



## Journal of the Short Story in English

Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

77 | Autumn 2021

Double Issue: Special Section and Varia

---

# “Partly in Prose”: Woolf’s humble Cutbush

Bryony Randall

---



### Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/jsse/3634>

ISSN: 1969-6108

### Publisher

Presses universitaires de Rennes

### Printed version

Date of publication: December 1, 2021

Number of pages: 83-103

ISBN: 978-2-7535-9378-7

ISSN: 0294-04442

### Electronic reference

Bryony Randall, “Partly in Prose”: Woolf’s humble Cutbush”, *Journal of the Short Story in English* [Online], 77 | Autumn 2021, Online since 01 December 2023, connection on 04 December 2023. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/3634>

---



The text only may be used under licence CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. All other elements (illustrations, imported files) are “All rights reserved”, unless otherwise stated.

## “PARTLY IN PROSE”: WOOLF’S HUMBLE CUTBUSH

This contribution focuses on a sadly neglected short fiction by Virginia Woolf entitled “Ode Written Partly in Prose on Seeing the Name of Cutbush above a Butcher’s Shop in Pentonville.” This short fiction was composed in 1934, but not published until 1985, well after Woolf’s death. The contrast between the title’s lofty tone and its everyday content signals the gentle satire of the piece, in which Woolf makes one of her few, tentative, attempts to enter the interior world of a member of the working class.<sup>1</sup> There are numerous other tensions between the elevated and the mundane present in or invoked by this text: between the protagonist, John Cutbush of Islington, and the poet Byron, to whom he is compared; between a London park and the pagodas of China; between frolicking urban swimmers and the classical subjects of high art; between the butchers of Smithfield and medical surgeons. These tensions are framed by two overarching ones. The first is thematic: the text traces the contours of a familiar story, contrasting Cutbush’s youthful aspirations with the mundanity, even misery, of his adult life. The second is formal: the text deliberately plays on the relationship between the supposedly elevated

---

1. The best-known instance of sustained attention to a working-class figure among Woolf’s oeuvre is the fragmentary portrait of Mrs McNabb in her 1927 novel *To the Lighthouse*, but there are two important examples in her short fiction—both, like the “Ode,” unpublished in Woolf’s lifetime. In 1987, Susan Dick published a piece that Woolf titled “The Cook,” probably dating from the late 1920s or early 1930s; Dick reads this piece as a fictionalised portrait of Sophia Farrell (1861-1942), who was cook to Woolf’s family when she was a child and who continued to work for Woolf and her siblings into their adulthood. In 2014, Clara Jones published an apparently undiscovered piece dating from 1931, whose protagonist bears a clear resemblance to that of “The Cook” but which departs, as Jones points out, in “key formal and thematic ways”—most strikingly, because it is written in the first-person voice of the cook herself, thus constituting an “act of class ventriloquism” (1, 2).

genre of poetry, and the supposedly humble one of prose. If this piece is an “Ode” and written only “partly” in prose, then some of it must be poetry. However, as this essay will demonstrate, the state of Woolf’s typescript—the only extant version of this text, which although annotated in Woolf’s hand, we cannot assume was finished—makes no clear distinctions between the genres in which it claims to participate. Careful attention to the physical appearance of this typescript makes clear the extent of the profoundly irresolvable tension, inherent to its only material incarnation, which any reading of this text has ultimately to confront.

Both thematically and formally, then, Woolf’s piece complicates the notion of short fiction as a genre only or mainly fitting humble subjects; or one that necessarily constitutes a humble form of literature. Importantly, the “Ode” does so not simply by insisting, conversely, on the importance or elevation of its subject matter or form. Rather, it does so by refusing finally either to categorise Cutbush the protagonist (instead, saluting him from a respectful distance), or to allow itself to be categorised as either prose or poetry. In this contribution, I take what might be called the humble critical approach of paying close attention to what might seem modest questions of textual detail, thereby, I suggest, meeting the work on its own terms.<sup>2</sup>

## INTRODUCING THE “ODE”

As noted above, “Ode Written Partly in Prose on Seeing the Name of Cutbush above a Butcher’s Shop in Pentonville” was unpublished in Woolf’s lifetime—in common with the vast majority of her short fiction—and exists in only one document, a six-page typescript revised in Woolf’s hand in both pencil and black ink. This document dates from some time on or before 28 October 1934; we can be unusually precise since Woolf wrote this date in black ink in the top left-hand corner of the first page of the typescript—presumably at the same time as she made the black ink revisions. It can be assumed, from knowledge of Woolf’s usual writing practices, that the piece was originally drafted by Woolf in hand, then typed up and annotated by her.

The “Ode” (for short) is a bildungsroman of sorts, telling the life story of one John Cutbush from the day when his parents decide his “fate”—that is, whether to be a florist or a butcher. As the title previews, and in flagrant disregard of the clear indication provided by his Dickensian surname, he

---

2. I am grateful to the first reviewer of this essay for *JSSE* for helping me crystallise my own thought about my critical praxis in this way.

becomes a butcher, cutting meat not greenery; but not before he has wooed and won as his wife “Louis” or “Louie,” a domestic servant in a curate’s household. Woolf provides evocative snapshots of John’s heroic youthful pursuits (“like Byron he could swim the Hellespont,” we are told: he could, but he has not, having to make do with lakes in London parks [237]); and festive scenes from the north London street where John installs his family and sets up shop.<sup>3</sup> Yet the tone turns sombre; before long “time has run its wheels over him” (240), his son dies, his daughter worries her mother, and eventually customers shuffle past Cutbush’s shop to try the new butcher down the street. This text is worthy of a great deal more attention than it has yet attracted, and not only for being one of Woolf’s few attempts to inhabit the persona of a working-class character; its rich and dense poetic language, its social commentary, its preoccupation with the question of genre (as signalled in its title), and, as things have turned out, its tantalisingly ambiguous textual condition, all make it ripe for further discussion. Of these, generic hybridity is its most mentioned feature in the limited body of critical commentary on this text.

