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Bertrand Russell in Blue Spectacles: His Fascination with Astronomy

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Abstract. Bertrand Russell frequently formulated his epistemological investigations of the material world with examples drawn from astronomical phenomena. He persistently evoked images of stars and starlight, the planets, the sun, eclipses, even planetariums to stage his arguments. This is true for early publications such as *Our Knowledge of the External World* (1914) and *The Analysis of Mind* (1921), as well as later works such as *An Outline of Philosophy* (1927), and *Human Knowledge* (1948). Russell was clearly fascinated by astronomy and cosmological phenomena. He noted that his interest in astronomy was inspired by his uncle Rollo Russell, who lived in Bertrand's childhood home, and whose conversations with Bertrand 'did a great deal to stimulate [his] scientific interests'.¹ The Honorable Rollo Russell 'was a meteorologist, and did valuable investigations of the effects of the Krakatoa eruption of 1883, which produced in England strange sunsets and even a blue moon'.² At a very young age, Bertrand knew something of the planets. He noted that at about age five or six, he would wake early in the morning to watch Venus rise: 'On one occasion I mistook the planet for a lantern in the wood'.³ 'The world of astronomy,' Russell later observed, 'dominates my imagination and I am very conscious of the minuteness of our planet in comparison with the systems of galaxies'.⁴ Russell also once noted, 'I have always ardently desired to find some justification for the emotions inspired by certain things that seemed to stand outside human life and to deserve feelings of awe... the starry heavens... the

¹ Bertrand Russell, *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, Vols 1-2 (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1967, 1968), Vol. 1, p. 21.

² Russell, *Autobiography*, Vol. 1, p. 21.

³ Russell, *Autobiography*, Vol. 1, p. 30.

⁴ Bertrand Russell, *My Philosophical Development* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), p. 130.

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vastness of the scientific universe...'.⁵ This fascination with the stellar universe would be productive for Russell's philosophical inquiries into the nature, and multiplicity, of physical phenomena. This paper will explore the importance of Russell's analogies of astronomy for British literary writers such as Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West. The paper will offer a reading of two fiction selections, 'Solid Objects' by Woolf and *Seducers in Ecuador* by Sackville-West, against the backdrop of Russell's fascination with astronomy.

Bertrand Russell's fascination with astronomy would be productive for his inquiries into the complexity and multiplicity of physical phenomena. This paper explores in particular how Russell's investigations of matter versus mind permeated modernist British literature, as illustrated in examples from two authors – Virginia Woolf and her colleague Vita Sackville-West.

Woolf and Material Phenomena

'The singular, & intoxicating charm of Stonehenge to me, & to most I think, is that no one in the world can tell you anything about it', wrote Virginia Woolf at age 21, upon her first excursion along with her sister Vanessa to Salisbury plain.⁶ 'There are these great blocks of stone; [] & what more? Who piled them there & when, & for what purpose, no one in the world -- I like to repeat my boast -- can tell'.⁷ What appealed to Woolf was the mysterious otherness and complete inexplicability of Stonehenge. She was struck by 'the stupendous mystery of it all'.⁸ Although she had seen pictures of Stonehenge, actually visiting the site of the monoliths was a mesmerizing experience: 'I suddenly looked ahead, & saw with the start with which one sees in real life what ones eye has always known in pictures, the famous circle of Stonehenge... I had not realised though that the stones have such a look of purpose & arrangement; it is a recognisable temple, even now'.⁹ Woolf contemplated the thousands of years that have passed since the stones were set in place, and noted in her diary that the monoliths 'have seen

⁵ Russell, *My Philosophical Development*, p. 262.

⁶ Virginia Woolf, *A Passionate Apprentice: The Early Journals 1879-1909*, ed. Mitchell Leaska (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), p. 199.

⁷ Woolf, *A Passionate Apprentice*, p. 199.

⁸ Woolf, *A Passionate Apprentice*, p. 200.

⁹ Woolf, *A Passionate Apprentice*, p. 199.

sunrise & moonrise over those identical swells & ridges for -- I know not how many thousand years'.¹⁰

She wrote, 'I felt as though I had run against the stark remains of an age I cannot otherwise conceive; [] a piece of wreckage washed up from Oblivion. There are theories I know--without end; & we, naturally, made a great many fresh, & indisputable discoveries of our own'.¹¹ Those discoveries that she and Vanessa concocted were easily as viable, Woolf realized, as any other theory on the origin and purpose of the monoliths. The structure seemed to her obviously to have been a temple to the sun. '[T]here is a rugged pillar someway out side the circle,' she observed, 'whose peak makes exactly that point on the rim of the earth where the sun rises in the summer solstice'.¹² Such evidence affirmed her vivid imagining of 'the moment the sun rose [and] the Priest of that savage people slaughtered his victim [t]here in honour of the Sun God'.¹³ Indeed, she commented, 'We certainly saw the dent of his axe in the stone'.¹⁴ However, such seemingly objective descriptions of material phenomena would always prove too simplistic for Woolf. 'Set up the pillars though in some other shape,' she noted, '& we have an entirely fresh picture...'.¹⁵

Even in her early fiction, Woolf began investigating the ways narrative shapes how one encounters the material world. Stonehenge might be an ancient temple of death and sun worship – the evidence seemed obvious. Or, those prehistoric monoliths might have been something else all together. 'Set up the pillars in some other shape' or, as Woolf suggests, structure one's narrative in some other way, and the significance of Stonehenge is radically altered. Her account of Stonehenge offers a point of entry into her engagement with Cambridge mathematicians Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead and their analyses regarding an articulation of material phenomena.

Woolf's celebration of the incomprehensible otherness of Stonehenge reflects her interest in the interchange with material phenomena particularly at the core of Russell's investigations. The important interconnections between the work of Russell and Woolf explains in part the reasons for her insistence on the use of multiple perspectives in her fiction and essays. Her interest in the human interchange with material

¹⁰ Woolf, *A Passionate Apprentice*, p. 200.

¹¹ Woolf, *A Passionate Apprentice*, p. 199.

¹² Woolf, *A Passionate Apprentice*, p. 199.

¹³ Woolf, *A Passionate Apprentice*, p. 199–200.

¹⁴ Woolf, *A Passionate Apprentice*, p. 200.

¹⁵ Woolf, *A Passionate Apprentice*, p. 200.

phenomena in the context of the Cambridge debates is particularly evidenced in a short story titled 'Solid Objects'. Vita Sackville-West's novella, *Seducers in Ecuador*, also reflects Russell's investigations of mind versus matter which presented not only objects but also the human subject as multiple and complex. Russell's arguments, I additionally wish to show, would have appealed to both Vita and Virginia because of their shared fascination with astronomy, which I have demonstrated elsewhere.

Bertrand Russell and Woolf's 'Solid Objects'

In November of 1918, Woolf began sketching a bizarre little story about objects and human perception. She titled it simply 'Solid Objects'. In this short fiction experiment, Woolf explored the questions that Russell and Whitehead were working out in their own theories regarding what can be known of the material world. Ann Banfield, in a carefully researched study of Russell and the Cambridge debates regarding theories of knowledge of the material world, points out that along with G.E. Moore, 'Russell and Whitehead define[d] the contours of philosophy as Bloomsbury understood it'.¹⁶ Both Whitehead and Russell examined the interface between humans, objects and events, and the parameters within which material phenomena might be articulated.

Whitehead's *The Concept of Nature* included a chapter titled simply 'Objects', Published in 1920, the same year Woolf published her story 'Solid Objects', Whitehead's text argues that a scientific understanding recognizes the physical world as a network of sense data, which are effects of both the object and a percipient observer. Phenomena must be understood as dispersed, as a multiplex of relations between an observer and a 'perceptual object' in a specific 'percipient event'.¹⁷ Russell also contended that material objects are better understood as the interchange between an observer, either human or an instrument such as a camera, and some event at the point in space where an object exists. 'Perception gives us the most concrete knowledge we possess as to the stuff of the physical world,' wrote Russell, 'but what we perceive is part of the stuff of our brains, not part of the stuff of tables & chairs, sun,

¹⁶ Ann Banfield, *The Phantom Table: Woolf, Fry, Russell and the Epistemology of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 7.

¹⁷ Alfred North Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature*, Turner Lectures Delivered in Trinity College November 1919 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1920), pp. 155, 152.

moon, and stars'.¹⁸ Thus, a more responsible scientific articulation of material phenomena would account for the multiple perspectives from which an object or event could be observed. As Ann Banfield demonstrates, Woolf was immersed in the Cambridge debates regarding the nature of physical phenomena and consequently developed a literary art that celebrates a multiplicity of perspectives.

In fact, Banfield traces Russell's investigations into the distinctions between matter and mind in part to an essay by Woolf's father, Leslie Stephen, titled 'What is Materialism?'. In that essay, Stephen contends that multiple perspectives can be deployed as a means to knowledge. He recalls how '[Johannes] Kepler constructed the solar system' by imagining from various points of view the planets moving through their orbits; Stephen notes, '[Kepler] supplied the intermediate positions by discovering the curve which passed through all the observed positions' of the planets.¹⁹ Thus, Stephen argued, knowledge is not limited by the particular perspective space from which an event or object is observed. We can widen our understanding, claimed Stephen, by 'seeing in imagination what we should see through a telescope or a microscope, or should see if we moved to Sirius...'.²⁰

Woolf's story 'Solid Objects' illustrates her own sense of the alterity and multiplicity of an object or an event, as the text traverses Russell's arguments regarding the limitations of what humans can know of either material phenomena or the human subject. The text also reflects Woolf's interest in using fiction as a means of imagining other 'possible worlds',²¹ a phrase I borrow from J.B.S. Haldane's essay 'Possible Worlds', and which also happened to be a favourite of Edwin Hubble's.²²

The story opens with the narrator's observation of a 'small black dot' moving along the shore of a distant beach. That dot, the narrator notes, 'possessed four legs... [and] was composed of the persons of two

¹⁸ Bertrand Russell, *An Outline of Philosophy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1956), p. 292.

¹⁹ Leslie Stephen, *An Agnostic's Apology* (London: Watts, 1937), p. 87; Banfield, *The Phantom Table*, p. 312.

²⁰ Stephen, *An Agnostic's Apology*, p. 87.

²¹ See J.B.S. Haldane's essay 'Possible Worlds'. According to Russell, it was drawn from the work of Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz (Russell, *Our Knowledge of the External World*, p. 190), see Bertrand Russell, *Our Knowledge of the External World as a Field for Scientific Method in Philosophy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1961), p. 190.

²² Russell, *Our Knowledge of the External World*, p. 190

young men'.²³ The men are engaged in a vehement political argument, evidenced by the violence of the words 'issuing from the tiny mouths of the little round heads'.²⁴

Despite the strange telescoping effect by which the reader sees the humans as little more than 'tiny mouths', the story maintains a simple plot. The younger of the two men is a promising politician, who becomes obsessed with material objects – bits of glass or rock. In the opening scene, as the men debate, the young man sticks his hand into the sand and his fingers close around 'a full drop of solid matter'.²⁵ 'It was a lump of glass so thick as to be almost opaque; the smoothing of the sea had completely worn off any edge or shape, so that it was impossible to say whether it had been bottle, tumbler, or window-pane...'.²⁶ Marvelling that it is 'so hard, so concentrated, so definite an object', he takes the glass home and places it on his mantle.²⁷

In time, similar peculiar and seemingly worthless objects attract the young man's attention. Soon, he takes to rummaging among alleys and junk heaps, where he uncovers a remarkable star-shaped piece of iron, so 'massy and globular, but so cold and heavy, so black and metallic, that it was evidently alien to the earth and had its origin in one of the dead stars or was itself the cinder of a moon'.²⁸ This strange and foreign chunk of dead star, or moon cinder, is placed on the mantle next to the other objects. The 'meteorite,' we are told, 'weighed the mantelpiece down; it radiated cold'.²⁹ A 'determination to possess objects that even surpassed these' so torments the young man that he gives up his promising political career.³⁰

The story not only evokes a fascination with the interface between humans and material objects, but also demonstrates the limitations of human perception of the material world. Dean Baldwin locates the genesis of 'Solid Objects' in a visit by Woolf in 1918 to the studio of

²³ Virginia Woolf, 'Solid Objects', in *A Haunted House and Other Short Stories* (New York: Harcourt, 1949), p. 79.

²⁴ Woolf, 'Solid Objects', p. 79.

²⁵ Woolf, 'Solid Objects', p. 80.

²⁶ Woolf, 'Solid Objects', p. 80.

²⁷ Woolf, 'Solid Objects', p. 81.

²⁸ Woolf, 'Solid Objects', p. 84.

²⁹ Woolf, 'Solid Objects', p. 84.

³⁰ Woolf, 'Solid Objects', p. 84.

Mark Gertler, a painter whom the Woolfs met at Ottoline Morrell's Garsington salon.³¹ Woolf noted in her diary:

I was taken to Gertler's studio & shown his solid 'unrelenting' teapot... Form obsesses him. He sees a lamp as an imminent dominant overwhelming mass of matter. Ever since he was a child the solidity & the shapes of objects have tortured him. I advised him, for arts sake, to keep sane; to grasp, & not exaggerate, & put sheets of glass between him & his matter. This, so he said, is now his private wish.³²

Woolf's curious recommendation regarding the 'sheets of glass' may have stemmed from her familiarity with Russell, who in *Our Knowledge of the External World* (1914) used an analogy of looking at an object through blue glass, or blue spectacles, to pose a series of arguments on the multiplicity of the appearances of an object, and the distinctions between sense-objects and physical phenomena. Russell argued: 'We can shut one eye, or put on blue spectacles, or look through a microscope. All these operations, in various ways, alter [an object's] visual appearance'.³³ Elsewhere Russell had argued that a painter 'has to unlearn the habit of thinking that things seem to have the colour which common sense says they "really" have, and to learn the habit of seeing things as they appear'.³⁴ More importantly, at least for Woolf, Russell had conjured forth the blue spectacles to explore the question of whether an object persists even when not observed.³⁵ Whitehead had defined '[o]bjects [as] elements in nature which do not pass'.³⁶ Russell would argue instead: 'Physics and physiology between them assure me that what [exists]

³¹ Gertler's work was revered by Vanessa Bell, as well as art critic Roger Fry and artist Duncan Grant. See Mark Hussey, *Virginia Woolf A to Z: A Comprehensive Reference for Students, Teachers, and Common Readers to her Life, Work, and Critical Reception* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995), p. 101.

³² Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Vol. I-V*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie (New York: Harcourt, 1980-4), pp. 175-6.

³³ Russell, *Our Knowledge of the External World*, p. 85.

³⁴ Bertrand Russell, *Portraits from Memory* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956).

³⁵ Russell comments, 'If we are to account for the blue appearance of objects other than the spectacles, when seen through them, it might seem as if we must assume that the spectacles still exist when we are not touching them...', in Russell, *Our Knowledge of the External World*, p. 87.

³⁶ Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature*, p. 143.

independent of my seeing, is something very unlike a visual experience, namely a mad dance of billions of electrons undergoing billions of quantum transitions'.³⁷ 'In short,' he claimed, 'the physical world of daily experience is... not solid' and thus does not exist 'independently of my mental life'.³⁸ For Russell, '[T]he 'real' shape is not what we see; it is something inferred from what we see'.³⁹ Perhaps, in her comment to Gertler regarding the sheets of glass, Woolf had in mind to suggest that art to some degree ensures that an object persists, despite the object's multiple and conflicting appearances.

