

**An Immigrant's View: Virginia
Woolf, Bloomsbury, Berwick
Church
– *Being* and Writing in Sussex**

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This essay was inspired by a visit to the church by Dr Koulouris and a group of Yr 3 Students in December 2018.

In 'North Haven' (1977), an elegiac tribute in verse to her friend, the poet Robert Lowell (1917-1977), the American poet Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979) pits the persistent mutability of nature against the finality of death; in a section of the poem worth quoting in full, she writes:

The goldfinches are back, or others like them,
and the white-throated sparrow's five-note song,
pleading and pleading, brings tears to the eyes.
Nature repeats herself, or almost does:
repeat, repeat, repeat; revise, revise, revise

...

You left North Haven, anchored in its rock,
afloat in mystic blue...And now—you've left
for good. You can't derange, or rearrange,
your poems again. (But the sparrows can their song.)
The words won't change again. Sad friend, you cannot
change.

Whilst the goldfinches will return *ad infinitum* and the sparrows will always revise their song, her 'sad friend' can never more rearrange his words – and, by virtue of his inability to rearrange his words, he himself *cannot* change. A diverse array of writers, artists and scholars have put great stock in the argument that texts (broadly conceptualised to include all works of art that stand before us prey to our interpretation) are the ultimate signifiers of mourning because as soon as they are produced they are poised to outlive us. I too share this view, and, in my work, I

have always felt the need to identify the act of producing and indeed consuming texts with loss and mourning. Here, however, I would also like to explore mourning, reading and writing with the concept of place (*locus* or *topos*) where ‘place’ refers both to a geographical locality *and* a broadly understood *site* designated, in turn, both by its physical coordinates *and* its *historicity*, *ideology* and, of course, its *politics*. In the aforementioned poem, Bishop laments the death of her poet friend (and the ensuing inability to rearrange one’s texts) by invoking the natural beauty of North Haven: its schooners once more tied afloat, its spruces once again heavy with cones, and the little islands not having ‘shifted since last summer even if they like to pretend they have, ... in a dreamy sort of way, a little north, a little south, or sidewise’. It is important to hold from this that many writers and artists seem to associate the act of writing – or generally producing texts – with *being*. From the Biblical ‘In the beginning was the Word’ (John 1:1) to Virginia Woolf’s ‘non-being’ and Nadine Gordimer’s memorable 1995 Nobel Prize lecture ‘Writing and Being’, many artists have written about the ways in which writing – or indeed any artistic creation – *essentially* constitutes an act of ontological dimensions.

There is, indeed, something extraordinarily moving (if at times devastatingly poignant) when one feels compelled to ask the question ‘what does it mean *to be*?’ first, to my mind, because of the often-trying circumstances that lead one to this question in the first place, and, second, because in asking this question we are pondering our own mortality. Especially when contemplating our being as part of a certain place, we are, more often than not, led to realise that the established geographical features of said place normally always *both* predate *and* outlive us; and it seems that for literature, philosophy and the creative arts, the concept of textual production (broadly understood) is *always already* imbued with, and/or tied to, a locality – either explicitly or implicitly. Despite popular understanding of literature and the creative arts as transcending time and place, works of art are products of material labour subject to the economic, socio-cultural, historical and, of course, local conventions of their production. Plato’s *Dialogues* are replete with references to Athenian suburbs: *Kerameikos*, *Phaleron*, *Eleusis*; in fact, the concept of ‘the academy’, *academia* or *academe* – now an abstract concept, used worldwide, with its own conventions and idiosyncratic traits – stems from the *physical* plot of ancient Athenian land, in which Plato first set his school and which used to belong to his friend, *Academos*. Neither lyrical nor pastoral poetry would exist without allusions to nature or to specific places of outstanding natural beauty, whilst the birth and peak of classical Greek tragedy is forever associated

with ancient Athens and, specifically, with the Theatre of Dionysus at the foothills of the Athenian Acropolis. Satire, according to the ancient poet Quintilian was *totally* Roman (*Satura quidem tota nostra est*), whilst *commedia dell' arte* is exclusively associated with Italy of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; and although Shakespeare's plays are famous for their Renaissance cosmopolitanism – Rome, Athens, Verona, Venice, Cyprus and so on – they are deeply and quintessentially English-Elizabethan. Not to be outdone, the novel, too (especially the modernist novel), is aesthetically and politically invested in its ability to localise its thematic preoccupations within the large urban centres of the early twentieth century – London, Dublin, New York, Berlin, Prague – whilst whole philosophical movements in the twentieth century are also associated with particular cities or places: Zurich, Frankfurt and, of course, Paris. In short, whether by happenstance or intentional nationalistic design, there is to my mind no artistic or philosophical movement that is not somehow associated with a certain place. Literature, philosophy, but especially the creative arts, have always been said to evoke, or indeed *belong* to, the places in which they were produced: the Italian School; the Flemish School; the English School; and let us not forget the intense, continuing wrangle between the British Museum and the Greek state over the ownership of the Parthenon Marbles. Indeed, whilst the British side argues that the British Museum as a *site* provides the Marbles

with a *locus* of worldwide exposure, the Greeks argue that it is precisely because the ancient *site* is still standing that the marbles ought to return to the *place* of their production, their natural *home*. Peoples and cultures need their art to provide the biggest building block to what the British historian Benedict Anderson called ‘imaginary communities’ or what the Indian-British scholar Homi Bhabha called a ‘national narrative’. One such (albeit local) narrative is the presence of the Bloomsbury in Sussex. Indeed, I cannot conceptualise either Sussex itself or my own living in Sussex without paying due attention to the signficatory importance of Monks’ House, Charleston House or indeed Berwick Church and its wonderful murals painted by Duncan Grant, Vanessa Bell and Quentin Bell. Sadly, however, beyond their ability to lift the human spirit beyond borders and (more often than not) petty national interests, philosophy, literature and the creative arts, especially in the grand European Empires of yesteryear, have been central to inspiring the most shameless acts of appropriation, legitimising despicable acts of cruelty, and, to be sure, condoning the basest behaviour humans have ever expressed. Indeed, according to the German philosopher Walter Benjamin in his essay ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ (1940), ‘there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism’.

When I was applying for a place on an MA course the University of Sussex in the summer of 1996, I only had a vague idea of the English county called Sussex; I had never heard of Brighton; and I had never heard of either Charleston House, Monks' House or indeed Berwick. As an undergraduate, I had only read one of Virginia Woolf's novels, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), and her long essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929). I was only vaguely aware of the so-called Bloomsbury Group. During my studies, however, I came to read more of her work and learn more about her life. It was then when I made two important discoveries; first, that Woolf used to live in Rodmell, a small village just a few miles from Lewes, in a house with a beautiful garden called Monks' House; and that the University of Sussex kept her papers in a special collection called *Monks' House Papers*. I also learnt that Woolf used to often cross the seven or eight-mile stretch of Sussex countryside to Charleston House – where her sister Vanessa Bell used live until her death in 1961, and where the members of the Bloomsbury Group used to congregate at regular intervals. Importantly, during my MA study, I also discovered Woolf's love for Greece and Greek letters and, even more importantly, I discovered a manuscript in *Monks' House Papers*, a notebook written between 1907 and 1909, which she wrote when she, too, was a student. Said notebook, to which I

have since been referring as ‘The Greek Notebook’ in my work, contains Woolf’s translations and/or analyses of a number of canonical ancient Greek texts such as Homer’s *Odyssey*, Plato’s *Symposium* and Sophocles’ *Ajax*. It was a moment of sheer elation when I discovered that Woolf appreciated the literature of my so-called ancestors as much I appreciated and enjoyed her own work. In addition to the multiple Greek themes and references with which her novels and essays are replete, this manuscript helped me crystallise the topic of my doctoral research, which subsequently gave birth to my thesis, a monograph, and a number of articles on the intriguing relationship between Woolf and what she used to call her ‘dead Greeks’. My latest publication was indeed an annotated transcription of this notebook in the 2019 issue of *Woolf Studies Annual*.

