Beak Of Brass

WILLIAM A. STERLING

Who am I to refuse the universe?

—Leonard Cohen

"Does the progress of civilization depend upon great men?" asks Virginia Woolf's Mr. Ramsay as he wanders the yards of his family's Hebrides cottage. "If Shakespeare had never existed, would the world have differed much from what it is today?" (42). Legacy was no small concern for Ramsay, a life-long academic hoping to forge his own. It would hound him, during his every waking moment, from the university to his family vacation. But in his reflection, he could not escape the fear that perhaps the answer to either of his questions was no. While a great man's fame may persist for a few centuries, even "the very stone one kicks with one's boots will outlast Shakespeare" (35). Indeed in the grandest scheme of things, neither the plight nor the progress of Mr. Ramsay and his ranks would hold much weight against the march of time. Nevertheless, wind and waves would keep churning, "like the amorphous bulks of leviathans whose brows are pierced by no light of reason" (134). With blind indifference to men like Ramsay, life would continue to sprout and spread like the flowers at his family's vacated Hebrides cottage, "looking up, yet beholding nothing, eyeless, and so terrible" (134-5).

Of course, one naturally begins to wonder: Why bother? Young Lily Briscoe most certainly asked herself that question while staring down at her easel in the Ramsay's yard. As Mr. Tansley, a fellow guest of the family and one of Mr. Ramsay's ardent admirers, was sure to remind her, if the universe was indifferent to the acts of great *men*, great *women* didn't stand a chance. Her critics aside, the agony of actually translating her vision to canvas didn't help either: "It was in that moment's flight between the picture and the canvas that the demons set on her who often brought her to the verge of tears and made this passage from conception to work as dreadful as any down a dark passage for a child" (19). But when inspiration finally strikes, Lily's psychic assailants fall by the wayside. "As if some juice necessary for the lubrication of her fac-

ulties were spontaneously squirted," Lily begins her work, "moving her brush hither and thither, but it was now heavier and went slower, as if it had fallen in with some rhythm which was dictated to her (she kept looking at the hedge, at the canvas) by what she saw" (159). The rhythm of creation consumes her: "Certainly she was losing consciousness of outer things. And as she lost consciousness of outer things, and her name and her personality and her appearance . . . her mind kept throwing up from its depths, scenes, and names, and sayings, and memories and ideas, like a fountain spurting over that glaring, hideously difficult white space" (159).

When contemplating her vision, the weight of the world's indifference has the power to crush Ms. Briscoe, but when she is actually engaged in creation, the weight of the world is no weight at all. Even if her work were merely destined to be lost in an attic or someday be destroyed, the artist was for once unconcerned. She asks herself: "What did that matter?" (208). Gazing out onto the Hebrides bay, Lily's vision is "full to the brim;" all its fleeting, myriad parts—the shadows; the sunlight; "a washer-woman with her basket; a rook; a red-hot poker; the purples and grey-greens of flowers: some common feeling held the whole" (192). For Lily Briscoe, this vision of unity trumps all worldly concerns, and trumps all universal concerns—all told, it trumps everything. In a novel where characters are so consumingly distraught in their search for meaning, both in their own lives and in the world as a whole, the completion of Lily's artistic vision, the tapping into the infinite streams of her creative power, silences all questions. For it is meaning itself.

But this singular power that Lily discovers within herself is nothing new. In fact, this sense of self-knowledge and, perhaps more important, meaning, is something that Mrs. Ramsay, the eternal matriarch of the Ramsay family, is intimately acquainted with. She portrays this surety throughout the novel. Alone on the porch of her family's cottage, she retires from the spider's web of domesticity woven through and among her family, to her own seclusion. "To be silent," she thinks, "to be alone. All the being and doing, expansive, glittering, vocal," evaporate, and one shrinks, "with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others" (62). At this moment, she imagines all and knows all. The trees, streams, and flowers—here she "felt they expressed one; felt they became one; felt they knew one, in a sense were one; felt an irrational tenderness thus" (62). Though she knows no God to save this beauty, no reason, no justice, and no order to preserve the subtle magnificence of these fleeting things, in her reflection Mrs. Ramsay embraces them with no reservation. Her mind entertains both the visions of grandeur flowing from her imagination and the cycle

of the Hebrides lighthouse standing miles from her cabin; she is as intimately attuned to these natural cycles as she is to those of society, and her family downstairs. Sitting alone, gazing out over her domain, her home, "there rose to her lips always some exclamation of triumph over life when things came together in this peace, this rest, this eternity" (63).