The critic who has engaged at most length with the “Ode” to date is Adam Hammond. His overall claim, which I entirely endorse, is that the text’s clearly hybrid status as regards genre exemplifies Woolf’s concerns in the early to mid-1930s with the limits of prose and the potential of poetry, including their class associations and, ultimately, political implications (Hammond, “Nineteen Thirty-Four” 111). Hammond claims the piece as Woolf’s “only poem” (106). At another point, however, he describes it slightly differently, as “Woolf’s only production in verse” (those pieces written for *Between the Acts* aside), which is somewhat more helpful for my purposes; although he then goes on to caveat this by noting that it is “not really, or wholly, in verse” (107)—as, indeed, the title signals and as I will explore further shortly. In Hammond’s reading, the text presents a *number* of poetic voices, including the narrator’s, John’s, and Louie’s. His position on the formal and narrative status of the text is best summarised where he says: “if a novelist narrator wants truly to tell the story of a pair of working-class people who happen to express themselves in verse, she will have no choice but to combine her prose with their poetry” (137). Hermione Lee succinctly summarises this tension but reverses the emphasis, in a brief reference to the “Ode” in her biography of Woolf, where she calls it “a strange *prose* ‘Ode’” (658; my emphasis). More recently, discussing the “Ode” in her contribution to the *Handbook to the*

---

3. Pentonville is an area of north London. At one point on the second page of the typescript, Woolf writes “Islington” above the word Pentonville—an adjoining area of north London—but Pentonville remains uncorrected elsewhere.

*Bloomsbury Group*, Vicki Tromanhauser skilfully skirts the question of what to call this text, referring to it variously as a “sketch,” an “ode,” and also “[o]ne of Woolf’s lives of the obscure,” explicitly invoking the genre of life writing as well as the text’s “rhythms of verse” (241-42). The text’s generic ambiguity is, of course, inextricable from its thematic critique of the conventional alignment of prose with low art and low class, and verse with high art and high class. Still, this ambiguity is further underlined when examining the particular features and context of the single typescript on which the text is based—this article’s main concern.

Before moving on to this textual examination, however, it is worth setting out what is known of the context for the composition of the “Ode,”—the conditions surrounding the production of its annotated typescript—in order to inform plausible readings of the typescript. While there is no direct reference in Woolf’s diaries or letters to this text, there is material which resonates with both the subject matter and the aesthetic elements of this generically experimental, socially anxious text. Hammond’s survey of this material emphasises the relationship between Woolf and the young poet Stephen Spender at this time (“Nineteen Thirty-Four” 108-10; Woolf first met Spender in 1932). There are in fact only a handful of letters from Woolf to Spender, but one in particular—dating from the summer of 1934—does indicate their shared interest in (unsurprisingly) the strengths and limitations of poetry and prose. Woolf agrees with Spender that while poetry “makes statements; and perhaps the most important” she nevertheless asks whether “there are some shades of being that it can’t state?” She goes on to suggest that “prose, as written, is only half fledged.” Without coming to a conclusion, she summarises the situation as being “complex and immensely interesting” (*The Letters of Virginia Woolf* 315). Indeed, as Hammond reminds us, such concerns had been with Woolf at least since the autumn of 1931, when she composed “A Letter to a Young Poet” (published in 1932). This epistolary essay reflects on the state of contemporary poetry; while Woolf adopts the self-deprecating pose of a prejudiced prose-writer (as she does in the later letter to Spender) in order to soften some pointed critiques of recent poetic publications, she ends on an optimistic note, filled with “hopes for the future” of poetry (“A Letter to a Young Poet” 222). It is, therefore, clear that Woolf was experiencing what Hammond calls a “generic restlessness” (“Nineteen Thirty-Four” 108, 109) in the early 1930s, and entirely appropriate to understand the “Ode” as a creative exploration of this (internal and external) aesthetic debate.<sup>4</sup>

---

4. Hammond’s argument also puts the emphasis on the relationship between this aesthetic debate, and the immediate political concerns of the 1930s, in particular the rise of fascism; a key part of his argument is that the “Ode” also represents “a form of anti-Fascist participation” (“Nineteen Thirty-Four” 110). While my own concerns here are not so much

Lee, however, attributes the writing of “Ode” to a more personal impetus, reading it as a direct response to criticism of Woolf’s work by a significant fellow writer (658). On 30 September 1934—four weeks before the date of the “Ode” typescript—Woolf had finished the first full draft of the novel that was eventually to be published as *The Years* (1937), and was feeling the exhaustion and, to some extent, depression that often accompanied the completion of a large work. The Woolfs returned to London from Sussex on 7 October, and on 11 October Woolf became aware of the publication of a book by writer and provocateur Percy Wyndham Lewis, including a chapter on herself. Her first response was one of trepidation, although in her diary she appears to write herself down from her initial anxiety:

I know by reason & instinct that this is an attack; that I am publicly demolished: nothing is left of me in Oxford & Cambridge & places where the young read Wyndham Lewis. My instinct is, not to read it. . . . Already I am feeling the calm that always comes to me with abuse: my back is against the wall: I am writing for the sake of writing: &c. & then there is the queer disreputable pleasure in being abused—in being a figure, in being a martyr. & so on. (250-51)

When she does (inevitably) bring herself to read Wyndham Lewis’s book, three days later, she records that he:

calls me a peeper, not a looker, a fundamental prude; but one of the 4 or 5 living (so it seems) who is an artist. That’s what I gather the flagellation amounts to. . . . I think (12.30) the pain is over. Yes. I think it’s now rippling away. Only I can’t write. When will my brain revive? in 10 days I think. . . . If there is truth in W. L. well, face it: I’ve no doubt I am prudish and peeping, well then live more boldly. But for God’s sake don’t try to bend my writing one way or the other. Not that one can. (253)

