Women with Women, without Men: The Emergence of Lesbian Themed Novels in 1920s and 1930s in London and Paris

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Abstract

This thesis is a product of my interest in the pioneering, explicitly lesbian themed novels which started appearing in the late 1920s and early 1930s in London and Paris. By 'lesbian themed novels' I mean only those novels which were written by women, who themselves at some points in their lives were attracted to other women. Most of the analysis focuses on the period around the year of 1928, when three lesbian themed novels were published in English: *Orlando: A Biography* by Virginia Woolf, *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall, and *Ladies Almanack* by Djuna Barnes. The first such explicitly lesbian novel in the French language, which was partially published in 1932, was *The Pure and the Impure* by Colette. The four novels, all came out of two quite famous smaller communities of London and Paris – the Bloomsbury group and the Left Bank community, respectively. In the thesis I am using the discourse analysis, as defined by Fran Tonkiss[1] to try and pinpoint the various factors that influenced the writing, censuring, and printing of these novels. I conduct a closer reading of the novels themselves, the available biographical materials on the lives of the authors, as well as the criticism and studies that appeared after the books have been published. The greatest part of my thesis tries to establish the idea of a women's modernism, a project mostly separate from the canonical modernist writings. It proves that women who wrote against the current modernist norm, established mostly by men, to erase the presence of the author, risked more than not being considered proper artists at their time. They risked being marginalised in, if not completely excluded from, the canon. Yet by staying true to their own beliefs of what literature should be about, they created a foundation for the next generation of women writers.

[1] Tonkiss, F. (1998). Analysing discourse. In Seal, C. (ed.), *Researching society and culture*. London: Sage Publications (pp.245-260)

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Contents

Chapter I - Introduction

The first quarter of the twentieth century saw a proliferation of literature written on homosexuality, both as pathology in 'works of such sexologists like Kraft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis and others'[2], as well as a topic of many works of art, of various genres. Of particular interest were novels written by women authors that followed lives of women who were romantically, sexually or in any other way attracted to the members of their own sex. I will refer to these as lesbian themed novels. In my thesis I will focus only on such novels written by women, although many male authors of the time wrote on the topic, much earlier than women. I will do so in order to escape falling into the trap of the male gaze.

Hence, the topic of this thesis is the emergence of the lesbian themed novels written by women who themselves felt more or less attracted to their own sex, mostly focusing on the last quarter of the 1920s, and the year of 1928 in particular, in which three such novels were published in London and Paris. The novels in question were *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall, *Orlando: A Biography* by Virginia Woolf, and *Ladies* Almanack by Djuna Barnes. To this I will add the fourth novel, drafted before all of these, but published in 1932, by the French author Colette[3], who moved in the same circle of the Parisian Left Bank community,

[2] Benstock, S. (1987). *Women of the left bank: Paris, 1900-1940*. London: Virago Press Ltd., p.11

[3] According to Shari Benstock's *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900-1940* (for details, please turn to bibliography), Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette (1873-1954), a stage performer and a dancer, was one of the most important members of the Left Bank community of Paris from the beginning of the twentieth century. After marrying for the first time she followed the advice of her husband Willy to start writing and publishing under his

as Djuna Barnes, and occasionally Radclyffe Hall. Colette's novel *The Pure and the Impure* is important for my thesis because it contains many direct references to other women of the Left Bank community, and the personal definitions of 'lesbianism' they had. This novel is also the only of the four written and published in French, by a French author. It will therefore serve me to show the way the wider public in France, particularly in Paris really regarded the lesbian themes (at least in terms of literature), and if the publishing of the books in English by American expatriate writers in Paris was just a *laissez-faire* business.

In my thesis I will pay particular attention to the lives of the authors who wrote the novels in question, as well as to important figures around them who in some way contributed to creating a space for them to contemplate, write, print and publish these books. I will devote my thesis to making links between their social status, place of residence, circles they were moving in, relationships to male modernist authors, in order to explore their importance for the four novels. The discussion will comprise three major parts.

In the first chapter, entitled By Any Other Name[4]: The Lesbian and the Novel, I first discuss the main concepts that I am going to use, starting with what I mean by 'lesbian', and discussing it as an umbrella term that in my analysis will also include bisexuality, and generally a lifestyle of women living with women, without men, as I specify in my thesis title. Secondly I

name. Afterwards she would publish under the name 'Colette'. She was the only of the Left Bank women to practice bisexuality throughout her life (although she did not call it by that name), as she married three times, all the while also having romantic relationships with other women.

[4] A part of the line from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet,* Juliet: 1600, '...that which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.'

will address the difference in view towards male and female homosexuality in the 1920s and 1930s in Paris and London, as well as how they differed with regard to class. This historical and biographical part will be informed by Shari Benstock's amazingly thorough and exceptionally well-informed research on the women of the Left Bank community[5], but it will be extended by inclusion of the more recent literature on the topic, by Andrea Weiss[6]. Against their discussion of the literary circle I will discuss the struggle for access to literature with a focus on women modernists by Bonnie Kime Scott[7]. I will discuss the importance of the novel as a genre, particularly its aspects of domesticity and the narrative, that according to Judith Roof in its very core serves to perpetuate heterosexuality as the only natural arrangement.[8] Her work *Come as You Are: Sexuality and Narrative* contains a numerous explanations on how the traditional narrative works to support heterosexuality, particularly in short stories and novels, and how the outcast, such as the 'lesbian' is used (if at all) as a threat that is usually eliminated in the end. I will argue with the help of Roof's claims that the lesbian outcast, may also subvert the narrative, use it for her own gain. Lastly, in this chapter I will give reasons for choosing to research the lives of the authors and circumstances with regard to lesbianism precisely through novels, and not some other, 'more personal' and 'authentic' genres, like memoirs, diaries, or correspondence.

[5] Benstock, S. (1987). *Women of the left bank: Paris, 1900-1940*. London:Virago Press Ltd.

[6] Weiss, A. (1995). *Paris was a woman: portraits from the left bank*. San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco.

[7] Scott, B.K. (1995). *Refiguring modernism vol.1: women of 1928; vol.2: postmodern feminist readings of Woolf, West and Barnes*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press

[8] Roof, J. (1996). *Come as you are: sexuality and narrative*. New York: Columbia University Press.

The second chapter, entitled Geographies: If 'Paris Was a Woman'[9], What Was London?, will serve me to discuss the importance of the place of residence of the authors for both their lives and their writings, as well as for their readership. I will try to establish how the two cities differed with regard to personal freedoms of expression, and if this had an impact on the emergence of these novels at this precise decade in history. I will also analyse the groups the four authors belonged to, namely the community of the Parisian Left Bank, and London's Bloomsbury. Here I will use the concept of the 'lesbian island'[10] that was empowering as much as it was encaging for those women who found themselves on it. I will argue that cultural differences between the two societies, with respect to their disposition to foreigners, made Paris a much more attractive place for majority of modernist artists, particularly for expatriate Americans (such as Natalie Clifford Barney, Ernest Hemmingway, Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Sylvia Beach, to mention but a few) who choose to settle there, instead of London.

In the third chapter, entitled Leaders of Modernism, Readers of Modernism: Aestheticism, Publishing and Censorship, I will write about the leading personas of modernist movements, most of whom were, not surprisingly, men. In this respect I will try to show how women who chose not to follow the proclamations of Ezra Pound, or T.S. Eliot, actually embarked the harder way, but doing so they remained true to their feeling(s) that literature which followed the conventions proposed by men was not their own. As a result they initiated a parallel

[9] Weiss, A. (1995). *Paris was a woman: portraits from the left bank*, HarperSan Francisco, San Francisco

[10] Martindale, K. (1997). *Un/popular culture: lesbian writing after the sex wars*. Albany: State University of New York Press. p.106

modernist project, much less celebrated, and much attacked, particularly by Pound and his likes, but a project that might be called the 'female modernist literature'. As a consequence, many of these women were never included in the canon, or have been marginalised and considered less worthy. Some, like Virginia Woolf, were recognized because they went with the flow with regard to the narrative technology of what modern fiction should be about, but retained the goal of creating a women's space in literature. Yet with Woolf in particular the practice of self-censorship emerges. So this chapter will also touch upon the extent of censuring some works had to undergo in order to be published at all. In this case censuring was at times inflicted on the writing by the artists themselves, while at other times it was done by different outer factors, such as the reading public. I will write first about the publishing business itself, and the printing houses that some of these women authors had, secondly their financial status and independence, and thirdly about the importance of these for the shape, content and the publishing of their novels. Lastly, I will also talk about the popularity of the finalized products, their reception, and the readership.

The methodology I will be using is discourse analysis as defined by Fran Tonkiss.[11] I will try to pinpoint the emergence of the lesbian themed novels through the study of the context in which the first three novels were published, and in which the fourth by Colette had to wait. In my analysis, besides tending to the content of the novels, I will take a closer look at the circumstances in which they emerged in order to show how different factors played crucial roles in making these women write openly about the various ways of enacting female homosexuality.

[11] Tonkiss, F. (1998). Analysing discourse. In Seal, C. (ed.), *Researching society and culture*. London: Sage Publications (pp.245-260)

These factors most of contemporary readers are not even aware of. I also want to show how in some cases the existence of these books hung by a thread, even though towards the end of the twentieth century they earned the status of a classic, particularly in the feminist and gay/lesbian fields of literary studies.

Chapter II - By Any Other Name[12]: The Lesbian and the Novel

In the first quarter of the twentieth century, the literary scene in Paris and London saw publishing of several novels that for the first time in the history of the genre made explicit reference to homosexual desire. Of particular interest were those written by women at the end of 1920s who created characters with lifestyles similar to their own, namely women who were interested in living and building relationships with other women, without men. I will refer to this broad group of women as lesbians, and some of their novels as- lesbian themed novels. In my use of the term, when I say lesbians I refer to women who in this particular epoch, in the first decades of the 20th century, lived in close relations with other women, and whose sexual orientation was either towards women only or who were bisexual. I am fully aware that their sexualities in this respect are problematic, since many of them never really identified with a particular sexuality. However because of their interest, sexual, or romantic, in other women, and because their works contain direct or less direct references to such desires and attractions, I will refer to them as 'lesbians'. Lesbian will thus serve as an umbrella term that covers any kind of desire and attraction of a woman for the members of her own sex, who chose to live in accord to this desire and attraction, and most importantly- who wrote about it in the particular genre of the novel.

[12] A part of the line from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet: 1600, '...that which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.'

I chose the genre of the novel because it so happened that for the first time in its history lesbianism was explicitly written about by women authors. Lesbianism has previously appeared in different forms of writing done by women, such as poetry and memoars, but not in novels. As the importance of the genre of novel kept on growing since its beginning, novel became one of the most important literary forms of modernism, accessible to a very wide audience. This is why the moment lesbianism appeared explicitly in novels written by women is of great importance. Three novels were published in the year of 1928 with lesbian lives as their major themes: *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall, *Orlando: A Biography* by Virginia Woolf, and *Ladies' Almanack* by Djuna Barnes.

Of the three, the only one that made major sales upon publishing was Woolf's, which was due to several reasons. Woolf was by then already an established author, one of the leading fiction writers of London, who had a publishing house of her own, and did not have to explain herself to anybody in order to bring the work to the wider public. Also, her novel was the only one in which the protagonist makes lesbian references mostly in memories, contemplating her past, and thinking of her female lovers. There is however one scene in which the boundaries are 'transgressed', though the subtlety with which Woolf described this scene is quite in accord to her general practice of not showing explicit scenes of sexual intercourse, this happens on the one hand because, as Julia Briggs explained, she could not write about them due to painful memories of sexual harassment her two step-brothers exercised over her for years[13], and on the other hand in my opinion possibly because there was a different kind of agenda in her writing- to point to deeper social problems. In order to present those, she tried to avoid obscenity.

[13] Briggs, J. (2006). *Virginia Woolf: an inner life.* London: Penguin

I believe Woolf was thus censuring herself, finding ways to avoid showcasing the actual sexual act. The scene from *Orlando* I am here referring to is the one when Orlando, now a woman, goes to her room and puts on her old male suit, after which she goes to the city and finds a prostitute. What follows is an interesting account of the interaction between the two women that happens in the prostitute's room:

'When all was ready, out she came, prepared – but here Orlando could stand it no longer. In the strangest torment of anger, merriment, and pity she flung off all disguise and admitted herself a woman.

At this, Nell burst into such a roar of laughter as might have been heard across the way.

"Well, my dear," she said, when she had somewhat recovered, "I'm by no means sorry to hear it. For the plain Dunstable of the matter is" (and it was remarkable how soon, on discovering that they were of the same sex, her manner changed and she dropped her plaintive, appealing ways), "the plain Dunstable of the matter is, that I'm not in the mood for the society of the other sex tonight..." Whereupon, drawing up the fire and stirring a bowl of punch, she told Orlando the whole story of her life. Since it is Orlando's life that engages us at the present, we need not relate the adventures of the other lady, but it is certain that Orlando had never known the hours speed faster or more merrily.'[14]

Regardless of the discreetness of this scene, it is clear for the reader that Orlando, a woman, sought out another woman, and enjoyed her company.

The other two novels published in 1928 did not have the same fate. Hall's book was banned, and she had to undergo a trial, while Barnes printed her book on her own, in a smaller number of copies, which along with her puzzling style made the book pass without greater trouble. When writing about the printing and publishing of Barnes' book, Andrea Weiss explains how 'it is ironic that *Ladies Almanack*, a far more radical lesbian book than Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, published in the same year, was unwittingly financed by Bryher's family'[15]. Bryher was a rich English heiress, a life-long partner of H.D.[16] and one of the

[14] *Selected Works of Virginia Woolf.* (2005). Hertfordshire: Wordsworths Editions Limited. p.503

[15] Weiss, A. (1995). *Paris was a woman: portraits from the left bank.* San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco. p.148

important figures of the Left Bank community[17], whose agreed marriage to Robert McAlmon won her freedom, while it won Robert £14.000, which he used to open the printing house that would eventually print *Ladies Almanack*.[18] In this way, *Ladies Alamanck* was printed with the money that came out of the pockets of a rich and conservative British aristocrat, Bryher's father.

The three novels were indeed the first ones with such direct addresses of the lesbian themes. Prior to that, Virginia Woolf has for instance, written about both female and male homosexuality in her other novels, but these references were so vague that although the reader could have assumed them if they wanted to read them in this light, Woolf would still be able to renounce them if attacked. I will provide examples for this later in the chapter.

There is another important novel that was published three years after the three above mentioned, and that although not being the pioneer in terms of the time of publishing, is important for my analysis for a different reason. The novel is *The Pure and the Impure* by the French author Colette, who was an important part of the Left Bank community, though one of only few of these women coming from the Francophone society. Her novel gives portraits of many of the women whose importance for this community is immeasurable. Colette was one of few authors who at that time openly celebrated her love for women, and wrote about it without

[16] Hilda Doolittle, an expatriate American poet, most famous for her imagist poems written under the supervision of Ezra Pound.

[17] A community of mostly expatriate American women authors formed on the left bank of the river Seine in Paris particularly in the period between the two World Wars

[18] Weiss, A. (1995). *Paris was a woman: portraits from the left bank.* San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco. p.148

any feeling of remorse or guilt, sketching one after another the important figures of the literary world of the time. From her accounts we know for instance more about the British poet Pauline Mary Tarn who, like many others, settled in Paris, and who wrote lesbian poetry under the name Renée Vivien.[19] As Andrea Weiss puts it:

> 'Women with creative energy and varying degrees of talent, women with a passion for art and literature, women without obligations that come with husbands and children, were especially drawn to the Left Bank, and never with more urgency and excitement than in the first quarter of this century…They came from as near as Savoy and Burgundy and from as far as London, Berlin, and New York, Chicago, Indiana and California – before the days of the aeroplane…came because Paris offered them, as women, a unique and extraordinary world'.[20]

Colette's novel documents lives of many of her friends and colleagues, since her style was according to Janet Flanner, Colette's contemporary, 'autobiographic novelizing'.[21]

Before going into more detail about these four novels, it is of utter importance to remember that, from its beginnings, the novel has been a genre concerned with domestic themes. It's most usual topics were daily lives of families, or individuals, unlike those of the old epics that always followed great heroes on their quests, where someone always needed to undertake an enormous task to re-establish the order. Since its emergence, the novel has been the genre that followed lives of individuals, in which there was, no doubt, a possibility for unusual events. However, the stress was still on those individuals and their relation to the society around them and the event that was depicted. For instance, Woolf suggested that the task of modern fiction is to follow 'an ordinary mind on an ordinary day'[22]. This is why I think it is very important to look at the novels that for the first time speak openly of women living with other women, being

[19] Colette, (2000). *The pure and the impure*. New York: NYRB Classics. p.83

[20] Weiss, A. (1995), *Paris was a woman: portraits from the left bank*, HarperSan Francisco, San Francisco, pp.17-18

[21] Ibid. p.117

[22] Woolf, V. (1925). *The Common reader*. London: Hogarth Press. retrieved 16/08/2010 <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/w/woolf/virginia/w91c/chapter13.html>

engaged with them in all kinds of relationships – sexual, friendly, romantic, etc. For, to show explicitly a daily life of two women who live together in such conditions in the time when the behaviour of this sort was considered a crime (homosexuality was a crime in the UK until 1967), and a pathological disease, would be extremely courageous and naturally, very problematic.

The ideals of modernism, or as I will later argue, building upon some previous research[23], the ideals of Male modernism were great in numbers. Most of them still could be said to have focused on the experimentation in form and content, fragmentation of the subject, proclaiming a break with the recent past and going back to the origins- to the ideals of antiquity, but adapting them to the time these authors were living in, and most importantly- the erasure of the author's presence. The author was supposed to bring the pure words to the reader, without inflicting anything personal onto the work of art. For instance, Imagism, proclaimed by Ezra Pound and his circle of poets (including two women- H.D. and Amy Lowell), saw ideal poetry as the one that offers a pure set of images to the reader, not packed with unnecessary words, but concise and loaded.[24] Virginia Woolf, being close not to Pound, but to his disciple T.S. Eliot, complained of the presence of the author, of falling into conventions of the old times that restrain one. For

[23] Works like *Difference in View: Women and Modernism* edited by Gabriele Griffin and *Come as You Are: Sexuality and Narrative* by Judith Roth, which I will be using to support my claims, are abundant sources of ideas and examples of a different kind of literature, literature written by women in the time of modernist movements who did not follow modernist conventions, or who used modernist tools to subvert modernist conventions themselves.

[24] Lowell, A. (1917). *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry*. New York: Macmillan Company. retrieved 16/08/2010 <http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g_l/amylowell/imagism.htm>

instance she wrote in *Between the Acts* 'don't bother about the plot: the plot's nothing!'[25], claiming that 'everything is the proper stuff of fiction'[26]. By putting the wall between the work and themself an author managed to achieve the goal of modern fiction. This was part of a project of Woolf's idea articulated later in *A Room of One's Own* where she suggested that the best author is androgynous in their perception of the world[27], with which Pound would probably have no problems. But for the women of the Left Bank, this kind of detaching oneself from the work, not showing one's own presence, meant suffering another erasure, not just as women, but as lesbians too.

This can account for a completely different approach to writing among them, which in all cases, regardless of genre they were writing in, included autobiographical and biographical material. Such material can be found everywhere, from Natalie Barney's poetry, to Djuna Barnes' poetry and particularly novels, as well as Colette's novels. According to Shari Benstock, 'at Barney's request, Louÿs read her writing...and offered advice about her work that she did not follow...she most often turned to literary men for assistance – Remy de Gourmont, Andre Germain, Ezra Pound – and then disregarded their suggestions'[28]. I argue that these women were very stubborn in their ways. This is not to say that for instance writings of Djuna Barnes were

[25] *Selected Works of Virginia Woolf*. (2005). Hertfordshire: Wordsworths Editions Limited. p.966

[26] Woolf, V. (1925). *The Common reader*. London: Hogarth Press. retrieved 16/08/2010 <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/w/woolf/virginia/w91c/chapter13.html>

[27] *Selected Works of Virginia Woolf*. (2005). Hertfordshire: Wordsworths Editions Limited.

[28] Benstock, S. (1987), *Women of the left bank: Paris, 1900-1940*, Virago Press Limited, London p.283

not modernist, for they were, and already in the years when she was publishing her novels she was compared to Joyce in style.[29] Nevertheless the transparency of the personal data behind the changed names of her characters makes her works, collectively, her best autobiography, since outside of her novels she was quite secretive about her private life.

In general, the break with the expected style of the novel of the time was made by the introduction of the personal writings of the lesbian women, who refused to be silent and succumb to the male gaze. What I mean by the 'male gaze' is that a great number of male authors wrote about lesbianism, incorporating it into their novels, but failed to portray lesbianism as felt and experienced by women because of their objectifying of women and their voyeuristic presence.

Proust, for instance wrote about them[30], in one novel of his series *À la recherche du temps perdu*. What Colette did after him was write a revisionary work on what it meant for women to be sexually, romantically, etc. engaged with other women, without that shadow of a man breathing behind their necks. Both Barnes and Colette wrote their respective novels as answers to Proust's portrayal of lesbians. Barnes wrote *Ladies Almanack*, according to Ladenson 'to counter Proust's version of Lesbos in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*; indeed it was probably written as a corrective to the Proustian version'.[31] Similarly, while 'Colette notes that "a dazzling light of truth" guides Proust's reader through Sodom...she finds the Gomorrah he depicts not merely

[29] Ibid. p.231

[30] Ibid. p.58

[31] Ibid. p.246

inaccurate, but completely nonexistent, purely a product of his fantasy or misperception'.[32] And even this is a very complex problem, for it was not the simple voyeurism that Colette found problematic in Proust's writing, according to Benstock, it was rather his portrayal of lesbian unions as the perfect ones because of their purity and impossibility to be infiltrated[33], conversely Colette thought women were constantly comparing themselves to men, which made them 'impure'[34] and saw the male homosexual community as the pure one because it was completely self-absorbed and completely ignorant of the opposite sex i.e. it did not even need women to define its own kind. She wrote about this in the scene from *The Pure and the Impure* when, surrounded by a group of homosexual men talking to one another, 'I was faithful to their concept of me as a nice piece of furniture...They got used to me, without ever allowing me access to a real affection...They taught me not only that a man can be amorously satisfied with a man but that one sex can suppress, by forgetting it, the other sex'.[35] In the lack of the same attitude Colette saw the greatest weakness of the lesbian community.

From her writings it can be concluded that she saw the constant referring to men as the greatest setback for lesbians in particular, and women in general. Colette was able to draw such conclusions because she was a part of such a community of primarily women. But these

[32] Ladenson, E. (1996). Colette for export only. In *Same sex/different text? Gay and lesbian writing in French.* Yale French Studies, No.90. (pp.25-46). retrieved <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2930356?origin=JSTOR-pdf>

[33] Benstock, S. (1987), *Women of the left bank: Paris, 1900-1940*, Virago Press Limited, London p.57

[34] In my interpretation of the title of Colette's novel, *The Pure and the Impure*

[35] Colette, (2000). *The pure and the impure*. New York: NYRB Classics. p.147

communities existed at all thanks to the constant engagement of several important women who provided physical spaces for lesbian encounters of whatever sort.

As Shari Benstock recounts from Lillian Federman, when describing Natalie Clifford Barney, the loud and proud lesbian who was the queen bee of the lesbian Left Bank, and whose literary salon was the focal point of this community as well as of a larger circle of modernist artists, 'what is generally passed over…is the extent to which [Barney's] circle functioned as a support group for lesbians to permit them to create a self-image which literature and society denied them.'[36]

Prior to the publication of *The Well of Loneliness*, *Orlando: A Biography*, and *Ladies Almanack*, lesbian themes have been part of the poetic expression of Sappho, Barney's great inspiration. Barney 'provided a role model in her own behaviour, she wrote poetry in the tradition of Sappho…made a pioneer effort to rewrite lesbian history and experience, to deny that guilt, self-recrimination, drug abuse, suicide, unhappiness and psychological torment were part and parcel of the lesbian's commitment to an alternative life'.[37] Even Djuna Barnes published poetry that had a lesbian touch to it as early as 1915, in her *The Book of Repulsive Women*, but the novel would wait for such themes until the last quarter of the 1920s.

My primary concern in the thesis is to discuss why these novels were not published before the year of 1928 (Colette drafted her novel at the beginning of the 1920s, for instance, but

[36] Benstock, S. (1987), *Women of the left bank: Paris, 1900-1940*, Virago Press Limited, London p.11

[37] Ibid.

would publish it only a decade later[38]), and secondly why was there a gap between the emergence of the lesbian poetry, and the lesbian novel, and why three of these novels appeared in the very same year, and were followed by a series of other lesbian novels (e.g. Colette's *The Pure and the Impure*, Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* in 1933, Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* in 1936, etc.).

As I already mentioned, the novel was a domestic genre, and precisely because it portrayed the life of a certain character in greater detail than any other literary form, it might have been problematic. There were probably various reasons why they were not published before 1928. These women might have needed to first establish themselves as serious authors, might have been reluctant to do so before, but found the courage and inspiration in Paris, the city they all loved. One must add to this the constant increase of knowledge production on the topic of homosexuality, which was mostly done by men, as I have written before, in both medical and literary circles. This was problematic not only because lesbianism was pathologised, but also because it was even as such described from the male perspective, through the male gaze. These women had to rise up and defend themselves sooner or later, it was only a matter of time. And not only in Paris, though it was by the information previously provided obviously more accepting to lesbians and other 'misfits' alike.

The only one of the four authors that did not have a direct link with Paris was Woolf. She, however, had her own circle of 'gender-bending' friends, the so-called Bloomsbury group, initially formed by her brother Thoby and his male colleagues, but that would soon centre around

[38] Thurman, J. (2000). *Introduction* in Colette, (2000). *The pure and the impure*, NYRB Classics, New York

her, as Briggs claims it in several instances in her biography of Virginia Woolf.[39] Bloomsbury was comprised of several men, some of whom were homosexual, and Stephen sisters Virginia, Vanessa, who later married Leonard Woolf and Clive Bell, respectively. This means Woolf was not living a life surrounded by lesbians, where she could develop a strong sense of lesbian community, like Natalie Barney, Djuna Barnes or Colette.

