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May Sinclair’s Portrait of the Artist as Daughter**

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**“IN THE SHADOW OF HIS LANGUAGE”:  
May Sinclair’s Portrait of the Artist as Daughter**

May Sinclair (1863–1946) has become little more than a footnote to the history of the English novel and literary modernism. The author of an extensive *oeuvre*, Sinclair is present as one of the key modernist authors in Bonnie Kime Scott’s groundbreaking 1990 anthology, *The Gender of Modernism*.<sup>1</sup> A chapter is also occasionally devoted to Sinclair in studies of women novelists, or female writers of the “novel of self-development”.<sup>2</sup> There are, however, few monographs devoted to this author who, as Gillespie stresses, “aptly defined, enthusiastically practised, and vigorously defended modernist innovations in fiction and poetry” (*Gender*, p. 436).<sup>3</sup>

In one of these defences Sinclair laments that H.D. (Hilda Doolittle, 1886–1961) has been badly served by critics who fail to respond to the “strange new beauty” and “austere ecstasy” of her later poetry (*Gender*, p. 467). Sinclair herself has been equally badly served. Nobody has bothered to trace accurately, for example, the metaphysics informing her *Mary Olivier: A Life* (1919), a semi-autobiographical

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<sup>1</sup> “May Sinclair: Introduced by Diane F. Gillespie”, in BONNIE KIME SCOTT, ed., *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 436–78. All further references to this anthology – abbreviated as *Gender* – are given in parenthesis in the text.

<sup>2</sup> SYDNEY JANET KAPLAN, *Feminine Consciousness in the Modern British Novel* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975); PENNY BROWN, *The Poison at the Source* (London: Macmillan, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> See however HRISEY D. ZEGGER, *May Sinclair* (Boston: G. K. Hall and Co, 1976); THEOPHILUS E. M. BOLL, *Miss May Sinclair: Novelist* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1973); SUZANNE RAITT, *May Sinclair: A Modern Victorian* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

*Künstlerinroman* which employs a modification of the experimental "stream of consciousness" technique – a phrase that Sinclair was responsible for introducing into literary criticism in her 1918 review of Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage* (*Gender*, p. 444).

There are numerous autobiographical elements in *Mary Olivier*: May Sinclair was born Mary and in the same year as her heroine; May and Mary Olivier's parents have the same Christian names; both girls spent only a short time at school; both have four brothers; both have access to a similar range of books; both admire Spinoza and have headteachers who warn against him; both have fathers who lose money and die alcoholics; both have ageing mothers who require a daughter's care. But significant details are also changed, including facts about the mother's final illness and the nature of May and Mary's achievements. May Sinclair is a best-selling prose writer: the author of twenty-two novels, a biography, two books and several articles on philosophy and psychoanalysis, six collections of short stories and extensive literary criticism. Her *oeuvre* does include poetry, but it is the fictional Mary who is renowned as a poet and for her translation of Euripides' *Bacchae* into blank verse.

The centrality of poetry and the translation of Euripides to the narrative of *Mary Olivier* suggests that Sinclair had imagined a parallel life for herself, and that she had allowed some of the persona of the young Hilda Doolittle (whose translations of Euripides were first published 1915–16) into the virtual reality that the novel explores. Thus, Mary becomes the mistress of Richard Nicholson – a figure who seems to be based on Richard Aldington, who was a (Platonic) friend of Sinclair's, the husband of H.D., and also a translator of Greek poetry. Even some of the lines of the translations that are repetitively "quoted" in the novel are strongly reminiscent of H.D.<sup>4</sup>

The complex relationship between May Sinclair and H.D. is further underlined by the fact that there are also references to May Sinclair in H.D.'s own *roman-à-clef*, *Bid Me to Live*. Here May Sinclair appears disguised as the spinster-novelist Miss Mary Kerr, who passes on a kind of mystical knowledge to "Julia", the figure who substitutes for H.D. herself.<sup>5</sup> Mary Kerr tells Julia about a secret

<sup>4</sup> MAY SINCLAIR, *Mary Olivier: A Life* (London: Virago, 1980), pp. 298–99, 322. All further references are to this edition.

<sup>5</sup> H.D., *Bid Me to Live* (London: Virago, 1984), pp. 168–69.

concerning D.H. Lawrence and the "Key-of-heaven tree", and in so doing H.D. implicitly includes a coded reference to the title of Sinclair's best-selling novel *The Tree of Heaven* – published in 1917, the year whose traumatic events are "frozen" into the memories of *Bid Me to Live*. H.D.'s novel ends with a mystical passage on "gloire": the "unborn story" that pre-exists the self and that reveals itself in the way Van Gogh paints light, a cypress or a blossoming peach tree.<sup>6</sup> Since nobody has bothered to look carefully at Sinclair's philosophy, the possibility that H.D.'s *gloire* might have been influenced by Sinclair remains unexamined, yet Sinclair's own novels frequently explore a pre-individual ecstasy evoked by light and by the beauty of trees and sky.

Neither of the two biographies of Sinclair that have been published in English spots these connections. Whilst this is excusable in Boll's biography from 1973, its absence from Raitt's biography (published 2000) is odd, since *Bid Me to Live* includes a description of Sinclair's London flat, and in 1976 Zegger also registered the link – albeit in a way that distorts the events and the lines of influence.<sup>7</sup> The biographical omissions are symptomatic: the writing of women's life stories tends to occlude a serious engagement with them as philosophers, with the result that women are liable to disappear from the history of philosophy – even 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosophy – and from the register of thinkers capable of influencing others' creative practices.

Boll's biography starts with a poignant scene: of Sinclair reading an invited paper to the Aristotelian Society in 1923, then returning to her seat, without waiting for questions from the audience. Recalled to the platform, she appeared flummoxed by the inevitable queries, frequently appealing for help from her Chairman "in a gesture of apparent rout". Instead of linking this "rout" to the Parkinson's Disease and dementia which awaited the 59-year-old author (and which would have muted her authorship completely by 1929), Boll reads the scene symbolically. He claims that the author's "intellectual attainment seemed to slip like a mask from her femininity"; Sinclair makes "a clear break from her philosophical writing" and resumes "with a

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 168–69, 176–77, 183.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 168–69; ZEGGER, *May Sinclair*, p. 158n.; RAITT, *May Sinclair*, cit.

demonic intensity the free expression of the creative writer".<sup>8</sup> Boll is much too quick to pit philosophy against literature, and to read the "feminine" creativity of Sinclair as expressed through her novels and short stories, instead of as being intimately bound up with her passion for philosophy.

Suzanne Raitt seems just as uninterested in Sinclair's philosophy, which is dismissed with the languid comment: "remarkable as it was in its time, it has limited significance for philosophers nowadays".<sup>9</sup> As such, she pays little attention to Sinclair's two main books of philosophy: *A Defence of Idealism* (1917) and *The New Idealism* (1922). Raitt does explore in some detail Sinclair's involvement with psychoanalysis: Sinclair read German and reviewed Freud and Jung as early as 1916. Even earlier, in 1913, she helped set up and fund the Medico-Psychological Clinic (or Brunswick Square Clinic), the first in Britain to offer psychoanalytic treatment. However, Sinclair read Freud and Jung through the tradition of Idealist philosophy that she was familiar with (especially Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer and Spinoza), and Raitt does not look closely enough at this background. As a consequence, Raitt tends to read Sinclair as eclectically *failing* to be Freudian, Jungian (or even Lacanian).

To compound Raitt's mistake in dismissing Sinclair's philosophy as of little interest to present-day philosophers, it is worth registering that Sinclair defended feminism and was passionate about Spinoza, and that Spinozism has proved attractive to a number of feminist philosophers writing at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, for Genevieve Lloyd, we can find in Spinoza a non-dualist model of the reason/passion relationship; for Susan James, Spinoza offers a counter to contemporary models of desire; for Moira Gatens, Spinoza provides a way of reimagining the public/private relationship.<sup>10</sup> It is interesting, therefore, that Spinozism is integral to the development of the self and the narrative of *Mary Olivier*. Furthermore, since Spinoza's philosophy provided a way of combining belief in causal determinism and

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<sup>8</sup> BOLL, *Miss May*, pp. 20, 22.

<sup>9</sup> RAITT, *May Sinclair*, p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, SUSAN JAMES' interview with Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd, "The Power of Spinoza: Feminist Conjunctions", *Going Australian: Reconfiguring Feminism and Philosophy, Hypatia* 15 (2), Special Issue 2000, ed. C. Battersby *et al.*, pp. 40-58.

freedom, registering the Spinozan theme allows the reader to see that the novel is not as fatalist as some critics have claimed.<sup>11</sup> Spinoza is not abandoned at the end of the novel, nor is *Mary Olivier* an exemplification of the philosophical idealism of T. H. Green, as is usually asserted.<sup>12</sup>

As a defence against agnosticism, in 1886 Sinclair's ex-headmistress Dorothea Beale advised Sinclair to read T. H. Green instead of Spinoza.<sup>13</sup> For a time the young May Sinclair seems to have followed her headmistress's advice and used Green's metaphysics to mask or mute the much more subversive Spinozistic model of identity that she put forward in her mature works. For Green, it is social relations that constitute the self and, in order to realise himself, a person must will the Common Good. Thus, Green rejects Spinozism which also advocates a relational model of identity:

The cardinal error of Spinoza's "Politik" is the admission of a right in the individual apart from life in society, apart from the recognition by members of a society of a correlative claim upon and duty to each other, as all interested in one and the same good.<sup>14</sup>

May Sinclair is closer to Spinoza than to Green. In her account of the emergence of the individuality of the female artist, it is not "life in society" (and even less social "duty") that she prioritises.