In December of 1921 Woolf recorded in her diary an engaging exchange with Russell: 'So Bertie Russell was attentive, & we struck out like swimmers who knew their waters'.⁴⁰ She admired Russell for his sharp intellect. His was a 'mind on springs,' she wrote, so she 'got as much out of him as [she] could carry'.⁴¹ They found easy agreement on the nature of material phenomena. "'All of this is mush[.]" Woolf recalled telling Russell, "& you can put a telescope to your eye & see through it".⁴² He responded, 'If you had my brain you would find the world a very thin, colourless place'.⁴³ This was, undoubtedly, a reference to Russell's claim that 'the colour we see is a result of [light] as it reaches the eye and [is] not simply a property of the object' observed.⁴⁴

Woolf also knew of Russell's work through her associations with the 1917 Club, a gathering of liberal Cambridge scientists and literary types including physicist J.D. Bernal, biologist Lancelot Hogben, and archaeologist Jane Harrison.⁴⁵ Virginia frequented the club, which her husband Leonard helped establish and which was located at 4 Gerrard Street in London. In January of 1918, Woolf wrote to her sister, 'The

³⁷ Russell, *Portraits from Memory*, p. 151.

³⁸ Russell, *Portraits from Memory*, p. 152.

³⁹ Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University, 1959), p. 11.

⁴⁰ Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. 2, p. 146.

⁴¹ Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. 2, p. 147.

⁴² Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. 2, p. 147.

⁴³ Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. 2, p. 147.

⁴⁴ Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, p. 35.

⁴⁵ Mark Hussey characterized the 1917 Club as a group of 'leftist intellectuals, artists and politicians' (Hussey, *Virginia Woolf A to Z*, p. 191). I am grateful to Judith Killen for pointing out to me the existence of the 1917 Club and Virginia and Leonard's association with it.

centre of life I should say; is now undoubtedly the 17 Club'.⁴⁶ Russell's public lectures on matter versus mind had become the rage among Club members. Woolf reported in her diary that 'the touchstone of virtue' among club members 'is whether you attend Bertie's lectures or not'.⁴⁷ The lectures, a series of eight public talks titled 'The Analysis of Mind', were held in Bloomsbury 'on Tuesdays in May and June' of 1919,⁴⁸ and covered topics such as perception, sensation and mental phenomena.⁴⁹ Despite her claims that she 'preferred the songsters of Trafalgar Square' to Russell's talks, Woolf nevertheless understood and respected Russell's philosophical investigations.⁵⁰ If for no other reason, Woolf would have been fascinated by Russell's lectures, given the many analogies from astronomy that he deployed.

'The world of astronomy,' Russell once observed, 'dominates my imagination and I am very conscious of the minuteness of our planet in comparison with the systems of galaxies'.⁵¹ Russell learned about astronomy in part from his uncle the Honorable Rollo Russell, a meteorologist whom Russell noted in his autobiography 'did valuable investigations of the effects of the Krakatoa eruption of 1883, which produced in England strange sunsets and even a blue moon'.⁵² This fascination with the stellar universe would be productive for Russell's philosophical inquiries. He persistently evoked stars, planets, the sun, eclipses, even planetariums to stage his arguments. This is true throughout his life's work. For instance, in *The Analysis of Mind*, Russell, in illustrating how sense-data offer no direct evidence of physical objects, explains that looking at a star involves one's mental 'sensation of the star'

⁴⁶ Woolf spent so much time at the club that she could write to Vanessa at length about scandal among its members (See Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. 2, pp. 209–213, p. 210.

⁴⁷ Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. 1, p. 273.

⁴⁸ Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. 1, p. 279, n. 4.

⁴⁹ The lectures were collected into a volume and published under the same title in 1921.

⁵⁰ Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. 1, p. 270.

⁵¹ Russell, *My Philosophical Development*, p. 130; Russell further noted, in Russell, *My Philosophical Development*, p. 262, 'I have always ardently desired to find some justification for the emotions inspired by certain things that seemed to stand outside human life and to deserve feelings of awe... the starry heavens... the vastness of the scientific universe... '.

