would depend on the region. For instance, in Velvettiturai, . . . it is the *karaiyars* (fishing people) who are the dominant caste. (100–01)

Ondaatje does not make much of the “coincidence,” but Woolf’s story does seem to play with these very particular social tensions. And so these varying shifts (including the story’s shift from the folk-tale practice of providing a moral to a rather ironic, Bloomsbury-esque dwelling on socially constructed immobility, the sort of literary space in which the characters recognize the nature of the flaws within a rigid system but keep repeating the same behaviour nonetheless because no character is willing to lose money) are not acknowledged.

“The Two Brahmins” sits uneasily next to “Pearls and Swine” and “A Tale Told by Moonlight” because it appears to lack the sophisticated narrative structure of either, and yet, in fact, the narrative’s ambivalence

is marked and troubling. “The Two Brahmans,” because of its distanced (third-person, “factual”) narrative, functions to give information about a particular (non-English) society and a “lesson” about a particular political reality. While the narrative is sympathetic towards the character of Chellaya, and his transgression certainly seems small enough to the western reader, the structure of the tale leads inexorably to a revelation about the inflexibility and hypocrisy of the entire Brahmin section of Yalpanam, and by extension the entire Brahmin caste of Ceylon. The moment at which one can read an emancipatory critique only occurs when one factors in the oddly sympathetic attempt to represent the characters in a psychologically realistic manner and the fact that the story certainly also provides a critique of the social underpinnings of the British caste/class and imperialist system. Quite possibly the true intended reader of this tale and of the other *Stories* was Woolf himself, implicated in the perpetuation of the Ceylonese caste system’s social inequities, excruciatingly aware of the fact that he was a carrier of the system he knew to be iniquitous, and feeling that he was very much intending to change that system.

Throughout his life, Woolf seems to have been negotiating between the interpretation systems vouchsafed him by a pro-imperialist education/acclulturation and the different realities he could see working themselves out in the situations in which he found himself. In this he was not different from many of his contemporaries; it does seem, though, that Woolf was, as much as possible, semi-knowingly operating within the space Mary Louise Pratt calls the “contact zone” between civilizations, the space in which disparate cultures and persons from those cultures interact with and influence each other. It was living in this contact zone in Ceylon which taught Woolf that, while he was a very able and effective benevolent dictator capable of working within the British imperial system, the “days of paternalism . . . were over; I had been born in an age of imperialism and I disapproved of imperialism and felt sure its days were already numbered” (*Growing* 247–48). Woolf’s set of stories is part of his passionate critique of imperialism, but it is unable to leave its sense of irony behind, instead focusing on representing the impossible conflicts of imperialism to an audience it generally seems to deem

incapable of self-knowledge and honest assessment of its participation in a fully iniquitous, indeed murderous situation. It is this very ambiguity which makes these stories representative of a politically engaged modernism.

Notes

- 1 And, indeed, Woolf assessed the impact of his “rational” protest on the world (rather too harshly) as largely non-existent:
Looking back at the age of eighty-eight over the fifty-seven years of my political work in England, knowing what I aimed at and the results, meditating on the history of Britain and the world since 1914, I see clearly that I have achieved practically nothing. The world today and the history of the human ant-hill during the last fifty-seven years would be exactly the same as it is if I had played pingpong instead of sitting on committees and writing books and memoranda. (*Journey* 158)
- 2 Ceylon will be used throughout, as it was the term in circulation for Sri Lanka at the time.
- 3 This paper uses *Diaries* for quotations from the *Stories* throughout. Glendinning’s edition was printed in 2006 and Ondaatje’s in 2007. Both are available at the time of writing through Amazon.ca. Since Woolf’s fiction has a history of being out of print, and the current Canadian copyright holder apparently requires a guarantee of purchase without returns for text orders of Woolf’s “Ceylonese” novel *The Village in the Jungle*, this point is significant. Elleke Boehmer also reprinted “Pearls and Swine” in her 1998 collection *Empire Writing*.
- 4 This tale was actually written before *The Voyage Out* was published (1912 -- cf Glendinning *Biography* 133) and so likely does not reflect Rachel Vinrace (or even Virginia Woolf) quite as much as Rosenfeld’s reading suggests. “Pearls,” of course, was largely a rewriting of letters to Lytton and the official diary material, and so very much predates the romance with Virginia (Glendinning 82).
- 5 Again, the story is based in Woolf’s experience of the pearl fishery at Marichchukkaddi (Woolf’s spelling) (see *Letters* 112–16) but should not be read only in terms of autobiographical correlations. The pertinent section of the autobiography is reprinted in Glendinning’s edition of the *Stories*.
- 6 Not to mention Kerr’s discussion of how the story actually functions to give Woolf-as-author full control over other participants’ internal knowledge denied him in his actual experience.
- 7 Herz briefly mentions the possibility of this drawing of materials from Woolf, but she does not investigate it, and no one else seems to have looked into the matter. Glendinning’s introduction to *A Tale* suggests this is a “wry retelling of a Ceylonese folk-tale” (viii), but the influence is almost certainly less direct; Woolf was drawing from the folk-tales but not replicating them.

- 8 Woolf's interest in Ceylonese folk-tales and speech rhythms is evident in *Village*; cf Sri Lankan discussions of the novel (particularly Yasmine Gooneratne's) as deliberately choosing to incorporate Sinhalese village speech. Others have also discussed the matter: "Initially puzzling is the number of Sinhalese words it contains which are explained only by their context . . . , as well as the wealth of indigenous folk tales, charms, spells, superstitions and sayings" (Tansley 179). In the Anglo-North American response, however, there may be something of a sense that folk-tales are not serious literature, or are a genre that only functions in terms of anthropological interest.
- 9 Indeed, that Woolf would not have known of Sir Henry Parker and his work is almost an impossibility, since, in the mid-1800s, Parker was *the* British engineer responsible for the rehabilitation of the ancient and amazing tank-irrigation system in Ceylon. He was also the author of *Ancient Ceylon*. There is, of course, a quite long history of collection and translation of the oral tales of India and Ceylon that accompanied the ethnographic surveys of Empire.

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