

SUMMONING HER SHADE FROM THE SHADOWS

The *Quipu Menstrual*. Something taboo, something repressed, something unspoken.

When in the 1930's Vivien was frantically pursuing her elusive spouse through the claustrophobic streets of central London, she glimpsed herself in a mirror and confided to her diary that all she could see was, 'A little ghost of a street child,' for she seems to have been famished, starved of love, for recognition of identity, for dignity, from general social and sexual repression.

One of the many tragic things about Vivien Eliot is that had she been born a good half Century later she could have been, at least partially rescued, the ghosts that haunted her exorcised, her identity reinforced, the Social inhibitions forced on her relaxed; she could have been prescribed the Pill! Someone could have taken her by the hand and in an age of inclusivity, Counselling, post second wave Feminism, it would have been permissible to say, 'It's O.K to feel and to express your feelings, it's reasonable to want love, it's fine to dress theatrically and to live your life as creatively as you do when you write or paint. It's normal and healthy to menstruate. *You don't have* to be a hypocrite and it is other peoples' problem if *they are.*'

For she was in so many ways a victim of both family and of social expectations. Her Mother faced with a child who confounded her ideas of a how a dutiful daughter should behave and with myriad disorders which medical science could only partially explain, concluded that Vivien's hysterical and exuberant behaviour could only have one outcome. Such conduct would incline her to something generally defined as, 'moral insanity', unable to control her lower nature she would disgrace her family by becoming pregnant out of wedlock and as such, she repeatedly told her daughter she was quite unfit to ever marry or have children. Despite all this when, in 1915, Vivien married, precipitately, an extremely good looking, well connected American, her family were remarkably pleased. Unfortunately, the young couple had only known each other three months and the pretty, animated girl who loved to flirt and dance gave only a very superficial picture of an extremely needy, unhappy woman whose Bridegroom knew nothing of her medical history. Moreover, Eliot who was a supremely snobbish man formed the initial impression that his Bride's family were as well connected as his own, causing many of his English acquaintances to describe her as 'slightly vulgar', a factor that could have done nothing to enhance Vivien's self-esteem.

On his marriage, Eliot seems to have been a virgin, and there is some evidence that at the time he had certain homosexual tendencies. Born with a congenital hernia he was obliged to wear a truss, something he was extremely self-conscious about, and that combined with his wife's uncertain and copious menstruation filled him with horrified alarm. Naturally, Vivien internalised all these attitudes, adding to her neurosis and feelings of rejection. Thus, her ghostly voice enters 'The Wasteland':

'My nerves are bad tonight. Yes bad. Stay with me/ Speak to me. Why do you never speak?

Speak. What are you thinking of? What thinking? What? / I never know what you are thinking. