on Sea

Art and Culture at the British Seaside

Edited by Lara Feigel and Alexandra Harris

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‘The Purest Ecstasy’

Virginia Woolf and the Sea

WHEN JOHN BOURKE ARGUED in his slender volume of 1954 that the sea has traditionally stood for three things in English poetry, freedom (both of movement and spiritual liberty), human life and eternity, he hardly whipped up a storm of dissent.[1] However, though the tweedy cut of his criticism is now as out of date as the clamour for dreadnoughts or Donald McGill’s fruity postcards, Bourke’s less than sensational reflections on the sea as a poetic symbol remain no less applicable to Virginia Woolf’s prose. No modernist writer, with the possible exceptions of Joseph Conrad and James Joyce, was so deeply inspired by the sea or spent so much of his or her imaginative life beside or beneath its figurative depths, and in the work of no other author from the modernist epoch is the sea invested with such rich symbolic value as it is in Woolf’s oeuvre.[2] And whilst the sea does function in her writings in the same broad ways that Bourke saw it functioning in English poetry at large, Woolf evokes it more frequently and profoundly as an emblem of the silenced and marginalised position of women. Similarly, although the submarine is occasionally represented as a place of security and peace in Woolf’s work, it is more commonly associated with isolation and annihilation. Above all, it seems likely that Woolf connected the beach, ambiguously positioned between land and sea, for ever shifting, always becoming more or less beachy, now terra firma, now washed away, with the first thirteen years of her life, a period of intense bliss before the sudden death of her mother in 1895 left her bereft not only of maternal affection and familial completeness, but also, no less suddenly, of St Ives, Cornwall, where

Woolf and her family had previously spent every summer vacation. Certainly, the beach symbolises a deep emotional fault-line in Woolf's fiction, a charged locus of joy, yearning, loss and grief. And if the littoral enchantment of her

Figure 17 Bloomsbury on the beach: Virginia Woolf and Clive Bell at Studland Bay, 1910

childhood summers in Cornwall most obviously inspired parts of *Jacob's Room* (1922) and the whole of *To the Lighthouse* (1927), it oozes up as inexorably as sea water through the sand from the beginning of her canon to the end: indeed, it is the source from which flowed the whole wistful, lyrical,

backward-looking, sea-salted, ghost-haunted cast of her genius. 'Why am I so incredibly & incurably romantic about Cornwall?', Woolf asked herself on the eve of a later visit to the county. 'One's past, I suppose: I see children running in the garden. A spring day. Life so new. People so enchanting. The sound of the sea at night.'[3]

In her late 'Sketch of the Past', Woolf reveals that her 'first memory, and in fact [...] the most important of all my memories' was of lying in bed and listening to the sea at Talland House, the summer home at St Ives which her father leased annually from 1882 to 1894. 'If life has a base that it stands upon', she writes,

> if it is a bowl that one fills and fills and fills – then my bowl without a doubt stands upon this memory. It is of lying half asleep, half awake, in bed in the nursery at St. Ives. It is of hearing the waves breaking, one, two, one, two, and sending a splash of water over the beach; and then breaking, one, two, one, two, behind a yellow blind. It is of hearing the blind draw its little acorn across the floor as the wind blew the blind out. It is of lying and hearing this splash and seeing this light, and feeling, it is almost impossible that I should be here; of feeling the purest ecstasy I can conceive.[4]

In August 1905, Woolf and her siblings, now orphaned (her father, Leslie Stephen, had died the previous year) and living together in London, returned to Cornwall. She wrote in her journal:

> It was with some feeling of enchantment that we took our places yesterday in the Great Western train. This was the wizard who was to transport us into another world, almost into another age. We would fain have believed that this little corner of England had slept under some enchanters [*sic*] spell since we last set eyes on it [...] we should find our past preserved, as though through all this time it had been guarded & treasured for us to come back to one day [...] Ah, how strange it was, then, to watch the familiar shapes of land & sea unroll themselves once more, as though a magicians [*sic*] hand had raised the curtain that hung between us, & to see once more the silent but palpable forms, which for more than ten years we had only seen in dreams, or in the visions of waking hours.[5]

Cornwall's 'silent but palpable forms', both natural and human, would haunt Woolf's fiction as powerfully as her mind, and the mingled sense of anticipation, trepidation, longing and curiosity which the four Stephen children carried with them on this 1905 journey back to the county seems to have been barely containable as they made their way at dusk towards Talland House:

> We could fancy that we were but coming home along the high road after some long day's outing, & that when we reached the gate ... we should thrust it open, & find ourselves among the familiar sights again. In the dark, indeed, we made bold to humour this fancy of ours further than we had a right to; we passed through the gate, groped stealthily but with sure feet up the carriage drive, mounted the little flight of rough steps, & peered through a chink in the escallonia hedge. There was the house, with its two lighted windows; there on the terrace were the stone urns, against the bank of tall flowers; all, so far as we could see was as though we had but left it in the morning. But yet, as we knew well, we could go no further; if we advanced the spell was broken. The lights were not our lights; the voices were the voices of strangers ... We hung there like ghosts in the shade of the hedge, & at the sound of footsteps we turned away.[6]

This powerful, painful account of the breaking of a spell, this bitter-sweet cameo of a fanciful homecoming, of hungering eyes and a lighted house, of belonging and severance commingled, is not, strictly speaking, a source for either *Jacob's Room* or *To the Lighthouse*, but the latter's setting in a summer home by the sea and its poignant fusion of mournfulness and rapture, nostalgia and deliverance, is drawn from the same deep well. Without her Cornish past Woolf's future career as a novelist would quite likely have taken a quite different shape and it is debatable whether her status as one of the great modernist writers would have been as assured as it is today.

Latent Inarticulate Passion

Jacob's Room rolls in on a high tide of elegy and eidetic topography. It opens with Betty Flanders, in tears, on a Cornish beach in September (just as the Stephens' summer vacations would typically stretch into that month) and immediately brings into focus a mother writing a letter, a bay and a lighthouse, all three being drawn directly from Woolf's own childhood: St Ives' Porthminster beach below Talland House; the view across St Ives Bay from the beach and Talland House to the Godrevy Lighthouse; and Julia Stephen's generation of relentless correspondence. Moreover, no sooner has the novel started than the reader is hand in hand with a distraught and fatherless child, Jacob Flanders, who has lost sight of his mother. In search of her, Jacob almost jumps from a rock onto a man and woman 'stretched entirely rigid, side by side', as if the corpses of his parents have been drawn up on the beach rather than it being an unknown couple taking a nap.[7] Reunited with his mother, Jacob leaves the beach carrying a sheep's skull, a *memento mori* that reappears throughout *Jacob's Room* and resurfaces as the boar's skull nailed to the nursery wall in *To the Lighthouse*. The narrator remarks early on that Mrs Flanders carries in 'the depths of her mind [...] some buried discomfort' (p. 8) and something very similar, it may be assumed, drove Woolf's pen forward as she wrote the opening chapter of *Jacob's Room*.

In her 1917 review of a new edition of Conrad's *Lord Jim* (1900), Woolf argued that '[t]he sea and the tropical forests dominate us and almost overpower us' in the novel and she goes on to speak of 'their largeness, their latent inarticulate passion'.[8] These observations shed interesting light on Woolf's own fiction from the same period. For example, they help us make sense of a striking paragraph in the second chapter of *The Voyage Out* (1915). The *Euphrosyne* has sailed down the Thames and into the English Channel on its journey to South America. The French coast is barely visible in the pale light of early morning as the passengers experience a remarkable sense of almost John Bourkian liberation: 'They were free of roads, free of mankind, and the same exhilaration at their freedom ran through them all.'[9] Up to this point in the novel the narrative has been completely realistic in mode, but when Rachel Vinrace suddenly observes Helen and Ridley Ambrose exchange a few

intimate words and kiss, both she and the reader are plunged to the bottom of a rather more imaginary English Channel:

> Down she looked into the depth of the sea. While it was slightly disturbed on the surface by the passage of the Euphrosyne, beneath it was green and dim, and it grew dimmer and dimmer until the sand at the bottom was only a pale blur. One could scarcely see the black ribs of wrecked ships, or the spiral towers made by the burrowings of great eels, or the smooth green-sided monsters who came flickering this way and that. (p. 20)

Rachel is dredged up from her make-believe seabed by her father's 'smart blow upon the shoulder' (p. 20), but the reader lingers beneath the waves and begins to make connections between what Rachel has 'seen' on the floor of the sea and her predicament as an uneducated and unworldly young woman. The wrecked ship is a portent of Rachel's watery and untimely death, while the burrowing eels and 'green-sided monsters' may be read as manifestations of the sexual oppression of women in general (there are a number of references to prostitution and a prostitute in the novel) and Richard Dalloway's impending molestation of Rachel in particular. But it is also worth noting that in Woolf's first fictional evocation of the submarine, the world beneath the waves is not necessarily a sphere of isolation, estrangement or even death. In Rachel's eyes, it is almost a zone of comfort, sanctuary and security, of 'latent inarticulate passion' as opposed to the dogmatic and authoritarian world of patriarchal discourse. The 'great eels' and 'smooth green-sided monsters' also have a companionable appeal for her.

Significantly, when Rachel is first introduced to Hirst and Hewet in Chapter 10 she holds out her hand and then immediately withdraws it: '"It's all wet," she said', while towards the end of Chapter 12 she tells Hewet and Helen Ambrose that she 'feel[s] like a fish at the bottom of the sea' (pp. 117, 155). Hewet later recalls that when he first set eyes on Rachel he thought she was 'like a creature who'd lived all its life among pearls and old bones. Your hands were wet, d'you remember ...' (p. 277). Rachel peers over the edge of a cliff to the bottom of the clear sea at the beginning of Chapter 16 – 'So it had been at the birth of the world, and so it had remained ever since' (p. 194) – and her

observation is recalled further on in the chapter when Hewet reveals to her his curiosity about the domestic confinement of women, how 'until a few years ago no woman had ever come out by herself and said things at all. There it was going on in the background, for all those thousands of years, this curious silent unrepresented life' (p. 200). As Rachel and Hewet move off into 'the depths of the forest' in Chapter 20 it is as if they are submerging themselves under the waves and descending ever closer towards 'this curious silent [...] life' of women: 'the light grew dimmer, and the noises of the ordinary world were replaced by those creaking and sighing sounds which suggest to the traveller in a forest that he is walking at the bottom of the sea' (p. 256). By Chapter 25, Rachel, now terminally ill and bed-bound, has become identified with the goddess Sabrina, from Milton's *Comus*, who spends her life 'Under the glassy, cool, translucent wave' of the River Severn: 'The glassy, cool, translucent wave was almost visible before her, curling up at the end of the bed, and as it was refreshingly cool she tried to keep her mind fixed upon it [...] She was completely cut off, and unable to communicate with the rest of the world, isolated alone with her body' (pp. 311–12).[10] As she sinks out of life Rachel enters

> a deep pool of sticky water, which eventually closed over her head. She saw nothing and heard nothing but a faint booming sound, which was the sound of the sea rolling over her head. While all her tormenters thought that she was dead, she was not dead, but curled up at the bottom of the sea. There she lay, sometimes seeing darkness, sometimes light, while every now and then some one turned her over at the bottom of the sea. (p. 322)

In no time at all she has passed away, yet her symbolic submersion and especially Hewet's earlier sense of Rachel being 'like a creature who'd lived all its life among pearls and old bones' is brought to mind in the third part of *To the Lighthouse* when Cam is described in the fishing boat with her father and brother:

> Her hand cut a trail in the sea, as her mind made the green swirls and streaks into patterns and, numbed and shrouded, wandered in imagination in that underworld of waters where the pearls stuck in clusters to white sprays, where

> in the green light a change came over one's entire mind and one's body shone half transparent enveloped in a green cloak.[11]

Cam's submarine imaginings transform her into a kind of caped wraith shrouded by the sea, and for both her and Rachel the undersea is connected with the hazardous transition from adolescence to womanhood as well as acting as a place of escape from that process.

This alone may explain why Jacob Flanders and Timmy Durrant, in their yacht off the Cornish coast in *Jacob's Room*, are solely preoccupied with surface matters. Jacob is 'trying to read Shakespeare' (p. 60) when we first encounter the two young men at sea, while Timmy is priding himself on possessing navigational skills that have brought them within sight of the Scilly Isles. The two men have quarrelled about 'the right way to open a tin of beef' and have regressed to 'sulky schoolboys', more irritated than enchanted by the fact that 'the waves tumble and lollop much the same hour after hour – tumble and lollop all across the horizon' (p. 60). Both men are conscious in a sensible, matter-of-fact way that '[s]hips have been wrecked here' (p. 61), but, unlike Rachel and Cam, they show no inclination at all to look out for them or even to try to imagine them below the waves. Timmy, on the contrary, knows all about the ships that 'go past, keeping their own side of the road. [He] knew where they were bound, what their cargoes were, and, by looking through his glass, could tell the name of the line, and even guess what dividends it paid its shareholders.' Both men resort to their pipes and Timmy writes up 'some scientific observations' (p. 61), enquiring of Jacob either 'the exact time or day of the month?' (the narrator is not sure which). Jacob then takes a quick, frisky dip in the sea, his volume of Shakespeare topples overboard, and it is the narrator, not one of the two men, who speculates about the sorrows that the Cornish hillsides have witnessed, especially when the tin mines were operating. Jacob and Timmy then have another 'tremendous argument' (p. 63) before going on to discuss, among other things, dress codes, their friend Marsham and the Duke of Wellington. Finally they sing hymns, but they may as well be hugging the Cornish coast in a touring car, a train or an aeroplane, so indifferent have they been to the ever-changing colours of the sea around and beneath them.

'Solid Objects' (1920) also opens on a beach and also involves a 'violent argument' between two pipe-smoking young men, Charles and John, as they approach the water's edge from a distance:

> 'Politics be damned!' issued clearly from the body on the left-hand side [John], and, as these words were uttered, the mouths, noses, chins, little moustaches, tweed caps, rough boots, shooting coats, and check stockings of the two speakers became clearer and clearer; the smoke of their pipes went up into the air; nothing was so solid, so living, so hard, red, hirsute and virile as these two bodies for miles and miles of sea and sandhill.[12]

As with Jacob and Timmy, the immensity of the sea is something Charles and John take no interest in at all: Charles has been 'slashing the beach for half a mile or so' (p. 54) before reaching the shoreline and begins skimming pieces of slate over the waves once he is there, whereas John, though fascinated by the oozy suction of the beach when he burrows his hand and arm into it, is even more keen on solid objects. Having encountered a lump of green sea glass, he holds it out in front of him. 'It pleased him; it puzzled him; it was so hard, so concentrated, so definite an object compared with the vague sea and the hazy shore' (p. 55).

That Woolf attributed 'vague[ness]' or uncertainty to the sea and solidity to men and the masculine fabric of things is noteworthy. For if the undersea lies beyond the pale of patriarchy, beyond the control of fathers, the masculine focus on solidity and tangibility, both in 'Solid Objects' and *Jacob's Room*, shows the outdatedness of such a view of the world: by the 1920s, the whole notion of solidity had been exposed as illusory. Indeed, it had become increasingly clear that even the most solid objects were really as vague as the sea. 'When we compare the universe as it is now supposed to be with the universe as we had ordinarily preconceived it', A.S. Eddington wrote in *The Nature of the Physical World* (1928), 'the most arresting change is not the rearrangement of space and time by Einstein, but the dissolution of all that we regard as most solid into tiny specks floating in a void'.[13] Eddington begins his 'Introduction' by contrasting the apparently substantial table on which he is writing with the table revealed by modern science, a table which

is 'mostly emptiness' (p. 6), and in *To the Lighthouse*, published in the same year that Eddington gave the Gifford Lectures in Cambridge on which he based his book, Woolf, too, introduces 'a phantom kitchen table' (p. 22). When Lily thinks of Mr Ramsay's philosophical work she always brings to mind 'a scrubbed kitchen table' (p. 22), and there are further reflections on the porous nature of solidity in *The Years* (1937) and *Between the Acts* (1941).[14] To become obsessed with solid objects, like John does in the story of that title, is to show ignorance of the latest developments in epistemology, and to show no interest in the sea is equally obtuse, revealing a dire limitation of the masculine outlook.

The All-absorbing Blue of the Sea

Just as Woolf condemned the materialism of Galsworthy, Wells and Bennett, so her alternative approach to fiction accorded with the latest discoveries about the porosity of the atom, and all the tensions that *To the Lighthouse* explores between the real and the phantom, the vague and the material, Victorians and moderns are embodied in the lighthouse itself.[15] At one level it is a mere solid object, substantial and immovable, and its solidity is reinforced as the novel progresses. For example, as seen by Mrs Ramsay in 'The Window', it is 'the hoary Lighthouse, distant, austere' (p. 19) and it is remembered by James as 'a silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye that opened suddenly and softly in the evening' (p. 251). In other words, it is a deeply romanticised and beguiling structure befitting Woolf's critique of Victorian and Edwardian ideals. But when the reader approaches it with James, his sister and his father in the final section of the novel, James suddenly realises it is no more than a 'tower, stark and straight [...] barred with black and white [... and with] washing spread on the rocks to dry. So that was the Lighthouse, was it?' (p. 251; see also pp. 273 and 274). By reaching the lighthouse with Mr Ramsay, James and Cam, the reader is able to see that it is just another place of work, a thing of utility, a solid object, not romantic at all. However, like the substantiality of a kitchen table, the solidity of the lighthouse is deceptive. Seen from the lawn of the Ramsays' summer home, the lighthouse is 'almost invisible, had

melted away into a blue haze' (p. 280), just as, seen from the fishing boat, the Isle of Skye becomes merely a 'frail blue shape' (p. 279), and between them lies the vague and all-absorbing blue of the sea. In the same spirit, as Lily dips her brush 'into the blue paint, she dipped too into the past there' (p. 232): what has been, what is and what will be are reconciled as one, and it is the sea that acts as the agent of reconciliation in this novel, bringing together island and lighthouse, wealth and poverty, feminine and masculine, vagueness and solidity.