Radclyffe Hall did travel to Paris and did visit Barney's literary salon. I believe this might have also influenced the explicitness of her book. While Woolf carefully constructed her book with great subtlety, writing in her usual style which demanded great concentration and high sensitivity for details, Radclyffe, possibly because she experienced the sense of lesbian community in Paris, was eager to voice her torments more explicitly, as did the other Parisian authors. The importance of Woolf's *Orlando* lies rather in the attempt to dissolve the gender in total, by showcasing that 'often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above'[40]. Since Orlando undergoes a change of sex in a series of supernatural events, the references that she makes to her past lovers are still 'legitimised' by the fact that she had female lovers while she was yet a man. Nevertheless, Orlando's constant claims that nothing is essentially different in her mind, and her showing that it is actually the society that imposes certain kinds of behaviours and preferences on individuals accounts for my calling this novel a lesbian one. Orlando makes no difference between her past and present lovers, male or female, thus that dimension only gives weight to my claim.

[39] Briggs, J. (2006). *Virginia Woolf: an inner life.* Penguin, London

[40] Selected works of Virginia Woolf (2005). Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, p.490

Redclyff Hall's novel, unlike *Orlando*, was explicit in the sense that it portrayed women together in the real time on most of the pages, not in memories like in the majority of Woolf's novel. Also, the very language used was more revealing. This is one of the reasons why it was first decided in the court that the book should be banned and all the copies burnt, but after an appeal, the decision was lifted up.[41] The same thing happened in the United States.[42]

As Meredith Wood writes in her review of Laura L. Doan's study *Fashioning Sapphism: the Origin of a Modern English Lesbian Culture*,

'by revealing that Hall and Troubridge [her lover] rarely visited Paris and that *The Well*'s critical reception was tied to larger social anxiety about masculinisation of British women, Doan's work posits that lesbianism was not widely expressed, recognized, accepted, or condemned until after photographs of Hall that appeared in the press subsequent to *The Well*'s banning created a "public face" for lesbianism.'[43]

This sheds some more light on the ban itself, giving it a more general reason, the fear of women who were not only attracted to the opposite sex, but also women who were more assertive and advocated, through the 'male' clothing, more visibility in the public sphere and the right to their own voice that would not be silenced down and being discredited as feminine. In addition to this Hall's novel might provide one of the answers to the question why the novels with lesbian themes emerged in this moment. The novel ends with a very powerful sentence:

[41] Taylor, L.A. (2001), "I made up my mind to get it": the American trial of "the well of loneliness" New York City, 1928-1929. In *Journal of the history of sexuality*, Vol.10, No.2 (April, 2001), (pp.250-286). University of Texas Press, retrieved 19/03/2010 http://www.jstore.org/stable/3704816

[42] Ibid.

[43] Wood, M. (2002), Untitled review. *Journal of the history of sexuality.* Vol.11. No.4. (October) pp.670-674. retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3704736>

'"God," she gasped, we believe; we have told You we believe...We have not denied You, then rise up and defend us. Acknowledge us, oh God, before the whole world. Give us also the right to our existence!'[44]

The sentence contains a direct reference to God, by a human being pledging existence in the state she was born in. She was not asking for a change of her desire, but rather she asked God directly to protect her the way she was. The right to address God directly would most probably be denied to homosexual or bisexual women and men by a vast majority of heterosexual believers at the time, and thus the majority of the readers. This was also the only of the four novels that had a protagonist, Stephen Gordon, who showcased sadness, loneliness and frustration because she was born as such.

In a way, in the fashion of the time, Radclyffe Hall proposes in the book that some people are born as 'inverts', a typical psychoanalytical expression for a homosexual man or woman, and asks for a place underneath the sun. If there was no freedom to openly express one's sexual desire prior to 1920s, and after the emergence of these spaces that gave some kind of freedom, though in confined areas, then once these women tasted the freedom, and finally felt fulfilled, complete, without fear, then their courage to rise against the oppression is completely expected. I argue that it happened after for several years they have been living 'on the islands', and then came the time to go further, and claim their legitimate space, like that of any other living being.

The idea of a lesbian island has been present since the antiquity, and Kate Martindale, for example, explores this idea, setting it as a paradigm of the lesbian community.[45] In a way, the

[44] Hall, R. (1928). *The Well of Loneliness.* retreived from Project Gutenberg of Australia <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks06/0609021.txt> p.314

Left Bank offered several subspaces where women could come and enjoy one another's company without fear. Such were Natalie Barney's salon, and garden, Gertrude Stein's salon and private home, as well as the two bookstores and libraries, 'Shakespeare and Company' and 'La Maison des Amis des Livres', owned by the two members of this lesbian circle, Sylvia Beach and her life-long partner Adrienne Monnier, respectively. These subspaces were what Martindale called 'islands' in her book *Un/popular Culture: Lesbian Writing After the Sex Wars*, denoting a safe place that is safe because it is isolated.[46] Martindale further suggests that after the island has become the place of utmost security, it can serve as a stronghold from which the expansion can take place.[47] In this respect, I argue that the courage of these women authors to write about lesbian topics and celebrate their lesbianism (not fully applicable to Hall), partially also came from the security they might have felt in their subspaces. Thus the result was the attempt to leave the borders of the salons, the gardens, and the libraries, and go beyond.

Conversely, the lack of precisely such subspaces might have been a major drawback for Woolf, who was known to be a very daring writer. Thus it is surprising that censuring would come from herself, although she had much better conditions than all of the other women, having a large income, her own publishing press, and being a respectable author. It has been argued that the reason for her censuring were her past experiences: sexual abuse by her step-brothers which she suffered when she was a child. However that only accounts for the lack of physical eroticism.

[45] Martindale, K. (1997). *Un/popular culture: lesbian writing after the sex wars.* Albany: State University of New York Press.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid.

It does not account for subtly of homosexual themes in her previous novels, like *Mrs Dalloway*. In this novel she does hint at homosexuality, particularly in the kiss that happened between Clarissa Dalloway and her friend Sally Saton when they were young, or in the fact that Clarissa's daughter Elizabeth spends too much time locked up in her room with her teacher Miss Kilman, whose name is very symbolical, insinuating that she is a lesbian. Clarissa and Richard talk about this in codes, supposing that the two women were 'in a stuffy bedroom with a prayer book...but it might be only a phase, as Richard said, such as all girls go through.'[48]

Though the above example is from *Mrs Dalloway*, which was published in 1925, besides the traces of lesbianism one can extract another important issue of the time from it. I am here referring to the intersection of homosexuality and class. Paris and London, cultural and political centres of their respective nations, were in the first decades of the twentieth century particularly divided according to class.

Parisian Right Bank has always been more affluent, as was the Westminster of London. Clarissa and Richard Dalloway from Woolf's novel live in Westminster, and are a part of the highest social strata (Clarissa's party is attended even by the Prime Minister). But unlike the higher classes of London, Parisian bourgeoisie according to Benstock lived in Faubourgs[49], and it too had its salons, which were much more conservative than those of the Left Bank, particularly when it comes to homosexuality.[50] Firstly there was a great gap between the classes

[48] Selected works of Virginia Woolf (2005). Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, p.134

[49] Faubourg was an older French expression for a suburb, that later fell out of use

[50] Benstock, S. (1987), *Women of the left bank: Paris, 1900-1940*, Virago Press Limited, London pp.60-61

with regards to homosexuality, and secondly there was a great difference between the views of homosexuality in men and homosexuality in women. Shari Benstock provides more facts on this:

'While male homosexuality was openly accepted – even flaunted – in certain salons, there were strong social pressures against it in many of the more bourgeois salons. In the salons that Edith Wharton attended [namely, those of the highest class], male homosexuality would indeed have been regarded as a sign of the moral bankruptcy of contemporary culture, and the subject of female homosexuality would probably not have arisen even as a topic of conversation, since in polite circles it was generally considered not to exist.'[51]

The bankruptcy Benstock talks about in my opinion had its roots in the medical discourse of the time, where homosexuality was not just a pathological disease but also meant moral corruption of an individual who succumbed to the temptations of the lowest urges of their being. However, I tend to disagree partially with Benstock when she claims that lesbianism was never talked about in these circles because it was considered non-existent. Although she is here referring to the French society, the example of the conversations of the high-class couple from Woolf's novel, the Dalloways, seems to indicate the contrary. It was not talked about openly, but it was still talked about. Clarissa and Richard Dalloway discuss the phase 'such as all girls go through'[52], worried because their only daughter is spending too much time alone in the room with her teacher.