As a Greek émigré to the UK, my work on Virginia Woolf helped me shape both an idea of self – what I will later describe as a type of *being* – and an idea of mourning; more specifically, it helped me understand the manifold ways in which mourning is articulated through and by means of texts. Mobilising the work of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, I have generally argued in my work that Woolf’s engagement with Greece constituted both an emancipatory avenue of self-realisation *and* an axis of loss and mourning; whilst it enabled her to partake of the literary beauty of the Greek classics, it also

emboldened her to demarcate her position vis-à-vis the masculine socio-cultural phenomenon of post-1850s British Hellenism as an ambivalent outsider owing, mainly, to her gender, sexuality and, to a lesser extent, her politics.

In 2016 I was invited by the University of Sussex Centre for Modernist Studies to take part in a celebratory conference to mark the centenary anniversary of Clive and Vanessa Bell moving into Charleston House. The conference comprised a series of papers given on Sussex campus, at Charleston House and at St Michael and All Angels Church, East Sussex (Berwick Church). Scholars from all over the world congregated in Sussex and gave very interesting papers that addressed working, living and loving in Sussex as part of the Bloomsbury Group. My own paper, whose tenor was unintentionally very close to the feelings that took hold of me when I first laid eyes on the Berwick murals, sought to argue two things: first, that the *paratextual* elements of a certain work of art are, to a considerable extent, as important to the reception of this work as indeed the work itself; and, second, that in any kind of interpretive work there is an ineluctable as well as ineffable (and more often than not unconscious) engagement with the act of mourning – more precisely, that the act of mourning is an indivisible part of all engagement with literature and the arts.

To pursue my first argument, I mobilised the work of the French literary theorist Gerard Genette, who, in his seminal work *Paratexts* (1987), argued that a literary work (or indeed a work of art) never exists on its own but rather in what he calls a 'long sequence of ... statements that are more or less endowed with significance'. For instance, a work by, say, Virginia Woolf, Vanessa Bell or Duncan Grant, has existed as part of certain tradition (a socio-aesthetic and historical *topos*) and has operated within a variety of *transtextual* dimensions: it has, in other words, operated within the tradition of British modernism and alongside a number of other texts by other authors or artists who exhibited a similar preoccupation with the role of art in an era of unbridled socio-political, cultural and technological development. Indeed, the continuing importance of a work of art by Woolf, Bell or Grant is the product of a complex set of factors, not least of the enduring cultural importance of the Bloomsbury Group and the traction it still has in certain social, cultural and political circles, both domestically and internationally. Works of art, therefore, operate within a complex nexus of national, cultural, artistic and socio-economic inter-relationships, which function to situate said works of art within *sites* of significant meaning.

The second part of my paper addressed loss and mourning. The scholarly argument was based mainly on Derrida's work (*Memoires for Paul de Man*, 1989; *The Work of Mourning*, 2001) and sought to suggest, as I note above, that any engagement with literary texts or works of art is essentially an exercise in mourning. However, whilst writing the paper I understood that, on a lesser note, I, too, was participating in a personal act of mourning because 2016 marked my own twentieth anniversary in the UK. It dawned on me that despite the warmth of the new familial environment that I have been fortunate to create and enjoy in the UK, I had spent what for younger people is a whole lifetime outside the *locus* of my birth, the *site* of my formative education, away from my old friends and, of course, my populous Greek family; in other words, if I were a text, one could argue that I had moved beyond or away from the formative paratextual elements of my production and reception, to a new environment and/or a new site of interpretation – indeed, to a new socio-cultural situation and another state of *being* (or, as Heidegger would put it, *being-in-the-world*).

