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The Shop Windows Were Full of Sparkling Chains: Consumer Desire and Woolf's Night and Day

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Wilson's *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1985). See chapter three especially in relation to Woolf and the necessity to theorize fashion beyond the market alone.

⁴ William James' memorable phrase crops up in his *Essays in Psychology*, "Consciousness."

⁵ The reference to Benjamin and his concept of "aura" derives from his essay, "The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction," collected in *Illuminations*, trans. H. Zohn [New York, Schocken, 1969], pgs. 142-157.

⁶ Wittgenstein's discussion of the "black box" takes place in his *Philosophical Investigations* [Oxford, Blackwell, 1958], para. 304-306, p. 102, in a series of passages that ask the reader to imagine both pain and also language secreted within a box, and thus seemingly "private," which he refutes.

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Elizabeth Outka

"The Shop Windows Were Full of Sparkling Chains": Consumer Desire and Woolf's *Night and Day*

"You know the horror of buying clothes" (L2 232), wrote Virginia Woolf to her sister in 1918. This statement takes us to the heart of early critical assumptions about Woolf and consumerism. Following good modernist principles, the argument ran, Woolf's art was naturally above shopping, distinct from and even a reaction against consumer culture. More recently, critics such as Jennifer Wicke, Rachel Bowlby, and Reginald Abbott have unsettled this separation and have started to consider the complex relations among consumption, the market, and Woolf's writing. Most of this attention, however, has focused either on selected essays or on *Mrs. Dalloway*, with its diverse scenes of stores and shopping. This paper addresses an earlier work,

Woolf's *Night and Day*, published in 1919. *Night and Day* is surprisingly connected to consumer culture, connected in ways that can deepen our understanding of consumerism in Woolf's later works. Woolf suggests in this early novel a critical two-part illusion: first, as a smart shopper, one might reach the tantalizing vision behind the glittering shop windows; second, one might reach this elusive vision without actually engaging in a material transaction. *Buying* clothes may be a horror, but what those clothes might deliver—the promise they promise—is another matter. This desire to purchase the illusions while hiding the material transaction actually paralleled emerging selling techniques and new modes of window display in London's department stores, most notably at Selfridges, which opened in 1909. I will put a central scene of window shopping in *Night and Day* into dialogue with these emerging techniques, and suggest that such a dialogue reveals the surprising, often paradoxical nature of shopping within Woolf's novels.

Early in *Night and Day*, Ralph Denham is walking through the streets of London, gazing in at shop windows on his way to an appointment. As he wanders and gazes, his surroundings become almost dreamlike: "on both sides of the road the shop windows were full of sparkling chains and highly polished leather cases, which stood upon shelves made of thick plate-glass. None of these different objects was seen separately by Denham, but from all of them he drew an impression of stir and cheerfulness" (130). The atmosphere here seems almost artificially enchanted. The natural light is fading, replaced by green and yellow streams. The objects in the shop windows hold qualities designed to dazzle and hypnotize the gazer—the chains sparkle, the cases are highly polished, the items stand on "thick plate-glass," suggesting a hazy visibility. Ralph absorbs the hypnotic atmosphere of the objects behind glass, not seeing them distinctly, but taking "an impression of stir and cheerfulness." The glittering atmosphere emanating from the shop windows produces in Ralph a dreamy and receptive mood.

Katharine seems to emerge directly from this window shopping. After Ralph has drawn his impressions from the store windows, Woolf writes "*Thus* it came about that he saw Katharine" (130, emphasis added) as if the reverie itself, inspired by the sparkling commodities, has conjured Katharine's presence. Katharine seems to Ralph "only an illustration of the argument that was going forward in his mind" (130), an extension, as it were, of his own internal thoughts. Yet at the same time, she seems absolutely distinct. Separated by "her height and the distinction of her dress" (130), Katharine appears both literally and figuratively above the crowd. Much like the objects set behind glass, she stands apart from the gazers. It is as if Ralph's Pygmalion-like gaze animates a store mannequin, allowing it to step out of the display to become a mobile commodity, a product of the store windows' glittering promise and Ralph's own imaginings. She materializes, in the most literal sense.

Katherine's appearance has an extraordinary effect on Ralph and his perceptions of his surroundings. As she passes by, "immediately the whole scene in the Strand wore that curious look of order and purpose which is imparted to the most heterogeneous things when music sounds" (130). Ralph is captivated, and the first thing he can think to do, after she walks past, is to keep looking. He wants simply "To walk though the streets of London until he came to Katharine's house, to look up at the windows and fancy her within" (130). Ralph wants to continue his window shopping. He has no desire to actually talk to Katharine; he instinctively knows that the allure depends on distance. He wants to remain in his position as gazer, staring up at an imagined image behind glass.

