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“When a Woman Speaks the Truth About Her Body”: Ethel Smyth, Virginia Woolf, and the Challenges of Lesbian Auto/biography

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Whatever is unnamed, undepicted in images, whatever is omitted from
biography, censored in collections of letters, whatever is misnamed as
something else, made difficult-to-come-by, whatever is buried in the memory
by the collapse of meaning under an inadequate or lying language – this will
become, not merely unspoken, but *unspeakable*.

– Adrienne Rich, “‘It is the Lesbian in Us...’”¹

Virginia Woolf lay in bed, wearing an old dressing gown, when the doorbell rang at 52
Tavistock Square, London.² She listened as her visitor swiftly ascended the stairs and strode
into her room – and into her life. She appeared older than Woolf had expected, all wrinkled
and fallen in, her grey hair being partly covered by a three-cornered hat. Nevertheless, the
septuagenarian’s demeanour was bluff and militant as she ‘descended’ on her ‘like a wolf on

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¹ Adrienne Rich, “‘It Is the Lesbian in Us...’”, in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose 1966–1978* (London, 1980), 199–202 at 199; italics in original. Rich’s essay was written in 1976 and first published in *Sinister Wisdom*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Spring 1977), 6–9. Copyright © 1979 by W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. Reprinted with permission.

² This biographical introduction has been assembled from various primary sources, notably the following: Virginia Woolf to Ethel Smyth, [17 February 1930], in Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (eds.), *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, 6 Vols. (London, 1975–80), Vol. 4, 139–40; Virginia Woolf Diary, 21 February 1930, in Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie (eds.), *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, 5 Vols. (London, 1977–84), Vol. 3, 290–1. Subsequent citations will refer to these volumes as *Letters* and *Diary* respectively, using the abbreviations VW for Virginia Woolf and ES for Ethel Smyth for convenience, and following the dating suggested editorially and the peculiarities of punctuation (much of which is faithful to Woolf’s original) given therein.

the fold'.³ "Let me look at you", exclaimed Ethel Smyth, loudly and at the top of her voice, as was her wont. She surveyed the fragile, ailing Woolf, herself approaching 50, with admiration. Woolf showed visible signs of not yet having entirely recovered from the influenza that had delayed their meeting.⁴ Indeed, she rarely granted interviews at all – but in this case she made an exception.⁵ Out immediately came a book and pencil, for Smyth had much to ask. They talked ceaselessly from the hours of 4 until 7, the guest considerably more vocal than her host. Afterwards Woolf wrote in her diary that on that day, 20 February 1930, the 'basis of an undying friendship' was made.⁶

In many senses, the strong bond that was to form between Smyth and Woolf was unsurprising, for the two women had much in common. Both had struggled to achieve professional success in fields traditionally dominated by men, and each published polemical writings that addressed the under-representation of females in their respective disciplines. They shared a special interest in biography: Woolf as theorist and practitioner, and Smyth as incorrigible memoirist. Both thrived on intense, long-lasting relationships with women; and the feminist and lesbian tendencies of each are central to an understanding of their life and work. What was more surprising, however, was that they did not meet until comparatively late in their lives – a fact they both subsequently came to regret. They had several strong mutual friends, including Maurice Baring and Victoria (Vita) Sackville-West, any of whom could have made the introduction; and they were certainly familiar with one another's careers and their corresponding plights for years prior to their meeting. Woolf had been present at the

³ VW to Saxon Sydney-Turner, 27 Feb[ruary 1930] (*Letters*, IV, 146)

⁴ See VW to ES, [11 February 1930] (*Letters*, IV, 136); VW to ES, 14 Feb[ruary 1930] (*Letters*, IV, 138); VW to ES, [17 February 1930] (*Letters*, IV, 140).

⁵ See VW to ES, [14 July 1932] (*Letters*, V, 78)

⁶ VW Diary, 21 February 1930 (*Diary*, III, 291)

London première of Smyth's opera *The Wreckers* at His Majesty's Theatre on 22 June 1909,⁷ and had read her earliest volumes – *Impressions that Remained*, her memoirs from childhood to the early 1890s, and *Streaks of Life*, a miscellaneous collection of autobiographical episodes – shortly after they were published, reviewing the latter for *The New Statesman*.⁸ Woolf had also drawn upon Smyth's example, by way of demonstrating the obstacles faced by women in the field of music, in an angry exchange of letters with literary editor Desmond MacCarthy (writing as "Affable Hawk") in the same periodical in October 1920, in which she defended the intellectual equality of women to men.⁹ And in her biographical introduction to a published collection of photographs by Julia Margaret Cameron, her mother's aunt, Woolf recalled the apocryphal story of the death of Cameron's father, James (Jim) Pattie, which Smyth had related in *Impressions that Remained*.¹⁰ But it was Smyth's admiration for Woolf's celebrated feminist polemic *A Room of One's Own* that catalysed their initial meeting.¹¹ Her interest having been piqued, Smyth became curious to speak with the author, specifically to request that she participate in a BBC radio programme, 'Point of View', which she had been asked to chair. The friendship that ensued, though unsteady, endured for just

⁷ See VW to ES, 6 May [1930] (*Letters*, IV, 164). In 1909, Woolf briefly turned her hand to music criticism, specifically the reviewing of opera, which led to two articles: 'The Opera', *The Times*, 24 April 1909, repr. in Andrew McNeillie (ed.), *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, 4 Vols. (London, 1986-94), Vol. 1, 269-72; and 'Impressions at Bayreuth', *The Times*, 21 August 1909, repr. in McNeillie (ed.), *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. 1, 288-93. For an overview of Woolf and music – incorporating her education in the field, writings on music, and musical references constructed in her novels and elsewhere, as well as her friendship with Smyth – see Peter Jacobs, "'The Second Violin Tuning in the Ante-room': Virginia Woolf and Music", in Diane F. Gillespie (ed.), *The Multiple Muses of Virginia Woolf* (Columbia, 1993), 227-60.

⁸ Smyth, *Impressions that Remained: Memoirs*, 2 Vols. (London, 1919); ead., *Streaks of Life* (London, 1921, 2/1924); Woolf, 'Ethel Smyth', *The New Statesman*, 23 April 1921, repr. in McNeillie (ed.), *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. 3, 297-301.

⁹ Woolf was prompted to write in response to Arnold Bennett's misogynist text *Our Women: Chapters on the Sex-Discord* (London, 1920), with which MacCarthy had expressed some agreement in his review in *The New Statesman*, 2 October 1920. Her initial letter and MacCarthy's editorially proffered reply were published as 'The Intellectual Status of Women', *The New Statesman*, 9 October 1920, and Woolf responded with another letter (in which she briefly discussed the case of Smyth) printed in the following issue, 16 October 1920. See further 'The Intellectual Status of Women', Appendix III, *Diary*, Vol. 2, 339-42, in which Woolf's correspondence is reprinted.

¹⁰ See Woolf, 'Julia Margaret Cameron', in Julia Margaret Cameron, *Victorian Photographs of Famous Men and Fair Women* (London, 1926), 1-8, repr. in McNeillie (ed.), *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. 4, 375-86 at 376; Smyth, *Impressions that Remained*, Vol. 2, 251-2. See further VW to ES, 30 Jan[uary] 1930 (*Letters*, IV, 130-1).

¹¹ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London, 1929). In view of Woolf's familiarity with Smyth's life and work, it is slightly curious that she chose not to make mention of her in this publication, in writing of the current standing of the woman composer. Perhaps she felt the danger of merely recapitulating her discussion in 'The Intellectual Status of Women'; or maybe she did not wish to risk diminishing the strength of the argument she constructed with reference to Cecil Gray's dismissive, misogynistic assessment of Germaine Tailleferre. See Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 82-3; Gray, *A Survey of Contemporary Music* (London, 1924), 245-6.

over a decade, cut short only by Woolf's suicide in 1941 – and the impact they made on each other's lives in that time was substantial.

The long-standing intellectual relationship between Ethel Smyth (1858-1944) and Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) provides musicology with an ideal starting-point for the critical analysis of biography as a literary genre of historiographical significance – a matter to which the discipline has only recently turned and in which much work therefore remains to be done. Their fascinating partnership is unique within musical biography for its bringing together of one of the most prolific autobiographers of all composers, and the author whose multitudinous writings have provided something of a solid foundation for modern biographical theory. As we shall see in the course of this article, Woolf discussed Smyth's autobiographical endeavours in some detail throughout their friendship, principally in her letters and diaries, though not without considerable tension, for she (paradoxically) both encouraged and criticised Smyth's work in this direction. At the heart of Woolf's unease toward Smyth's literary output lay their strongly differing approaches to autobiographical exposition: whilst Smyth egotistically recounted stories relating to herself, Woolf deliberately excised overt authorial presence from her texts.

My purpose in this study is to explore these radically contrasting strategies by which the two writers strove publicly to recount the truth about their experiences as women within patriarchal society, which investigation incorporates a certain emphasis on the crucial and inseparable issue of their lesbian proclivities. While it is not possible to arrive at definitive answers in terms of matters that (as per the epigraph to this article) have become historically unspeakable, I have used Woolf's personal documents, as well as her biographical theories and feminist critiques, as a lens through which to gain sight of these unspoken

epistemological spaces in Smyth's life, literary writings, and musical works, thereby to shed new light on existing scholarship on Smyth as memoirist and composer. My research additionally contributes to a better understanding of the general relationships between music and literature in terms both of canonicity and compositional processes, as well as offering insights into the nature of women's, and lesbian, artistic work within the context of these disciplines, and indicating the relative worth of their media as discursive structures suitable for the exploration of auto/biographical truths otherwise shrouded in silence.

Woolf had been immersed in biography from her formative years.¹² Her father, the historian Sir Leslie Stephen, was editor of the celebrated *Dictionary of National Biography* from its founding in 1882, coincidentally the year of her birth.¹³ The subjugation of the household's females by Stephen and its other authoritarian men (which extended to physical violence and sexual abuse), enflamed by the worry and poor health that his monumental biographical project brought to him, led Woolf to connect the genre with Victorian patriarchal domination, and female oppression.¹⁴ Her wider family customarily wrote one another's life stories, whether for official publication or personal benefit, which tradition Woolf continued.¹⁵ Biography became a major focus of her literary career: she imitated and explored the genre, most extensively in her biographical fantasies *Orlando* and *Flush*; she investigated biography's limitations and shortcomings, notably in her seminal articles 'The New Biography' and 'The Art of Biography'; and as we shall see below, she examined its inherent

¹² On this point see e.g. Julia Briggs, 'Virginia Woolf and "The Proper Writing of Lives"', in John Batchelor (ed.), *The Art of Literary Biography* (Oxford, 1995), 245-65.

¹³ Sir Leslie Stephen and Sir Sidney Lee (eds.), *Dictionary of National Biography*, 68 Vols. (London, 1885-1900). Stephen edited the *Dictionary of National Biography* from 1882 until 1891, jointly with Lee from 1890.

¹⁴ Some decades later, in a letter to Smyth, Woolf was to write that 'I never see those 68 black books without cursing them for all the jaunts they've lost me'. VW to ES, 27 Feb[ruary 1930] (*Letters*, IV, 145).

¹⁵ Woolf's earliest surviving such writings include a biography of her sister Vanessa (incorporating sketches of additional female family members), written in 1907 and posthumously published as 'Reminiscences', in Jeanne Schulkind (ed.), *Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings* (London, 2/1985), 28-59; another biography dating from the same year, of her friend Violet Dickenson, published as 'Friendship's Gallery', ed. Ellen Hawkes, in *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 25 (1979), 270-302; and an anonymous contribution to the official life of her father, Frederic Maitland's *The Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen* (London, 1906), 474-6, repr. as 'Impressions of Sir Leslie Stephen' in McNeillie (ed.), *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. 1, 127-30.

androcentricity in her critical essays.¹⁶ Woolf dissolved the boundaries between biography and fiction – which in her case were linked inextricably both to one another and to feminism – and translated her own observations on life into her literature.

Woolf's passion for 'life-writing', as she called it, led her especially to admire and encourage autobiography. She described the genre to Victoria O'Campo as 'my favourite form of reading', and she wrote to Hugh Walpole that 'of all literature... I love autobiography most. In fact I sometimes think only autobiography is literature.'¹⁷ Woolf, whose appetite for anecdote was only partly satiated by the Bloomsbury Group's own Memoir Club, thus aimed to learn as much as possible about her close friends.¹⁸ She fostered biography especially in her relationship with Smyth, and not merely in the many, lengthy conversations they shared face to face. At Woolf's request, Smyth handed over her diary and collections of her letters, including some from Henry (Harry) Brewster, whom Woolf called 'the man who dominated Ethel's life'.¹⁹ Most significant to the present enquiry, however, is the voluminous correspondence that arose between the two women themselves. Over a quarter of Woolf's letters written in the last twelve years of her life and published in the latter three volumes of *The Letters of Virginia Woolf* were written to Smyth, substantially more than to any of her

¹⁶ Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (London, 1933); ead., *Flush: A Biography* (London, 1933), first published (serialized) in *Atlantic Monthly*, July-October 1933; ead., 'The New Biography', *New York Herald Tribune*, 30 October 1927, repr. in Leonard Woolf (ed.), *Collected Essays by Virginia Woolf*, 4 Vols. (London, 1966-7) [henceforth *Collected Essays*], Vol. 4, 229-35; ead., 'The Art of Biography', *Atlantic Monthly*, April 1939, 506-10, repr. in *Collected Essays*, Vol. 4, 221-8. Due to the number of reprints of Woolf's essays in subsequent collections, both during her own lifetime and posthumously, I have endeavoured in the majority of cases to provide citations only for the first appearance of an article together with its location in one modern edition, giving preference to the *Collected Essays*.

¹⁷ VW to Victoria O'Campo, 22 Dec[ember 19]34 (*Letters*, V, 356); VW to Hugh Walpole, 28 Dec[ember 1932] (*Letters*, V, 142).

¹⁸ The Memoir Club, formed in March 1920 by Mary (Molly) MacCarthy, comprised all thirteen members of the Bloomsbury Group who would meet at intervals to read candid autobiographical papers to one another. Woolf's surviving contributions to these occasions, '22 Hyde Park Gate' (1920 or 1921), 'Old Bloomsbury' (1921 or 1922) and 'Am I a Snob?' (1936), are published in Schulkind (ed.), *Moments of Being*, at 164-77, 181-201 and 204-20 respectively.

¹⁹ VW Diary, 23 October 1930 (*Diary*, III, 326)

other correspondents during this period.²⁰ Likewise, Smyth's lengthy and frequent responses overwhelmed Woolf, who received 'generally, two letters daily' at their peak.²¹

Their friendship thrived on these various self-narrations, for each had much to learn about the other. A week after their first meeting, Woolf wrote to her new friend that 'I want to talk and talk and talk'.²² And while Woolf was keen to learn as much as she could about her new friend, Smyth enjoyed talking about herself – *endlessly*. Smyth had purportedly once proclaimed herself 'the most interesting person I know', and freely admitted that 'my mother had told me often it was bad manners to talk so much of myself, but I found the subject so absorbing that I never cultivated the opposite art'.²³ On more than one occasion, Woolf documented Smyth as having delivered a twenty-minute uninterrupted monologue in the course of normal conversation. 'Before she has sat down she is talking', Woolf observed; '[her] final words were rattled off on the doorstep'.²⁴ As Woolf bluntly told her, '[s]wollen with egotism, thats what you are'.²⁵

There were clearly points at which Smyth's self-centredness proved too much for Woolf to manage. She once described talking to Smyth as 'like being a snail and having your brain cracked by a thrush – hammer, hammer, hammer', 'tapping till the beak of her incessant

²⁰ For the record, the latter three volumes of *Letters*, which cover the period 1929-41, comprise correspondence from Woolf to Vanessa Bell (154 letters), Lady Ottoline Morrell (70 letters), Vita Sackville-West (256 letters), Ethel Smyth (439 letters), and to miscellaneous recipients (826 letters); a total of 1,745 letters. A remarkable number of Woolf's letters have survived and this edition aimed at completeness (aside to a sizeable number of trivial and/or brief correspondence); those documents discovered too late for inclusion within the relevant volume but added as an Appendix to Vol. 6 have nevertheless been incorporated within the above statistics.

²¹ VW Diary, 16 June 1930 (*Diary*, III, 306). Smyth's surviving letters to Woolf are currently held in The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection, New York Public Library, which is also one of the principal collections of Woolf's correspondence.

²² VW to ES, 27 Feb[ruary 1930] (*Letters*, IV, 145)

²³ Smyth, *As Time Went On...* (London, 1936), 280; ead., 'Louisa Lady Sitwell', Appendix D in Sir Osbert Sitwell, *Left Hand, Right Hand!* (Boston, 1944), 314-9, at 316. The first of these remarks, and perhaps also the second, was made when Smyth was relatively young, but it is nevertheless significant that they both bore repetition decades later, in reminiscences written towards the end of the author's very long life.

²⁴ VW Diary, [2 February 1932] (*Diary*, IV, 69, 70). Twenty-minute Smythian monologues are recorded in VW Diary, 16 June 1930 (*Diary*, III, 306) and 7 July 1931 (*Diary*, IV, 34).

²⁵ VW to ES, [8 August 1934] (*Letters*, V, 321)

voice broke my skull'.²⁶ Nevertheless, Woolf certainly appreciated Smyth's candour, writing early in their friendship that 'I am very glad that you have written with such frankness'.²⁷ Smyth, on the other hand, felt the relationship to be too one-sided, and found Woolf not forthcoming. As she confided in her diary, 'you have to take what you can get of Virginia', because she 'asks a lot, and gives little – in *quantity* at least.'²⁸ She even returned one of Woolf's shorter letters, appending the acidic comment, '[a]fter this I said "This is so little pudding I can't eat it"'.²⁹ It is true that at times, Smyth *could* cause Woolf to open up, and to converse bluntly on a variety of taboo topics ranging from suicide to sex to sickness to scatology – amidst her frequent apologies for soliloquizing and self-presentation. But when considered together, the pair were fundamentally opposites: the former outspoken, militant, candid, and entirely confident about herself, and the latter frail, introspective, withdrawn, and afraid. '[H]ow we differ!' Woolf once observed to her friend; '[o]ur minds are too entirely and integrally different: which is why we get on'.³⁰

The polarisation upon which their relationship depended was reflected in their published writings. Smyth conducted her life in the public domain through the many autobiographical volumes she produced. Elizabeth Wood describes Smyth as the 'heroic protagonist in the romantic drama of her own life'; Suzanne Raitt has observed that 'her life was conducted in a blaze of publicity, and of narrative'.³¹ Woolf, by contrast, steered clear of the public gaze,

²⁶ VW to Vanessa Bell, [19 February 1933] (*Letters*, V, 160); VW Diary, 17 February 1933 (*Diary* IV, 147).

²⁷ VW to ES, 29 June [1931] (*Letters*, IV, 350)

²⁸ ES Diary [1933], quoted in Christopher St. John, *Ethel Smyth: A Biography* (London, 1959), 222, 223; italics in original. The one-sidedness of their friendship led Smyth to refer to Woolf affectionately as '4d. for 9d.' (ibid. 223, original italicised). These quotations are taken from the detailed sketch of Woolf that Smyth wrote in her diary, excerpted in St. John's biography (ibid. 222-4).

²⁹ The letter in question was VW to ES, [15 June 1937] (*Letters*, VI, 136; for the quotation of Smyth's response, see ibid. n. 4). Smyth's words referred to a story Woolf may well have recalled from *Impressions that Remained*, Vol. 1, 16, which Smyth subsequently recapitulated in *What Happened Next* (London, 1940), 252-3. See further ES Diary [1933], quoted in St. John, *Ethel Smyth*, 224.

³⁰ VW to ES, [11 April 1935] (*Letters*, V, 383, 384)

³¹ Elizabeth Wood, 'Gender and Genre in Ethel Smyth's Operas', in Judith Lang Zaimont, Catherine Overhauser, and Jane Gottlieb (eds.), *The Musical Woman: An International Perspective*, Vol. 2 (Westport, Conn., 1987), 493-507 at 493;

[continued]

instead playing out her existence through her fiction, and in the private and semi-public environments of her exclusive circles of (female) family and friends. She constantly feared that she might become a subject for inclusion in one of Smyth's autobiographies, and in several instances made it clear that she should not make such an appearance. Woolf believed that her overt presence in a text would contradict her fiction. '[M]y publicity is already too much... limelight is bad for me: the light in which I work best is twilight', she once explained; 'I must be private, secret, as anonymous and submerged as possible in order to write'.³²

Though Woolf drew heavily on her observations of life in own her writings, she was determined that they would never merely recount her own story. She thus progressively edited out her authorial presence in the many drafts that her texts underwent prior to completion. Moreover, she ardently believed that writers who merely talked about themselves were egotistical, and that this egotism was epitomized in the use of the word 'I'. Her characteristic deconstruction of the first person singular was an attempt to avoid this self-centredness; as she claimed, "'I" is only a convenient term for somebody who has no real being.'³³ Instead she wrote fragmentary prose and spoke through the voices of protean narrators, who were constructed by rather than coincident with their author, as in the introduction of the fictitious characters called "Mary" who subsequently appear throughout *A Room of One's Own*: 'Here then was I (call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please...)'.³⁴ Yet through these rhetorical dialectical strategies, Woolf remained inscribed at the subtextual level, and as such, she remains one of the most important

Suzanne Raitt, "'The tide of Ethel": Femininity as Narrative in the Friendship of Ethel Smyth and Virginia Woolf', *Critical Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (Winter 1988), 3-21 at 3.

³² VW to ES, 21 Aug[ust 1932] (*Letters*, V, 97); VW to ES, 17 Sept[ember 1938] (*Letters*, VI, 272).

³³ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 7

³⁴ Ibid. 8. Woolf borrowed these names from an old Scottish ballad, 'The Queen's Maries', whose protagonists were popularly believed to have been companions of Mary, Queen of Scots.

figures in the field of women's autobiography. All the elements most crucial to her life and her creative output – her childhood sexual abuse, her lifetime struggle with (genius-related) mental illness, her womanhood and feminist tendencies, and of course her lesbianism – receive abundant articulation in her writings.³⁵

Smyth and Woolf both pursued life crusades to challenge the invidious barriers erected within patriarchal society to hinder females from becoming professionals. They were painfully aware from their own experiences that women lacked the freedom, education, opportunity, and finance accorded to men, which resulted in their under-representation in the fields of music and literature. (Ironically, in this period there were substantially more women than men both pursuing formal study in music and working as music teachers in Britain; but they were discriminated against at educational establishments, and there remained much prejudice surrounding women who performed or composed professionally.³⁶) But as discussed, the ways in which they addressed this issue in their writings differed strikingly. The diametric opposition of their published texts was reflected in their respective attitudes towards their lesbian tendencies. Smyth rejected outright the patriarchal norms of marriage and conformed to the contemporary stereotype of the lesbian as masculine woman.³⁷ Woolf, in contrast, sought out the security of a heterosexual marriage by which publicly to obfuscate her true identity, thereby ostensibly subscribing to the very sociocultural conventions she

³⁵ Amongst the most significant full-length studies are, respectively, Louise DeSalvo, *Virginia Woolf: The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on Her Life and Work* (London, 1989); Thomas C. Caramagno, *The Flight of the Mind: Virginia Woolf's Art and Manic-Depressive Illness* (Berkeley, 1992); Jane Marcus (ed.), *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf* (London, 1981) and ead. (ed.), *Virginia Woolf: A Feminist Slant* (Lincoln, Nebr., 1983); Eileen Barrett and Patricia Cramer (eds.), *Virginia Woolf: Lesbian Readings* (New York, 1997).

³⁶ See Paula Gillett, *Musical Women in England, 1870-1914: "Encroaching on All Man's Privileges"* (London, 2000); Cyril Ehrlich, *The Music Profession in Britain since the Eighteenth Century: A Social History* (Oxford, 1985); Katharine Ellis, 'The Structures of Musical Life', in Jim Samson (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Music* (Cambridge, 2001), 343-70.

³⁷ Elizabeth Wood has observed the similarity of Smyth to the heroine of Radclyffe Hall's notorious lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness* (London, 1928); Wood, 'Women, Music, and Ethel Smyth: A Pathway in the Politics of Music', *Massachusetts Review*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Spring 1983), 125-39 at 127. The rise of the lesbian stereotype exemplified by *The Well of Loneliness* is examined by Esther Newton in her article 'The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman', in Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey Jr. (eds.), *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (New York, 1989), 281-93.

aimed to subvert from within.³⁸ Nevertheless, lesbianism was central to the life and work of both, and not merely because of its reflection of sexual preferences, as modern lesbian scholarship has indicated.³⁹ The unifying notion of the lesbian as politicized woman-identified-woman – epitomized by Adrienne Rich’s famous (and generous) theorization of a ‘lesbian continuum’⁴⁰ – is now considered old-fashioned by many for its ideological position, and more recent critics, including Julia Penelope, Emma Healey, and Martha Vicinus, have deconstructed such stereotypes in embracing the multiplicity of definitions of lesbian sexual identity.⁴¹ But even Penelope has offered, as central to the meaning of being ‘lesbian’ within a heterosexual-dominant, patriarchal environment (as incontrovertibly describes that of Smyth and Woolf), the following: ‘one who *resists efforts to make her into “a woman”*; one who *defies the male descriptions and prescriptions that would limit her possibilities*; one who *refuses the very foundations of heteropatriarchal reality*’.⁴² In this context, therefore, lesbianism can be seen as not merely representing the inclination towards particular physical erotic activities, but also to a certain extent a refusal (whether consciously political or not) of heterosexual-patriarchal values and definitions of womanhood, for it involves a degree of separation from the socially hegemonic men, and correspondingly, of solace sought in all-female relationships and networks.

³⁸ It is now widely known that the marriage (or union akin to marriage) of convenience was a not uncommon practice in Woolf’s closest circles as a means of disguising homosexuality. Vita Sackville-West, her onetime lover, was married to the homosexual Harold Nicolson, whilst Lytton Strachey, also a homosexual (to whom Woolf was herself briefly engaged in 1909), lived with Dora Carrington among others.

³⁹ I use the word ‘preferences’ rather than ‘practices’, not to deny the existence of sexual acts between women, but since both Smyth and Woolf are known to have also had (reluctantly) intercourse with men. However, on occasion, each nevertheless seemed to resolve complex questions of sexuality into simpler ones as to erotic physical practices, as seen elsewhere in this article.

⁴⁰ See Adrienne Rich, ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence’, in *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985* (London, 1987), 23-75, esp. 51-2. Written in 1978, this article was first published in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, ‘Sexuality’, Vol. 5, No. 4 (1980), 631-60.

⁴¹ See Julia Penelope, *Call Me Lesbian: Lesbian Lives, Lesbian Theory* (Freedom, Calif., 1992); Emma Healey, *Lesbian Sex Wars* (London, 1996); Martha Vicinus, “‘They Wonder to Which Sex I Belong’: The Historical Roots of the Modern Lesbian Identity”, in ead. (ed.), *Lesbian Subjects: A Feminist Studies Reader* (Bloomington, Ind., 1996), 233-59 (see also Vicinus’s editorial introduction, *ibid.* 1-12).

⁴² Julia Penelope, ‘Heteropatriarchal Semantics and Lesbian Identity: The Ways a Lesbian Can Be’, in *Call Me Lesbian*, 78-97 at 78; italics in original. Penelope’s essay was published in an earlier version in *Lesbian Ethics*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Fall 1986), 58-80, and much revised for her later volume.

The female independence that lesbianism brought with it was crucial to the establishment of feminism (for all men, even homosexuals, reaped the benefits of patriarchal supremacy), and the women's suffrage movement itself provided one important semi-public nexus in which such women could seek camaraderie and sanctuary.⁴³ In 1910, Woolf was working behind the scenes in the 'Votes for Women' campaign, while Smyth, having become enchanted with Emmeline Pankhurst – Woolf even believed they had been lovers⁴⁴ – pledged to devote two years to the suffrage cause, famously suffering imprisonment for her militant activities. But the need for all-female contact shared by Smyth and Woolf extended far beyond their situation within the lesbian networks of suffrage and associated artistic circles; both women were supported throughout their lives by a long line of strong, enduring relationships with members of the same sex. Louise DeSalvo, in her controversial study of the significance of the sexual abuse of Woolf and other female members of her family by the male side of the household, has even suggested that '[h]er lifelong response to her prolonged abuse was a dislike, perhaps even a terror, of heterosexual sexuality... she chose lesbian love... as a positive, adaptive response to her abuse'.⁴⁵ Long-standing female allies in Woolf's life had included her aunt Caroline Emelia Stephen, her sister Vanessa Bell (to use her married name), and her friends Violet Dickinson, Margaret Llewelyn-Davies and Vita Sackville-West; those of Smyth included Elisabeth (Lisl) von Herzogenberg, the Empress Eugénie, Lady Mary Ponsonby, Emmeline Pankhurst and Edith Somerville. Woolf typically sought mother figures in her strongest female friends, a pattern also reflected in some of Smyth's unions (notably that with Lisl von Herzogenberg), perhaps arising from the fact that both

⁴³ On the importance of lesbianism to the suffrage movement and the complex relationship between the two, see Emily Hamer, 'Lesbians and Suffragists', in *Britannia's Glory: A History of Twentieth-Century Lesbians* (London, 1996), 15-39, esp. 20-7.

⁴⁴ 'In strict confidence, Ethel [Smyth] used to love Emmeline [Pankhurst] – they shared a bed.' VW to Quentin Bell, 3 Dec[ember 1933] (*Letters*, V, 256).

⁴⁵ DeSalvo, *Virginia Woolf*, 119

women had enjoyed strong relationships with their actual mothers.⁴⁶ Indeed, their own friendship flourished on a pseudo-familial bond intensified by the 24-year age difference, which Suzanne Raitt has termed the ‘maternal metaphor’ and argued to be ‘crucial to the kinds of narrative identifications that the women develop, and the ways in which they use those identifications to challenge and confirm each other’s femininity’.⁴⁷ Whether this particular union was physically consummated remains a matter for speculation; but both women appeared well aware of the lesbian inflections of their relationship. Smyth admitted in her diary that ‘I don’t think I have ever cared for anyone more profoundly... for 18 months [after meeting Woolf] I really thought of little else. I think this proves what I have always held – that for many women, anyhow for me, passion is independent of the sex machine.’⁴⁸ Woolf, meanwhile, acknowledged that ‘[a]n old woman of seventy one... has fallen in love with me’, but asserted that she was ‘not in love with Ethel’ herself.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, a decade later she reflected to Smyth upon their ‘queer collocation... two people who have nothing alike, except – well, I cant go into that’.⁵⁰

Woolf’s appeal to a multiplicity of fictitious narrators in place of the unified authorial voice in her texts may similarly be seen as an attempt to replicate in her works the all-female, protective environments in which she sought refuge from the patriarchy. As the self-styled ‘mouthpiece of Sapphism’, she famously once wrote to Smyth that ‘I only want to show off to women. Women alone stir my imagination – there I agree with you.’⁵¹ It is surely no

⁴⁶ On Woolf’s strong relationships with females, including her mother and Smyth, who functioned in a maternal role, see especially Jane Marcus, ‘Virginia Woolf and Her Violin: Mothering, Madness, and Music’, in Ruth Perry and Martine Watson Brownley (eds.), *Mothering the Mind: Twelve Studies of Writers and their Silent Partners* (New York, 1984), 180-201, and ead., *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy* (Bloomington, Ind., 1987), 96-114. See also Louise Collis, ‘Mothering Virginia Woolf’, Chapter Twenty in *Impetuous Heart: The Story of Ethel Smyth* (London, 1984), 174-89.

⁴⁷ Raitt, “‘The tide of Ethel’”, 8

⁴⁸ ES Diary [1933], quoted in St. John, *Ethel Smyth*, 222

⁴⁹ VW to Quentin Bell, 14 May 1930 (*Letters*, IV, 171); VW Diary, 25 August 1930 (*Diary*, III, 314).

⁵⁰ VW to ES, 12 Oct[ober 1940] (*Letters*, VI, 439)

⁵¹ VW to Vita Sackville-West, 8 Sept[ember] 1928 (*Letters*, III, 530); VW to ES, [19 August 1930] (*Letters*, IV, 203).

coincidence that her most ferociously feminist texts began life as papers read to private gatherings of women: *A Room of One's Own* was expanded from two talks on 'Women and Fiction' given at Girton and Newnham colleges, Cambridge in October 1928, while *The Years* (1937) and *Three Guineas* (1938) have their origins in the 'Professions for Women' speech Woolf delivered, alongside Smyth, at a meeting of the London [and] National Society for Women's Service on 21 January 1931, the subject of which was 'Music and Literature'.⁵² But with Woolf, the deconstruction of the narrating self (which was a concern of early modernist literature more generally) also served another, feminist purpose; she saw the egotism and subjectivity symbolised by the 'I' as inherently male, and therefore oppressive.⁵³ As she wrote in *A Room of One's Own*:

But after reading a chapter or two a shadow seemed to lie across the page. It was a straight dark bar, a shadow shaped something like the letter 'I'. One began dodging this way and that to catch a glimpse of the landscape behind it... Back one was always hailed to the letter 'I'. One began to be tired of 'I'.⁵⁴

Woolf believed that the normative 'man's sentence' – as epitomized in the fictitious novel, by "Mr. A", described in above quotation – was 'unsuited for a woman's use'.⁵⁵ She thus exiled the masculine from her texts in order faithfully to investigate collective experience by

⁵² Woolf, 'Women and Fiction', *The Forum* (March 1929), repr. in *Collected Essays*, Vol. 2, 141-8, and S. P. Rosenbaum (ed.), *Women and Fiction: The Manuscript Versions of A Room of One's Own* (Oxford, 1992), Appendix 4, 195-201; Woolf, *The Years* (London, 1937); ead., *Three Guineas* (London, 1938); ead., 'Speech Before the London/National Society for Women's Service, January 21 1931' [henceforth 'Professions for Women'], in Mitchell A. Leaska (ed.), *The Pargiters by Virginia Woolf: The Novel-Essay Portion of The Years* (London, 1978), pp. xxvii-xliv. The speech Smyth gave on that occasion has not been published (and is consequently lost), despite an offer from Woolf on behalf of the Hogarth Press, which at the time she owned jointly with her husband Leonard; see VW to ES, 24 [January 1931] (*Letters*, IV, 280).

⁵³ On Woolf's deconstruction of the narrating authorial voice and the relationship between her modernism and her feminism, see Makiko Minow-Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject* (Brighton, 1987).

⁵⁴ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 150

⁵⁵ *ibid.* 115

‘think[ing] back through her mothers’.⁵⁶ Woolf found significance in the graphical similarity of the letter ‘I’, the embodiment of uniformity and individualism, to the phallus, the bodily manifestation of patriarchal domination⁵⁷ – in much the same way as Catharine R. Stimpson, in exploring lesbian effacement in history, has equated the vulval ‘O’ with both female sexual potential and the zero of silence thereon.⁵⁸ And just as Woolf believed that such first-person language could be used only to tell the truth about men, she understood that a woman’s plight could be accurately recounted only with reference to her own biology. (Indeed, Woolf’s practice of relating her own experiences as a woman by burying herself within a multiplicity of quasi-authorial narrators may help to resolve the apparent paradox between her passion for autobiography, and her detestation of the male-centred ‘I’, further to which, it also seems likely that she sought in the life-stories of others inspiration for her own fiction.) As she said in her ‘Professions for Women’ speech, a female writer ‘has to say I will wait... until men have become so civilised that they are not shocked when a woman speaks the truth about her body’.⁵⁹ Given that her paper discussed Smyth at length, praising her and acknowledging her achievements, and since she delivered the speech alongside Smyth, one wonders whether Woolf held *her* specifically in mind in its writing.⁶⁰ Such speculation is certainly consistent with Jane Marcus’s recent suggestion that Woolf’s ‘Women and Fiction’ speeches were partly addressed to Vita Sackville-West, with whom she then shared the platform.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Ibid. 146. In fact, Woolf believed that the ideal state for a writer was to utilize both male and female experience to create new traditions (ibid. 146-58); after all, though she drew on collective Womanhood in her writings, she also used the same language employed by the patriarchy (being the only one available) therein.

⁵⁷ On this point see Linda Anderson, ‘Virginia Woolf: “In the Shadow of the Letter ‘I’”’, in ead., *Women and Autobiography in the Twentieth Century: Remembered Futures* (Hemel Hempstead, 1997), 42-75, esp. 43.

⁵⁸ Catharine R. Stimpson, ‘Zero Degree Deviancy: The Lesbian Novel in English’, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (1981), 363-79, repr. in ead., *Where the Meanings Are: Feminism and Cultural Spaces* (New York, 1988), 97-110 at 99-100.

⁵⁹ Woolf, ‘Professions for Women’, in Leaska (ed.), *The Pargiters*, pp. xxxix-xl.

⁶⁰ Woolf’s speech was, however, first published in a substantially revised version, with all references to Smyth removed, presumably by her husband Leonard, who acted as editor (and who famously disliked Smyth, believing her to be too much for Woolf to handle). Woolf, ‘Professions for Women’, in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (London, 1942), 149-54, repr. in *Collected Essays*, Vol. 2, 284-9.

⁶¹ See Jane Marcus, *Virginia Woolf, Cambridge and A Room of One’s Own: ‘The Proper Upkeep of Names’* (London, 1996), 33.

Even before they had met, Woolf wrote to Smyth that '[a]ll I can do is to read you and wish to goodness you had written 10 volumes not 2'.⁶² This wish was ultimately granted, no doubt partly owing to her continual encouragement of her friend's literary endeavours throughout their decade-long friendship.⁶³ In her 'Professions for Women' speech, she had referred to Smyth's texts as masterpieces.⁶⁴ The following year she wrote, '[i]f you've one duty, this side of the grave, it is to go on memorialising'; '[p]lease please please write more'.⁶⁵ Then in 1934 she said, 'please I beg of you devote yourself to memoir writing for posterity... This I consider your most sacred duty'.⁶⁶ Following publication of *As Time Went On...*, in which Smyth continued the chronological narrative of her life begun in *Impressions that Remained*, Woolf told her, 'What you must do is *to continue*. You cant, in justice to posterity and the present, let your great fountain bottle itself up'.⁶⁷ Even after *What Happened Next*, which was to be Smyth's last instalment of memoirs, Woolf wrote: 'it isn't the end... There must be artistically as well as humanly another volume'.⁶⁸ In recognition of her support, Smyth (tentatively) dedicated *As Time Went On...* to Woolf, 'solely because this book was written at her suggestion'.⁶⁹ Subsequent correspondence indicates that Woolf both heartily approved of this gesture and attempted to persuade Smyth also to dedicate her next autobiographical volume to her.⁷⁰

⁶² VW to ES, 14 Feb[ruary 1930] (*Letters*, IV, 138)

⁶³ In addition to providing criticisms of Smyth's autobiographical writings, Woolf also advised her on logistical matters such as the negotiation of contracts and royalties with her publishers (soliciting Leonard's opinion on her behalf). See VW to ES, 16 Jan[uary 1940] (*Letters*, VI, 379).

⁶⁴ see Woolf, 'Professions for Women', in Leaska (ed.), *The Pargiters*, p. xxviii

⁶⁵ VW to ES, 7 Sept[ember] 1932 (*Letters*, V, 101); VW to ES, [21 October 1932] (*Letters*, V, 112)

⁶⁶ VW to ES, [27 and 29 August 1934] (*Letters*, V, 326)

⁶⁷ VW to ES, 11 and 13 May [1936] (*Letters*, VI, 39)

⁶⁸ VW to ES, 9 July [1940] (*Letters*, VI, 404). A further volume of autobiography, *A Fresh Start*, remained unfinished at Smyth's death in 1944, and its manuscript is currently held in The Ethel Smyth Collection 1910-1962, Special Collections Library, University of Michigan.

⁶⁹ *As Time Went On...*, Dedication (page unnumbered). Smyth and Woolf had corresponded over *As Time Went On...* for quite some time prior to its publication; Woolf made comments on manuscript drafts as early as 1934 (see n. 91).

⁷⁰ See VW to ES, [12 March 1936] (*Letters*, VI, 21); VW to ES, 20 April [1936] (*Letters*, VI, 27); VW to ES, 17 Sept[ember 1938] (*Letters*, VI, 272); VW to ES, 9 Jan[uary] 1939 (*Letters*, VI, 309).

Woolf admired Smyth's memoirs for their honesty, directness, and the keen sense of observation by which the characters and their settings were brought to life. 'How you do it, God knows', she said; 'I mean I can't see how it's done – how face after face emerges, when there is apparently so little preparation'.⁷¹ But Woolf also held lingering concerns as to Smyth's colloquial, un-literary prose style, as amply reflected in her comments – part praising, part deeply critical.⁷² As she wrote in her diary of *Impressions that Remained*:

I wish it were better... What a subject! That one should see it as a superb subject is a tribute to her, but of course, not knowing how to write, she's muffed it. The interest remains, because she has ridden straight at her recollections, never swerving & getting through honestly, capably, but without the power to still & shape the past so that one will wish to read it again.⁷³

Woolf's unease similarly permeates her review in *The New Statesman* of Smyth's *Streaks of Life*, though articulated in more tactful language: 'It was not that Miss Smyth possessed extraordinary literary power... Her method appeared to consist of extreme courage and extreme candour... whatever she chose to describe she described wholly, as it appeared to her, without disguise or titivation.'⁷⁴ Smyth's openness reached a level to which Woolf was, plainly, afraid to aspire. 'I wonder how it feels to do it', Woolf once reflected to her friend; 'I mean[,] to be so candid; and convinced that the public will be enthralled. I couldn't do it; but then you can. How?... It's a curious light on your psychology; that you can confess so openly,

⁷¹ VW to ES, 11 and 13 May [1936] (*Letters*, VI, 39); see further, VW Diary, 16 June 1930 (*Diary*, III, 306).

⁷² See e.g. VW to ES, [19 November 1933] (*Letters*, V, 249); VW to ES, [18 November 1934] (*Letters*, V, 346-7); and especially VW to ES, 6 June [1933] (*Letters*, V, 191-3).

⁷³ VW Diary, 28 November 1919 (*Diary*, I, 315); see further VW to Lytton Strachey, [30 November 1919] (*Letters*, II, 405). In fact, Woolf did reread *Impressions that Remained*; see VW to ES, [11 February 1930] (*Letters*, IV, 136) and VW to ES, 13 February 1930 (*Letters*, IV, 137).

⁷⁴ Woolf, 'Ethel Smyth', in McNeillie (ed.), *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. 3, 298. Though the subject of the review was *Streaks of Life*, the book under discussion at this point in the article was *Impressions that Remained*.

what I should have hidden so carefully.’⁷⁵ It was a source of tension in the relationship, and maybe it was a source of jealousy too.

But Smyth’s frankness also led her to be egotistical. In all her texts and for all her powers of storytelling, she would twist the focus of attention back onto herself, even when she was ostensibly talking about other people.⁷⁶ Vita Sackville-West has made the point admirably:

[Smyth’s] letters and her books are all the same. They are HER. She might concisely have entitled her successive books ME ONE, ME TWO, ME THREE, and so on... In all writers their style must be to a certain extent the reflection of their personality; in Ethel’s case the one simply could not have existed without the other.⁷⁷

Smyth claimed that ‘one of the underlying ideas of autobiography, whether you are conscious of it or not, is an attempt at self-expression’, and her memoirs abundantly reveal her to be self-centred and proud of it.⁷⁸ She believed she possessed an ‘inordinate preoccupation with myself and my aims’, and stated that she had ‘always thought of myself, and of nothing else... of what I had to achieve in life, of what my duty to myself was... always myself.’⁷⁹

⁷⁵ VW to ES, 9 July [1940] (*Letters*, VI, 404). Woolf continued by conceding that Smyth was ‘absolutely right’, noting that ‘I get a great deal more of Ethel this way than any other’.

⁷⁶ Biographical sketches occur frequently throughout Smyth’s published output; her more substantial such writings include the following: ‘Recollections of the Empress Eugénie’, *Streaks of Life*, 4-68; ‘Henry B. Brewster: A Memoir by Ethel Smyth’, in H. B. Brewster, ed. Smyth, *The Prison: A Dialogue* (London, [1931]), 11-44, repr. as ‘Henry B. Brewster (1850-1908): A Memoir’, in *Female Pippings in Eden* (London, 2/1934), 87-113; ‘Recollections of Brahms’, *ibid.* 57-70; ‘Emmeline Pankhurst (1858-1928)’, *ibid.* 187-290; ‘Thomas Beecham (Fantasia in B# Major)’, in *Beecham and Pharaoh* (London, 1935), 3-75; Chapter VI, ‘Lady Ponsonby: A Study’, in *As Time Went On...*, 83-108; ‘Biographical Outline Down to 1914’, in *Maurice Baring* (London, 1938), 1-49.

⁷⁷ V. Sackville-West, ‘Ethel Smyth, the Writer’, in St. John, *Ethel Smyth*, 245-50 at 246, 245. Sackville-West would have herself been aware, through her close friendship with Woolf and her own experiences as an author (for which, see later in this article), of possible alternatives to egotism available to Smyth in her writings.

⁷⁸ Smyth, *As Time Went On...*, 126

⁷⁹ Smyth, *What Happened Next*, 180-1; ead., *Impressions that Remained*, Vol. 2, 225, ellipses in original. In both places, Smyth also acknowledged that her unremitting self-centredness was a serious weakness, and had perhaps been responsible for the unhappiest times of her life.

Equally, her attitude towards her self-interested polemical essays is best summed up by her words in 'Female Pippings in Eden': observing that 'some of the proofs are autobiographical', she said that if this lay her open to charges of 'inflamed egotism, or vindictiveness', then she 'hopes to be acquitted... but Lord! what does it matter?'⁸⁰

Naturally, Woolf censured Smyth perennially for this egotism, which (as explored above) she perceived to be phallogentric, and consequently not suited to writing about women. Thus she objected especially in the case of 'Female Pippings in Eden', which proved to be her most fiercely feminist work, though she also repeatedly expressed uncertainty as to the advice she offered and indicated that Smyth should seek out alternative opinions.⁸¹ In commenting on an early draft, she wrote that

what I criticise is what you say to be necessary – that is the autobiography. I hate it. I don't think it adds any thing to what you have said. I think the personal details immensely diminish the power of the rest... I hate any writer to talk about himself; anonymity I adore... And the mention of 'I' is so potent – such a drug, such a deep violet stain – that one in a page is enough to colour a chapter...

...give all the facts and all the dates; the more the better; but let them be about other people, not E[thel] S[myth]. My own longing in reading... is to escape the individual... there are a thousand others. Leave your own case out of it...⁸²

⁸⁰ Smyth, 'Female Pippings in Eden', in *Female Pippings in Eden*, 3-56, at 28, 38, 38.

⁸¹ See VW to ES, 6 June [1933] (*Letters*, V, 191); VW to ES, [7 June 1933] (*Letters*, V, 193); VW to ES, [15 August 1933] (*Letters*, V, 213).

⁸² VW to ES, 6 June [1933] (*Letters*, V, 191, 193); VW to ES, 8 June 1933 (*Letters*, V, 194, 195).

Woolf implored Smyth to discuss women's experience collectively rather than merely stating her own circumstances, as she (quite rightly) felt that it would appear to the reader that 'the womans got a grievance about herself; Shes unable to think of any one else' – which comment no doubt prompted the aforementioned justificatory passage in the published version of Smyth's work.⁸³ It cannot be coincidental that the criticisms Woolf offered, specifically her remarks on the use of the word 'I', strongly recall the passage from *A Room of One's Own* quoted above. Indeed, she reinforced the point by explaining that 'I forced myself to keep my own figure fictitious; legendary' in that text – thus, ironically, drawing on her own case in the very act of explaining why this practice should be avoided.⁸⁴ Equally ironic was the fact that she also requested that Smyth remove the references to herself from her manuscript, claiming that it actually weakened her argument.⁸⁵ Though she desired that Smyth introduce examples besides her own, Woolf was similarly determined that she herself should not be included; as previously discussed, she feared that such an explicit appearance in a text, even if not her own, might compromise her work as a novelist. Nevertheless, given the extent to which she drew on Smyth's character for inspiration in her own novels – scholars are in broad agreement that she provided the model for Rose Pargiter of *The Years*⁸⁶ and contributed to the character of Miss La Trobe of *Between the Acts*⁸⁷ – Woolf's attitude in this instance certainly qualified Smyth's unease as to one-sidedness in their relationship.⁸⁸

⁸³ VW to ES, 8 June 1933 (*Letters*, V, 194)

⁸⁴ *ibid.* 195

⁸⁵ see VW to ES, 6 June [1933] (*Letters*, V, 192)

⁸⁶ As discussed above, Woolf's *The Years*, which included several real-life characters, originated in the 'Professions for Women' speech with which Smyth is connected in a number of different ways.

⁸⁷ Woolf, *Between the Acts* (London, 1941). Elizabeth Wood's contention that '[t]he fictional Ethel Smyth is Woolf's Miss La Trobe of *Between the Acts*... Miss La Trobe is Woolf's tribute to Smyth as *Orlando* is to Vita Sackville-West' is, however, a little far-reaching, given the strength of the case for Edith Craig having provided a model for the character, as various other scholars have observed. Wood, 'Women, Music, and Ethel Smyth', 137-8.

⁸⁸ Smyth had made a previous appearance in a work of fiction, as the unconventional and somewhat eccentric composer Edith Staines in E. F. Benson's *Dodo: A Detail of the Day*, 2 Vols. (London, 1893). See further Smyth, *As Time Went On...*, 204-5.

On this particular occasion, Smyth conceded on two counts: she removed all references to Woolf,⁸⁹ and revised her text generally, leading Woolf to remark that ‘I like it much better so, with the letter ‘I’ comparatively muted... its much more persuasive and far carrying this way than the other’.⁹⁰ But the ‘I’ of the self-centred autobiographer could only ever be *comparatively* muted. Smyth merely learnt to adapt Woolf’s post-individualist paradigm to her own needs, substituting the word ‘one’ for ‘I’ so that she could continue to talk about herself whilst ostensibly embracing collectivity. Woolf immediately saw through her efforts, for Smyth’s meagre concession did not free her from the constrictions of male language. ‘I dont care for your so persistent use of ‘one’ for ‘I’’, she commented; ‘[i]ts too wobbly for my taste.’⁹¹ It must have been obvious to the two women that their views on auto/biography, and on writing, differed fundamentally. Woolf once stated plainly to Smyth that ‘you’re not, as I so futilely call myself, a novelist’ – though she subsequently ceded that she was ‘a novelist wasted if ever there was one’, and persisted in her simultaneous commendation and condemnation of her friend’s endeavours.⁹² And though the stubborn Smyth was evidently not prepared to change her autodidactic literary ways, she continued to solicit, and to expect, Woolf’s comments – even when, as in the case of her biography of Maurice Baring, she had given her the opposite impression.⁹³

Following the publication of *What Happened Next* in 1940, Woolf explained to her friend why she must continue writing memoirs. ‘[E]very book is only a fragment’, she said, ‘and one may be a brighter or a bigger fragment; but to complete the whole one must read them

⁸⁹ The only mention of Woolf in Smyth’s published output merely records her presence, alongside that of many other of her friends, at her seventy-fifth birthday party in 1933. Smyth, *As Time Went On...*, 287. However, Smyth’s chronological autobiographies (*Impressions that Remained*, *As Time Went On...*, and *What Happened Next*) narrate only the first fifty years of her life story, ending with Brewster’s death in 1908, over two decades before she met Woolf.

⁹⁰ VW to ES, [19 November 1933] (*Letters*, V, 249)

⁹¹ VW to ES, [18 November 1934] (*Letters*, V, 346), commenting on an early draft of Smyth’s *As Time Went On...*

⁹² VW to ES, [11 July 1930] (*Letters*, IV, 187); VW to ES, 1 April [1931] (*Letters*, IV, 302).

⁹³ See VW to ES, 4 Jan[uary 1938] (*Letters*, VI, 201-2). Smyth’s *Maurice Baring* comprised a biographical sketch, discussions of Baring’s novels and other works, and sections of correspondence.

all'.⁹⁴ She believed Smyth was suited to autobiography precisely because she was, to use her words, 'not a finished precious vase, but a porous receptacle that sags slightly, swells slightly, but goes on soaking up the dew, the rain, the shine, and whatever else falls upon the earth'.⁹⁵ Hermione Lee has determined, by reading Woolf's relevant writings in parallel, that she considered that in good biography, 'there must be movement and change: generalisations, fixed attitudes, summings-up, are fatal... just as lives don't stay still, so life-writing can't be fixed and finalised'.⁹⁶ Thus Woolf rejected the practice in Victorian biography of distilling many-faceted lives into the whitewashed, uniform subjects she likened to 'the wax figures now preserved in Westminster Abbey... that have only a smooth superficial likeness to the body'⁹⁷ – or, to use her turn of phrase in the letter under present discussion, 'finished precious vases'. In this context, therefore, Woolf was expressing her desire for Smyth to continue her life story by recounting some as yet untold stories about herself. Shortly afterwards, she indicated more explicitly which new tales she wished to be narrated, writing that

I was thinking the other night that there's never been a woman's autobiography... Chastity and modesty I suppose have been the reason. Now why shouldn't you be not only the first woman to write an opera, but equally the first to tell the truths about herself?... I should like an analysis of your sex life... More introspection. More intimacy.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ VW to ES, 24 July [1940] (*Letters*, VI, 406)

⁹⁵ *ibid.*

⁹⁶ Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London, 1996), 10-1

⁹⁷ Woolf, 'The Art of Biography', in *Collected Essays*, Vol. 4, 222

⁹⁸ VW to ES, 24 Dec[ember] 1940 (*Letters*, VI, 453). (St. John apparently misdated this letter to 24 February 1940, in *Ethel Smyth*, 232-3.) In this letter, Woolf claimed that there currently existed no women's autobiography comparable to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* (publ. 1781-8). This work, which was written between 1764 and 1770, recounts various revealing truths about Rousseau's sex life – including masturbation and his masochistic tendencies – and is commonly referred to as 'the father of modern autobiography' (which phraseology is itself telling) for its centrality to the canon.

Clearly Woolf observed a difference between women's (and lesbian) autobiography, and autobiographies that were merely *written* by women (and lesbians), into which category she manifestly placed those of Smyth.⁹⁹ Her conjecture is eminently consistent with the scholarship on women's auto/biography that has proliferated in recent years, from which two principal points arise strongly: that the authentic writing of a woman's life (whether by the subject herself or not) is inherently different from that of a man, and therefore requires distinctly separate approaches;¹⁰⁰ and correspondingly, that autobiographical writings by women in history have tended to employ peripheral, discontinuous literary modes that elude (or have the potential to elude) classification in terms of the conventional male form.¹⁰¹

Woolf had noted in *A Room of One's Own* that 'biography [is] too much about great men',¹⁰² and that as an established genre of literature, it had been appropriated as a political tool by which to enforce patriarchal domination.¹⁰³ She recognized that such androcentric paradigms could not be used to tell a woman's story. In *Orlando*, the experimental biography (modelled on the life, friends, and surroundings of her then lesbian partner Vita Sackville-West) whose long-lived subject undergoes a change of sex in the course of the book, Woolf had explored the differences between writing the life of a man and that of a woman. In 'Professions for Women' she had spoken of an invisible self-censor, 'The Angel in the House', which

⁹⁹ I shall presently return to the significance of Woolf's (apparently erroneous) description of Smyth in the above quotation as the first female operatic composer, in connection with the issue of women's autobiography.

¹⁰⁰ See e.g. Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck (eds.), *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography* (Ithaca, 1988); Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (London, 1989); Ruth A. Solie, 'Changing the Subject', *Current Musicology*, 'Approaches to the Discipline', No. 53 (1993), 55-65; Paula R. Backscheider, *Reflections on Biography* (Oxford, 1999), esp. Chapter 5, 'Feminist Pressures', 127-62.

¹⁰¹ Amongst the principal studies to date are Estelle C. Jelinek, *The Tradition of Women's Autobiography: From Antiquity to the Present* (Boston, 1986); Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation* (Bloomington, Ind., 1987); Shari Benstock (ed.), *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings* (London, 1988); Liz Stanley, *The Autobiographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/biography* (Manchester, 1992); Leigh Gilmore, *Autobiographies: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation* (Ithaca, 1994); Trev Lynn Broughton and Linda Anderson (eds.), *Women's Lives/Women's Times: New Essays on Auto/biography* (Albany, NY, 1997). For its relevance to the issues discussed in this article, see also Nicky Hallett, *Lesbian Lives: Identity and Auto/Biography in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1999).

¹⁰² Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 164. See further, ead., 'The Art of Biography', in *Collected Essays*, Vol. 4, 226-7; ead., *Three Guineas*, 136-7.

¹⁰³ see Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 114-16

prevented females from producing faithful narrative.¹⁰⁴ Her call for Smyth to write a *women's* autobiography recollects her previous argument that Woman may recount herself accurately only when she speaks the truth about her body – here aligned overtly with her sex life. In November 1940, just one month prior to this request, Woolf had abandoned her own autobiographical fragment, 'A Sketch of the Past', in which she disclosed some of her deepest, most intimate truths, including the sexual abuse she experienced as a young girl at the hands of her half-brother Gerald Duckworth.¹⁰⁵ And Woolf's original plan for a sequel to *A Room of One's Own* was a book 'about the sexual life of women', an idea conceived on the eve of her 'Professions for Women' speech in which the publications that lay greatest claim to being this sequel, *The Years* and *Three Guineas*, have their origins – which strongly suggests that in terms of her feminist writings, Woolf recognized a connection between lesbianism and the possibilities for female contemporaries to become career women.¹⁰⁶

Smyth wrote in her memoirs of her strong feelings for women and included extensive literary portraits of female friends,¹⁰⁷ but she never made her lesbianism explicit nor described such sexual encounters; as Suzanne Raitt has written, '[Smyth's] published writing, although absolutely frank about the passion and the romance of her feelings for women, remains resolutely silent about the sexual aspects'.¹⁰⁸ Though Elizabeth Wood has argued that examining Smyth's music and texts in tandem reveals that 'her narrative invention...

¹⁰⁴ See Woolf, 'Professions for Women', in Leaska (ed.), *The Pargiters*, pp. xxix-xxxiii; ead., 'Professions for Women', esp. 285-6. Woolf hereby made reference to Coventry Patmore's four-part misogynist poem *The Angel in the House*, 2 Vols. (London, 1854-63), which depicts a love and marriage regarded as socially exemplary for the subservience of the story's heroine.

¹⁰⁵ Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past', in Schulkind (ed.), *Moments of Being*, 64-159 at 69; see further VW to ES, 12 Jan[uary 19]41 (*Letters*, VI, 460). Woolf's autobiographical text was apparently abandoned due to the pressures of the Second World War: her two London homes had both been badly bombed, 37 Mecklenburgh Square in September 1940 and 52 Tavistock Square the following month, and she and Leonard had been forced to move permanently to their Sussex country home, Monk's House, Rodmell, where the frequently fought air battles proved a constant reminder of the dangers faced by civilians on a daily basis. See VW to ES, 10 March [1941] (*Letters*, VI, 478).

¹⁰⁶ VW Diary, 20 January 1931 (*Diary*, IV, 6); see further *ibid.*, 1 November 1924 (*Diary*, II, 320).

¹⁰⁷ Notably, Smyth produced biographical essays on the Empress Eugénie, Emmeline Pankhurst, and Lady Mary Ponsonby (for citations, see n. 76).

¹⁰⁸ Raitt, "'The tide of Ethel'", 14

inscribes a musically coded lesbian message', she proceeds from the premiss that '[d]uring the 1920s and 1930s in England... it was hazardous, if not impossible, for any writer openly to proclaim her lesbianism', to which notion the present article adds wider context in investigating the paradigms that were then available within literature alone for exploring female sexual difference (including that of the author), here exemplified by Woolf.¹⁰⁹

Wood's scholarship is particularly valuable from the musical standpoint, and as we shall later see, the findings of my own study add further weight to her critical readings of Smyth's music as containing encoded female and lesbian meanings. However, on the literary side, certain of her claims do not altogether stand up to scrutiny; in particular, my assessment of Smyth's writings reveals Wood's suggestion that 'in her memoirs... she was astoundingly frank, on the surface, about her passionate lesbian love affairs' to be somewhat over-generous, especially in view of Woolf's testimonies.¹¹⁰ Smyth was indeed honest in apologizing to the reader for the fact that 'unlike other woman-writers of memoirs... I have... no orthodox love affairs to relate', and she even stated that 'I... would rather have died than put my own head in the matrimonial noose'.¹¹¹ But she repeatedly explained the absence of men, marriage, and motherhood through their being incompatible with her vocation and the lifestyle that it necessitated¹¹² – a time-honoured rhetorical ploy for disguising homosexuality in composer biography, which Gary C. Thomas has termed the 'Aesthetic Fallacy'.¹¹³ 'My work must, and would always, be the first consideration', Smyth asserted, asking '[w]here should be found the man whose existence could blend with mine without loss of quality on

¹⁰⁹ Elizabeth Wood, 'Lesbian Fugue: Ethel Smyth's Contrapuntal Arts', in Ruth A. Solie (ed.), *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship* (Berkeley, 1993), 164-83, at 165.

¹¹⁰ Elizabeth Wood, 'Music into Words', in Carol Ascher, Louise DeSalvo, and Sara Ruddick (eds.), *Between Women: Biographers, Novelists, Critics, Teachers and Artists Write about their Work on Women* (New York, 2/1993), 71-83 at 78.

¹¹¹ Smyth, *Impressions that Remained*, Vol. 2, 5; ead., *What Happened Next*, 238.

¹¹² Smyth also wrote in her memoirs that the dogs she kept over a period of many years fostered her maternal instinct; see *What Happened Next*, 120. See further, her *Inordinate (?) Affection: A Story for Dog Lovers* (London, 1936), in which she sketched the stories of her first six dogs.

¹¹³ Gary C. Thomas, "'Was George Frideric Handel Gay?'" On Closet Questions and Cultural Politics', in Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Thomas (eds.), *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology* (New York, 1994), 155-203 at 166. Thomas defines the Aesthetic Fallacy as 'the idea that a composer, being in love with his Muse, has therefore no time for erotic relations with real human beings' (loc. cit.).

either side?’¹¹⁴ She thus developed the metaphor of the operas as her progeny – an apposite analogy, for such works are typically born of two ‘parents’, composer and librettist, working in partnership, and rank amongst their proudest, most momentous joint achievements. She spoke of *Fantasio* as her ‘operatic first-born’, referred to the ‘secret pre-natal career’ of her next such work, *Der Wald*, and recorded that, upon finishing the orchestration of Act II of *The Wreckers*, she sent the telegram ‘May 31, 1904. Safely delivered of fine female child, name Thirza Rampagia Smyth’ to Harry Brewster, who (significantly, in view of the above) was her key collaborator as librettist for these three earliest operas.¹¹⁵

When the topic of Smyth’s marital status is raised in her autobiographies, it is typically coupled with a qualificatory passage that either justifies her decision to remain single or reinforces her (ostensible) heterosexuality.¹¹⁶ She observed that, despite her father’s intention to ensure that all six of his daughters married, she remained single, for otherwise she would have lost the allowance she was granted.¹¹⁷ She blamed her early tomboyishness for her not having a boyfriend in her youth, since any male contemporaries who showed initial interest in her ultimately found greater attraction to her more feminine sister Mary.¹¹⁸ Her statement that ‘I was not going to marry, having other views’ is followed immediately by the story of her brief, secret engagement to William (Willie) Wilde.¹¹⁹ She even claimed that ‘I have always

¹¹⁴ Smyth, *Impressions that Remained*, Vol. 2, 5

¹¹⁵ Smyth, *What Happened Next*, 175; *ibid.* 167; ES to Harry Brewster, 31 May 1904, quoted *ibid.* 254. Thirza is the name of the female romantic lead in *The Wreckers*, and Act II ends with an event that Smyth described as ‘very rampageous’ (*loc. cit.*).

¹¹⁶ Elizabeth Wood has read Smyth’s procedures of simultaneous suggestion of lesbianism and reinforcement of heterosexuality – specifically, the veiling of her love for Lisl von Herzogenberg by her relationship with Harry Brewster – precisely as representing lesbian narrative: ‘Smyth’s subterfuge... effectively denies the lesbian by inscribing in her place the presence of a different [hetero]sexual subject’ (Wood, ‘Lesbian Fugue’, 171). But as noted, the entity that Smyth ultimately used to eclipse her lesbianism in her memoirs was her musical career rather than a man; and as I discuss presently, she was unambiguous in stating that Brewster was *not* a romantic attachment. The present reading abundantly demonstrates that the strategies by which Smyth obfuscated her sexuality in her writings were those of silence rather than subtextual encodification; can one really therefore say that such practices reflect her candour about (and faithfulness to) her lesbianism?

¹¹⁷ see Smyth, *Impressions that Remained*, Vol. 1, 41, 34

¹¹⁸ see *ibid.* 79

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.* 115; on Smyth’s engagement to Willie Wilde (brother of Oscar), see *ibid.* 116-17.

believed the two or three men who have thus honoured me knew perfectly well there was not the slightest danger of their being accepted, so were free to indulge in that priceless luxury of the young, an unrequited attachment'.¹²⁰ She wrote that Harry Brewster, the most serious contender, had soon come to realize that matrimony was out of the question,¹²¹ and she preferred to think of their close, long-standing friendship as an alliance. Though her relationship with Brewster was unquestionably central to her life (as Woolf herself observed), Smyth stated categorically that 'we were not lovers', and that 'there had been nothing resembling love-making', excepting one time 'when we were as good – or as bad – as an engaged couple'.¹²² At the same time, she was unguarded in her memoirs about the fact that she 'always got on better with women than with men', writing that 'all my life... I have found in women's affection a peculiar understanding, mothering quality that is a thing apart.'¹²³ She even included therein a letter to Brewster in which she had asked, 'I wonder why it is so much easier for me, and I believe for a great many English women, to love my own sex passionately rather than yours?'.¹²⁴ But she explained her special friendships with women through solidarity, perhaps also incorporating an element of separatism, for she observed that 'the people who have helped me most at difficult moments of my musical career, beginning with my own sister Mary, have been members of my own sex. Thus it comes to pass that my relations with certain women, all exceptional personalities I think, are shining threads in my life.'¹²⁵

Woolf believed that by omitting to be faithful to her lesbianism (and, by extension, her womanhood) in her published writings, Smyth had failed to represent herself truthfully. Just

¹²⁰ *ibid.* 168

¹²¹ see Smyth, *What Happened Next*, 30

¹²² Smyth, *As Time Went On...*, 57, 253, 253

¹²³ *Ibid.* 110; *ead.*, *Impressions that Remained*, Vol. 2, 6.

¹²⁴ ES to Harry Brewster, 6 October 1892, quoted in Smyth, *As Time Went On...*, 156.

¹²⁵ Smyth, *Impressions that Remained*, Vol. 2, 6

months into their relationship, she had asked Smyth, ‘how can you suppose that you and your nakedness could shock?’, and had remarked to her, ‘[l]esbianism? Thats your theme; I await illumination anxiously’.¹²⁶ Now, a decade later, she was urging her friend to address the ‘reticences innumerable’ that she had discerned in her texts, and to record the essence of her being on the pages that so far had merely chronicled her story.¹²⁷ ‘If you can write your life’, Woolf said, ‘you must be able to write your spirit.’¹²⁸ Smyth, however, considered such prurient discussions off-limits. Woolf persisted, replying

I’m interested that you cant write about masturbation. That I understand. What puzzles me is how this reticence co-habits with your ability to talk openly magnificently, freely about – say H[arry] B[rewster]. I couldn’t do one or the other. But as so much of life is sexual – or so they say – it rather limits autobiography if this is blacked out. It must be, I suspect, for many generations, for women; for its like breaking the hymen...¹²⁹

It is notable that Woolf places Smyth’s discretion in opposition to her candour in her autobiographies about the one significant heterosexual relationship of her life (of which one particularly revealing passage has already been quoted). This fact, coupled to the judicious use of the word ‘co-habits’, suggests that the unmentioned subject of this correspondence is indeed lesbianism. Also telling is Smyth’s interpretation of her friend’s request for information about her sex life, in order accurately to convey her disparate womanly

¹²⁶ VW to ES, 22 April [1930] (*Letters*, IV, 159); VW to ES, 28 Sept[ember 1930] (*Letters*, IV, 222).

¹²⁷ Woolf, ‘Ethel Smyth’, in McNeillie (ed.), *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. 3, 298

¹²⁸ VW to ES, 6 Dec[ember] 1940, quoted in St. John, *Ethel Smyth*, 236. This quotation almost certainly comes from the letter of the same date that appears incompletely in *Letters*, VI, 449-50, where the last page of the document is recorded as having been lost – presumably at some point between preparation of the two publications, and possibly, given the subject matter that may have been discussed therein, not accidentally.

¹²⁹ VW to ES, 12 Jan[uary 19]41 (*Letters*, VI, 459-60). It is further telling that St. John, in quoting this letter, censored it heavily and deleted the word ‘masturbation’; see St. John, *Ethel Smyth*, 236.

experiences, as an enquiry centred on female masturbation – especially in light of Luce Irigaray’s theorization that this physical act differs radically from the male equivalent, and (more importantly) that woman’s pluralism and woman’s language most radically coincide at the corporeal site with which it is associated.¹³⁰ And the reference to the hymen reflects Woolf’s contention that phallogentric language, typified by the unity of the word ‘I’, similarly violates (pluralistic) celebrations of womanhood.

Smyth and Woolf were active as writers at a time in which the exploration in literature of lesbianism was indeed possible, with many authors (including Willa Cather, Djuna Barnes, Natalie Barney, and Gertrude Stein) devising strategies by which to express their sexuality through fiction that reflected thinly disguised auto/biography.¹³¹ Given the social situation of women in the domestic sphere, the domination of the household by patriarchs, and the epistolary culture that offered writers a means through which to experiment with their literary ideas, it would seem likely, as Leslie Hankins has suggested, that lesbian textual codes may have partly developed in correspondence.¹³² This point would account for a certain emphasis in the present article on the letters (and other personal documents) of Smyth and Woolf – for the latter is well known for not having exercised due tact in her writings at times – together with critical readings of *A Room of One’s Own*, the publication that motivated Smyth to hunt for Woolf, and ‘Professions for Women’, the paper with which Smyth is linked on a number of levels.¹³³ Literary encodings of lesbianism, however, were by no means limited to the

¹³⁰ Luce Irigaray, *Ce sexe qui n’en est pas un* (Paris, 1977), 21-32, trans. Claudia Reeder, ‘Ce sexe qui n’en est pas un’, in Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (eds.), *New French Feminisms: An Anthology* (Brighton, 1981), 99-106.

¹³¹ On lesbianism in modern English literature see e.g. Blanche Wiesen Cook, “‘Women Alone Stir my Imagination’: Lesbianism and the Cultural Tradition’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (Summer 1979), 718-39; Stimpson, ‘Zero Degree Deviancy’ (n. 58 above); Laura Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of a Modern English Lesbian Culture* (New York, 2001). Cook’s article offers a particular emphasis on Woolf and her literary circles.

¹³² On this issue, and on the censorship of lesbianism (both private and public) in Woolf’s day, see Leslie Kathleen Hankins, ‘*Orlando*: “A Precipice Marked V”: Between “A Miracle of Discretion” and “Lovemaking Unbelievable: Indiscretions Incredible”’, in Barrett and Cramer (eds.), *Virginia Woolf: Lesbian Readings*, 180-202.

¹³³ On Woolf’s infamous lack of discretion, see Hermione Lee, ‘Virginia Woolf and Offence’, in Batchelor (ed.), *The Art of Literary Biography*, 129-50. On her correspondence, see Catharine R. Stimpson, ‘The Female Sociograph: The Theater

[continued]

semi-public arenas of correspondence and speeches. It is undeniable that some authors still capitulated to the censor, including Vita Sackville-West, who (shortly before her affair with Woolf) wrote the novel *Challenge* (1923) about her partnership with Violet Trefusis, which she dutifully revised prior to publication, changing the protagonists from a lesbian couple to a heterosexual one.¹³⁴ But others braved the consequences of publishing lesbian texts – even though this meant the possibility of legal action being taken against them. In *Hungerheart: The Story of a Soul* (1915), for example, Christopher (Chris) St. John depicted her relationship with Edith (Edy) Craig, with whom she then lived and collaborated on feminist pageants.¹³⁵ And Radclyffe Hall famously endured a censorship trial for *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), the notorious *roman-à-clef* that drew on the author's own experiences as a lesbian in the portrayal of her protagonist as possessing a male soul and mind in a female body (in accordance with the theory prevalent in contemporary sexology of lesbianism as sexual inversion).¹³⁶ Woolf, who had herself published her lesbian novel *Orlando* in the same year, was encouraged by Sackville-West to lend her support to Hall; she co-wrote a published letter of protest with E. M. Forster over the banning of the book, and was even prepared to testify at the trial.¹³⁷

The challenge posed to Victorian sensibilities in the post-war climate had also brought about changes the field of biography. The work of Woolf's Bloomsbury friend Lytton Strachey inaugurated a new era of intimacy and candour, in stark contrast to the reticent

of Virginia Woolf's Letters', in Domna C. Stanton (ed.), *The Female Autograph: Theory and Practice of Autobiography from the Tenth to the Twentieth Century* (Chicago, 1984), 168-79, repr. in ead., *Where the Meanings Are*, 130-9.

¹³⁴ V. Sackville-West, *Challenge* (New York, [1923]), which was never published in England.

¹³⁵ *Hungerheart: The Story of a Soul* (London, 1915), published anonymously. Christopher St. John (pseudonym of Christabel Marshall) was connected with both the subjects of the present article: she had a brief affair with Woolf's former partner, Vita Sackville-West, in the 1930s, and became Smyth's literary executor and first biographer.

¹³⁶ Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness* (see further, n. 37).

¹³⁷ E. M. Forster and Virginia Woolf, 'The New Censorship', Letter to the Editor, *Nation*, 8 September 1928; see further VW to Vita Sackville-West, 8 Sept[ember] 1928 (*Letters*, III, 529-30). Jane Marcus reads allusions to Radclyffe Hall and *The Well of Loneliness* in Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*; see her article 'Sapphistry: Narration as Lesbian Seduction in *A Room of One's Own*', in *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy*, 163-87.

hagiographical life-writing of the nineteenth century.¹³⁸ Woolf had herself painfully experienced the constraints of biography: in chronicling the life of her friend Roger Fry, she encountered difficulty in the treatment of such episodes as his affair with her sister, Vanessa Bell;¹³⁹ and she abandoned a projected biography of Strachey himself because it was considered impossible to portray him faithfully without openly discussing his (homo)sexual exploits.¹⁴⁰ Woolf longed for a time in which lives could be written openly – and in which women could (finally) tell the truth about themselves. But she never lived to see that day. On 28 March 1941, she committed suicide by weighting her pockets with stones and drowning herself in the River Ouse. The shock was such that Smyth, for once, was silenced, for she declined a request to write a tribute – ‘[l]ater perhaps’, she wrote to Vanessa Bell, ‘but my god not now.’¹⁴¹ Woolf had left her husband Leonard a short note ending with the instruction, ‘[w]ill you destroy all my papers’, scrawled up the left-hand side of the page.¹⁴² Her final thoughts, quite possibly the last words she ever wrote, related to her perennial anxiety of betraying her autobiographical self. One can hardly imagine the great loss to posterity had her request been executed.

Towards the end of her life, Woolf wrote: ‘And little though I shall carry across the Styx to justify my life here, that one bright deed shall shine like a medal, or a wound, to show that I,

¹³⁸ Lytton Strachey produced three watershed volumes of biography, *Eminent Victorians: Cardinal Manning – Florence Nightingale – Dr. Arnold – General Gordon* (London, 1918), *Queen Victoria* (London, 1921), and *Elizabeth and Essex: A Tragic History* (London, 1928), as well as a number of biographical articles that have since been republished in various collections. *Eminent Victorians* is significant for its manifesto-like preface (pp. vii-ix), in which Strachey lamented the present state of biography in England. Woolf assessed Strachey’s importance to the development of the genre in ‘The Art of Biography’; in addition, her experimental biography *Flush* pays homage (of sorts) to his unique style in places, notably at the point of death of the protagonist.

¹³⁹ Woolf, *Roger Fry: A Biography* (London, 1940)

¹⁴⁰ See Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, 2 Vols. (London, 1972), Vol. 2, 165. Various scholars have remarked on the historical irony that figures such as Strachey and Woolf who have revolutionized biography have themselves led lives that challenge traditional biographical models.

¹⁴¹ ES to Vanessa Bell, Good Friday [11 April] 1941, Charleston Papers, University of Sussex Manuscript Collections; quoted in Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 763.

¹⁴² VW to Leonard Woolf, [28 March 1941] (*Letters*, VI, 487). This reading follows the revised (though not altogether certain) dating of Woolf’s suicide notes proposed by the editors of *Letters* and explored in ‘The Dating of Virginia Woolf’s Last Letters’, Appendix A, *Letters*, VI, 489-91.

Virginia, kept Ethel at it.’¹⁴³ Her words ring true. She and Smyth were separated only by the different interpretive lenses through which they viewed life; or, to use her words, ‘[i]t is merely a matter of blue eyes or brown.’¹⁴⁴ Woolf, by disguising her existence through the relative anonymity of pluralistic, fictitious narrative, could recount her experiences as a woman and a lesbian in ways that Smyth could not, because she wrote the silences *into* her works where Smyth merely left them out. ‘As I told Ethel Smyth,’ Woolf once wrote in her diary, ‘one must drop a safety curtain over ones private scene’.¹⁴⁵ And yet the superficially candid Smyth refused the methods Woolf encouraged her to use in order to tell the truth about herself as a woman and to free herself from the narrow constraints of her egotism. So why did she reject these linguistic frameworks outright, in favour of the previously-existing male paradigms?

Smyth’s sensibilities were resolutely Victorian, in comparison to the modernist tendencies of Woolf, who had once described the inveterate autobiographer and her work as the ‘figure’ and ‘soul of the [eighteen-]nineties’.¹⁴⁶ Woolf surely discerned nineteenth-century biographical paradigms in Smyth’s output, right down to its ‘usual two volumes’ in the case of *Impressions that Remained*, and the frequent interruption of many of her narratives by lengthy passages of quoted correspondence.¹⁴⁷ Similarly Smyth, despite her acute awareness of the significance of gender to creative art, sought in the field of composition the equal rights for women (specifically, herself) for which the suffragettes vociferously campaigned, whereas Woolf anticipated second-wave feminism in explicitly celebrating sexual difference as a writer – another symptom of their generational divide. But the reasons for their very divergent opinions on auto/biography, although undoubtedly inflected by these contrasts, are

¹⁴³ VW to ES, 22 Dec[ember 19]39 (*Letters*, VI, 376)

¹⁴⁴ VW to ES, 24 Feb[ruary 1930] (*Letters*, IV, 144)

¹⁴⁵ VW Diary, 21 September 1940 (*Diary*, V, 323)

¹⁴⁶ VW to Lytton Strachey, [30 November 1919] (*Letters*, II, 405)

¹⁴⁷ Woolf, ‘The New Biography’, in *Collected Essays*, Vol. 4, 231

more complex. In her 'Professions for Women' speech, Woolf had said: 'what is a woman? I assure you, I don't know... All I can tell you is that I discovered when I came to write that a woman... is not a man. Her experience is not the same. *Her traditions are different.*'¹⁴⁸ In her references to females and lesbians in literature, from Sappho to Aphra Behn to Charlotte Brontë to Vita Sackville-West (and Ethel Smyth), Woolf examined shared experiences among women – because she could.¹⁴⁹ In *A Room of One's Own*, she observed that

...masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice. Jane Austen should have laid a wreath upon the grave of Fanny Burney, and George Eliot done homage to the robust shade of Eliza Carter... All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn...¹⁵⁰

But Woolf also acknowledged, in 'Professions for Women', that females who were 'now for the first time practising' in their chosen careers had 'no Sappho, no Jane Austen to fall back upon'.¹⁵¹ And in Smyth's case, there were simply no comparable legacies to which to appeal in her writings. Though she encouraged solidarity amongst female musicians,¹⁵² she chose to ignore the many women *composers* with whom she was contemporary – with the notable

¹⁴⁸ Woolf, 'Professions for Women', in Leaska (ed.), *The Pargiters*, p. xxxiii; italics added

¹⁴⁹ Woolf discussed some of the more famous women writers in a variety of contexts, including the essays 'Charlotte Brontë', *Times Literary Supplement*, 13 April 1916, repr. in McNeillie (ed.), *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. 2, 26-31; 'George Eliot', *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 November 1919, repr. in *Collected Essays*, Vol. 1, 196-204; 'George Eliot (1819-1880)', *Daily Herald*, 9 March 1921, repr. in McNeillie (ed.), *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. 3, 293-5. On the emergent tradition of women writers in modern times, and their significance to literary history, see Jane Spencer, *The Rise of the Woman Novelist: From Aphra Behn to Jane Austen* (Oxford, 1986); for a comprehensive (and generous) view of lesbians in/and literature, see Lillian Faderman (ed.), *Chloe Plus Olivia: An Anthology of Lesbian Literature from the Seventeenth Century to the Present* (New York, 1994).

¹⁵⁰ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 98

¹⁵¹ Woolf, 'Professions for Women', in Leaska (ed.), *The Pargiters*, p. xl

¹⁵² See e.g. Smyth, 'England, Music and Women', *The English Review*, Vol. 22 (1916), 187-98; ead., 'An Open Secret', in *Streaks of Life*, 231-246.

exception of Augusta Holmès (Holmes)¹⁵³ – for few had achieved lasting widespread fame, and a lesbian tradition in music remained completely unknown.¹⁵⁴ While Smyth (perhaps ungenerously) allowed for the possibility that ‘a future chain of great women composers’ might one day be recognized, for the present she was seen to be ‘of the race of pioneers, of pathmakers’, to borrow Woolf’s own words.¹⁵⁵ Thus Smyth focussed on her own case exclusively in support of her arguments.

Both writers appreciated that women were perceived as intellectually second-rate compared with men, owing to androcentric constructions of genius and greatness¹⁵⁶ – to which biography, in all its forms, subscribed by its very practice of presenting exemplary lives. Smyth’s texts amply demonstrate her awareness both of the existence of historical canons of musical works, and of the role played in regulating the currently performed repertoires by a powerful patriarchal clique she variously termed the Inner Circle, the Group, the Elders, or (most commonly) the Machine. This body, she alleged, unfairly assisted a select few up-and-coming composers while firmly excluding her, thus accounting for the difficulties she repeatedly encountered in having her works accepted in England, since all the jobs of power in music were given to men who, for reasons of prejudice, favoured those of their own sex. Smyth’s polemics on music criticism, meanwhile, testified to her understanding of the power of the printed word to act as an agent of canonicity.¹⁵⁷ She held that the power (and discrimination) of the press, though incapable of bringing about the death of a musical work

¹⁵³ See Smyth, ‘Augusta Holmes, Pioneer’ [July 1921], in *A Final Burning of Boats etc.* (London, 1928), 126-36; see further Smyth, *As Time Went On...*, 129-30 and ead., *What Happened Next*, 156-7.

¹⁵⁴ On contemporary female composers in Britain – and Smyth’s ignoring of them in her writings – see Sophie Fuller, ‘Women Composers during the British Musical Renaissance, 1880-1918’ (Ph.D. diss., King’s College, University of London, 1998). On the exclusion of women composers from the musical canon and the agents by which this historical effacement was effected, see Marcia J. Citron, *Gender and the Musical Canon* (Cambridge, 1993).

¹⁵⁵ Smyth, ‘Female Pippings in Eden’, 45; Woolf, ‘Professions for Women’, in Leaska (ed.), *The Pargiters*, p. xxvii.

¹⁵⁶ Christine Battersby has recently explored the exclusion of women throughout history from concepts of genius (and creativity), in her book *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (London, 1989).

¹⁵⁷ See especially Smyth, ‘Where Musical Criticism Goes Astray’, in *Female Pippings in Eden*, 71-86. See also her articles ‘Composers and Critics’, *The New Statesman*, 9 May 1931, 389-90, and ‘Female Pippings in Eden’ (cited in n. 80).

altogether, could nevertheless ‘induce a state of suspended animation which may last longer than the life of the unfortunate composer’.¹⁵⁸

Moreover, Smyth fully recognized that the canons of music and literature were differently structured. In comparing the two disciplines – a subject on which she was uniquely qualified to comment – she believed that the difficulties encountered by an aspiring artist, especially a woman, were far greater in the former, being so dependent on training and professional development, and relying on a very limited reception of one’s work by an often ignorant public.¹⁵⁹ In consequence, the history of music centred on a discrete number of Great Composers, with much less room for more minor figures than in literature. Woolf subverted these canonical constructions in order to promote secondary, pluralistic traditions of women’s literature. But the sole viable option for Smyth was to appeal to these ideologies even as she challenged them, in order to insinuate herself within the only musical tradition available – the closed circle of the male-centred, nineteenth-century canon. Thus her volumes perpetuated the Victorian masculine biographical myth of the artist destined to succeed, and willing to make sacrifices and to labour unremittingly in pursuit of that success, but encountering all manner of obstructions along the way – including, in her case, opposition by men to a female composer. The fact that she privileged her professional career in her memoirs, rather than emphasizing the private spheres she occupied and their intersections with her public life, may likewise be seen as characteristic of traditional, male life-writing; and the act of casting Harry Brewster in the role of her Muse at points therein appropriates a paradigm commonplace elsewhere in musical biography in the presentation of male compositional geniuses alongside

¹⁵⁸ Smyth, ‘Where Musical Criticism Goes Astray’, 79

¹⁵⁹ See Smyth, ‘Female Pippings in Eden’, esp. Chapter III, ‘Literary and Musical Careers Contrasted’, 14-8; see also ead., ‘A Final Burning of Boats’, in *A Final Burning of Boats*, 3-54, esp. 7-11.

associated females seen only to have provided inspiration for their acts of creation.¹⁶⁰ It is, furthermore, clear that Smyth's life could not be made to fit such an individualistic (egotistic) life-shape as that of the unilinear biographical model, for though her accomplishments are extraordinary when placed in their sociopolitical context, commentators have all too often dismissed them as modest, especially given the length of her life, in relation to those of other (male) composers. Paula R. Backscheider has put the point concisely in stating that 'writing the lives of men and women is different... Women's conflicts are likely to be different, and a moderate... achievement may be truly remarkable.'¹⁶¹ But Smyth's employment of masculine paradigms did serve one crucial function, in ensuring that her autobiographies reduced her to a persona appropriate to posterity, which identity she herself created and controlled – just as her public image resolved her lesbianism into (acceptable) male heterosexuality.¹⁶² Here, Smyth looked to the future where Woolf looked to the past – ironically, quite the opposite trajectories to those of their art.

Smyth's literary forays were thus an attempt to canonize her works, and herself, by speaking to the musical patriarchy in its own language. This project took priority over any attempts to represent herself accurately; despite the claims made in her memoirs to 'speak[ing] the whole truth and nothing but the truth', she also reflected that 'it takes some of us a lifetime to learn that "toute vérité n'est pas bonne à dire"'.¹⁶³ In fact, she found it necessary to distort herself completely, through not being faithful to her lesbianism, which, given the above reading, it is

¹⁶⁰ On (masculine) life-paradigms in musical biography, see my 'Rewriting Composers' Lives: Critical Historiography and Musical Biography' (Ph.D. diss., Royal Holloway, University of London, 2004). See also my preliminary article "'A Relic of an Age still Capable of a Romantic Outlook": Musical Biography and The Master Musicians Series, 1899-1906', *Comparative Criticism*, Vol. 25 (November 2003), 161-202.

¹⁶¹ Backscheider, *Reflections on Biography*, 132; italics in original

¹⁶² Sue-Ellen Case has argued, albeit in a different context, that lesbianism that conforms to an ostensibly heterosexual gender dynamic in fact appropriates (and undermines) rather than merely perpetuates societal norms. See her article 'Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic', in Lynda Hart (ed.), *Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women's Theatre* (Ann Arbor, 1989), 282-99, repr. in Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (eds.), *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (New York, 1993), 294-306.

¹⁶³ Smyth, *Impressions that Remained*, Vol. 1, 110; ead., *As Time Went On...*, 252.

difficult not to consider an ordering principle of her life. We have seen that Smyth's sexual identity provided a source of inspiration for her creative output and a basis for her opposition to male-dominated society, and (in all fairness to her) it was probably also a prime reason for her having the time and inclination to conduct the extraordinarily varied life that made her autobiographies interesting in the first instance. Humphrey Carpenter, the author of a recent biography of another gay twentieth-century British composer, has spoken of the centrality of such 'personal danger areas', to use his term, to an artist's 'creative personality';¹⁶⁴ Lis Whitelaw, biographer of Cicely Hamilton (the suffragette journalist who provided the words for Smyth's 'The March of the Women'), has argued for the importance of like-minded biographers to the fair portrayal of female and lesbian subjects.¹⁶⁵ In view of the now widely accepted view, to which Woolf evidently subscribed, that the production of (authentic) 'women's auto/biography' is governed by factors other than merely possessing a female subject, it is significant that Smyth's first biographer, Christopher St. John, was herself lesbian. Though inevitably censorial in particular areas, St. John's biography nevertheless demonstrates a certain sympathy towards and identification with Smyth's sexual orientation, such as in the use, observed by Katharine Cockin, of the coded designation of 'intimate friendship' to indicate one of Smyth's lesbian bonds, which formulation she (St. John) had elsewhere employed to refer to herself in relation to her partner Edith Craig.¹⁶⁶

Woolf appears to have been ambivalent over Smyth's compositions and uncertain as to her wider standing in the realm of music. In her diary she once wrote that

¹⁶⁴ Humphrey Carpenter (in conversation with Lyndall Gordon), 'Learning about Ourselves: Biography as Autobiography', in Batchelor (ed.), *The Art of Literary Biography*, 267-79, at 272-3. See further, id., *Benjamin Britten: A Biography* (London, 1992).

¹⁶⁵ Lis Whitelaw, 'Make of our Lives a Study: Reading and Writing Lesbian Biography', in Suzanne Raitt (ed.), *Volcanoes and Pearl Divers: Essays in Lesbian Feminist Studies* (London, 1995), 103-22. See further, ead., *The Life and Rebellious Times of Cicely Hamilton, Actress, Writer, Suffragist* (London, 1990).

¹⁶⁶ Katharine Cockin, *Edith Craig (1869-1947): Dramatic Lives* (London, 1998), 24; St. John, *Ethel Smyth*, 58; Edith Craig and Christopher St. John (eds.), *Ellen Terry's Memoirs* (New York, 1932), p. viii. Ellen Terry was Edith Craig's mother.

I suspect [Smyth's] music is too literary – too stressed – too didactic for my taste. But I am always impressed by the fact that it is music – I mean that she has spun these coherent chords harmonies melodies out of her so practical vigorous, strident mind. What if she should be a great composer? This fantastic idea is to her the merest commonplace... As she conducts, she hears music like Beethoven's.¹⁶⁷

But Smyth did at least succeed in her music in one crucial respect that escaped her autobiographies, namely the subversion of male traditions and corresponding codification of lesbianism. Elizabeth Wood's recent scholarship demonstrates Smyth's (defiant) manipulation of the musical conventions of the patriarchy through such strategies as her undermining and hybridization of standard structures and genres, her ironic use of quotation, and the prominence given to the mezzo-soprano voice.¹⁶⁸ Such hermeneutical readings are convincing in relation to music of this period and especially that of Smyth, who suffered because of her sex and who was abundantly aware of gendered criticisms of her music by George Bernard Shaw and others.¹⁶⁹ Her activities in the 1900s had taken her to Paris, where the teachings on composition then current at the Schola Cantorum were being systematized by Vincent d'Indy in a multi-volume treatise, the 1909 contribution to which contains one of the most pronounced discussions in theoretical musical writings of the gendered nature of sonata form as enacting a narrative in which the 'feminine' second subject is subjugated by

¹⁶⁷ VW Diary, 4 February 1931 (*Diary*, IV, 10). Beethoven, apart from being situated at the very heart of the musical canon, was also one of Smyth's favourite composers, and his music discernibly influenced her own. Woolf noted elsewhere that 'they say [Smyth] writes music like an old dryasdust German music master'; VW Diary, 16 June 1930 (*Diary*, III, 306).

¹⁶⁸ The devices by which Smyth achieved a lesbian (and feminist) musical aesthetic are given fullest exegesis in Wood's 'Performing Rights: A Sonography of Women's Suffrage', *Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 79, No. 4 (Winter 1995), 606-43. See also Wood's articles 'Gender and Genre in Ethel Smyth's Operas' (cited in n. 31); 'Lesbian Fugue' (cited in n. 109); 'Sapphonics', in Brett, Wood, and Thomas (eds.), *Queering the Pitch*, 27-66, esp. 44-55; and 'The Lesbian in the Opera: Desire Unmasked in Smyth's *Fantasio* and *Fête galante*', in Corinne E. Blackmer and Patricia Juliana Smith (eds.), *En travesti: Women, Gender Subversion, Opera* (New York, 1995), 285-305.

¹⁶⁹ See Smyth, 'A Final Burning of Boats', 34-6; ead., *As Time Went On...*, 174-5.

its stronger, ‘masculine’ counterpart.¹⁷⁰ It thus appears plausible that Smyth, especially in the years that followed, might have appropriated and subverted sonata form, as Wood has indicated with reference to Smyth’s ‘suffrage music’, including the final movement of her last String Quartet (1912) and the quasi-sonata pairing of two of her most overtly feminist melodies in the Overture to *The Boatswain’s Mate* (1913-4).¹⁷¹ In view of the previously mentioned importance of the suffrage campaign generally to lesbianism and its associated art, Wood’s determination of the significance of that movement to Smyth’s resistance to the patriarchy through lesbian-inscribed music is similarly feasible, especially given the emphasis Wood places on the Pankhurst family – headed by the woman who, in Woolf’s mind, had been Smyth’s lover, and to whom she devoted over a hundred pages in her collection of essays *Female Pipings in Eden*.

Furthermore, much of Wood’s scholarship concentrates on opera, which she has described as ‘[apparently] Smyth’s chosen means... through which she contrived to reveal and reshape her lifelong struggle with what she called the “eternal sex problem between men and women”’.¹⁷² Susan McClary has determined the crucial role played by opera throughout its history in ‘develop[ing] a musical semiotics of gender... for constructing “masculinity” or “femininity” in music’, owing to its associated male and female cast members; Catherine Clément has demonstrated opera’s traditional construction of women as subservient and as ‘perpetually sing[ing] their eternal undoing’.¹⁷³ Thus Smyth’s preference for mezzo-soprano operatic heroines in place of the traditional soprano may indeed be indicative of the undermining of the gendered narrative conventions of the genre. Opera was the repeated subject of Smyth’s

¹⁷⁰ Vincent d’Indy, *Cours de composition musicale*, Book 2, Part 1 (Paris, 1909), 262, quoted in Citron, *Gender and the Musical Canon*, 136 and 260 n. 38.

¹⁷¹ see Wood, ‘Performing Rights’, 624-5, 630

¹⁷² Wood, ‘Gender and Genre in Ethel Smyth’s Operas’, 500

¹⁷³ Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minnesota, 1991), 7; Catherine Clément, trans. Betsy Wing, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women* (Minneapolis, 1988), 5.

polemical tirades, and as noted, her memoirs portray her contributions to this genre as children, which indicates their import both as products of her life and as a reflection of their parent.¹⁷⁴ In view of her depiction of *The Wreckers* as a ‘fine female child’, as well as her general gravitation towards strong female relationships and networks, maybe she, like her own mother, gave birth to six daughters.¹⁷⁵ And we have seen that Woolf, at a pivotal moment in her correspondence with Smyth, designated the composer ‘the first woman to write an opera’ – the (literal) inaccuracy of which she would have been aware, if only from Smyth’s writings on Holmès. In that letter, as shown above, Woolf hypothesized the difference between (faithful) ‘women’s autobiography’, and works written by women but according to the masculine standard, characterized by the nefarious ‘I’. Wood has observed that Smyth’s (authorial) voice quite literally pervades her operas, in the prevalence of mezzo-soprano writing coincident with her own range as a singer,¹⁷⁶ but she has also indicated that Smyth represented certain other people in her compositions, specifically, that the various instruments of her lost String Quintet (1883) might each reflect a figure central to her life at the time, and that Mrs Waters, the protagonist of *The Boatswain’s Mate* (libretto by Smyth after W. W. Jacobs), is modelled on Emmeline Pankhurst.¹⁷⁷ Such readings suggest that in her music, Smyth could depart from the egotism that so displeased Woolf, by utilizing a similar technique to that by which contemporary lesbian authors explored their sexual experiences and relationships in literature. Did Woolf’s apparently erroneous remark therefore indicate her recognition that Smyth had triumphed where other female operatic composers had failed, in writing feminist (and lesbian) operas true to the sex of the originator – hence, the first genuine ‘women’s operas’?

¹⁷⁴ See especially Smyth’s ‘The Opera Fiasco’, in *Streaks of Life*, 206-30 and ‘An Iron Thesis on Opera’, in *A Final Burning of Boats*, 180-99.

¹⁷⁵ Smyth’s six operas are as follows: *Fantasio* (1892-4); *Der Wald* (1899-1901); *The Wreckers* [*Les naufrageurs, Standrecht*] (1902-4); *The Boatswain’s Mate* [*The Bosun’s Mate*] (1913-14); *Fête galante* (1921-2); *Entente cordiale* (1923-4).

¹⁷⁶ see Wood, ‘Sapphonics’, esp. 45-6

¹⁷⁷ See Wood, ‘Lesbian Fugue’, 179; ead., ‘Performing Rights’, 628.

Perhaps Smyth could safely be more manipulative and subversive – not to mention forcefully noncompliant – within the narrative framework provided by music. By virtue of its ambiguity relative to other artistic media (such as literature), music is ideally suited to discussions of such notionally unspeakable subjects as the experiences of women and lesbians within oppressive heterosexual-patriarchal contexts. Correspondingly, the auto/biographical messages borne by music, although more difficult to interpret, may for the same reason prove to be even more potent than those of such pseudo-fictional paradigms as were employed by Woolf in her writings. Certainly, Woolf's literary lesbian texts were recognized as such by the academy significantly in advance of Smyth's musical ones, and indeed generated some concern during her own day as to the possibility of hidden meanings. But in any case, and despite Woolf's best efforts to the contrary, Smyth's published writings quite literally told an altogether different story from that of her music. Annegret Fauser has recently demonstrated how one of Smyth's contemporaries, Lili Boulanger, also reconstructed herself through music in a manner faithful to her womanhood (specifically, according to the socially acceptable image of the child genius), through identification with the fragile heroine of her opera *La Princesse Maleine* (1911-18); Jann Pasler has shown that the immediate popularity of the music of Augusta Holmès, who led an unconventional life and whose public identity came to be modelled along masculine lines, was inextricably tied to its perceived virility.¹⁷⁸

Ironically, the fact that Smyth's compositions were deemed 'masculine' by her contemporary critics, even though more recent hermeneutical readings have indicated this opinion to be misguided, weighed against the reception of her music – inasmuch as she found herself

¹⁷⁸ Annegret Fauser, 'Lili Boulanger's *La princesse Maleine*: A Composer and her Heroine as Literary Icons', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, Vol. 122, Part 1 (1997), 68-108; Jann Pasler, 'The Ironies of Gender, or Virility and Politics in the Music of Augusta Holmès', *Women & Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture*, Vol. 2 (1998), 1-25.

caught in a gendered aesthetic double-standard, as Eugene Gates has recently explored¹⁷⁹ – whereas adherence in her autobiographies to the normative masculine model, albeit neither coincident with nor appropriate to its subject, was later to work in her favour. For an autobiography not only represents the transliteration of its protean subject into falsely homogenous form, but also the author's own retrospective assessment, reinvention, and distortion of his or her life.¹⁸⁰ The medium is notoriously unreliable owing to the abundant opportunities afforded its practitioners to relate their preferred version of events – and tacitly to omit any information not in keeping with this self-portrayal – thereby to propagate only those truths *and fictions* by which they desire to be remembered. Moreover, where biographies are short-lived and of necessity continually rewritten, autobiographies are seemingly immortal, being invested with a false and continuing authority by virtue of their ostensibly internal frame of reference. In presenting lasting, unchangeable opinions of the subject for the benefit of future generations of readers, they reflect a historical defensive manoeuvre, inevitably conditioning the ways in which the author's life, as well as the products of that life, may subsequently be discussed. Autobiography has therefore often been appropriated by socially repressed groups, women and lesbians included, in order to resist hegemony and gain cultural ground.¹⁸¹ The importance of such texts lies in their very existence and in the permanence of the documentary record of their subjects.

¹⁷⁹ Eugene Gates, 'Damned if You Do and Damned if You Don't: Sexual Aesthetics and the Music of Dame Ethel Smyth', *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Spring 1997), 63-71; see also id., 'The Woman Composer Question: Four Case Studies from the Romantic Era' (Ed.D. diss., University of Toronto, 1992). See further Elizabeth Kertesz, 'Gender and Beyond: Talking about the Critical Reception of Ethel Smyth', in Stefan Fragner, Jan Hemming and Beate Kutschke (eds.), *Gender Studies und Musik: Geschlechterrollen und ihre Bedeutung für die Musikwissenschaft* (Regensburg, 1998), 65-74.

¹⁸⁰ The following section offers only a (cursory) summary of the issues most pertinent to the present discussion, drawing on the extensive theoretical literature on autobiography, of which the principal studies include the following: James Olney (ed.), *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton, 1980); Paul John Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (Princeton, 1985); Philippe Lejeune, trans. Katherine Leary, *On Autobiography* (Minneapolis, 1989); James Olney (ed.), *Studies in Autobiography* (New York, 1988); Paul John Eakin, *How our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (Ithaca, 1999). On revisionary acts in the autobiographical writings of another twentieth-century composer, see Maynard Solomon, 'Charles Ives: Some Questions of Veracity', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Fall 1987), 443-70, esp. 443-53.

¹⁸¹ On the employment of autobiography by women as a means of striking back against (patriarchal) hegemony, see especially Mary Jean Corbett, *Representing Femininity: Middle-Class Subjectivity in Victorian and Edwardian Women's* [continued]

Most autobiographers are not granted as many chances to rewrite their life as was Ethel Smyth. It is often said that Smyth abandoned music altogether in the 1930s due to increasing distorted hearing and deafness. Referring to the literary career that later sustained her, she famously wrote ‘should Fate be thanked for providing a second string whereon to play, as well as one can, the tune life is always making up in one’s heart’.¹⁸² But although she no longer produced new compositions, only the *nature* of her musical activities had changed. Her work as a composer had always involved extensive efforts to network – to showcase her skills and to market her output. Now, in her autobiographies, she attempted to secure a lasting future by according herself and her music a special place in history. Smyth confessed that ‘it sometimes saddens me to think that during my lifetime I have had no chance of making myself musically known to my countrymen and women as I have done in books – more or less. Yet rather less than more.’¹⁸³ She was acutely aware that more people could have read her writings than could ever have heard her music, so the former (including her autobiographical polemical essays) functioned to generate lasting, belated interest in the latter, providing documentary records that would supersede those of her critics in order that, as she stated, ‘someday, I may make friends, musically, with those I cannot get at in my lifetime.’¹⁸⁴ Thus it was also important, given her awareness of music’s exclusivity, for her to appeal to as wide a readership as possible – hence her repeated claims to have written ‘not for [specialist] musical readers in particular but for Mr. Everyman and his family’.¹⁸⁵ Her endeavours apparently met with success; as William McNaught’s obituary of Smyth in *The Musical Times* testifies, ‘her books were read by countless people who had never heard a note

Autobiographies (New York, 1992), and Sidonie Smith, *Subjectivity, Identity and the Body: Women’s Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century* (Bloomington, Ind., 1993).

¹⁸² Smyth, *As Time Went On...*, 4. In her literary texts, Smyth developed the metaphor of her music and her writing being, respectively, her first and second ‘strings’; see further, ead., *What Happened Next*, 2.

¹⁸³ Smyth, *As Time Went On...*, 303

¹⁸⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ Smyth, *What Happened Next*, 87

of her music... It may be – in fact it seems to be generally believed – that her books will do more than her music *to preserve and brighten her fame*.¹⁸⁶ Even during her own lifetime, Smyth's writings resulted in 'a certain curiosity as to the author's music'; she observed that, as a result of her activities apart from composition, 'innocents frequently write: "I am ashamed to say I know none of your music"'.¹⁸⁷ She once said that 'if I were ever to win through at all it would not be till I had one leg in the grave' – and her autobiographies represent her final attempt at attaining this success.¹⁸⁸ Perhaps she hadn't switched to her second string at all; she had been playing on her first one all along.

Abstract

As professionals who encountered first-hand the invidious barriers within patriarchal society that hindered career women, Ethel Smyth and Virginia Woolf both used their published writings to pursue lifelong crusades against the under-representation of females in their respective disciplines. This article compares the different strategies by which the two artists strove to tell the truth about their experiences as women, and considers the corresponding implications for Smyth's musical output. While the egotistical Smyth candidly recounted stories relating to herself, Woolf excised overt authorial presence from her texts, instead invoking fictitious, protean narrators to reflect the collective unconsciousness of Womanhood. Woolf's encouragement and criticism of Smyth's literary endeavours are examined in the context of her biographical theories and feminist critiques, and of the lesbian proclivities of both women. Their published writings and personal documents suggest that Smyth actively appealed to the very autobiographical strategies that Woolf persistently

¹⁸⁶ W[illiam] McN[ought], 'Dame Ethel Smyth', *Musical Times*, Vol. 85 (1944), 207-12 at 207, 212; italics added.

¹⁸⁷ Smyth, 'Female Pipings in Eden', 37; ead., 'Composers and Critics', 390. See also ead., 'A Final Burning of Boats', 16, 33-4.

¹⁸⁸ Smyth, *As Time Went On...*, 290

counselled her to subvert, in order to compete with the (heterosexual) patriarchy on equal terms. She apparently held this option to be the only available one through which to insinuate herself within the canonical traditions specific to music, as distinct from those of literature.