The Dalloways' conversation however, in my opinion, points also to another typical belief of the time, namely that lesbianism was considered to be just a phase. The medical discourse of the time suggested that it was curable. In any case it was not paid as much attention as the male homosexuality. This invisibility of female sexuality was part and parcel of the

[51] Ibid. p.60

[52] Selected works of Virginia Woolf (2005). Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, p.134

grander scale invisibility of women. There is an interesting passage in Woolf's *Orlando* that exposes the apparently common beliefs of men of the time:

'Women have no desires, says this gentleman, coming into Nell's parlour; only affectations. Without desires (she has served him and he is gone) their conversation cannot be of the slightest interest to anyone. "It is well known," says Mr S. W., "that when they lack the stimulus of the other sex, women can find nothing to say to each other. When they are alone, they do not talk, they scratch." And since they cannot talk together, and scratching cannot continue without interruption and it is well known (Mr T. R. has proved it) "that women are incapable of any feeling of affection for their own sex and hold each other in the greatest aversion", what can we suppose that women do when they seek out each other's society?'[53]

If we are to take Woolf's words as a valid comment on the general beliefs and practices of the time (even though this comment was made at the very end of the eighteenth century in the novel, but I believe Woolf tried to communicate that nothing much ha changed), then the fact that lesbianism was considered just a phase is even an improvement on those beliefs, since even a phase requires some kind of a desire. An improvement not too short of utter misogyny, of course.

The way different classes regarded homosexuality differently is apparent from Benstock's example of Marcel Proust, who was first moving in the highest circles, but later in life started taking lovers from the working class as well, which in the eyes of the bourgeoisie led to his downfall.[54] I assert that this elitist approach to the issue drew on the discourse of 'othering', in which the bourgeoisie saw itself as 'moral' and 'normal' precisely because it could claim the absence of these two in the working class. Thus Benstock writes:

'When male homosexuals crossed the barrier of social class to seek out relationships with working-class men, they were considered to be irretrievably lost, morally and physically corrupt. That the male homosexual experience was

[53] Selected works of Virginia Woolf (2005). Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, p.504

[54] Benstock, S. (1987), *Women of the left bank: Paris, 1900-1940*, Virago Press Limited, London p.60

thought to result in degradation that crossed the lines of social class and economic structures marked it significantly different from the perception and experience of female homosexuals.'[55]

This meant that male homosexuality was not to be talked about, at least not in the high class salons (as opposed to those like Natalie Barney's where women could express their love for other women freely, as could men who visited these salons). In the second part of the quote when Benstock mentions that the female homosexuals were not in the same boat in the eyes of the public, she refers to the most common institution of the time that gave women protection against the 'disgrace' – marriage. If married, women were free to experiment, as this was not seen as serious, as long as they kept it a secret.[56] In a way, lesbianism was then seen in a similar fashion as some 'alpha males' see it even today – an experimentation, something that does not threaten the heterosexual union, on the contrary it serves to arouse the 'alpha male' himself.

Nevertheless, marriage did provide more freedom for some women with lesbian attractions, as for instance the case of the novelist Bryher proves. As I previously mentioned, Bryher, a rich English heiress arranged a marriage with a man in order to gain more freedom to travel and to be with her partner H.D. She thus spent most of her life with her female partner, despite of being officially married to a man. A more important example is Virginia Stephen, who married Leonard Woolf. It is not certain if their relationship was ever romantic, although they shared a lifetime of companionship. Both Virginia and her sister Vanessa married young, although they bought showed signs of same-sex attractions throughout their lives.

[55] Ibid. p. 61

[56] Ibid.

As I have so far been discussing the meanings of the term lesbian, placing it in the context, presenting the discourses that were emerging around it in the first decades of the twentieth century, it is now time to turn to the novel as a genre, particularly the narrative and its relation to sexuality. This link is very important, as Judith Roof has done some great research on inseparability of the narrative and heterosexuality in her study *Come as You Are: Sexuality and Narrative*.[57] In a similar fashion like the individual who is writing about ideology, and who makes certain claims about the ideology but is aware that even those claims are done from within the ideology[58], Roof claims that it is impossible to 'escape narrative, even imperfect narratives, since narrative is the inevitable register through which we define, reason, analyze, criticize, and comprehend the protagonists – narrative and sexuality – in this case'[59]. This means simply that we already have the narratives of sexuality and narrative. Narrative precedes cognition, because the cognition itself is possible only through narrative.

To show why Roof's analysis is important for my project, I first have to sum up her main arguments, which I will do through the main concepts that she is using. Roof claims that every story starts from the ending, because there had been some kind of disruption of the order that gave a certain result, which needs to be told.[60] The ending is thus very important. Further on she

[57] Roof, J. (1996). *Come as you are: sexuality and narrative*. New York: Columbia University Press.

[58] Althusser, L. (1970). Ideology and ideological state apparatuses. In Althusser, L. *"Lenin and philosophy" and other essays.* La Pensee. retrieved from <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm>

[59] Roof, J. (1996). *Come as you are: sexuality and narrative*. New York: Columbia University Press. p.xiv

[60] Ibid. pp.xx-xxi

draws on Freud's model of the pervert to show that when the pervert is introduced, the order is disrupted.[61]

The pervert Roof decided to study is the lesbian, hence what she was trying to do was to prove that sexuality and narrative are inseparable; that the core element of every narrative is the resolution that comes in the end when the order is re-established through the birth of something new.[62] For there to be a birth, there needs to be reproduction; this is why heterosexuality is according to Roof intertwined with the narrative, and is supported by it; heterosexuality is naturalised through the act of reproduction, because it is the only kind of attraction which literally bears fruit.[63] On the other hand, lesbian love cannot reproduce to give something new, this is how the pervert is established, and marginalised.[64]

By applying the relation between sexuality and narrative to the four novels by Woolf, Hall, Barnes and Colette, which I am analysing, I am able to argue that these women were committing a double transgression in writing and publishing these novels. Firstly, they were not writing in accord to the male-proclaimed norms, namely to be objective, detached from the work, to erase their own presence and let the characters have their own, separate lives (with the partial exception of Woolf). They did the exact opposite – they wrote autobiographic accounts in the form of novel. Secondly, they transgressed the boundaries by writing of their personal

[61] Ibid. pp.xx-xxi

[62] Ibid. pp.xx-xxi

[63] Ibid. pp.xx-xxi

[64] Ibid. pp.xx-xxi

experiences as lesbians, twisting the common practice of using the 'pervert' just to disrupt the order in the narrative.

This meant that their novels were essentially different from all other novels written before. They showed characters who were lesbians, yet were not dismissed as perverts. I argue that the women they created were first and foremost human beings, whose lives mattered. In these novels, lesbianism was celebrated, analysed, deemed pathological, etc. but at all times, it was defended. Never did these women authors attack or judge their characters for their affections. There was a need to open up the space that did not exist before, the space for the acceptance of women who were attracted to their own sex as human beings worthy of decent life.

There are several reasons why I chose to study the emergence of lesbian novels and not some other lesbian writings, such as poetry, memoirs, diaries, etc. Firstly, novel as a literary form always had a much wider audience than any other literary form. Particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries it was a common practice to publish novels in instalments, in both literary and cultural magazines. In this way the novel was a perfectly accessible genre that could reach masses easily through print. Lesbian themed novels were no exception.

Secondly, some of these women wrote most of their biographical data into their novels, for example Djuna Barnes whose private life was accessible only to some of her closest friends, friends who according to Benstock 'protected her need for privacy by not commenting on her at length in their memoirs'[65], but whose novels, particularly *Ladies Almanack* and *Nightwood*, are

[65] Benstock, S. (1987), *Women of the left bank: Paris, 1900-1940*, Virago Press Limited, London p.231

abundant resources of information about the lives of the women of the Left Bank, and Barnes' personal relationship with Thelma Wood, respectively.

Similarly, Colette used her fiction to write the story of her own life experiences. Only she did so with a difference that her life was always more public than private. She was an actress and a dancer who at the same time wrote literature, and expressed her sexual attraction to both women and men, openly. Radclyffe Hall's novel, although it is pointed out on the front page that it is the reader's fault if they read it as an autobiography, was written in the form of one, following Stephen Gordon's life from her birth to maturity. As for Woolf's novels, it is a widely known fact that Woolf's circle of intellectual friends, the so called Bloomsbury Group, served as a great inspiration for her novels. According to Julia Briggs, she would use the ideas gathered from their debates, transforming them into literature; similarly, her memories emerged in countless moments in her novels.[66] Although highly fictionalised, and rich in supernatural elements, *Orlando: A Biography* was written as a record of Vita Sackville-West's life and travels.[67]

[66] Briggs, J. (2006). *Virginia Woolf: an inner life.* Penguin, London

[67] Ibid.

Chapter III - If 'Paris Was a Woman'[68], What Was London?