This scene is representative of many that appear throughout *Night and Day*, moments of intense and rhapsodic desire, when a character imagines that all light, all beauty, lies through a window, a vision usually inspired by the glamorous and idealized figure of Katharine Hilbery. Even Katharine has related moments of complex longing, such as when she stands outside Ralph's office or when she gazes up at the light from Mary Datchet's window. Most of these scenes, though, involve Ralph looking through windows at Katharine, in ways similar to the scene I have described in detail. These scenes reach a climax near the end of the novel, when Ralph at his most rhapsodic imagines that "all dryness, all safety, all that stood above the surge" (395) lies just through the window, with Katharine as "a shape of light" (395) within.

Such scenes seem a strange hybrid of commercialism and romantic fantasy. On the one hand, the glittering store windows produce the appropriate atmosphere for Ralph's distracted, *flaneur*-like window gazing. On the other hand, the scene seems less commercial than romantic fantasy. Ralph does not buy anything, or even enter a store; Katharine is not (at least technically) for sale, and her very distinction and promise seem the antithesis of reproducible commodities. Yet the very hybrid nature of these scenes actually connects them in complicated ways to commercialism in London as it was emerging at the time. The dreamy, enchanted quality of this scene, the lack of any actual purchase, and Katharine's seeming distinction, all suggest new modes of window displays and selling techniques in London department stores. Let me highlight a few central shifts in the commercial landscape of London, and then suggest why they matter to our reading of *Night and Day*.

In 1909, Gordon Selfridge, an American entrepreneur, opened an enormous new department store in London, and in the next ten years revolutionized the way commodities were presented and sold to the British public. Selfridge's central aim was to dignify commerce (Pound 3). He continually emphasized the elegance and beauty of the store, and wherever possible he hid the commercial nature of the enterprise (Honeycombe 9). Shoppers were invited to come and spend the day, without buying anything.

The interior of the store was designed to produce a distracted reverie in the guests: hidden string quartets played music, and lighting was arranged to highlight different commodities and to make the store seem enchanted (Pound 67).

Selfridge likewise revolutionized window displays. Formerly, stores had tended to pile up their goods in the window, with prices displayed prominently. Selfridge changed all this, forming special design teams to create carefully crafted artistic displays. Special lighting gave the windows a fairy tale atmosphere, designed to mesmerize the outside gazer. Window designers were instructed to visit art galleries, museums, and libraries to obtain ideas. While commodities were sometimes massed for effect, the trend was to set objects apart under special lights. In the store windows, the designers emphasized fantasy, beauty, and distinction, never the commercial exchange. In fact, price tickets were nowhere to be found (Honeycombe 10, Pound 71). Such window displays often inspired gushing description; as one literary magazine commented during the war, the “beautifully arranged” windows seemed to exude the promise of “beauty and order” within (qtd. in Honeycombe 45), offering a welcome oasis from the violent atmosphere outside.

We can see these new modes of selling at work in Woolf’s scene of window watching.¹ The atmosphere, created by artificial lights and glittering objects, places Ralph in the kind of dreamy, distracted mood that Selfridge desired to produce in his shoppers. Katharine, separated from the crowd around her, takes the form of a distinct commodity. Like the string quartets hidden behind the palm trees at Selfridges, the effect of all this on Ralph is to bring a sense of order and beauty to heterogeneous things, as if music suddenly played in the background. And like a good shopper, Ralph can only wish to stay distracted, to continue to gaze and desire.

What should we make of these links between Woolf’s scene of window shopping and Selfridge’s new techniques? Woolf encapsulates an underlying promise of commodity culture, a tantalizing vision of the possibilities available behind the glass. She presents Ralph, the dazed consumer, staring in a dream-like reverie inspired by the dream-like displays, along with the appealing, just-out-of-reach commodity, surrounded by the promise of distinction and glamorous style. She leaves out, of course, what the store windows leave out: the actual commercial exchange. The horror of shopping is nowhere to be found, which is in fact part of what the store windows promise.

Arguments on consumerism often seek to expose such window shopping, whisking away the glittering façade to reveal the sordid but actual truth behind the curtain. We might, for example, discuss the false nature of marketing and store display, and consider how idealized images were designed to trick the consumer. In a similar vein, we might expose Ralph’s idealization of Katharine as inaccurate and trace it to a whole line of familiar

romantic delusions involving women as objects. Exposing these promises is important, but exposure is not my aim here. Instead, I want to take seriously the gazer's overwhelming desire that the vision behind the window might be obtained without any actual purchase.

Let me clarify this fantasy of possessing the promise without the purchase by turning to the letter with which I opened this paper, a letter Woolf wrote to her sister in 1918, the same year she was finishing *Night and Day*. The letter reveals a fascinating juxtaposition between actual shopping and Woolf's own idealized vision of the promised "result," in this case embodied by her sister Vanessa. In the first part of the letter, Woolf dramatically tells her sister of a terrible shopping excursion:

I can't describe to you what an agony this afternoon was to me. You know the horror of buying clothes, especially for one forced as I am to keep my underclothes pinned together by brooches. [. . .] I flung myself into a shop in Holborn. [. . .] The impropriety seemed to me beyond anything we know. So it went on: I tried shop after shop; and then in a perfectly random way went and bought a wine-coloured black striped coat or dress [. . .]. (L2 232)

The language seems intentionally over-blown. Buying clothes is an agony, a horror, even improper. Here we have not the promised vision, the suspended moment of looking that we see with Ralph, but the tiresome process of going from store to store and actually engaging in a material transaction. Like "underclothes pinned together by brooches," it is the disorderly, unglamorous underside of shopping.

Immediately after the above description, however, Woolf makes a telling shift. She relates how she has been writing her novel about Vanessa that morning—her sister was the explicit model for Katharine in *Night and Day*.

I've been writing about you all the morning, and have made you wear a blue dress; you've got to be immensely mysterious and romantic, which of course you are; yes, but its the combination that's so enthralling; to crack through the paving stone and be enveloped in the mist. (L2 232)

Woolf leaps from the sordid scene of shopping and actual purchase to the glittering promise of the store window. In Woolf's vision, Vanessa need not buy a dress, she already wears one, taking on the mysterious and romantic quality so seductive to Ralph. Like a dreamy window shopper who is magically whisked from the sidewalk to the enchanted vision before her, Woolf's fantasy is to crack through the material hardness of the paving stone and be enveloped in the ethereal mist. Woolf imagines in Vanessa, and by extension in Katharine, a deliberate exclusion of any act of consumption, presenting only the oasis promised by the finished product.²

Woolf captures in this letter the very leap we see in Ralph and the very leap promised to Selfridge's shoppers: that one could skip over any materi-

al transaction and simply obtain the tantalizing vision. It is important to stay alert to the problems inherent in this vision: to the dangers of Ralph's idealization, to insidious marketing techniques, and to Woolf's overly romantic notions of her sister. It is also important, however, to understand that part of the romanticized promise is not having to do this, not having to leave the mist to be deposited on the material truth of the paving stone. Attentive to the dangers, we might nonetheless stand for a moment with Ralph, hoping that just through the lighted window lies the answer to everything, or that a store window might give off such order and beauty as to hide the ugliness of a war, or that a lovely and mysterious sister might make up for a terrible morning of shopping.

I have linked Ralph's window gazing, Selfridge's new displays, and Woolf's note to her sister because, read together, they alert us to an important way to approach Woolf and material culture, one we might miss if we hurry too quickly to expose them. Woolf imagines a consumerism without the consumption, a purified shopping, a shopping made aesthetic. Yet at the same time she is writing, London department stores are creating a similar fantasy, imagining an aesthetic mode of shopping, one appealing *because* it hides its commercial nature. It is a desire akin to many modernist endeavors: to hold an aesthetic vision without the seeming taint of commercialism.³ The lines among shopping, consumption, fantasy, and pure aesthetics become increasingly blurred, and I would urge us to keep these competing impulses in mind when considering Woolf and material culture. Woolf's works are neither above consumerism, nor do they simply embrace it. Scenes such as the one I have discussed in *Night and Day* hold contradictions, hold the desire both to be above consumer society and of it, a desire which itself reflected new trends in the commercial landscape of London.

Notes

¹ Ralph, of course, is walking near the Strand, not on Oxford Street, where Selfridges was located. Woolf does write specifically of Oxford Street and its atmosphere in "Oxford Street Tide," where she contrasts the "sublime rites" (16) of shopping on Bond Street with the "too blatant and raucous" (16) buying and selling on Oxford Street. By 1932, when Woolf published her article, Selfridges was much less focused on hiding the commercial exchange, and more content to highlight prices and bargains.

² See also the "blue dress" scene in *Night and Day*, where Cassandra as the dazzled gazer watches Katharine's reflection in the looking-glass (ND 343-344).

³ For a summary of the modernism/marketing debate, and essays on the interaction of modernism and the market, see Dettmar's collection of essays.

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