*Mary Olivier* can be read as a response to James Joyce's own semi-autobiographical novel, *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* (1916).<sup>15</sup> In *Portrait* Joyce recounts – without the use of an omniscient or first-person narrator – the development of the protagonist, Stephen Dedalus, from early childhood through an Irish Catholic upbringing, through his loss of faith, to his leaving of his mother and family and his embarkation on a career as a writer. Thus in the opening sentences

<sup>11</sup> KAPLAN, *Feminine Consciousness*, p. 57.

<sup>12</sup> BOLL, *Miss May*, p. 36; BROWN, *Poison*, p. 12; RAITT, *May Sinclair*, pp. 49–50, 234; ZEGGER, *May Sinclair*, pp. 19–22, 107.

<sup>13</sup> RAITT, *May Sinclair*, pp 44n-45n).

<sup>14</sup> T. H. GREEN, "Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation", *Collected Works of T. H. Green*, ed. Peter Nicholson (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1997), vol. 2, p. 362, §38.

<sup>15</sup> A comparison made by JEAN RADFORD, "Introduction". to *Mary Oliver*, ed. cit.

we find the young Stephen in the nursery. We are within the immediacy of the child's consciousness:

Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo. . . . His father told him that story: his father looked at him through a glass: he had a hairy face.

He was baby tuckoo. (p. 7).<sup>16</sup>

In her 1918 review of Richardson's *Pilgrimage*, May Sinclair praises Joyce for having "plunged" far into the depths of consciousness and life, and in a way that avoids outdated dualisms such as "realism and idealism, or subjective and objective art" (*Gender*, pp. 443, 442). In *Mary Olivier* she is doing something very similar to Joyce, but there are also important differences. Sinclair's novel also starts with the two-year-old child in the nursery, but its first sentence interposes the voice of an impersonal narrator – "The curtain of the big bed hung down beside the cot" – before the move inside the consciousness of the child in the second and third sentences:

When old Jenny shook it the wooden rings rattled on the pole and grey men with pointed heads and squat, bulging bodies came out of the folds on to the flat green ground. If you looked at them they turned into squab faces smeared with green. (*Mary*, p. 3)

As the first section of the first chapter moves on, we move further and further into the child's consciousness until we are taken into Mama's "big bed" and until Mary's hands reach "Mother's breast: a smooth, cool, round thing that hung to your hands and slipped from them when they tried to hold it" (*ibid.* p. 4).

In *Portrait*, after the opening nursery scene, the memory of the narrating consciousness flickers forward to school, to the young Stephen in the playground engaged in a game of football. Stephen's identity is shaped as much by the schools and colleges that he attends as by his family. It is of the English-born Dean of Studies at the University that Stephen silently complains:

<sup>16</sup> JAMES JOYCE, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), p. 7. All further references are to this edition.

– The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words *home, Christ, ale, master*, on his lips and on mine! [...]. My soul frets in the shadow of his language. (p. 189)

Although Stephen's identity emerges through an intense relationship with his father and mother (whose love is denied along with his faith at the end of the novel), the family does not emerge as a separable "private" sphere. As Stephen wrestles with his own identity, it is the language and ideas of Roman Catholicism and of England that act as a barriers, and in the family conversations recorded by Stephen we can see how the political, the religious and the public intertwine. Torn between sensuality (identified with his father's Irishness) and an overly idealised philosophy, in which Art takes over the place that God had occupied in the young Stephen Dedalus's life, Joyce's hero struggles towards being "born" as a soul:

When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk at me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets. (p. 203)

Joyce gives us an account of his hero's struggle with the philosophical "nets" set out to catch Stephen's Irish soul: Aristotle, Aquinas, Plato, the Stoics. It is against these nets that Joyce's hero struggles and emerges "born" as a soul, and as perhaps an artist – the outcome is left open at the end of the novel.

In Sinclair's novel being "born" as a soul and as a woman artist is a much more private matter than being born as a hero who is an artist and a man. Whereas there are only a few pages in *Portrait* spent in the domestic sphere prior to school, in *Mary Olivier* the situation is reversed. Mary is at her first school for one part of one brief chapter which is nearly half-way through the novel (pp. 137–44). This chapter represents Mary aged fifteen, briefly admitted to school and "expelled" (according to her mother's account) because of her pantheism and "heresy". And even here the focus of this chapter is on mother-daughter relations (pp. 142–45). We are told that Mary attends another school for eighteen months (aged fifteen to seventeen), but the details on that are even more sketchy and given on one page (p. 146).