A reasonable question to ask at this point would be why did the ex-patriot American women writers coming to Europe around the turn of the century choose to settle in Paris, instead of, for instance, London? In running away from, as Shari Benstock puts it in the documentary *Paris Was a Woman*,[69] the expectations of the society, these women came to Paris for several different reasons: most of them to escape the inevitable marriage, some because of Paris' literary fame, and some, like Natalie Barney whose famous salon would become the centre of the women's literary circle, came because it also sounded promising when the complete freedom of expression was in question. Benstock traces that, upon her arrival to Paris, Barney began a romantic relationship with Liane de Pougy, who was part of the Demi-monde world.[70] Demi-monde was 'a subculture of powerful women who were beyond society's dictates'.[71] These women were courtesans, but held a certain share of power, and held close together, which probably inspired Barney to form her own circle, only in her case a circle of literary figures, particularly women.

According to Benstock, what drew a whole range of American artists to seek their new home in Paris was the state of Europe after the First World War; they came to Paris 'in search of

[68] Weiss, A. (1995). *Paris was a woman: portraits from the left bank*, HarperSan Francisco, San Francisco

[69] Weiss, A. (Writer), & Schiller, G. (Director). (1996). *Paris was a woman* (Documentary). USA: Zeitgeist Films

[70] Benstock, S. (1987), *Women of the left bank: Paris, 1900-1940*, Virago Press Limited, London, p.274

[71] Ibid.

the sophistication and freedom that Paris represented...all life in Paris during these years was influenced by this influx of expatriates who appropriated the city as their own'.[72] The void that people felt after the pointless war that took millions of lives ended was a topic of a great number of works of literature. What these foreigners brought to Paris was a new wave of vigour and sense of doing something worthy.

At approximately the same time like Barney, from 1900 onwards, Colette was present in the Parisian public life, not as a writer, for she was in the shadows, publishing books under her husband's name (who, upon the success of the books, her *Claudine* series, claimed all the merits), but as a performer and a woman of a different lifestyle who expressed herself freely. Unlike Woolf, Barnes or Hall, Colette was never a feminist, and often her remarks were quite anti-feminist[73], but her life and works were always promoting the complete autonomy of a human being over their desire and sexual expression (which is why it is very hard to say Colette was solely anti-feminist). Benstock records Colette would show this in the theatrical performances she conducted, of which the one in Moulin Rouge (though for my analysis still quite early, in 1907) was particularly famous, since it ended in a riot due to obscenity between two women on the stage, Colette and her then lover.[74] Further down the timeline, Colette would publish books that showed these kinds of freedoms, but her lesbian themed book would wait until the 1930s. In 1928, when all three remaining authors, Woolf, Barnes and Hall published

[72] Ibid. p.5

[73] Southworth, H. (2004), *The intersecting realities and fictions of Virginia Woolf and Colette*, The Ohio State University Press, Columbus, p.178

[74] Benstock, S. (1987), *Women of the left bank: Paris, 1900-1940*, Virago Press Limited, London, p.48

their respective lesbian themed novels, Colette published *Break of Day*, a book preoccupied with completely different themes — the mother-daughter relationship, and importance of nature, among others. Since Colette took writing quite lightly, it might be said her lifestyle spoke more of her convictions than did her novels. The incident from Moulin Rouge speaks loud enough about it.

The line of division between Paris and London of the time was not that thick. Most of modernist painters, writers, poets and performers frequented both cities. Some, like H.D. and T.S. Eliot choose to live in London, or it was their home, like it was to Virginia Woolf. Others, like Ezra Pound, Duncan Grant, James Joyce or Radclyffe Hall had strong connections with both, and some, like Colette, Natalie Barney, Djuna Barnes, and Gertrude Stein opted for Paris. Needless to say, both cities were exhilaratingly vibrant and flamboyant, as well as culturally and ethnically diverse. As far as the artistic lesbian circles, or at least artistic circles that problematised the conventional notions of sex (since the term gender was still not used then) and sexuality are concerned, they were present in both cities. Of those in London, the Bloomsbury group, situated around Virginia and Vanessa Stephen, later Woolf and Bell respectively, appears to be the most interesting in this respect.

In the autobiographical collection of Virginia Woolf's writings, published posthumously under the title *Moments of Being*, there is an invaluable source of information about the group from one if its most essential members- Virginia Woolf herself. The piece in question is a memoir entitled *Old Bloomsbury* (referring to the Bloomsbury group in its years before the First World War), written for the Memoir Club, of which Woolf was a member.[75] In this memoir,

[75] Woolf, V. (2002), *Moments of being*, Pimlico, London, p.43

Woolf gives a somewhat fragmented history of the group's coming into being, tracing its roots long before the members actually knew each other, to the time of her adolescence, spent with her numerous siblings and family members in a house at 22 Hyde Park.

By introducing the stiff atmosphere, and lack of space in this house, Woolf enables the reader to grasp the latter difference in lifestyle, which came with the change in address upon the death of most of her elders (her mother, father, and step-sister). After her brother Thoby Stephen, who went to Cambridge, told her endless stories of his college friends' brilliancy, Woolf was intrigued to meet them. Now at 46 Gordon Square, in the heart of Bloomsbury, the remaining four Stephen siblings- Virginia, Vanessa, Thoby and Adrian, started living slightly more loose. Thus, Woolf writes:

'We were going to do without table napkins...we were going to paint; to write; to have coffee after dinner instead of tea at nine o'clock. Everything was going to be new; everything was going to be different. Everything was on trial... We were, it appears, extremely social.'[76]

This kind of openness to experimenting led the young household of four to start going to numerous social events, and also to bring those events to their home. Thoby's college friends started coming to their home more often, the meetings that would soon turn into the famous 'Thursday evening parties...the germ from which sprang all that has since come to be called – in newspapers, in novels, in Germany, in France – even, I daresay, in Turkey and Timbuktu – by the name of Bloomsbury'.[77]

[76] Ibid. pp.46-47

[77] Ibid. p.48

In what follows, Woolf then gives more personal details on the ways the new members came into the group, also constantly commenting on the nature of meetings. For years, these demanding meetings, in which everyone had to think something through well before saying it, were the place to discuss art, politics and such. What Virginia and Vanessa particularly liked was the fact that they were considered equals by the rest of the group members (all men), and that while 'in the world of the Booths and Maxses we were not asked to use our brains much. Here we used nothing else.'[78] The fulfilment such a twist brought to the young, home-educated Virginia was almost unsurpassable. I stress this almost, because there came another twist, the one within the Bloomsbury group itself, without which there would most-probably be no *Orlando* in the form we have it today; the moment that had it but not come about would leave the literary world much poorer in works on sexuality and sex roles in general. This was the moment when the first obscene word was uttered at one of the meetings.

It was preceded by Virginia's moving to a new address with her brother Adrian after Vanessa got married to Clive Bell, and finally suspecting some of the group members to have been 'buggers'[79] i.e. homosexuals. This was a big revelation that explained much of the behaviour of those men and their handling of Virginia and Vanessa. All this would culminate one night when:

'It was a spring evening. Vanessa and I were sitting in the drawing room. Vanessa sat silent and did something mysterious with her needle or her scissors. I talked, egotistically...Suddenly the door opened and the long and sinister figure of Mr Lytton Strachey stood on the threshold. He pointed his finger at a stain on Vanessa's white dress.
"Semen?" he said.

[78] Ibid. p.51

[79] Ibid. p.54

> Can one really say it? I thought and we burst out laughing. And with that one word all barriers of reticence and reserve went down. A flood of the sacred fluid seemed to overwhelm us. Sex permeated our conversation. The word bugger was never far from our lips...When all intellectual questions had been debated so freely, sex was ignored... Now we talked of nothing else. We listened with rapt interest to the love affairs of the buggers...I—had I not written in 1905, women are so much more amusing than men...'[80]

According to Woolf, that was a breaking point, from which a different kind of Bloomsbury emerged. These friends would start sharing all the most intimate details of their sexual lives, and much more than just that- they would start experimenting freely in all kinds of relationships amongst themselves.

The group completely opened up, livened up, so to say. Vanessa Bell, married to Clive Bell, had a daughter with Duncan Grant, a homosexual painter and a member of the group; Angelica Bell, the daughter in questions, was still raised by Clive Bell as his own.[81] Duncan Grant prior to that used to be a lover of Adrian Stephen[82], Vanessa's youngest brother. These kinds of curiosities were, of course, not happening all the time, but they were part and parcel of the Bloomsbury life the group led. I believe that precisely these kinds of reasoning and exploding of the conventional and expected lifestyles in the respectable social circle, influenced Woolf so much, helped her open up, not just to experience certain things, but to write about them as well. From the previous citation taken from *Old Bloomsbury* it is obvious that the first obscene word made Woolf to start thinking differently, and supported by the developments regarding the openness of the group, helped her come to terms with her own sexual preferences.

[80] Ibid. p.56

[81] Briggs, J. (2006). *Virginia Woolf: an inner life.* Penguin, London

[82] Ibid.