Like Lily, in this state of sublimity, Mrs. Ramsay knows not only meaning but also an incredible authority, a strength that the men surrounding her all seem to lack. Wandering his cottage grounds, Mr. Ramsay is arrested by his wife's stark magnificence; the thought that at this moment he cannot possess her stops him dead in his tracks. "It saddened him, and her remoteness pained him, and he felt, as he passed, that he could not protect her, and, when he reached the hedge, he was sad. He could do nothing to help her. He must stand by and watch her. Indeed, the infernal truth was, he made things worse for her" (64). During her meditation, Mr. Ramsay's wife was "lovely, lovelier now than ever he thought. But he could not speak to her. He could not interrupt her" (65). No, all he could hope to do was bow in reverence.

Of course, Mrs. Ramsay is not Lily Briscoe. She has not rejected the life of a mother for the life of an artist, or the life of a wife for the life of a spinster. Despite this fact, however, in Woolf's universe the wisdom that these two women find in their moments of epiphany—Lily's at her canvas, Mrs. Ramsay's gazing out over her kingdom—seems to be worth the same thing; that is to say, it is worth everything.

But this wisdom is strange. In the wellspring of their creative power, women like Lily and Mrs. Ramsay find incredible nourishment—the only sustenance they need, so it would seem, leaving men like Mr. Ramsay in the cold as spectators. The truth of the matter is not so simple. This feminine wisdom is imbued with generosity: from that darkened, wedge-shaped core, that rest she has so long sought away from her family, Mrs. Ramsay will gladly leave; to her partner, as he tramps out a border around her in the yard in sheer awe of her magnificence, she is willing to return of her own free will and "to give him what she knew he would never ask"—*herself* (65). As her husband strikes poses in front of her and begs his home-bound wife for some sort of validation, Mrs. Ramsay, with her young son James in her lap, raises herself to meet him, pouring all of her sympathy into the air and exerting with all her might "a rain of energy, a column of spray, looking at the same time animated and alive as if all her energies were being fused into force, burning and illuminating." Her husband laps this up, "and into this delicious fecundity, this fountain and spray of life, the fatal sterility of the male [plunges] itself, like a beak of brass, barren and bare" (37). Though the men in this novel are

smart, part of me has to wonder just what it is these women figure out that makes them so much smarter, that allows the wisest among them to sit, soundly and silently, with knowing authority, as their men try to conquer the world. But even more so, part of me has to wonder just what is more profound: that a woman like Mrs. Ramsay can find this immense self-satisfying wisdom, or that for a man like Mr. Ramsay she is willing to expend it.

In Joseph Conrad's *Victory* it would seem that these two forces—a woman's mystifying wisdom and what seems like her compulsion to give it up for her man—are combined and synthesized into the female protagonist Lena. After being rescued by the expatriated Axel Heyst from the certain misery of life as a traveling, orphaned musician, Lena's love for him foments in her an unquestionable sense of direction, and as bounty hunters descend on the couple's island home in search of Axel's alleged fortune, Lena's love crystallizes into a clear mission to protect the man who first protected her. Whereas once her mind was clouded with doubt as to the reason for her own existence, Lena the protector "no longer wondered at that bitter riddle, since her heart found its solution in a blinding, hot glow of passionate purpose" (344). With this newly discovered bearing, Lena's senses are sharp and instincts keen; though Axel chooses to ignore it, Lena's eyes can't help but be drawn towards the ill-omened sky on the eve of the novel's final showdown, which ultimately leads to both lovers' deaths. "Beyond the headland of Diamond Bay, lying black on a purple sea," Lena sees massive clouds, "piled up and bathed in a mist of blood. A crimson crack like an open wound zigzagged between them, with a piece of dark red sun showing at the bottom" (330). This purposive force that takes hold of Lena is terribly attractive to the men who come after her. After she fights him off as he breaks into her cabin, the pirate Ricardo looks at Lena "with something like respect." The intruder is "awed by her stillness, by her economy of words. Womanlike, she felt the effect she had produced, the effect of knowing much and of keeping all her knowledge in reserve." This weight Lena holds above him is undeniable, and it moves these two characters with the power of some strange, primordial force. "So far, somehow, this had come about of itself" (278).