In fact, Woolf records that “the W. L. illness” only lasted two days; nevertheless, her acknowledgement that “W. L. had the power to sting” (253), and clear rumination on his criticism, prompts Lee’s argument that the “Ode” was written “clearly in response to Lewis’s jibes about ‘peeping’” (Lee 658). While Hammond suggests an intersecting range of plausible impetuses, he agrees with Lee that Wyndham Lewis’s book was likely to have been significant, citing Woolf’s acknowledgement of Lewis’s claim and her response to it (“I am prudish and peeping: well then live more boldly” [*The Diary of Virginia Woolf* 252]) as context for Woolf’s decision to write what he calls

---

with Woolf’s engagement with global politics in this text and at this time, it is absolutely right to highlight its wider political context, and I endorse Hammond’s reading of this text as a refutation of fascism, and defence of democracy.

this “speculative biography” of a north London butcher.<sup>5</sup> As it happens, Woolf was at that time embarking on her first attempts to write a biography of a real person: her dear friend the art critic Roger Fry, who had died in early September 1934. The writing of the biography was a struggle from start to finish; Woolf’s attempt at something of a biographical experiment, in the form of the “Ode,” very early on in her attempts to write Fry’s life, makes it a particularly significant example of Woolf’s exploration of how to capture a life in writing.

One further key aspect of Woolf’s response to Lewis’s criticism, however, is worth emphasising: the fact that Woolf asserts, when recording her first reaction to the prospect of Lewis’s criticism, that “I am writing for the sake of writing” (*Diary* 251)—albeit perhaps as much by way of a morale-boosting instruction to herself than a description of how she feels at that moment—suggests an impetus towards writing absolutely freely, without constraint or inhibition. Similar sentiments appear when she has actually read his book: “dont try to bend my writing one way or the other. Not that one can” (253). If nothing else, then, this is a time at which Woolf insists on her writing as unconstrained; although perhaps in tandem with the fear that it might be constrained, or others might attempt to constrain it.

Finally, there are a number of other extracts from Woolf’s private writing around this time which resonate with the “Ode”’s evocation of London and its inhabitants. Woolf was sustained all her life by the pleasure she got from walking around London and imagining the lives of those she saw and overheard. In a letter to her intimate friend the composer Ethel Smyth (1858-1944) on 12 October she says:

I’m too sleepy to tell you why I went to Bromley. But I like the London suburbs in autumn and their immense poetry. And I like Hyde Park fading into night, only the flowers burning in a few pale facades. I love overhearing scraps of talk by the Serpentine in the dusk; and thinking of my own youth, and wondering how far we live in other peoples and then buying half a pound of tea, and so on and so on. (*Letters* 337-38)

In a similar vein, in a diary entry of 17 October Woolf writes—just after insisting that the distress caused by Lewis’s criticism is “over”— “[o]nly I can’t get up any steam. I’m so ugly. So old. No one writes to me. I’m.... Well: don’t think about it, & walk all over London; & see people. & imagine their lives” (*Diary* 253). And between-whiles, on 15 October, Woolf and her

---

5. Woolf’s sensitivity to claims that she was prudish also appears in “A Letter to a Young Poet,” where she insists that she is shocked not “prudishly and conventionally” by the relatively explicit content of contemporary poetry, but rather, aesthetically (215).

husband Leonard walked “all round Serpentine & K[ensington],” discussing a series of profound questions about Woolf’s work (including “What is the sensible attitude to criticism? [answer]: Not to read it” [252]), and about their marriage. While it was far from unusual for Woolf to wander the streets of London ruminating, or discussing important matters, the concatenation in these entries of London at dusk, youth, imagining others’ lives, even of shopping—all within the wider context of Wyndham Lewis’s stinging criticism—is strikingly resonant with the subject matter, scenes and preoccupations of the “Ode.”

In summary, then, Woolf’s relatively gritty “Ode,” with its explicit confrontation of sexual mores, poverty and the effect of consumer capitalism, can be read as a response to Lewis’s implicit challenge (or the one she makes to herself) that she “live more boldly” in terms of the content of her material; and yet one which stays true to her insistence on “writing for the sake of writing,” refusing to be “bent” but rather following her lifelong inclination to involve herself imaginatively in the lives of her fellow Londoners. What is more, as Hammond’s work implies, one could argue that this prompt to “live more boldly” also manifests itself in the bold experiment with genre in this text. An awareness of these contexts for the writing of the “Ode” is inevitably at play, then, as we now move to pay close attention to the specific features of the typescript of this short fiction, and to reflect on the interpretative opportunities that different editions of this text might offer: in particular, the opening up of approaches to the “Ode” made more widely available by a new digital edition.

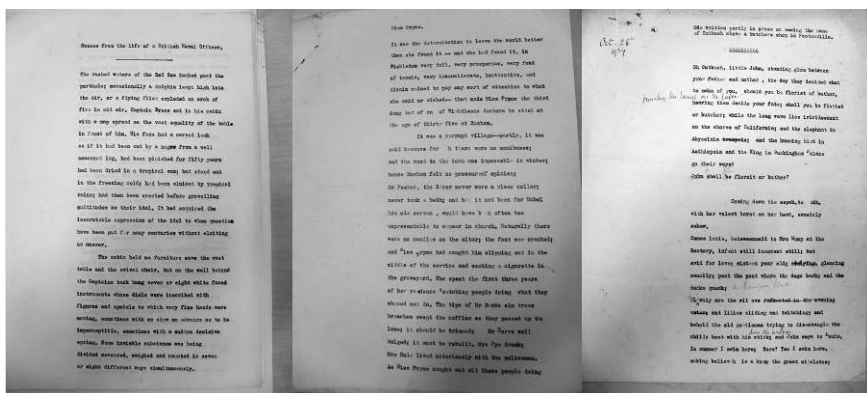
## THE “ODES” WE HAVE

There are currently two editions of Woolf’s “Ode” in the public domain. Up until 2017, there was only one, Susan Dick’s version in her landmark *Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*. While prepared by a Woolf scholar, this was not a full scholarly edition in that it has no textual apparatus (and minimal explanatory material)—Dick herself acknowledges as much and this is not a criticism of the collection, simply a recognition of the purpose it was meant to serve (*Complete Shorter Fiction* 7-13). However, it does mean that, while Dick gives a general overview of editorial approach in her Introduction to the collection, details of many of the individual editorial decisions she made are imperceptible to the reader. In 2017, however, a new edition of the “Ode” was published, an output of the New Modernist Editing Network. This digital edition offers the reader the opportunity to view