Yet, fruitful opening up in the Bloomsbury took place rather behind the closed doors of the house and the gardens, and as the public could hint at what was happening behind and nothing more, so it could find quite a number of unconventional and liberating ideas in the works of Woolf only if they were ready to unpack them. 'While Woolf's writing is "emotional, elusive, imaginary or symbolic," for Hall...[Sally] Cline [her biographer] suggests..."realism is the core"'[83] concludes Helen Southworth.

In her article *Correspondence in Two Cultures: The Social Ties Linking Colette and Virginia Woolf*, Southworth makes a parallel between the two authors through the person they both knew- Radclyffe Hall, recording their reactions to Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*. Their reactions are of great importance for my analysis of the climates in the two cities, since in London, '...Hall was not well received by the Bloomsbury set, who disliked the openness with which she dealt with her homosexuality...*The Well of Loneliness* received extremely poor reviews in Britan...Woolf's responses were condescending.'[84] In other words, the members of the Bloomsbury group preferred to be vague on the sexual matters when in public.

Southworth traces that 'in contrast to her British contemporaries, Colette liked *The Well of Loneliness* although she objected to Hall's portrayal of her protagonist's feeling of

[83] Southworth, H. (2003), Correspondence in two cultures: the social ties linking Colette and Virginia Woolf. *Journal of modern literature*, Vol.26, No.2, Virginia Woolf and Others (Winter, 2003), p.81-99, retrieved 19/03/2010 http://www.jstore.org/stable/3831896, p.13

[84] Ibid. pp.13/14

abnormality'.[85] It was natural to expect Colette to support Hall, as Colette herself continued to shock the public with her behaviour throughout her life, having relationships with various women of her time. Also, as it is obvious from her life and writings, Colette did not see her sexual ambivalence as some kind of abnormality, au contraire, she celebrated it.

But the different opinions about this one book set a much bigger picture for my analysis, as Southworth herself wrote, 'their reception of this particular work also highlights the difference in their environments, contrasting the closed elitism of Bloomsbury with the openness of contemporary Paris'.[86] This hints at what my assumption was from the very beginning- that the two metropolises differed in regard to freedom to do as one pleased in public. But the period in question is still the first quarter of the twentieth century, and the time of greater sexual freedoms was still decades away.

Interestingly, Paris did not seem to be the promised city just because a number of artists settled there and decided to build certain communities; the reasons for its charm where of different nature. Benstock writes:

'Among the expatriate women of Paris was a black American writer and journal editor, Jessie Fauset, whose reasons for expatriation reveal narrow limits of American life during these years: "I like Paris because I find something here, something of integrity which I seem to have strangely lost in my own country. It is simplest of all to say that I like to live among people and surroundings where I am not always conscious of >>thou shall not<<. I am coloured, but sometimes I have felt that my growth as a writer has been hampered in my own country..." What Jessie Fauset experienced as a black woman in America was confirmed by Josephine Baker, another woman who discovered that "the French treated black people just the way they do anyone else"...One was more in need of a "stiffened self-control" in America than in Paris, where life was economically, psychologically and politically easier.'[87]

[85] Ibid. p.14

[86] Ibid. pp.14/15

[87] Benstock, S. (1987), *Women of the left bank: Paris, 1900-1940*, Virago Press Limited, London, p.13

Though the above says well of the Parisian freedom and openness, it does reaffirm the stereotype of the French snobbery. In the case of London, and the English society, the snobbery just changes the flavour, but is there undoubtedly. While the French felt themselves better and did not care about the rest, the English did the same but still held to their manners, and some things were not to be talked about in public.

Paris seemed to be more interesting for the artists of the time. The centre of the avant-garde, it was home to the majority of both women and men of the avant-garde movements. According to Benstock, '...Pound had left London (in spring 1920), having already declared in 1913 that "the important work of the last 25 years has been done in Paris."'[88] But soon that would be taken back as well, since 'within two years he would leave Paris for Rapallo, apparently having determined that the promise of Paris as a centre of literary activity had not been fulfilled.'[89] It seems that no one was able to please Pound's obsession with form and order. It may be that in this lies the answer to why he would support Mussolini's fascists in the years after that.

Unlike Pound, all the literary women of the Left Bank community remained loyal to Paris. It was their home until the breaking out of the Second World War.[90] Similarly, the artists who lived in London, stayed loyal to London, despite Pounds claims. Virginia Wolf, for instance, continued to write in it and about it.

[88] Ibid. p.23

[89] Ibid.

[90] Ibid.

In this analysis of the two cities, I have brought several conclusions that further help me to explain the phenomenon of the first lesbians themed novels, first appearing in the year of 1928. By showing that the two great metropolises had certain subspaces in which the members of those subspaces could express themselves more freely and openly, I gave a part of the answer to my question why the lesbian themed novels emerged in the moment they emerged in. London's Bloomsbury group and Paris' Left Bank community, despite their differences in organisation, history, and 'philosophies', still had many similar traits. All four women who published the four novels I am discussing in this thesis either belonged to one of the two, or had close ties with them. This influenced their writing at length, and enabled them to write more boldly and more openly on a topic which was still a great taboo.

Chapter IV - Leaders of Modernism, Readers of Modernism: Aestheticism, Publishing and Censorship

In her introduction to *Difference in View: Women and Modernism*, Gabriele Griffin makes a claim that there is something different in the way women write, and also, that it is not just that which is written what determines the destiny of a certain written piece, in other words that the audience has a great impact on the work as well. As Gertrude Stein says in the quote that serves as an epigraph to Griffin's introduction, 'When you are writing before there is an audience anything written is as important as any other thing...After the audience begins, naturally they create something, that is they create you, and so not everything is important, something is more important than another thing...'[91]

This great quote holds much truth in itself. Indeed, the most active life a work endures comes about after it has been published, for nothing can then be changed, yet it is open and vulnerable for whatever interpretations that can be accounted for. Women authors like Radclyffe Hall, Djuna Barnes and Virginia Woolf knew this very well before beginning work on their three respective lesbian themed novels. They were writing as women, and as women who were attracted to their own sex, and it was perfectly reasonable that books would meet mixed reviews from the audience. They wrote books for different reasons: Radclyffe to stand up for the lesbian

[91] Griffin, G.(ed.) (2005), *Difference in view*, Taylor and Francis e-Library, p.11

women of the time, women like herself;[92] Barnes to entertain her beloved Thelma Wood, then in hospital;[93] and Woolf to entertain and immortalise her beloved, Vita Sackville-West, by giving her at least in the book what was taken away from her based on her gender- the Knole House, a centuries-old residence of her noble family.[94]

Esther Newton writes in her article *The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman*:

> 'For many women of Radclyffe Hall's generation, sexuality – for itself and as a symbol of female autonomy – became a preoccupation. These women were, after all, the "sisters" of D.H. Lawrence and James Joyce. For male novelists, sexologists, and artists rebelling against Victorian values, sexual freedom became the cutting edge of modernism. Bourgeois women like Hall had a different relation to modernist sexual freedom, for in the Victorian terms of the first generation, they had no sexual identity to express. Women of the second generation [born in 1870s and 1880s] who wished to join the modernist discourse and be twentieth-century adults needed to radically reconceive themselves.'[95]

Newton's claim, regardless of its flaws (for instance, when she talks about 'the modernist discourse', assuming there is one, monolithic modernist discourse, instead of a whole range of

[92] Newton, E. (1984), Mythic mannish lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the new woman. *Signs*, Vol.9, No.4, The lesbian issue (Summer, 1984) p.557-575 The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, retrieved 20/08/2010 http://www.jstore.org/stable/3173611 p.9

[93] Berni, C. (1999), „A nose-length into the matter": sexology and lesbian desire in Djuna Barnes's „ladies almanack". *Frontiers: a journal of women studies*, Vol.20, No.3 (1999), pp.83-107, University of Nebraska Press, retrieved 19/03/2010 http://www.jstore.org/stable/3347224, p.2

[94] Rudikoff, S. (1979-1980), How many lovers had Virginia Woolf?. *The Hudson review*, Vol.32, No.4 (Winter, 1979-1980), pp.540-566, The Hudson Review, retrieved 22/08/2010 http://www.jstore.org/stable/3849817 p.22

[95] Newton, E. (1984), Mythic mannish lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the new woman. *Signs*, Vol.9, No.4, The lesbian issue (Summer, 1984) p.557-575 The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, retrieved 20/08/2010 http://www.jstore.org/stable/3173611 p.9

them), points in a clear direction, giving the reason for the obsession to express the sexuality freely, and openly, in whatever form it appears. Through this it transpires that although it was Hall who set out with the particular agenda to defend her own sexuality before the public, she was not the only one to have thought about it. She might have pioneered in writing the first openly lesbian novel, but apparently her frustration with the silence over lesbian question was a part of the grand-scale question of all women's sexuality.