These feelings coincided with my first visit to Berwick Church as part of the aforementioned conference. Since then, Berwick Church has been a very frequent destination whenever I drive around the South East; in truth, it has come to mean a lot more to me than, say, Monk's House or Charleston House. Berwick is special to me for two, I think, reasons: first, because despite the bitter memories of my own religious upbringing – it should be noted here that the role of the Orthodox Church in post-WWII Greece is well established as not only backward but at times positively evil – I did feel moved both by Berwick Church (its architecture, its murals, and the beguiling surrounding countryside) and by the warm hospitality of Rev. Peter Blee, the Rector of St Michael. Secondly, I am attracted to this unique place because my position in the School of Media of the University of Brighton has enabled me to involve myself and my students in the long, arduous, but, I am sure, ultimately rewarding effort to raise funds to restore the Church and conserve its murals. In my first letter of support of the Church's bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund in the autumn of 2017, I laid out ways in which our School could be involved with the whole bid; and in October 2018, I wrote another letter of support, in which I accounted for the role of the Church in my students' intellectual development, and visited the Church with a group of final-year students and two colleagues.

Beyond the role that the Church could play in the professional and intellectual development of my students, in both letters of support I laid out another reason for my continuing support of, and I would say love for, Berwick Church. It is no news that the UK is going through an upheaval unlike any other in its post-WWII history. The socio-economic asymmetries that led to Brexit coupled both with the rise of the far-right across Europe and the irrevocable environmental damage that advanced capitalism has unleashed on the very nature that surrounds us all, will create even more unwelcome living conditions for the overwhelming majority of people. The rise of ethnonationalism, however, is what I personally fear the most. Despite the fact that I am legally a British citizen, I cannot overlook the fact that I was not born in this green and pleasant land; the fact that despite my passable British accent and my general Apollonian, stiff-upper-lip demeanour there are times when my Dionysiac *Greekness* explodes in my speech and temperament; or that despite my knowledge of the wonderful texts of English literature that I have read, taught and loved, the texts I first fell in love with were in a different language and of another literary tradition. There are, in other words, times when I, too – in all, a privileged white man – have felt dislocated; alienated; cut off; in short, there have been times when I, too, have felt painfully alien.

The important role of Berwick Church in my personal journey might be better illustrated by an example from a seminal work of modernist literature. In perhaps the most famous passage from Marcel Proust's first instalment to the multi-volume novel *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-1927) – *Du côté de chez Swann* or *Swann's Way* (1913) – the central character narrates the moment he took a sip of tea in which he had dipped a little madeleine cake, an act which brought back in a flash a raft of childhood memories and feelings – this is the famous 'madeleine excerpt'. By means of this act and the jolt he experienced, a welcome sensory stimulus overwhelmed the narrator in an electrifying way, a way which enabled him to not only associate the moment of drinking tea with something that was akin to self-realisation – who he *was* – but, more importantly, with the concept of *being* itself:

... [T]his new sensation having had on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me, *it was myself*. I had ceased now to feel mediocre, accidental, mortal. Whence could it have come to me, this all-powerful joy? I was conscious that it was connected with the taste of tea and cake, but that it infinitely transcended those savours, could not, indeed, be of the same nature as theirs. Whence did it come? What did it signify? How could I seize upon and define it? (emphasis added).