facsimile images of the original typescript alongside an edited version of the story (or indeed just one or the other). In addition, however, in this interactive edition, the reader can make a range of different editorial choices: for example, to include links to explanatory notes, or not; to show only those emendations Woolf made in pencil, or those she made in ink. To this extent, then, this version of the “Ode” is not a single edition, but offers a choice of numerous different editions to the reader.

There is one major editorial dilemma presented by this text, the implications of which the digital edition makes particularly clear. That is the question of whether an edition of this text should preserve the line breaks of the typescript, as in Dick’s version; or, as the 2017 edition implicitly endorses as equally legitimate, ignore these line breaks. Dick, in her edition, simply comments that “VW’s line divisions have been retained” (307)—which does at least imply that they might not have been. One challenge to Dick’s decision can be made simply with reference to the title of the piece, which signals that, though an “Ode,” it is written “partly” in prose; and conventionally, of course, prose has no line breaks other than at the end of a paragraph, and for reported speech. Further justification for ignoring the line breaks in this text, and treating it as (at least partly) unlineated, can be found in the evidence of other of Woolf’s typescripts dating from a similar period as the “Ode”: “Scenes from the Life of a British Naval Officer,” which probably dates from late 1931 or early 1932, and “Miss Pryme” which probably dates from late 1933. The layout of each of these typescripts, including that of the “Ode,” is very similar, characterised by a wide left-hand margin, resulting in a long, thin column of text on the right (see Fig. 1). It is true that the “Ode” typescript has more line breaks than the others, resulting in some short one-line paragraphs (or stanzas, if read as poetry). There are even, on the first page, three mid-line breaks occurring in the middle of a sentence, although these are after punctuation, and there are no further such line breaks in the rest of the typescript. Therefore, comparison of these typescripts provides further evidence for the legitimacy of presenting the “Ode” without preserving the line breaks visible on the typescript; or put another way: to treat these line breaks as enforced by the edge of the paper on which Woolf was typing, rather than chosen by her.



**Fig. 1. “Scenes from the life of a British Naval Officer”**

*Monks House Papers of the University of Sussex, SxMs-18/2/B/B.9/D; “Miss Pryme,” Monks House Papers of the University of Sussex, SxMs-18/2/B/B.9/G; “Ode written partly in prose on seeing the name Cutbush above a butcher’s shop in Pentonville,” Monks House Papers of the University of Sussex, SxMs-18/2/B/B.9/F.*

There is, then, a sense in which there is *no* legitimate version of this text. Any edition laid out either entirely in prose (unlineated), or entirely in verse (lineated), is necessarily at odds with the promise set out in the title. And yet, given that no clear indication is given on the typescript, either implicitly or explicitly, of which parts are in prose, and which (therefore, presumably) in verse, no version of the text which is, indeed, “partly” in prose can claim more legitimacy than any other. The very condition of the document which contains the text of “Ode” has ensured that the relationship it proposes between prose and verse—and thus, by implication, between the elevated and the mundane, the humble and the exalted—remain eternally intractable. Therefore, discussions of, for example, the extent to which this text contains poetry that we are to understand is by the humble Cutbush himself (as Hammond argues); whether its narrative voice reveals the artistry in the prosaic life and work of the butcher; or the manner in which its subject matter more generally insists on the potentially high aesthetic value of the everyday life of the overlooked—any or all of these readings, all of which I could endorse, must ultimately confront the profound instability, even impossibility, of this document.<sup>6</sup> I now want to give some examples of how

6. Hammond’s extended reading of the “Ode” ends with a similar recognition of the text’s elusiveness, concluding that “we must accept complexity . . . we must suspend our craving to resolve the narrative situation . . . acknowledging that mastery is beyond us” (“Nineteen Thirty-Four” 148). My point here is that the narrative and tonal ambiguity of this piece is deepened by the precise material condition in which it is manifested: the actual marks on the

reading this text with careful attention to its material form as typescript, including the question of its lineation or otherwise, might affect our perception of the humble/elevated dynamic which pervades the “Ode.”

## LOSING LINE BREAKS

My first two examples take as their starting points existing readings of the “Ode.” The first is a moment at which Hammond reflects on the effect of the line break at “upper / window” in the following passage, describing people pursuing activities of varying cultural value in their individual flats in an apartment building:

And the dusk falls;  
dusk gilt with lights from the upper windows;  
one reads Herodotus in the original at his upper  
window; and another cuts waistcoats in the basement;  
and another makes coins; and another turns pieces  
of wood that shall be chairlegs. (“Ode” 1989, 237-38)

While it is clear from his commentary elsewhere that Hammond knows the state of the typescript (“Nineteen Thirty-Four” 107), the version he close reads is Dick’s 1989 lineated version (that cited above)—which was, indeed, the only published version available at the time. Hammond argues that this line break “both stresses the disparity of pursuits (productive activity such as the fashioning of waistcoats and chair legs is contrasted with the apparently ‘low,’ possibly criminal minting of coins and the rather ‘higher’ activity of reading Greek, whether for self-improvement or mere enjoyment) [and] calls attention to the window—which both reveals and separates—as a symbol of their tantalizingly close division” (128-29). This dynamic, between connection and separation, is one which Hammond reads—quite rightly, in my view—as centrally characterising the tone of the “Ode” as a whole.

Certainly, Hammond’s reading of this passage does not rely solely on this line break. Interestingly, however, if we read this passage without the line breaks, the result, far from invalidating the reading, arguably strengthens it:

---

page which make up the typescript and its annotations. So we must also suspend our craving to resolve the *textual* situation of this particular work.

And the dusk falls; dusk gilt with lights from the upper windows; one reads Herodotus in the original at his upper window; and another cuts waistcoats in the basement; and another makes coins; and another turns pieces of wood that shall be chairlegs; (“Ode” 2017)

Here the word “window” loses the emphasis brought to it by the line break, and thus the plausibility of that part of Hammond’s reading which puts weight on the role of the window as exemplifying “tantalisingly close division.” However, the repeated pattern of semicolons, and particularly the repetition of “and another”—inviting comparison of each apparently disparate activity—becomes if anything even more striking in this prose layout. The absence of line breaks means there is no competing rhythm in this part of the text to distract from its emphatically paratactic form, which both insists on non-hierarchical sameness (“one . . . and another . . . and another . . . and another”), and, precisely in so doing, registers the difference between that which it purports to equate.

My second example, also from Hammond’s reading of the text, provides an illustration where removing the line break pulls the reading in opposite directions. To understand the context for this reading, it is important to know that central to Hammond’s argument is the claim that the “Ode” consists in part of the actual Byronic-inspired verse of John Cutbush himself; Hammond describes the “Ode” at one point as “the story of a pair of working-class people who happen to express themselves in verse” (“Nineteen Thirty-Four” 137). Here is Hammond quoting the first of the Ode’s two references to Byron, followed by his commentary on it:

“Yes I swim here. / making believe he is among the great athletes; / like Byron he could swim the Hellespont; John / Cutbush of Pentonville” (68-71). A negative reading of these lines would see it as further evidence of disjunction and disconnection. . . . The Miltonic line break that cuts John’s heroic nomination in half would only reinforce this reading (“Nineteen Thirty-Four” 130)<sup>7</sup>

A non-lineated version would not, of course, have such a line-break—or, more precisely, if the line happened to fall between John and Cutbush, a reader is much less likely to ascribe to it any significance. To that extent, then, a non-lineated version would mean that Hammond would not be required to set up this imagined negative reading, of disjunction and disconnection, which he then counters later in his discussion with reference to the “engagement with a

---

7. Hammond is here citing Dick’s edition by line number, but gives the wrong line numbers, which should be 23-26.

[Byronic] literary tradition already characterized by adaptation, flexibility, and reconfiguration” (“Nineteen Thirty-Four” 132)—in other words, Hammond argues, Cutbush’s Byronic longings provide an antidote to the supposed disconnection implied by his severed name. So far, so helpful to Hammond. And yet, of course, were we to be reading this part of the text in non-lineated prose, we are far less likely to read it—indeed, arguably could not read it—as the actual Byronic-inspired verse of John Cutbush himself. While this would not invalidate Hammond’s reading of this part of the text, it would be significantly weakened by no longer being able to rely on this argument that the text constitutes material representation of John’s lineated poetry.

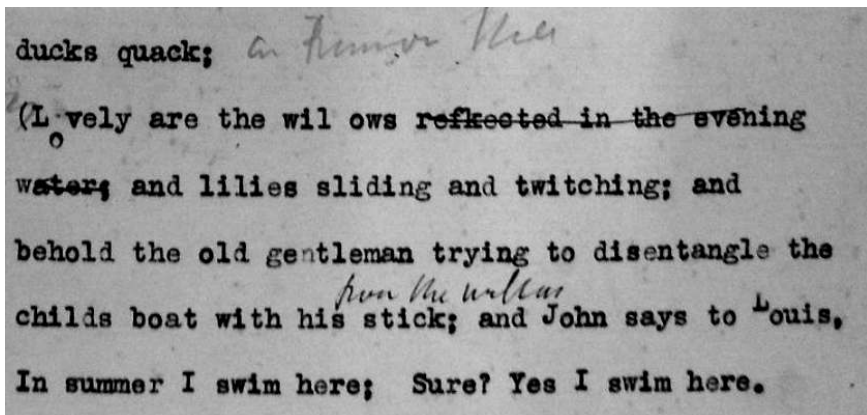
My third example is of a reading made by my younger self—not much younger, perhaps just a few years—of these lines, which of course I initially encountered in Dick’s edition of the text, cited here:

Lovely are the willows  
and lilies sliding and twitching;  
and behold the old gentleman trying to disentangle the  
child’s boat with his stick from the willows; and John says to Louie  
(*Complete Shorter Fiction* 237)

At some early stage of my engagement with the “Ode,” I noted the striking increase in line length as they appear in Dick’s version. Add to this the aural and visual impact of the proliferating alliterative “l”s (“Lovely,” “willows,” “lilies”); what Hammond describes as the “heightened diction and inverted syntax” of this passage (“Lovely are the willows,” “behold” [“Nineteen Thirty-Four” 136]); and finally the juxtaposition between this crescendo and the almost bathetic exchange of the line which follows (“In summer I swim here; Sure? Yes I swim here.”) and a reader could not help but admire Woolf’s impressive use of line breaks to significant poetic effect—again, I could have argued, in the service of the text’s negotiation of connection and separation, particularly between the elevated and the mundane. Yet inspection of the typescript reveals that no such accretion in line length appears in the original document (see Fig. 2). Woolf deleted several words after “Lovely are the willows,” and added three, apparently intended to be inserted after “with his stick.” Dick incorporates these emendations into her text, with the result that one line is shortened and the other lengthened. Woolf also added three words in pencil after “ducks quack”; which Dick did not incorporate.<sup>8</sup>

---

8. Dick may have found these words illegible; even if working from original documents, she would not in the late 1980s have had the benefit of the highly scalable, high-resolution images we can work with today.



**Fig. 2 “Ode written partly in prose on seeing the name Cutbush above a butcher’s shop in Pentonville”**

*Monks House Papers of the University of Sussex, SxMs-18/2/B/B.9/F.*

The version of the text which results if we fully accommodate these changes, if we ignore line breaks, and if we view the pencil insertion “on Primrose Hill” as marking the end of a paragraph, would read thus: “Lovely are the willows and lilies sliding and twitching; and behold the old gentleman trying to disentangle the child’s boat with his stick from the willows; and John says to Louis (“Ode” 2017). Here, any visual distinction to be made between the elevated, poetic lines previously read as rising from “ducks quack” to “John says to Louie/s,” and the mundane, prosaic lines “In summer I swim here”—a distinction which would further enact the connection/separation dynamic—completely disappears. This particular passage, as it turns out, also includes an example of one of the key inconsistencies in this typescript: that is, the name given to John Cutbush’s sweetheart and later wife. My next set of examples focus on this textual crux.

## LOUIS/LOUIE

In her wonderful reading of the role of meat in the “Ode,” Tromanhauser notes that in 1934—that summer, in fact—“the Woolfs hired Louie Everest as their daily cook, whom Woolf wrote into a fictional sketch about a London butcher” (241)—that is, the “Ode.” It is, of course, highly plausible that Louie’s name was the inspiration for Woolf’s choice in this

text, although the Londoner Louie Cutbush's life is very different from the countrywoman Louie Everest's. And in fact, the typescript gives this character two different names, oscillating between "Louie" and "Louis." On the first two occasions, the name is given as Louis. On the third, Woolf types Louis, and then immediately afterwards, Louie. On the fourth, the name is Louie, and then on the fifth and final occasion, the name reverts to Louis. There is an obvious practical explanation for this variation: namely that Woolf will have been much more used to typing Louis than Louie, and relatively recently, since she used the name Louis for one of the (male) protagonists of her 1931 novel *The Waves*.<sup>9</sup> From that point of view, each instance of Louis can be read as a simple typo for Louie, and there is indeed, as Tromanhauser's phrase implies, a direct line from Louie Everest to Louie/s Cutbush. This reading will have been encouraged by the fact that Dick's edition regularises this inconsistency so that the name reads "Louie" throughout. And yet, the fact of the marks "Louis" having been repeatedly made on the page by Woolf means that there is another figure lurking behind this text: the diffident, aspirant poet Louis of *The Waves*, whose accent (he comes from Australia) makes him shy, and whose lack of confidence perhaps lies behind his failure to pursue his ambition as a writer, instead taking a job at a shipping firm. The parallels between Louis and Woolf's friend T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) have been frequently remarked upon—Eliot having come to Britain in 1914 from America, via Paris (he was born in St Louis), and been employed for several years by Lloyds Bank (Morris 126-27; Beer xxxiii). Regardless, then, of the intention or otherwise behind Woolf's typing of "Louis," the presence of this privileged male poet figure, associated with a British colonial legacy, in the typed marks made to refer to an English female domestic servant, further enhance the text's destabilisation of hierarchies of art and class, and indeed might be read as extending this destabilisation to other categories, including those of ethnicity and race.

My final example concerns both a mistranscription, and a reading of a line break in close proximity to this mistranscription, which together reinforce a particular reading of the depiction of class and art in this text. Dick's version of the passage in question, which describes John Cutbush swimming while Louie looks on, reads:

And he sees the violets and asphodels and the  
naked swimmers on the bank in robes like

---

9. Louie Everest is mentioned in Woolf's letters and diaries, but these are, of course, almost exclusively handwritten.

those worn by the Leighton pictures at Leighton house. Louie of the Avenue kitchenmaid to the clergyman, watches and waves her bare arm as he dives. (*Complete Shorter Fiction* 239).

These lines refer to the work of Frederic Leighton (1830-1896), one of the most successful painters of his age. Leighton had a studio-house, completed in 1866, purpose-built to his specifications in Kensington, West London, with a number of lavish interiors including the gilt and mosaicked Arab hall; the house was opened to the public in 1929, and thus fits perfectly with the 1934 dating of this piece. Londoners such as John and Louie, understanding them (with Hammond) as autodidacts with considerable interest in art and literature, would have been precisely the kind of audience for such a destination. Leighton House would certainly have been well-known to Woolf through her connections with Leighton's Holland Park Circle set; indeed, Leighton's immediate neighbour was the artist Valentine Prinsep, a cousin of Woolf's mother.

Commenting on this passage, Hammond draws attention to a line break in order to reinforce a reading of this passage which emphasises Louie's separation from this high art context, while also reinforcing the text's endorsement of her individuality: "The epic voice again shows its usefulness, however, by separating Louie from her overdetermined surroundings in all her geographical and occupational specificity. The break at 'the / clergyman' enhances the effect, moderating her subordination to Cuthbert by leaving her in her own line" ("Nineteen Thirty-Four" 140). Yet inspection of the typescript reveals that here, it is Louie herself whom John imagines wearing the robes—the line reads "and on the bank in robes like those worn by the Leighton pictures at Leighton house, Louie of the Avenue kitchenmaid to the clergyman, watches and waves her bare arm as he dives" ("Ode" 2017; my emphasis). This makes more sense than Dick's version, upon which Hammond relies, in which it is apparently the naked swimmers who are "clad" (although admittedly in some of Leighton's paintings being robed does not necessarily mean one is entirely clothed; he was celebrated for his depictions of women in classical or allegorical guise, sometimes draped only in diaphanous robes; see for example *Crenaiia, the Nymph of the Dargle*, c.1880, or *The Bath of Psyche*, 1890). Close attention to the typescript reveals, then, that John does not imagine this erotic scene—certainly "overdetermined" as Hammond has it by markers of high art, high class, and permissiveness—with Louie standing *apart* from those naked swimmers. Instead, Louie herself has been fully absorbed into this aesthetic—indeed, she represents it. What is more, if



we read the text without its line breaks, as I have argued is possible, Louie's designation as kitchenmaid to the clergyman now reads in any case as a secondary qualification to her primary identity, embodying high art. One need not have recourse to lineation to read this line as emphasising Louie's centrality to the scene.

This reclamation of Louie's position on the periphery of high art is, however, double-edged. On the one hand, it dismisses the implicit assumption (which may, perhaps, have played a part in this mistranscription?) that the servant-class Louie would have been set apart from this scene; instead, the typescript seems to insist on her presence as a figure literally clad in the robes of a particular kind of aesthetic, both wildly popular and critically acclaimed. On the other, it is clear from looking at Leighton's paintings that his aesthetic relies on a particular kind of treatment of the female body; an idealisation of that body, which might include a transformation of the body of an individual woman into either a classical, mythological figure, or an allegorical representation, rendering their corporeality a figure for other meanings, rather than meaningful in itself.

The artistic fetishisation of the specifically working-class female body in this period is particularly associated with the pre-Raphaelite painters, from whom Leighton distanced himself; famously, this group of artists frequently took as their muses (and sometimes wives or lovers) working-class women collectively named "stunners." Still Leighton too developed a close working relationship (and possibly intimate relationship) late in his career with a young working-class woman, Dorothy Dene (née Ada Alice Pullen; 1859-1899); she became his most frequently used model from the 1880s onwards, and he was her benefactor, supporting her attempts to become an actress and leaving substantial sums of money to her and her sisters on his death. While, of course, many of these women earned a living and a measure of respect from their own artistic work, they remained profoundly economically reliant on their patrons, in ways which were often inextricable from complex emotional or erotic demands. If, then, with Hammond, we read at least some of the "Ode" as John's own poetic output, is this an example of another hierarchy, that of gender, coming into play, as John apparently figures his lover as a "stunner": the classical, and classically subordinated, artistic muse? Put another way: "elevating" Louie from humble kitchenmaid to high art icon may appear to challenge class assumptions, but may not in this instance necessarily figure an escape from the inequality of patriarchy, deeply embedded in the aesthetics and the social structures of high art.<sup>10</sup>

---

10. Woolf herself was, apparently, no fan of Leighton's: the only appraisal of his work found in her writings, admittedly dating from her youth, records that in March 1897 (when Woolf

•

In this analysis, I have of course been in dialogue with—and thus at points led by—the connection/separation dynamic central to Hammond’s argument, which certainly manifests at many levels of this text. I have also been informed by Woolf’s apparent preoccupation at the time with questions of genre, her desire to resist her characterisation as “prudish” (which might extend to an apparent squeamishness around the working-classes), and her ongoing fascination with the cheek-by-jowl, intimate yet impersonal urban environment of London. My reading has not taken place in a vacuum; it was fundamentally informed, as it evolved, with an increasing engagement with existing critical and paratextual material.

This may appear to go without saying, but is worth emphasising insofar as my analysis emerges from what was originally a textual editorial engagement with this literary text.<sup>11</sup> I therefore started from the position of privileging this apparently error-strewn and unfinished typescript—a mere, or humble, draft, perhaps—affording the actual marks on these pages meticulous attention, notionally regardless of context or even, indeed, sense or coherence. In so doing, and again following a textual editor’s orientation, I have paid attention in particular to two different kinds of “error.” The first kind of error is authorial. It would be entirely legitimate to brush off my reading of Louis/Louie as overreaching, assigning excessive meaning to what was apparently a typing error on Woolf’s part. Yet we cannot get away from the fact that Louis is what she typed, several times. The second kind of error is editorial; I have advanced an analysis of the aesthetic positioning of Louie/s on the basis of a part in the typescript which, for whatever reason, appeared in the first ever edition of this work with a word missing, and the replacement of a comma with a full stop. I have also questioned the assumption that the text ought to be read as lineated.

My ultimate aim, however, has been to explore the effects of reading these different material marks—in the typescript, in Dick’s edition, and in the digital edition—rather than automatically insisting that one reading invalidates another. To repeat by way of reinforcing the point: the readings I have critiqued may not rely entirely on the lineated version of the “Ode,” or its mistranscribed or editorially amended elements, but they do find ways to be encouraged by it, constructing a coherent hermeneutic circle in which

---

was fifteen) she and her sister “paid a visit to Burlington House—as it is the last day of the Leighton exhibition. They were mostly very ugly” (*A Passionate Apprentice* 53).

11. I am co-editor, with Laura Marcus, of the collected edition of Woolf’s short fiction forthcoming in the Cambridge Edition of the Works of Virginia Woolf.

form and content reinforce each other. This is no criticism: producing such readings is precisely what defines the job of the literary critic, along with offering alternative interpretations relying on alternative readings of form and content. The difference here is that the alternative readings arise from different editorial treatments of a document containing the text of the notional work which we call “Ode Written Partly in Prose on Seeing the Name of Cutbush above a Butcher’s Shop in Pentonville.”<sup>12</sup> Previous critics and I are actually, therefore, reading different texts—different manifestations of this notional work—and readings of each of these manifestations, including of the errors they contain, will offer different interpretative insights.

To a certain extent, then, my position is at variance with many of the classical precepts of textual editing, where notional accuracy and the elimination of error are paramount considerations, in order to produce an edition of a text on which in turn the most accurate and plausible interpretations can be built—privileged interpretations. Instead—as I have argued elsewhere—we should shift the epistemological parameters in order to recognise that useful, legitimate interpretations can arise even from the reading of what is apparently erroneous, or inaccurate.<sup>13</sup> To be clear: it is not that I am arguing that we reject the goal of accuracy in the actual preparation of editions. My point is that even editions with “inaccuracies” (understood broadly as lack of fidelity to copytexts, whether they be manuscripts or published editions) might give rise to insightful and productive readings. The fact that in the “Ode” it is actually impossible to establish a “correct” or accurate edition—lineated or unlineated?—is what makes analysis of this work particularly useful in articulating my position. The final words of the unfinished, inconsistent, ambiguous “Ode”—which in common with many of Woolf’s short fictions would surely have retained these qualities in any “final” version Woolf might herself have authorised—remind us that there are moments at which, as literary critics, we must step back to ensure that our interpretative ambitions are kept anchored to a simple, perhaps humble, gesture to the material reality of what we have before us: “how little we can

---

12. I am, here, using the terms “document,” “text” and “work” specifically in the senses employed in textual editing—that is, where “document” means “[t]he physical object . . . in which a *text* can be found”; “text” means “an arrangement of words,” and “work” means “a mental construct which . . . may take many physical forms” (Kelemen 570, 575, 576). While in literary critical discourse the terms “text” and “work” are often used interchangeably to mean something like “a particular literary output of an author,” I have in this essay consistently used the word “text” rather than “work” where I employ it in this more general sense to refer to a singular output; and “work” to refer to a body of literary or critical outputs.