The "nets" that Mary Olivier has to escape are not the nets of nationality, language and public religion, but of family and Oedipal relationships:



Wool, spun out, wound round you, woven in a net. You were tangled and strangled in a net of unclean wool. They caught you in it when you were a baby a month old. Mamma, Papa and Uncle Victor. You would have to cut and tug and kick and fight your way out. They were caught in it themselves, they couldn't get out. They didn't want to get out. The wool stopped their minds working. They hated it when their minds worked, when anybody's mind worked. Aunt Lavvy's – yours. (p. 113)

Although there is a struggle over language in *Mary Olivier*, this is not related to national identity as in the case of Stephen. Instead, it occurs when Mary's borrows books of Greek from her brother and books of philosophy (in German) from a neighbour, and has to fight for the time and skills to read them (pp. 126–29, 208). The tussle over religion in *Mary Olivier* is also a more private affair, in that Mary employs mysticism and Spinozistic pantheism to counter her mother's Protestantism.

In a letter to Pound in 1919, Sinclair indignantly defends *Mary Olivier* against the charge that it is more "subjective" than Joyce's *Portrait*. "Mary's mind is a sufficiently clear mirror of 'objects'. Mary's mind is 'objective' to me."<sup>17</sup> Sinclair's style is not more "subjective"; Pound is wrong about that. It is actually more "objective" in its use of an impersonal voice. However, because of the nature of the "nets flung at it to hold it back from flight", the "freeing" of the soul of Mary Olivier seems both a more personal and also a more lengthy affair. Sinclair's novel does not end until its heroine is 47, and it is only as her mother is dying that Mary attains the status of an individual – but "individual" and "personal" here have to be understood in terms of the pantheism that informs the novel as a whole.

The first time a pantheistic experience of nature occurs, Mary is aged seven. She saw "A queer white light everywhere, like water thin and clear" and this light transforms the fields and the earth – "clear light; grey earth, shot delicately with green blades, shimmering" – so that Mary "drew in her breath with a sharp check. She knew that the fields were beautiful" (p. 48). Taken over by this beauty, Mary returns home and goes into the drawing room which is itself "full of the queer white light". Her gaze moves past "the wine-red satin stripes in the

<sup>17</sup> MAY SINCLAIR, Letter to Pound of 24 Oct. 1919, quoted RAITT, *Mary Sinclair*, p. 240.

grey damask curtains" and the "rings of wine-red roses on the grey carpet", past the furniture "shining like dark wine", the "emerald green silk in the panel of the piano", past the "small wine-red flowers on the pale green chintz", past "the green Chinese bowls in the rosewood cabinet" and "the blue and red parrot on the chair", to the figure of the mother who is sitting at the far end of the room (p. 49).

This richly-coloured passage – with resonances of the greenness of nature, the redness of blood and the wine at holy communion – takes Mary to the object of her desire and her love: her mother. Overwhelmed with a feeling of happiness so great "she could hardly bear it", Mary runs over to her mother and buries her face in her mother's lap. "Mama" is transformed into a Madonna-like figure: with "small beautiful nose bending over the tray of beads" and "bright eyes that slid slantwise to look at her". As she bonds with her mother, Mary experiences once more the happiness that "was sharp and still like the white light". But Mary can't put the happiness that she feels into words in response to her mother's questions, and she retires to her room, pressing her face into the pillow and crying "Mama! Mama!" (pp. 49, 50).

Mary's ecstatic pleasure in the beauty of and bond with her mother – what recent psychoanalytic critics would term her *jouissance* – is still further emphasised by the section that opens immediately after the "Mama! Mama!" cry: a section which is concerned with the "awful feeling" associated with Christianity, the Crucifixion and Passion Week (pp. 50–52). Christianity is linked with "darkness", and is the antithesis to the "queer light" and also the colours that will later be explicitly linked with pantheism, Shelley and Spinoza by the fourteen-year-old Mary:

The God of Baruch Spinoza was the God you had wanted, the only sort of God you cared to think about. Thinking about him – after the Christian God – was like coming out of a small dark room into an immense open space filled with happy light. (p. 100)

It seems that Shelley also "knew about the queerness of the sharp white light, and the sudden stillness, when the grey of the fields turns to violet: the clear hard stillness that covers the excited throb-throbbing of the light"(p. 130).

Spinoza and Shelley represent epiphanic ecstasy and union with the mother; but, on the other hand, their dangerous pantheism also represents the conflicts that exist between Mary and those around her at the level of conscious beliefs. As soon as the young Mary opens the *Encyclopædia Britannica* and realises the Spinozistic "truth" about God, she wonders what her beloved brother Mark and her mother would say (pp. 98–101). The problem is: should she tell her mother (who is a devout Christian) that the Bible contains untruths? From this point on, the battle over Mary's avowed pantheism – and her supposed "atheism" – marks her own development as an individual, being presented by her mother as the reason for her "expulsion" from her first school (p. 145). Mary does not reject God (in the manner of Joyce's hero), but relocates God through dispersing him through nature. Nature is beautiful and divine; God is nature; the self is part of nature, and is therefore also part of an immanent, non-transcendent, God.