I had a similar experience on one of my visits to Berwick Church – in fact, it was on the first visit with our students in October

2018. It was a crisp Sussex morning; the sun was at pains to warm the brow of the Downs escarpments and illuminate the contours of the ancient hedges that engulf the Church on its southern side; it felt quite cold and the soil under our feet rather wet. The group of students with whom I visited the Church on that day comprised a diverse array of backgrounds and aspirations. All, however, were initially surprised by (if not suspicious of) our visit to a church – I suppose because they never identified me as a devout person or as someone who would be in any way associated with a church or its vicar. What was remarkable, however, was the way in which the initial feelings of suspicion and disbelief had evaporated by the end of the day; how enthralled, delighted, and how calm my students were as we boarded the van back to campus; clearly, the Church had had an effect on them. Was it the location? The graveyard? The murals that blend Bloomsbury's early Renaissance influences with a decidedly twentieth-century aesthetic? The murals that meld the everyday with the sublime, the ordinary with the exalted, and the violence of war with the welcome tranquillity of a peace to come? I do not know; what I do know is that clearly something had happened to my students.

Indeed, something had also happened to me. Earlier on the same day, as my students were busying themselves with filming, recording and otherwise collecting material for their work, I

found myself with little to do; as I was walking on the left-hand side of the altar (the southern side of the Church), I chanced upon an open Bible resting on a reading lectern next to the pulpit. Still standing, I leafed through its pages and read the titles of familiar Books – *Genesis*, *Judges*, *Psalms* and so on – until I found the *Song of Solomon* (*Song of Songs* or *Asma Asmaton* in Greek). I sat down. A warm feeling took hold of me as I read the following lines:

Thy lips are like a thread of scarlet, and thy speech is comely: thy temples are like a piece of a pomegranate within thy locks.

Thy neck is like the tower of David builded for an armoury, whereon there hang a thousand bucklers, all shields of mighty men.

Thy two breasts are like two young roes that are twins, which feed among the lilies.

Until the day break, and the shadows flee away, I will get me to the mountain of myrrh, and to the hill of frankincense

Thou art all fair, my love; there is no spot in thee (*Song of Solomon*, 4: 3-5; italics maintained).

I felt my adult heathen heart leap a bit as I remembered that the same passage was once read by my twelve-year-old self after Sunday School over thirty years ago in Greece. There I was, an adult with greying beard and greying temples, reading the very same passage in Berwick Church, Sussex, whilst being observed by Duncan Grant's 'Christ *Pantocrator*' (Christ in Glory) hung above the altar. Memories came rushing back. I remembered the

attraction I felt as a child to those words; I remembered the admonishment of our parish catechist when a week later I told him that I had read from the *Song of Solomon* – I was, he said, way too young to comprehend its majesty and divine significance (and, to be fair, he was probably right); I remembered the joy I felt when many years after my first encounter with this text as a child, I saw the same passage in one of the set readings of the first module I ever taught as a fellow at the University of Sussex (Plato's Legacy: Beauty and Truth, 2004); I remembered how inspired my first ever students were after we discussed the significance of these words from a literary-historical point of view; and I realised on that crisp October morning in Berwick Church, that the text I found myself re-reading as my current students were milling about, was always there before me and would always be there after me; I realised that my lot in life was to read and re-read such texts, continuously re-inscribing them into the ontological blueprint of my life and within the vicissitudes of whatever it throws at me. The conceptual parameters of transcendence are hard to render into words, mainly because the nature of such an experience is indeed personal and abstract. When confronted with the sublime materiality of words like 'lips like a thread of scarlet' and 'temples like pomegranate', however, one cannot help, despite one's general irreligiosity, but be moved by this rather simple simile found in such a foundational ecclesiastical text. Further, what was equally important to me was

the actual locality, the *locus*, within which this experience was taking place – a *locus* that I felt welcoming me, embracing me, engulfing me within a protective and reassuring cordon; it was not just the text; there I was with *my* colleagues, *my* students, in *my* Sussex; much like Proust's tea and madeleine incident, it was not just an experience of home, it *was* home; and it was not merely an experience of self; it was *being* itself.