But Lena, for all her mysterious and fatal drive to save Axel, is not what is so fascinating about *Victory*. No, the image of her as Axel's protector, lips closed in knowing silence, moving with precise, unhurried motion, a vision of some strange feminine mission to save, "a red gleam in the white mist which wrapped the prompting and longings of her soul," is not so wild or so different from the image of Mrs. Ramsay gazing out over her family's Hebrides cottage, her own self contented by that triumph over life that her wisdom has

afforded her, that sublime knowledge of the universe and her place in it (374). Axel Heyst even says it himself: "I wonder, Lena, whether you are just a little child, or whether you represent something as old as the world" (337). Conrad's hero Lena has tapped into something so completely natural that one does not think to question it. What is truly fascinating about *Victory*, and what must be asked, is what exactly Axel Heyst has done to deserve her.

With Lena, Heyst is utterly inept, and though he has rescued her from a life of misery, he is consistently unable to connect. "As far as women went," writes Conrad, "he was altogether uninstructed"; in conversation with her, "his mental attitude was that of a man looking this way and that on a piece of writing which he is unable to decipher" (209). As bounty hunters encroach upon his volcanic island in Samburan, Axel is helpless and terrified, without a trace of courage to protect himself or his partner, hoping instead for some god to swoop in and protect him and Lena from the encroaching envoys of the world, a "heaven to which he could recommend this fair, palpitating handful of ashes and dust" (332). When by chance Axel does happen to be moved—whether by Lena or by the view from staring out over his island—emotional stirrings come as a strange and alien shock. Long secluded on his volcanic island, Axel "was not used to receive his intellectual impressions in that way—reflected in movements of carnal emotion" (206). In *Victory* the courage and carnality are all Lena's; she is tough because she is the only one who seems to understand how to be. Hers is a fatal hero's journey—indeed, a tragedy—out of absolute necessity, for her man has let her down.

But in spite of all of this, Lena loves that man with every fiber of her being, is willing to sacrifice—to give her very life, with no qualms and no questions about it—out of her love for him, as if it were her sole purpose in the world, the pinnacle of her existence. If Lily Briscoe's masterpiece is her painting, dying to save Axel is Lena's. In a novel where a man has fled from all society and has come to believe that the world holds no meaning for him, and he no meaning for the world, Lena has found her own life's meaning in that man himself. But not only that, not only does he give her life a purpose, but Lena also wonders if it is Axel who is responsible for her very being in the first place, if it is Axel who gives her life itself. "Do you know," she asks Axel, "it seems to me, somehow, that if you were to stop thinking of me I shouldn't be in the world at all!" (177).

What is this life force that Axel Heyst gives Lena, which can lead her to her death? With *Victory*, the mystery of what women like Lena, and indeed women like Lily Briscoe and Mrs. Ramsay, have figured out has been infinitely compounded, for what could these women possibly know that makes a man

like Axel Heyst worth dying for? Of course, Conrad's example is a bit extreme, and perhaps that question is too. Fair enough. Nevertheless, *Victory* does much to suggest that while there is plenty that a man like Axel or Mr. Ramsay does wrong, there must be something that he does absolutely *right* to earn what he does from these women. The central marriage in either of these novels cannot be a one-way street: what these men take is plain to see, but what do they give?

If there is an answer to this question, E.M. Forster's *Howards End* may bring us closer to it. Like Woolf and Conrad, Forster deals in opposites. At the core of the novel revolve two characters: the bookish and cultured Margaret Schlegel, of Germanic blood, dedicated to love, the imagination, and "personal relations" with the world, and Henry Wilcox, the prototypical stuffy, business-class Englishman of the early 20th century (25). Like Woolf's Mr. Ramsay, Forster's Wilcox is certainly host to many of those same fatal male faults, and as their relationship comes under increasing fire from her fellow socialites, Margaret can freely list them. "He's afraid of emotion. He cares too much about success, too little about the past. His sympathy lacks poetry, and so isn't sympathy really. I'd even say . . . that, spiritually, he's not as honest as I am" (158).

For Margaret's sister Helen, a woman of the world and of the body and perhaps this man's polar opposite, this emotional paucity is enough to dismiss Henry and his Wilcox clan. The race of Englishmen and women the Wilcoxes inhabit is spiritually and emotionally oblivious, she tells Leonard Bast, and its members have no sense of themselves and hence no real sense of the world apart from them. "Perhaps," she wonders aloud, "the little thing that says 'I' is missing out of the middle of their heads, and then it's a waste of time to blame them" (213). A man like Wilcox is not like her and her sister; in fact, he may be a different species altogether. "Had you thought it, then?" she asks Leonard. "That there are two kinds of people—our kind, who live straight from the middle of their heads, and the other kind who can't, because their heads have no middle? They can't say 'I,'" she declares. "They *aren't* in fact, and so they're supermen," a race of souls devoid of something Helen thought intrinsic to all humanity, perhaps devoid of souls altogether (213).

But in defense of this alleged superman and his ilk, Margaret gladly rises. "If Wilcoxes hadn't worked and died in England for thousands of years," she contends, "you and I couldn't sit here without having our throats cut. There would be no trains, no ships to carry us literary people about in, no fields even. Just savagery. No—perhaps not even that. Without their spirit, life might never have moved out of the protoplasm" (159). While hardly the self-

proclaimed metaphysician that Woolf's Mr. Ramsay makes himself out to be, Wilcox's business conventions and dry Catholic faith would rank him in about the same league: all mind and very little body, an emotional imperialist. For Margaret though, an immense attraction sprouts from this contrast, from this gap between her and Henry, between the worlds of her earthy, artistic elite and the foundations laid by his pragmatic business class throughout the grid of the British Empire. That this symbiotic attraction will lead her to love him she is quite positive. Margaret assures her sister: "Indeed, I began to the moment he spoke to me" (158).

But is that all there is? Is love just a matter of the right mind finding the right body? Is the role of these men simply just to be men, their gift to these women their obliviousness, their fatal male sterility, as Woolf would call it? Is that all it takes?

Perhaps it is. For all the effort she makes to save him, there is very little in Conrad's *Victory* to suggest that aside from rescuing and naming her early in the novel, this mysterious thing that Axel does to fulfill Lena's existence is anything that great or profound, or is even anything that has that much to do with Lena at all. Though she knows that she loves him and is certain of what she must do to protect him, she remarks to Axel that "sometimes it seems to me that you can never love me for myself, only for myself, as people do love each other when it is to be forever" (208). In the end, Lena will die for a man who may not even love her in the first place. In an opposite sense, we find the same sort of disconnection from the male with Mrs. Ramsay: for all her giving and motherly tendencies, and the satisfaction and fulfillment she seems to get out of them and out of being her husband's wife, out of playing the part that she does, there are certain lengths to which she *will not* go for Mr. Ramsay, certain things she *won't* do, certain things he has *not* earned from her. As her husband gazes at her with rapt expectation, Mrs. Ramsay stares instead out her window and denies him those three simple words he longs for the most. She will do so much for him, but she will not tell him that she loves him (124). One would think that those three words would be at the heart of a marriage like the Ramsays', that they would cement the Ramsay family, their guests and their entire Hebrides estate together, but No, Woolf tells us, despite all of this they do not.

I cannot help but wonder if perhaps the wisdom these women have found has nothing to do with the men *themselves*. Maybe these men are just accessories to it, just the nameless, faceless substrates, vital yet somehow disposable, that can activate these strange, primordial forces that possess these women, that then drive these women to kill and to be killed to protect their

men, their families, and their homes. Maybe Mr. Ramsay is not the true source of Mrs. Ramsay's affection. Maybe Mr. Ramsay could have been any other Mr. in the British Empire, and Mrs. Ramsay would have been satisfied. Maybe.

Then again, what is necessarily so special about Mrs. Ramsay and these other women in the first place? Lily Briscoe, as she completes her vision over her hideously difficult white canvas, only captures that vision of unity—that image of the world's fleeting, myriad parts working in concert with one another to crystallize into some sort of masterpiece—when she finally stops worrying about her critics and gets herself out of the way. Then her creative force almost forcefully possesses her, and the art practically takes care of itself. She is as much the owner of her final masterpiece as she is subject to it. Just the same, as Mrs. Ramsay sits in meditation, gazing out over the Hebrides Bay and driving her husband to such terrible distraction, the truth that she uncovers is something that is as much self-affirming as it is affirming of the rest of the world around her. In her reflection, she does not sit alone but sits with every tree, stream, and flower and every bit of sun and shadow tracing across the lawn; she is not one, she is all; she is not just confined to her porch, but at that moment she is everywhere. And Conrad's poor martyr Lena contradicts herself perhaps most of all, for the mission she finds on Samburan, the "blinding, hot glow of passionate purpose" that guides her and gives her a sense of meaning that she had *never* in her wildest dreams imagined she could possess comes only at the cost of her life (344). Ultimately she is *defined* by this fact; she is fully realized only in the acceptance of her own expendability. Helen Schlegel derides the Wilcoxes for missing the "little thing that says 'I'" from the middle of their heads, but when these women are at their peaks—when they are at their absolute wisest—I have to wonder if the word 'I' even enters their vocabulary. We can talk all we want about how the men in these women's lives may not ultimately matter, but if we break down just what was so uncanny about these women in the first place, it is clear that in a certain sense, they don't either.