Mary associates the mother's presence and her (colourful) body with an ecstatic union in which there is no individuality, and in which self and other are one; but the narrative voice is also very clear that the union with the mother is blocked at the level of conscious interaction. This is in part through a difference in belief systems, but also because the mother's own desire is directed to one of her four brothers, Mark. Thus, after the fifteen-year-old Mary has been sent home from her first school on account of her "infidelity", she explicitly recollects the "sudden, secret happiness that more than anything was like God" and remembers how the first time she had experienced this ecstasy she had knelt down at her mother's knees, "and kissed her hands with the idea of drawing her into her happiness". But Mary's memory of this *jouissance* is disturbed by the thought will she will "never be able to talk about it to Mama" (p. 144). The language from which James Joyce's hero is alienated is the public language of Church and nation; the language from which May Sinclair's heroine is alienated is that of her mother and unconscious desire.

For a brief moment after her return from school, Mary dreams that "the miracle" could happen and that she will be able to find the words to tell her mother about her oneness with nature. But there is no miracle. Instead Mary realises that her mother had never loved her, and that "Miracles don't happen." As the belief in her mother's love dies in

her, we are told Mary's "childhood died in her with a little gasp". But it is in the death of the desire for oneness with her mother that Mary's individuality begins to emerge: "suddenly she felt hard and strong, grown-up in her sad wisdom" (pp. 144, 145). Interestingly, what goes wrong in part in Sinclair's parallel novel, *The Life and Death of Harriet Frean* (1922), is her heroine's inability ever to sufficiently separate herself out from her parents' expectations and love. By contrast, in *Mary Olivier* it is Mary's conflictual relationship with her mother that turns her into a person.

In May Sinclair's *A Defence of Idealism* (1917) being born a self means only "that which is present to all states of consciousness in any one conscious organism". It does not entail being an individual. Individuality is only attained gradually through the course of a life as the child develops into an adult and separates itself off from its ancestors and relatives. Substance is infinite, but manifests itself as particular finite individuals, and involves "a plurality of illusory consciousnesses, a plurality of illusory selves, held together by one 'real' self".<sup>18</sup> What is charted in *Mary Olivier* is this "becoming an individual", and the simultaneous revelation of the "real" – pre-personal and pre-conscious – self that underlies individuality. Sinclair's treats this "real self" as linked with memory, which is also described as pre-individual and as non-identical with consciousness.<sup>19</sup> The "undivided, unapparent being" that is the self contains within itself "all selves which are and shall be". We can become conscious of this "real" pre-conscious self that synthesises materiality, time and space in new patterns that "escape for ever the net of memory", in privileged moments of awareness revealed in the experience of beauty, love or danger.<sup>20</sup>

The "net" metaphor from Sinclair's *A Defence of Idealism* is used in a very similar way in *Mary Olivier*. The metaphor is developed in stages. At stage one we are told that family relationships bind the child and her mind in "a net of unclean wool" which acts as a block to thought, and from which it is necessary to struggle free (p. 113). At

<sup>18</sup> MAY SINCLAIR, *A Defence of Idealism: Some Questions and Conclusions* (London: Macmillan, 1917), pp. 4 and 377 respectively.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 74, 77.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 31, 74, 379 respectively.

stage two there is a realisation of how extensive these "nets" are. Once again there is specific reference to Spinoza and to his account of "the intellectual love of God" (p. 288). This involves not looking for a "reality" hidden by appearances, but seeing reality as immanent to the "exquisite movements and connections of the live world":

You had been wrong all the time. You had thought of your family, Papa and Mama, perhaps Grandpapa and Grandmama, as powerful, but independent and separate entities, in themselves sacred and inviolable, working against you from the outside. [...] But it was not so. There were no independent, sacred entities, no sacred, inviolable selves. They were one immense organism and you were part of it; you were nothing that they had not been before you. It was no good struggling. You were caught in the net; you couldn't get out. (pp. 289-90)

At the third stage Mary does find an "escape". This does not involve giving up on pantheism, but comes through "the faint ecstasies of dreams" and through moments of pantheistic ecstasy in which one escapes the "I":

But that ecstasy and this happiness had one quality in common; they belonged to some part of you that was free. A you that had no hereditary destiny; that had got out of the net, or had never been caught in it. (p. 312)

This is still a kind of Spinozism. The individual is but a part of the whole. In a way that May Sinclair's heroine seems to wish to imitate at the end of the novel, Spinoza suggests that the individual becomes free by understanding – and hence changing – her relationship to the whole of which she is a part. For the Spinozist it is through understanding that we become free, since understanding involves a changed relation to passion – and to the underlying state of *conatus* which is a kind of will-to-life, involving a striving to persist and enhance being.<sup>21</sup> At the end of the novel Mary Olivier sets out very deliberately to put herself in touch with this life-force that runs through nature and that also underlies the "I". In so doing she is seeking to attain Spinoza's "intellectual love of God".

<sup>21</sup> GENEVIEVE LLOYD, *Spinoza and the Ethics*, (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 8-9, 89-90.

In *Mary Olivier* the relational monism of *A Defence of Idealism* is exemplified through exploring the relationships that exist within the family unit, from cradle to the attainment of full individuality. Mary attains personhood through a series of relational bondings and refusals. There is the sisterly identification with, and differences from, her brothers (who die one by one); a daughterly repulsion from her father (his beard and smell); the desire for bonding with the mother and the struggle against the mother's conscious beliefs; the fear of becoming like her unmarried "Aunt Charlotte" who is portrayed as a hysteric, driven mad by blocked sexual desire (pp. 79–81). In a way that is non-Freudian (and which Sinclair links instead to Jung), Sinclair makes the struggle against the mother key to the daughter's gradual attainment of individuality and freedom: "It must be fought to a finish, and the child must win it or remain forever immature."<sup>22</sup> Thus, it is only as her mother moves close to death that Mary's self begins to will freely. However, this "freedom" also needs to be understood within a philosophical framework, which displaces the "I" from being master in its own house.

Unlike *Portrait*, *Mary Olivier* does not end with an adolescent heroine separating from her mother and leaving home to set up by herself as an author. At the end of the novel her mother is dead and Mary is in her late forties, but the last chapter opens with her "imprisoned" by a house that she has taken on a seven-year lease (pp. 371–72). Mary is still struggling to free herself from the net of memories – including memories of a love affair that she has given up to care for her mother and to leave her lover "free". The novel concludes with Mary's escape from the "net" of memory into an impersonal ecstasy in which individuality is attained, but also simultaneously downplayed as the "I" conjoins with the not-I or "it" that acts through it.

At the start of *Mary Olivier*, the dominant pronouns used of the heroine are "she" and "you", and these pronouns alternate in ways that push and pull the reader inside and outside her stream of consciousness. Until Mary is 39 and is about to start her first sexual affair, the pronoun "I" is used only in reported speech or thought. But then, embedded in a complex paragraph full of reported speech – and

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<sup>22</sup> MAY SINCLAIR, "Clinical Lectures on Symbolism and Sublimation: Part II", *Medical Press* (16 Aug. 1916), p. 144.

sentences in French – we can see a stronger (direct) “I” about to emerge, and then this “I” strengthens as the mother sickens and Mary dreams of her death (pp. 347, 350–52). However, as Mary becomes free – as she meditates and escapes the “net” of memory and inherited habits – her individuality is simultaneously disrupted by the “it” that inhabits her body:

Going and coming back; gathered together; incredibly free; disentangled from the net of nerves and veins. It didn't move any more with the movement of the net. It was clear and still in the blackness; intensely real.

Then it willed. Your self willed. It was free to will. [...] Willing was *this*. Waves and waves of will, coming on and on, making your will, driving it through empty time . . . Time where nothing happens except this. Where nothing happens except God's will. God's will in your will. Self of your self. Reality of reality . . . It had felt like that. (p. 351)

The language here does not abandon Spinoza, but adds in Schopenhauerian elements – yet another of the philosophers praised (and occasionally quoted) in the text. Where Kant is dismissed as having “cheated” Mary with his doctrine of “duty” and his moral philosophy, Schopenhauer is absolved (p. 254). For Schopenhauer the pre-personal and non-individualised energy that acts through the self is “will”, and will is the force that underlies the conscious ego or self. Will is the “thing-in-itself” which expresses itself most directly not through the brain (which distorts the world by dividing it up into discrete individuals), but through the body – and through the (male) sexual organs in particular. For Schopenhauer, the normal male expresses the pre-personal life-force that he calls “will” through his sexual drives that move him beyond consciousness and beyond self, and the super-male or “genius” also expresses the impersonal energies of the will in a way that transcends normal (male) sexuality.<sup>23</sup>

Freud, profoundly influenced by Schopenhauer, translates this impersonal energetic drive which is below the level of conscious awareness into the “id” or the “*es*” (literally, the “it”). For Jung, by contrast, the ego does not emerge out of a process of repression, instead there is – as in Sinclair – a gradual process of individuation which takes place over the course of a person's life. However Jung is,

<sup>23</sup> CHRISTINE BATTERSBY, *Gender and Genius* (London: The Women's Press, 1989), pp. 107–11.

like Freud, also influenced by Schopenhauer; like Freud, he genders the genius as male in terms of the way the pre-personal energy is sublimated to become art.<sup>24</sup> Freud and Jung are not discussed in *Mary Olivier*, but are clearly in play at the end of the novel. As *A Defence of Idealism* shows, Sinclair read Freud and Jung through a Schopenhauerian and Spinozistic tradition in which what is primary is the not-I or "it", with the ego only what Sinclair would call a "secondary" phenomenon. In Sinclair's account the ego or the "ich" (literally, the "I") is a kind of foam produced on the surface of the waves of the pre-personal life-force that she calls "primary consciousness".<sup>25</sup>

For Sinclair, the ego is not equivalent to consciousness or to identity. This "it" that wills in the "I" that is Mary resembles Spinoza's infinite substance or "God", and Schopenhauer's "will". These are read onto Jung "collective unconscious" and Freud's id; but the Jungian and Freudian models are extended so as to include female creators and female sexual desires. What May Sinclair suggests is that Mary's artistic creativity is sublimated sexual energy, and that it is Mary's mysticism and her dreams that allow her to be taken over by Freud's pre-personal 'it' or Jung's unconscious in a way that is not simply disabling. Sinclair describes herself as closer to Jung than to Freud,<sup>26</sup> but what she takes from Freud is the notion that the female body is as sexualised as that of the male. Female sexual energy can be displaced – not simply *mis*placed, as in the case of Mary's crazy Aunt Charlotte – in such a way as to produce art.

At the very end of the novel, Mary's "I" and the "it" merge in a avowal of futural remembrance: "If it never came again, I should remember" (p. 380) It is not that Mary's "I" comes into existence through repression of the it/id or unconscious (as in Freud), but the "I" only emerges through its relationship to the whole – so that in the end its freedom seems to consist in "remembering" that "it" and "I" are one. Given the roles played in recent psychoanalytic theory by the

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 7–8, 134–5.

<sup>25</sup> See MAY SINCLAIR, *The New Idealism* (London: Macmillan, 1922) and ID. "Primary and Secondary Consciousness", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, N.S. 23 (1923), pp. 111–20.

<sup>26</sup> MS 1089, Macmillan Archive, University of Reading; quoted RAIJT, *May Sinclair*, p. 230.



German *es* (it/id) or the French *ça* (that) as signifiers of the unconscious, Sinclair's change of pronouns at the end of *Mary Olivier* seems both sophisticated and subtle. But these parallels seem to have misled critics, who have read Sinclair as *failing* to be orthodox in terms of psychoanalytic theory. Instead Sinclair is conjoining psychoanalysis to a Spinozistic and Schopenhauerian model of the relational self, so that the "I" becomes only a temporary mode of the not-I which is dispersed through nature in the manner of Spinoza's "substance" and is unindividuated like Schopenhauer's "thing-in-itself" or "will".

For Schopenhauer, escaping from the "nets" of illusion was reserved for the male genius, the male saint and the male ascetic, but could be attained on a kind of temporary basis by the person lost in the contemplation of beauty. At the end of *Mary Olivier*, May Sinclair's heroine seems to have united Schopenhauer's four modes of escape into the body of one, defiantly female, heroine. But looking carefully at the light/colour/darkness imagery as it is used at the end of the book should raise a question about how far the author is endorsing the way out from the "net" of memory that Mary takes. To evade the nets, the ageing Mary has to lie on her back, with her eyes loosely shut. She has to "think of nothing, absolutely nothing; not even think. You keep on not feeling, not thinking, not seeing things till the blackness comes in waves, blacker and blacker" (p. 351).

What is aimed at is, in effect, Schopenhauer's "nothingness" or "nirvana",<sup>27</sup> and this is different from the earlier ecstasy that was linked with life, not death: "It wasn't like this before. *This* is an awful feeling. Dying must be like this." As Mary lies there trying not to "think about the feeling", trying to think only "of the blackness", gradually "specks and shreds of light" appear. But even this has to be thought away – "Don't think about the blackness and the light" – until the mystical moment occurs and "it willed. Your self willed. It was free to will" (p. 351).

In this mystical state of renunciation, there is thus an absence of the colours that were linked with the ecstatic pre-individualised union with the body of the mother. Although in a subsequent section colour has returned to the ecstatic vision – in a passage that picks up and transfers the "green silk" of the seven-year-old's *jouissance* to the

<sup>27</sup> ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1969), vol. 1, pp. 409–11; vol. 2, pp. 608–29.

leaves of the lime tree in the garden – the book itself ends not in colour, but in black and white: "it was clear, clear as the black pattern that the sycamore makes on the sky" (pp. 373, 380). Although Mary expresses confidence in the clarity of this vision in the final words of the book, this certainty is only reached by the act whereby she "stripped" her soul, letting "ice-cold thoughts in on the poor thing; it stood shivering between certainty and uncertainty" (p. 379).

Despite the responses of the critics who seem to suppose that Mary Olivier has left her Spinozism behind her at the end of the novel, there is no evidence that Mary Olivier has turned to Christianity, nor to a kind of Kantianism, to Spencerian evolution or Christian mysticism.<sup>28</sup> Brown's reading of *Mary Olivier* as a "novel of self-development" is also flawed by the assumption that what Mary attains at the end of the novel is a version of T. H. Green's idealism which emphasises "a strong sense of duty and of self-sacrifice in the interests of a higher good" broadly consistent with the notion of a Christian God and a "divinely ordered universe, itself a manifestation of God's consciousness".<sup>29</sup>

On the contrary, for Mary, nature is not the creation of an anthropomorphic God; nature has to be thought as a totality, and that totality *is* God. Like Schopenhauer and Spinoza she remains anti-Christian: "Hegel. Spinoza. She thought of Spinoza's murky, mysterious face. It said, 'I live in you, still, as he will never live. You will never love that old German man'" (p. 278). This passage ends with Mary torn between Hegel and Spinoza's view of substance – but with Hegel positioned as a cowardly defender of the Christian Trinity, and Spinoza as the proud and anti-Christian thinker who is excommunicated for his equation of Substance and God. Although in her thirties Mary does come to admire Jesus as a literary figure, "the sublimest rebel that ever lived" – he is not a God, but a hero whose status has been distorted by Christian orthodoxy (pp. 319–20). Mary never gives up the "heresy" of pantheism; instead she appropriates the figure of Christ for her ecstatic religion in which God, the "real self" and nature coincide.

The end of *Mary Olivier* has been read as straightforwardly moralistic, and as advocating self sacrifice and sexual abstinence. But

<sup>28</sup> RAITT, *May Sinclair*, pp. 229-30, 234.

<sup>29</sup> BROWN, *Poison*, p. 12.

does May Sinclair want her readers to respond uncritically to her heroine's baring of the soul and her "ice-cold thoughts"? Are we supposed not to register that the heroine has exchanged the rich colours and smells of nature for outlines in black and white? I would suggest that it is only our tendency to read a portrait of a woman artist – as opposed to the portrait of the male artist – as philosophically and theoretically unsophisticated, and as providing documentary evidence about the life or beliefs of its (female) author, that leads critics to close down the options and read Mary straightforwardly as May. The narrative itself suggests a more open-ended conclusion – one that raises as a possibility the *dangers* of perverting Spinozism into a philosophy of renunciation, as opposed to a philosophy of affirmation.

For Spinoza, "the intellectual love of God" does not entail the abandonment of passion, but its redirection through a conscious awareness of one's place in the whole. But Mary, without renouncing Spinozism, now concentrates on "not feeling, not thinking, not seeing", on blackness (p. 351). There has been a subtle shift in her pantheism: adding in Schopenhauer's emphasis on nirvana and on becoming one with the pre-personal "will" through an emptying of ego-based passions and desires. It is not an accident that we notice this, even though the novel ends with Mary Olivier's own defiant assertion that she has successfully escaped the "nets" that limit memory and the ego.

Brown reads *Mary Olivier* as a kind of *Bildungsroman* which offers us an account of the self-development of the individual within the kind of metaphysical frame provided by T. H. Green. But it is a mistake to read Sinclair as a "green parrot" – as followers of Green were sometimes called – and *Mary Olivier* is less a narrative of self-development than an exploration of the peculiar problems faced by the female creator who inhabits a Spinozistic world. Carolyn Heilbrun has remarked, "If a man is to break into revolt against the system he has, perhaps for his parent's sake, pretended to honor, he will do so at a much younger age." Heilbrun also shows what difficulties biographers have in reading in positive terms the "new possibilities" opened up in middle age for those women who have "escaped the usual rhythms of once traditional female existence".<sup>30</sup> Sinclair's portrait of the artist as daughter turns into "A Portrait of the Artist as Middle-Aged Woman".

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<sup>30</sup> CAROLYN HEILBRUN, *Writing a Woman Life* (London: The Women's Press, 1989), p. 124.

But this is such an unfamiliar genre that we find it hard to recognise it as a *Künstlerinroman*, or know how to read its ending.

It is a mistake to suppose that women have adopted broadly similar solutions to disrupting the *Künstlerroman*: a genre of which we could say – echoing Joyce – “The artist novel of which we are speaking is his before it is hers. Her soul frets in the shadow of his language.” But *Mary Olivier* deserves to be far better known for its courageous and creative use of theory to reimagine the artist as *female*, and in ways that do not implicitly gender as male the “I” or the “ego” which emerges as a kind of foam from the waves of the pre-personal “it”. Far from making the ideal individual subservient to the “nets” of the social in the manner of T. H. Green, what Sinclair privileges is the female artist who escapes the social through contact with a “strange new beauty” that produces ecstasy. Given May Sinclair’s achievement in investigating the “nets” that catch the female soul and that can prevent it being “born” as an artist or writer, it seems ironic that the specificity of Sinclair’s achievement in offering a *Künstlerinroman* has been lost, in part through a failure to take her seriously as a philosopher.