⁵² Russell, *Autobiography*, Vol. 1, p. 21.

but not what occurs at the 'place where the star is'.⁵³ In *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912) he made this same point with yet another example taken from astronomy: 'it takes about eight minutes for the sun's light to reach us; thus, when we see the sun we are seeing the sun of eight minutes ago'.⁵⁴

In arguing that sense-data do not reveal qualities intrinsic to an object in *An Outline of Philosophy* Russell recreates the scene of an observer looking at 'stars' in a planetarium:

The world of astronomy, from the point of view of sight, is a surface. If you were put in a dark room with little holes cut in the ceiling in the pattern of the stars letting light come through, there would be nothing in your immediate visual data to show that you were not 'seeing the stars'. This illustrates what I mean by saying that what you see is *not* 'out there' in the sense of physics... What you see when you see a star is just as internal as what you feel when you feel a headache.⁵⁵

Like Russell, who argued for the human limitations on understanding material phenomena, Woolf too emphasized the limitations of human perception. In her story titled 'The Mark on the Wall' (1917), the narrator comments that the barrows on the South Downs 'are... either tombs or camps,' and while the contents of those barrows are carefully displayed in 'the local museum', the narrator assures regarding those barrows that 'nothing is proved, nothing is known'.⁵⁶ Woolf, who preferred more provisional articulations of the world, saw in fiction the potential for re-inscribing, to borrow a phrase from Russell, 'the world as it can be made'.⁵⁷

⁵³ Bertrand Russell, *The Analysis of Mind* (1921; London: Routledge, 1989), p. 130.

⁵⁴ Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, p. 33.

⁵⁵ Russell, *An Outline of Philosophy*, p. 145.

⁵⁶ Virginia Woolf, 'The Mark on the Wall', in Virginia Woolf and Leonard Woolf, *Two Stories* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1917).

⁵⁷ This was the title of a series of lectures on social concerns that Russell drafted in the fall of 1916. The lectures were later published in the U.S. under the title *Political Ideals* (1917).

Sackville-West's *Seducers In Ecuador*

Vita Sackville-West's novella *Seducers in Ecuador* (1924), which Vita dedicated to Virginia, also engages Russell's theories – particularly his analogy of the blue spectacles. In fact, this light-hearted tale was for Vita no more than a play on Russell's theories regarding the material world. The protagonist Arthur Lomax, while touring Egypt as part of a yacht trip, takes up the habit of wearing 'coloured spectacles [which] shiel[d] him from the "too-realistic glare" of the sun'.⁵⁸ At the opening of the story we are told: 'In Egypt most tourists wear blue spectacles. Arthur Lomax followed this prudent if unbecoming fashion'.⁵⁹ 'He already had his blue pair, bought in London; in Cairo he bought an amber pair, and a green, and a black... [S]oon', we read 'it eased to be an amusement and became an obsession--a vice'.⁶⁰ Lomax becomes obsessed with 'the phenomenon produced by the wearing of those coloured glasses'.⁶¹ 'In fact, he had already dismissed the Sphinx as a most overrated object...'.⁶² Later we are told, 'The sights of Egypt were a fact, having a material reality, but here was a phenomenon that presented life under a different aspect'.⁶³

In a fascinating twist that further suggests Sackville-West's reading of Russell, the blue coloured glasses do more than change Lomax's view of reality; Lomax himself begins to occupy differing subject positions with each subsequent change of his lenses. 'The world was changed for him, and, had he but known it, the whole of his future altered, by those two circles of blue glass'.⁶⁴ That the spectacles are blue is no accident. Russell had evoked blue spectacles to address the questions of perspective and whether objects persist when not being observed. Both Kant and later James Jeans evoked the blue spectacles in considering how mathematicians account for physical phenomena, and Whitehead evoked the colour Cambridge blue in his 'Objects' chapter in a consideration of what distinguishes 'sense-objects' from physical phenomena.⁶⁵

⁵⁸ Victoria Glendinning, *Vita: The Life of V. Sackville-West* (New York: Knopf, 1983), p. 140.

⁵⁹ Vita Sackville-West, *Seducers in Ecuador* (London: Hogarth P, 1924), p. 279.

⁶⁰ Sackville-West, *Seducers*, p. 14.

⁶¹ Sackville-West, *Seducers*, p. 279.

⁶² Sackville-West, *Seducers*, p. 279.

⁶³ Sackville-West, *Seducers*, p. 281.

⁶⁴ Sackville-West, *Seducers*, p. 279.

⁶⁵ Sackville-West, *Seducers*, p. 151.