But let us return to those men again, because to define them simply as substrates to this feminine wisdom and leave it at that would be to limit them to a role no man or woman would be satisfied with. Three hundred and four pages into *Howards End*, with his adulterous and unapologetic past revealed, and his son convicted of manslaughter for killing his father's mistress's husband, Henry Wilcox is defeated, a husk of a man. He and Margaret have fallen apart and have been pulled back to the cultural poles they seemed so close to escaping. Howards End, the Wilcox clan's beloved English estate, stands

locked and unclaimed. It has been denied Margaret (its rightful owner as decided by Mrs. Wilcox on her deathbed) by Henry Wilcox himself. The societal opposites that the two should have transcended remain as disparate as ever; there is no love, there is no union; there is nothing. If soulless male rationality were supposed to be the catalyst for love, it wasn't enough.

Three hundred and seventy-seven pages into *Victory*, Lena is killed. As Axel stands over her, watching her dark blood seep slowly from the small, circular speck of a wound left from her killer's bullet, his regret and his remorse for her death and for so much more begin to escape from his mind out into the world. "I was a disarmed man," he tells her, "I have been a disarmed man all my life as I see it now" (378). But whereas once Axel would have bemoaned his dull, neutered state, during his final moments with his lover those forces of carnal emotion finally get the best of him:

> She tried to raise herself, but all she could do was to lift her head from the pillow. With a terrified and gentle movement, Heyst hastened to slip his arm under her neck. She felt relieved at once of an intolerable weight, and was content to surrender to him in the infinite weariness of her tremendous achievement. Exulting, she saw herself extended on the bed, in a black dress, and profoundly at peace; while, stooping over her with a kindly, playful smile, he was ready to lift her up in his firm arms and take her here into the sanctuary of his innermost heart—for ever! The flush of rapture flooding her whole being broke out in a smile of innocent, girlish happiness; and with that divine radiance on her lips she breathed her last, triumphant, seeking for his glance in the shades of death. (380)

As Lena's life is further and further depleted, the power that for the whole novel had guided her now guides them both. Finally, she can touch him, and he can just be quiet and touch her. At long last, Axel Heyst puts down the defenses that had for so long kept him hidden from the world and from himself, and he and Lena finally connect. Lena's knowledge of her mission was self-satisfying in its own right, but at the end of *Victory*, nothing feels better than that binding carnality, a mission accomplished.

It is the great fault of the men in these novels that they are so ignorant and oblivious to this natural passion, but I would wager that, for better or for worse, when these men finally do cede control, it is its own redemption. This carnality that overcomes Axel Heyst at *Victory*'s end is a return to an eternal form; something immortal that has survived in the face of a universe blind and indifferent; something, as Axel suggests, as old as the world itself. Whether he deserves it or not, through this carnal force a man like Axel is finally able to connect, to the women in his life and to the world at large. In

their own way, the men in these novels can be as wise as the women they fawn over, the women who awaken these forces in them. To the extent that they are able to, it is the great miracle of the women in these novels that they are attuned enough to these forces to inspire this transformation. Is this love? Perhaps ultimately it is, though I do not know if it is the type of love Margaret and Helen imagine between Margaret and Henry Wilcox, or the type of love that Mrs. Ramsay tries to motivate by playing matchmaker with every young man and woman who visits the family's bayside home. The power that possesses these women and men and binds them together with such uncanny force is something far more powerful than mere gossip and matchmaking, and honestly something far less complicated. In a world of fleeting things, where life can sprout and spread with utter abandon only to be destroyed with equal nonchalance, where a great man's legacy is no match for the legacy of the stones underneath his feet, this carnal energy—this ultimate, intimate connection to the world, that Lily feels with her canvas, and Mrs. Ramsay with her home, and Axel Heyst with the woman dying in his arms—is its own validation. In the end it is all you can ask for, for it is all you can ever really get.

WORKS CITED

Conrad, Joseph. *Victory.* New York: Modern Library, 1921.
Forster, E. M. *Howards End.* New York: Modern Library, 1999.
Woolf, Virginia. *To The Lighthouse.* New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1981.