It could not be more appropriate, therefore, that Minta Doyle loses her grandmother's brooch on the beach. Although she is mortified by its loss, it is in reality yet another hopeful sign that the younger generation is gradually being released from the world of Victorian things, the hold of Victorian matriarchs and patriarchs. That 'the brooch which her grandmother had fastened her cap with till the last day of her life' (p. 63) must soon be washed over by the incoming tide to be eventually absorbed by the sand of the beach, provides a fitting counterpart to John's disastrous discovery of the sea glass in 'Solid Objects', after which his career and life decline into obsessive disorder and oblivion. 'One can hardly tell which is the sea and which is the land' (p. 103), says Prue at the beginning of 'Time Passes', and this symbolic shift into vagueness anticipates the bringing together of island, lighthouse and sea at the end of the novel. It is as if the 'swollen sea-moistened woodwork' (p. 103) of the house becomes part of the sea before being dried out and made habitable again by Mrs McNab and Mrs Bast. Earlier in the novel the dampness of the house has stood for the social and sexual inequalities it has accommodated, but during the war years the house becomes more and more dilapidated until it is eventually abandoned, 'left like a shell on a sand-hill to fill with dry salt grains now that life had left it' (p. 112). Things become so precarious that if a feather had shifted its position, 'the whole house would have plunged to the depths to lie upon the sands of oblivion' (p. 114). But when the guests return to the house at the end of 'Time Passes' it has been brought back to life, to a better life, and '[t]he sigh of all the seas breaking in measure round the isles soothed them' (p. 116), just as it had soothed Woolf as she envisaged the novel: 'I am making up "To the Lighthouse"', she wrote in her diary on 27 June 1925, ' – the sea is to be heard all through it'.[16]

Woolf hoped the sea would also be 'heard all through' *The Waves* (1931), and it does resound through its 'interludes', yet in this novel the beach is more associated with conquest and violence than with loss.[17] Even in the first interlude the waves are described as '*pursuing* each other, perpetually' rather than following each other. In the second interlude, the waves descend 'with muffled thuds, like logs falling, on the shore', but just as readily suggesting some kind of bombardment, while in the third the waves 'drummed on the shore, like turbaned warriors, like turbaned men with pointed assegais'.[18] By the fourth interlude the waves fall 'with the concussion of horses' hooves on the turf. Their spray rose like the tossing of lances and assegais over the riders' heads [...] They drew in and out with the energy, the muscularity, of an engine which sweeps its force out and in again' (p. 68). Further on in this interlude we read that the sea now beats 'like a drum that raises a regiment of plumed and turbaned soldiers' (p. 69). By the fifth interlude, when the sun has reached 'its full height', the beach lies exposed as the site of a battle or resisted invasion: a 'rusty cartwheel', 'white bone' and a 'boot without laces' are all exposed, 'stuck, black as iron, in the sand' (p. 93). At the end of this interlude and in the sixth the waves have acquired a destructive energy (p. 106), while by the eighth, as the sun sinks, their power has diminished. Even so, the image Woolf deploys continues to be linked to destruction: 'the waves, as they neared the shore [...] fell in one long concussion, like a wall falling, a wall of grey stone, unpierced by any chink of light' (p. 134).

As Woolf planned *The Waves* she realised that she wanted 'to saturate every atom. I mean to eliminate all waste, deadness, superfluity: to give the moment whole; whatever it includes. Say that the moment is a combination of thought; sensation; the voice of the sea.'[19] 'Autobiography it might be called', she wrote a few months later.[20] With this comment in mind it is significant that at one point during the novel's emergence Woolf envisaged the beach not as a place of conflict but as a kind of vast maternity suite, teeming with babies. 'It is a vision of life emerging from the sea', Julia Briggs remarks of this draft passage in the holograph, 'of individual lives endlessly begetting others, like waves, and of the endlessly repeated throes of childhood, through which each self must enter the world – a vision of maternal genesis challenging the patriarchal narrative of scripture'.[21] At another point in the holograph the beach is again described as inundated with babies: 'Soon they

were staggering across the sand, & leaving foot prints, the toe of one touching the heal of another … There were innumerable footprints … innumerable children … pullulating, bubbling walking everywhere. The beach was black with them.'[22] But by the time the novel was published the waves and beach in the interludes are specifically connected with male conquest and violence. There is not a baby to be seen.