Nevertheless, this does not take away from Hall's courage, which was great and admired by as many women with lesbian attractions as it was loathed by others among these women who found her novel faulty. I have already written of Woolf's and Colette's comments regarding the novel, and as for Djuna Barnes, she gave her comment through her own lesbian novel *Ladies Almanack* pondering the works of the same sexologists like Hall, but laughing at them instead of taking them as a matter-of-fact material.[96]

Unlike Hall, and Woolf who intended to make their novels accessible to public, Barnes intended the *Ladies Almanack* to be for a very specific readership of close friends with a number of details that only these women around her knew, as each of them had a character of her own in the book, although the protagonist was the character based on Natalie Barney, the central figure of the salon life, the so-called Amazon.[97] This *roman à clef* (meaning *novel with a key*) was written in styles of Shakespeare and Rabelais with a great number of things that would be fully

[96] Berni, C. (1999), „A nose-length into the matter": sexology and lesbian desire in Djuna Barnes's „ladies almanack". *Frontiers: a journal of women studies*, Vol.20, No.3 (1999), pp.83-107, University of Nebraska Press, retrieved 19/03/2010 http://www.jstore.org/stable/3347224, p.2

[97] Ibid.

understandable only to this intended audience. Yet, 'Barnes eventually agreed to have 1050 copies privately printed'.[98]

Going back to Gertrude Stein's quote from the beginning of this chapter, one must ask oneself- what is it then that the readers get from this book today? Can we as researchers and readers of Barnes' carefully constructed *Ladies Almanack*, intended for her very own circle, really grasp the true intention of this work without the help of someone from that circle? Even with all of our postmodernist tools, it would hardly seem possible. So what could the readers outside her circle in her own time have understood? Did it puzzle them even more than it puzzles us? And does, then, in this lie the secret of its not suffering a trial, even though it was a lot more explicit than *The Well of Loneliness*, celebrating lesbianism, and portraying (both visually and graphically) women's bodies and all their characteristics without taboos?

Woolf was never obscene in her works, particularly novels, which differed from the rest of her writings in the sense that they were her true art. Essays and other writings served her to ponder on societal problems or to take her mind of the novels.[99] Before *Orlando: A Biography*, her novel *To the Lighthouse* was a big success, as was *Mrs Dalloway* before that, and she had already built a reputation of a great writer.[100] She would not undermine this, nor betray her ideals buy publishing an obscene book. The ideals she shared with some of the leading male modernists were fragmentation of the subject, and the invisibility of the author. But simply because she as

[98] Ibid.

[99] Briggs, J. (2006). *Virginia Woolf: an inner life.* Penguin, London

[100] Ibid.

the author was not to be present, it did not mean she could not write of the subjective experiences of the real people around her. *Orlando* was to be a book of ambiguity. According to Briggs, even the name of the protagonist points to ambiguity- in its or/and part.[101] A vague book, though it contained many revolutionising ideas, but steeped in fantasy and scattered among so many genres, which was all so distracting, *Orlando* 'met no such opposition [as *The Well of Loneliness*]'.[102] It's subheading *A Biography* was added by the author at the expense of its sales (for it would not be placed among the novels, but among the biographies); and although the primary reference to it would be mocking the long tradition of biography-writing that existed in her family, certainly other reference is that it is a biography of a real person- Vita Sackville-West[103], which gives it the weight of the real lesbian existence of the protagonist. Thus Woolf wrote the experiences of a single woman very sublimely into the history.

And while the British society accepted Woolf's novel, and banned Hall's, the American expatriate community of women in Paris welcomed Djuna Barnes' *Ladies Almanack*. As for Colette's novel, finally finished in 1931, in French, it did not have the same fate. According to Colette's biographer Judith Thurman,

'Money was a particular worry in 1931...she sold the rights to *Ces Plaisirs* [*The Pure and the Impure*]...to her friend Joseph Kessel, literary editor of *Gringoire*, a popular journal of politics and culture...[but] after only four of nine instalments had run – and apparently in response to the outrage of certain conservative readers – the publisher of

[101] Ibid.

[102] Southworth, H. (2003), Correspondence in two cultures: the social ties linking Colette and Virginia Woolf. *Journal of modern literature*, Vol.26, No.2, Virginia Woolf and Others (Winter, 2003), p.81-99, retrieved 19/03/2010 http://www.jstore.org/stable/3831896, p.13

[103] Briggs, J. (2006). *Virginia Woolf: an inner life.* Penguin, London

Gringoire, a Corsican named Horrace de Carabuccia, abruptly cut off Colette's text in mid-sentence with the word "fin"'[104]

This act does not speak for the whole of the French society, but it does show how one of the pioneering lesbian novels in the French language was accepted by a part of the reading public. It would not be published again until 1941.[105]

All four of these novels show however a non-conforming with the standards for what is modern proposed by the men of modernism. Such refusal to write faceless works, led these women to write themselves into history, not because they have since been read as much as they perhaps hoped they would be, but because they created works that are inseparable from their own lives. In this they created their own modernism, a female one. As such, these works can be studied in-depth only through an in-depth study of the authors' lives. If world did not have lesbian protagonists before, now it had four. These four were not essential, nor prototypical, although they might have ended up being seen as such, but nevertheless they fulfilled the task of leaving the trace, that could be followed by those who sought it.

[104] Thurman, J. (2000), Introduction. In Colette, (2000). *The pure and the impure*. New York: NYRB Classics. pp.xii-xiii

[105] Ibid. p.xiii

Chapter V - Conclusion

When a man writes an autobiography, he is adding another brick on an ever-growing wall. When a woman writes an autobiography, she is laying the foundations for a wall that would have been there if it was not for patriarchy. This, I believe, could be a summary of what most of the women authors of the first quarter of the twentieth century held to be true. Furthermore, the same sort of logic would work with sexuality, where heterosexuality would be the one with a long literary tradition, while homosexuality, particularly lesbianism (which concerns me more in this analysis), would be the one whose existence boils down to Sappho's poetry and nothing more.

The project of women modernists was to finally lay strong foundations of women's literature that would then enable the future generations to add more and more. But some of these women were attracted to their own sex, and naturally, wanted to leave a mark, to write their existence into history, from all its angles- the one of attractions, companionships and sexualities as well. They chose to do so in the genre that was most accessible to the public, the one that reached into people's homes- not plays, staged in theatres; not poems, written in a vague language, hard to discern; but novels- written in narratives, where ordinary lives of individuals were showed like under s microscope- only, to write it as women, to write themselves into it, to secure the foundations of their histories.

Modernism is often spoken about as a singular movement, or a set of different schools of art that appeared roughly around the turn of the nineteenth century and ended with the Second World War, or some time after that. Of course, it all depends in what aspects one is considering

the period. According to Griffin, what was seldom taken into account prior to 1970s was that most of those considered the leading figures of modernism, in all literary genres as well as in other arts, were men, with the exception of Virginia Woolf.[106] Since it is the academia that renders something worthy or unworthy, and since it was only men who were admitted to universities in the period in question, naturally- it was men's production that was taken as a standard, and women were asked to follow. If they did not, and luckily, most of them did not, they were not added to the canon. One would think this a very tragic thing if by this women did not actually save themselves. They risked being obliterated again, as many of them have been since then- true. But they saved themselves from falling into that trap of patriarchy that renders them mere complements of men. Authors like Radclyffe Hall, Djuna Barnes, and Gertrude Stein tried, each in her own way, to write what it felt like to be a woman at that time, and particularly not a woman interested in the opposite sex, but in her own. Others, like Colette and Woolf wrote more of the margins of the sexes and the sexual ambivalence, alongside of all the other aspects of human existence.

These women writers lived in enormous cities, where anonymity (though some of them came to be quite famous even during their lifetimes) gave them more opportunities to be themselves, to live freely. They did so in the company of carefully chosen people, mostly of other women, but also sympathising men, who helped them express themselves, despite the restraints of the societies they lived in. This resulted in great literary works, which were created by each of them individually, but which gave voices to millions of those who were downtrodden, marginalised and repressed, for centuries.

[106] Griffin, G.(ed.) (2005), *Difference in view*. Taylor and Francis e-Library, p.12

The contribution of this research to the present-day debates and those already existing ones is that it establishes firm grounds for the so-called female modernism, rendering it visible. It also showcases that the roots of such a modernism lie not only in the fact that these authors were women authors who had troubles getting their messages across in the male-dominated public, but that they were lesbians and that precisely this trait of their personas, which suffered such marginalisation, was the stronghold from which they decided to fight back – in the very fashion of Audre Lorde who decades later wrote, for different kinds of struggles, 'if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others – for their use and to our detriment.'[107] By leaving a mark, they have placed themselves on the fire line. They have been attacked for being elitist, essentialist, racist, etc. Nevertheless, it is easy to make such claims about them now that there is somebody to make claims about. They have laid the foundation, now new bricks can be added freely.

Velid Beganović

[107] Lorde, A. (1984), Scratching the surface: some notes on barriers to women and loving. *Sister outsider: essays and speeches*, Transburg, Crossing P. (pp.45-52), p.45

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