13. This might be particularly the case when exploring the work of avant-garde or experimental writers like Woolf whose work often deliberately set out to break established norms of what was “correct,” whether in content or, more significantly here, in form (Randall).

grasp; how little we can interpret and read aright the name John Cutbush but only as we pass his shop on Saturday night, cry out Hail Cutbush, of Pentonville, I salute thee; passing” (“Ode” 2017). Still we can also, with Woolf, “live more boldly”—be bold and ambitious in asserting the legitimacy of fully reading these material marks, errors, inaccuracies and all.

Bryony Randall  
*University of Glasgow*

#### WORKS CITED

- Beer, Gillian. Introduction. *The Waves*. Ed. Gillian Beer. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992. xii-xxxvi. Print.
- Dick, Susan, ed. *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*. 1985. Orlando, FL: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing, 1989. 1-6. Print.
- . “Virginia Woolf’s “The Cook.”” *Woolf Studies Annual* 3 (1997): 122-42. Print.
- Hammond, Adam. “Nineteen Thirty-Four: Generic Hybridity and the Search for a Democratic Aesthetic.” Diss. U of Toronto, 2011. Print.
- . “Woolf as a Model Builder: Complex Form in the ‘Ode to Cutbush.’” *Virginia Woolf and the World of Books*. Eds. Nicola Wilson and Claire Battershill. Clemson, SC: Clemson UP, 2018. 142-48. Print.
- Jones, Clara. “Virginia Woolf’s 1931 ‘Cook Sketch.’” *Woolf Studies Annual* 20 (2014): 1-23. Print.
- Kelemen, Erick. *Textual Editing and Criticism: An Introduction*. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008. Print.

- Lee, Hermione. *Virginia Woolf*. London: Vintage, 1997. Print.
- Morris, Pam. *Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf and Worldly Realism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2017. Print.
- Randall, Bryony. “[T]hey would have been the first to correct that sentence’: Correcting Virginia Woolf’s Short Fiction.” *Textus: English Studies in Italy* 3 (2015): 75-94. Print.
- Tromanhauser, Vicki. “Case Study: Eating Animals and the Aesthetics of Meat in Virginia Woolf’s *The Years*.” *The Handbook to the Bloomsbury Group*. Eds. Stephen Ross and Derek Ryan. London: Bloomsbury, 2018. 239-52. Print.
- Woolf, Virginia. “A Letter to a Young Poet.” 1932. *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1970. 208-26. Print.
- . *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*. Eds. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann. Vol. V: 1932-1935. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979. 6 vols. Print.
- . *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*. Ed. Anne Olivier Bell. Vol. IV: 1931-1935. San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1982. 5 vols. Print.
- . “Ode Written Partly in Prose on Seeing the Name of Cutbush above a Butcher’s Shop in Pentonville.” *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*. 1985. Ed. Susan Dick. Orlando, FL: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing, 1989. 237-41. Print.
- . *A Passionate Apprentice. The Early Journals: 1897-1909*. Ed. Mitchell A. Leaska. London: The Hogarth Press, 1990. Print.
- . “Ode written partly in prose on seeing the name of Cutbush above a butcher’s shop in Pentonville.” Ed. Bryony Randall with the New Modernist Editing Network. 2017. <<https://nme-digital-ode.glasgow.ac.uk>>. Web. 16 Feb. 2021.

*Cet article se penche sur une nouvelle de Virginia Woolf qui n'a pas été publiée de son vivant, "Ode Written Partly in Prose on Seeing the Name of Cutbush above a Butcher's Shop in Pentonville" (1934). Ce texte est traversé par des tensions entre le noble et le banal. Il trace les contours d'une histoire familière qui oppose les aspirations de jeunesse de Cutbush et la banalité de sa vie adulte. Mais il joue aussi délibérément sur les relations entre le genre noble de la poésie et le genre humble de la prose : le tapuscrit de Woolf (seule version disponible du texte datant de son vivant) tel qu'il se présente, ne montre pas de manière explicite de quel(s) genre(s) le texte se réclame. Cette contribution explore la façon dont Woolf, en mêlant différents genres, rend hommage à l'humble Cutbush, tout en s'interrogeant sur ce que soumettre un texte inachevé—humble ébauche—à une attention éditoriale et technique soutenue signifie.*

This article discusses Virginia Woolf's short fiction "Ode Written Partly in Prose on Seeing the Name of Cutbush above a Butcher's Shop in Pentonville" (1934), unpublished in her lifetime. There are numerous tensions between the elevated and the mundane present in or invoked by this text. It traces the contours of a familiar story contrasting Cutbush's youthful aspirations with the mundanity of his adult life. Yet it also deliberately plays on the relationship between the elevated genre of poetry, and the humble one of prose: the layout of Woolf's typescript (the only version of this text extant from Woolf's lifetime) does not make explicit the genre(s) in which it claims to participate. This contribution explores Woolf's attempt to "salute" the humble John Cutbush through her experiment with blended genres, while also considering what it means to treat an apparently unfinished text—a humble draft—to meticulous editorial and technical attention.