It is not just in the novels with a littoral aspect that the sea is audible. Even in Woolf's most emphatically metropolitan works, with the notable exception of *The Years*, sea imagery occasionally washes into the text in surprising ways. For example, when Katharine Hilbery shows Ralph Denham the family pictures in the first chapter of *Night and Day* (1919), the inner room in which they are displayed is described as being 'something like a chapel in a cathedral, or a grotto in a cave, for the booming sound of the traffic in the distance suggested the soft surge of waters, and the oval mirrors, with their silver surface, were like deep pools trembling beneath starlight'.[23] And in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), Septimus Warren Smith figuratively drowns, feeling himself 'falling through the sea', before he flings himself to his death. Prior to this fatal act he has heard 'the sound of water' in his sitting-room and birds calling to him 'through the waves'.[24]

Sir Henry Newbolt begins his 'Introduction' to his compilation of *Sea-Life in English Literature from the Fourteenth to the Nineteenth Centuries*, published in the same year as *Mrs Dalloway*, as follows:

> A nation living in an island, and especially in an island so small as Great Britain, could not possibly escape the influence of the sea. Many millions of Russians or of Chinese pass their lives in communities so far inland that neither physically nor intellectually have they ever realised the existence of coasts or sundering oceans. An English child may not yet have seen the sea, but he cannot long have attained the power to read before becoming aware that the sea is his boundary, his safeguard, the only highroad of his food supply and his foreign travel. Whether or not it is an influence in his own personal life, it comes to him unavoidably as an element in the national life, a fact of practical and historical importance. And if he reads our English literature he will soon find out that it has given experience, tradition, and impulse to the imaginative wishes of his country for many generations. In short, whether we are landsmen or seamen ourselves, sea life is

> essentially a part of national life, part of its daily course, part of its record, part of its imaginative experience.[25]

Newbolt's patriotic tone helps us to appreciate why neither the sea nor the seaside figure prominently in modernist literature beyond the writings of Conrad, Joyce and Woolf. By the end of the First World War, the sea had become associated with a conception of character which was being debunked, a view of history that was being repudiated, a hallowed version of England which had lost its appeal and a hearty communality that many modernists reviled. The briny had by then as little attraction as the bosky. Newbolt, on the other hand, was so taken with the glamour of the sea that he seems to have overlooked Blériot's dashing Channel crossing of 1909 and the German air-raids on London during the First World War, both of which showed categorically that the sea was no longer England's 'safeguard'. It is this misplaced sense of national security, of England as an island fortress, that Woolf critiques in *Between the Acts*. Miss La Trobe's pageant may have been '*Drawn from our island history*', but Woolf and many other intellectuals in the late 1930s were all too aware that this was a comforting narrative that could easily come to an abrupt end with Hitler's forces gearing up for invasion; the planes that shred the Revd Streatfield's leisurely interpretation of the pageant bring this home all too forcefully: 'The word was cut in two. A zoom severed it'.[26] No area of the British Isles was beyond the range of Hitler's bombers and the sea would prove to be no obstacle at all to their menace.

The 'silent but palpable forms' which accompanied Woolf and her siblings on their visit to St Ives in 1905 remained with her throughout her life, despite her feeling that with *To the Lighthouse* she laid to rest the ghosts of her parents.[27] 'Often now I have to control my excitement – as if I were pushing through a screen ; or as if something beat fiercely close to me', Woolf had written in a diary entry of 13 June 1923. 'What this portends I don't know. It is a general sense of the poetry of existence that overcomes me. Often it is connected with the sea and St Ives.'[28] That these comments were written as the land-locked *Mrs Dalloway* flowed from her imagination and not one of her more obviously Cornwall-inspired fictions, provides the most telling testimony of all, perhaps, to the importance of the sea in and to Woolf's

work and her life-long tendency to fly southwestwards in her mind to the landscape of her lost content. And, finally, perhaps it also helps explain why Woolf chose to drown herself in March 1941 rather than take her life in any other way – to dispatch herself to the 'sands of oblivion', to curl up, Rachel Vinrace-like, at the bottom of the River Ouse.