With the passage of time my experience of that morning could be deconstructed, analysed and/or explained – even denied or disavowed; it may disappear into the deep recesses of my unconscious or it may be forgotten altogether; what is undeniable, however, is the potency of the experience itself and that it took place where it did. It provided me with a sense of *being* – that is, with the means to localise my ontological trace within a certain site and a moment in time; it provided me with the means to re-energise my ability to read and re-read texts that I have found appealing over the years; it was, by all accounts, not only a revelatory experience but also an exhilarating one. I entertain no misconceptions about who could be afforded a similar experience; this was a personal experience because it awakened in me a remembrance of time that had gone unaccounted for, what Virginia Woolf would call 'a time of non-being'. To be sure, despite the passage of time, my formative experiences as a child *were* marked by the presence of God and

what was constantly referred to as ‘His Word’; therefore, my feeling as I did on that October morning was perhaps a natural response. I cannot therefore say the Church would have exactly the same effect on other, especially younger, people. That said, and judging from my students’ individual responses to what they thought to be a wonderfully instructive and inspiring visit, I believe that Berwick Church can awaken similar remembrances and/or emotions in different people from different walks of life. Berwick Church benefits from the combinatory potential of a wealth of factors – not least the warm hospitality of Rev Blee. Its idyllic location in the middle of the South Downs commanding spectacular views on its southern side; its ancient roots which provide the visitor (and, of course, the parish) with a sense of continuity and links to a collective past; its unique ability to link the pagan with the Christian in a harmonious co-existence of intense religiosity even in those who are avowedly devoid of metaphysical preoccupations or concerns; and, of course, the wonderful murals by Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant, and Quentin Bell. Whilst in my case it was Woolf and the Bloomsbury murals that brought me to Berwick Church, I now feel that this attraction has gone beyond these admittedly majestic national treasures.

The first time I ever visited the Church as part of the 2016 University of Sussex conference, I remembered a passage from one of Woolf's letters to her friend, the composer Ethel Smyth (1858-1944); in it, whilst on her second visit to Athens in 1932, Woolf – the gay, avant-garde and avowedly secular writer who was preoccupied with the material condition of women in the first few decades of the twentieth century – was communicating her feelings upon witnessing the Procession of the *Epitaphios* (Jesus' symbolic bier), which still to this day takes place on the evening of the Greek Orthodox Good Friday. 'I can assure you,' she writes, 'all that is in me of stunted and deformed religion flowered under this hot sensuality, so thick, so yellow, so waxen; and I thought of the lights of the herring fleet at sea' (*Letters* V, 59). Although I do not possess Woolf's imagination or indeed her way with English words, I must confess I felt a similar emotion on that warm July afternoon in 2016; what Woolf felt in the place that *I* grew up in 1932, I *also* felt in Sussex, the place in which *she* lived and worked, over eighty years later. All that was in me adulterated by injustice, personal failure or disappointment, was, even if it were for one moment, healed.

Whilst I belong to a secular school of thought whose task is to question metaphysics – because western metaphysics predominantly resorts to providing final and absolutist responses to important philosophical questions whilst, at the same time, shunning the material conditions of ordinary working people – I cannot deny the appeal that this sublime place of worship has on me. It may be its location, its murals, the textual continuity I felt whilst visiting with my students, or indeed my personal experiences whilst in its warm and welcoming embrace; I daresay though that anyone, from any walk of life, could (and to my mind would) feel equally welcome and inspired. In my two letters of support of the Church's fund-raising bid, I underscored its role which, to me, is of local, national and international importance. There is no doubt in my mind that we are rushing headlong into what will be a protracted state of affairs punctuated by sectarianism, intolerance and socio-economic oppression; the living and working condition of those who need our care and attention the most is, both domestically and internationally, dire and will only get worse. The political situation, both in Britain and abroad, will only deteriorate for the foreseeable future. I hate to strike such a pessimistic tone, but whoever feels differently has, I regret to say, not been paying attention. That said, in such difficult times it is indeed to what can inspire perseverance, equanimity and transcendence that we turn; and places like

Berwick Church can help us endure and, importantly, resist what are, at the very least, extraordinarily trying times.



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