Moreover, references to astronomy permeate Vita's text. For instance, while Lomax wears the blue tinted spectacles, '[a] thick green light shrouded everything, the sort of light that might be the forerunner of some undreamed of storm, or hang between a dying sun and a dead world'.⁶⁶ And the black spectacles, which eventually become his favourites, evoke 'the lull that comes over the world at the hour of solar eclipse' when the 'leaves on the trees become still and metallic' and 'the stars come out, terrible in the daytime, with the clock at midday instead of at midnight'.⁶⁷ Also, on one particular evening while Lomax gazes up at the stars he recalls astronomical terms and phrases such as 'Nebulae, Inter-planetary space, Asteroids, Eighty-thousand miles a second'.⁶⁸

Indeed, it was while wearing the black spectacles that Lomax has an intimate conversation with the distressed Miss Whitaker, a fellow tourist on a yachting tour. While wearing the black spectacles, Lomax chivalrously marries this Miss Whitaker to save her reputation and later offers to help euthanize Captain Bellamy who claims he has a terminal illness. Thus Lomax alters his identity with each pair of spectacles; he becomes, so to speak, multiple men. In 'The Ultimate Constituents of Matter', Russell had argued that Bergson's 'favourite illustration of the cinematograph' demonstrates that, like objects, the human subject does not persist one moment to the next:

When in a picture palace we see a man rolling down hill... we know that there is not really only one man moving, but a succession of films, each with a different momentary man. The illusion of persistence arises only through the approach to continuity in the series of momentary men... The real man too... is really a series of momentary men, each different one from the other, and bound together, not by numerical identity, but by continuity... And what applies to men applies equally to tables and chairs, the sun, moon, and stars. Each of these is to be regarded not as one single persistent entity, but as a series of entities succeeding each other in time, each lasting for a brief period...⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Sackville-West, *Seducers*, p. 280.

⁶⁷ Sackville-West, *Seducers*, p. 283.

⁶⁸ Sackville-West, *Seducers*, p. 293.

⁶⁹ Bertrand Russell, *Mysticism and Logic* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1929), p. 129.

In Vita's story, Lomax becomes a series of men, altering each time he dons a different pair of coloured spectacles. While some critics recently have dismissed this little tale, the story reflects Vita's engagement with Russell's notion of the 'biography' of an object or a person, as well as her shared interest with Woolf in the Cambridge debates regarding mind versus matter.

At the end of Vita's tale, the fantasy worlds the characters inhabit cause Lomax's demise. He is put on trial for marrying a woman against her will (as there is not a seducer in Ecuador) and for assisting a man in committing suicide, as Bellamy apparently had never been diagnosed with a terminal illness. As he awaits his trial, Lomax ponders what became Russell's lifelong investigations: 'What bearing had the extrinsic world upon the intrinsic? ... What was reality?'.⁷⁰

Even reviews of Vita's novella suggest that in writing the story she had in mind Russell's questions regarding the nature of the mental and material phenomena. One American review reported that *Seducers* could 'do more in an hour's reading to make the reader think and meditate on the values of what he considers realities than a great many novels do'.⁷¹ Geoffrey Scott, who disapproved of the novel, which Vita called a 'joke', commented to Vita: 'Virginia [Woolf] forged her method for her own very personal perception of phenomena. Your... apprehension is I think at the opposite pole...'.⁷²

Woolf's own interest in multiple perspectives emerged out of an eagerness to discover what other material realities alternative forms of fiction could make possible. Both Woolf and Sackville-West 'test... various narrative possibilities that allow for different conceptions of self and world'.⁷³ I want to suggest that Vita and Virginia were both working out in fiction Russell's theories on material phenomena, human perception, and his explorations on the persistence of humans and objects alike. Their experiments in fiction were attempts to make possible alternative, non-human, even alien perspectives that more responsibly account for the material world.

⁷⁰ Sackville-West, *Seducers*, p. 295.

⁷¹ Glendinning, *Vita*, p. 141.

⁷² Glendinning, *Vita*, p. 142.

⁷³ Pamela Caughie, *Virginia Woolf & Postmodernism: Literature in Quest & Question of Itself* (Urbana, IL: U of Illinois Press, 1991), p. 67.

