‘Take my lens. I bequeath it to my descendents’: Julia Margaret Cameron

Woolf, like Katharine Hilbery, knew that through photographs she could, ‘join the present on to this past’ (N&D: 106). Those in the Hilbery family album are fictionalisations of the Pattle sisters and their coterie sweeping over the lawns at Melbury House/Little Holland House, with Julia Margaret Cameron constructed as Queenie Colquhoun (106–7). As early as January 1919, Woolf recognised the comic potential of anecdotes about Freshwater such as she read in the biography of Watts,¹ for instance of the Camerons leaving for Ceylon and taking their coffins with them (D1: 237). She includes the coffin anecdote in Night and Day and develops the joke in Freshwater. She thus overtly constructs Cameron, like Ritchie, as a figure of fun, belittling, mocking and patronising her, while obliquely acknowledging her status by intertextual affiliation.

Cameron’s legacy

In Freshwater, the Mrs Cameron character commands, ‘Take my lens. I bequeath it to my descendents. See that it is always slightly out of focus’ (F: 73). Woolf did take Cameron’s lens and used it in many complex and subtle ways. Cameron’s is not the only lens which influences Woolf, of course, not least because of technical developments in the art of photography and cinema during her lifetime. However, Cameron’s influence was formative, part of the matrilineal legacy inherited in her childhood, and a family ritual, as Maggie Humm explores in Snapshots of Bloomsbury (2006a). Woolf’s work exhibits all of the qualities for which Cameron was well known: her experimental
photographic techniques and innovative use of light; the ontological uncertainty of her subjects; the fluidity between fact and fiction; and her use of private reference and personal anecdote. Woolf’s lexicon frequently derives from the photographic process, which she knew was such a lengthy, arduous, yet highly creative one for Cameron. Woolf had been a keen consumer of Victorian photography. Aged five she went with Vanessa and Adrian to see the Animatographs, a precursor of the cinema, but was shown X-ray photographs of hands, a baby and a puppy (PA: 9–10). She had a lifetime's interest, and practical expertise, in all aspects and innovations of photography, which was informed, though not exclusively, by Cameron’s work. As a child, she watched her siblings taking, developing and printing their photographs so that she was knowledgeable not only about the artistic but also the technical aspects, as evidenced by her diary entry for 7 August 1897 in which she lists exact prices and specifications for photographic equipment ordered (120).

Cameron, like Ritchie, provides Woolf with the model of a successful, independent, business woman and artist who could also subvert patriarchal institutions by her espièglerie. Woolf kept, and referenced, Cameron’s photographs, as she did Ritchie’s books. There is the same fluidity and border-crossing between the work and lives of Cameron and Woolf as I have argued for between Woolf and Ritchie. Cameron’s work, like Ritchie’s, not only shadows Woolf’s, but at times merges and overlaps with it, because of qualities which can be labelled proto-modernist. Cameron’s photographs of Julia Stephen, and those of Herschel and Taylor, intertexts in ‘The Searchlight’, were material objects transported from 22 Hyde Park Gate and recontextualised in 46 Gordon Square; thus physically, visually and aesthetically bridging the gap between her nineteenth-century childhood and her twentieth-century modernist maturity. In ‘The Searchlight’, as Marcus argues, the telescope becomes a device profoundly linked to Woolf’s relationship with her past and her own genesis; in this sense, ‘the “telescope story” takes its place alongside To the Lighthouse, a text in which optical technologies – telescope, photograph, film – become the media of memory and of the “passage” between present and past, past and present’ (2008: 7). Photography and optics enter Woolf’s literary lexicon and creative aesthetic, especially in her crafting of childhood memory through scene-making: ‘Figuratively I could snapshot what I mean by some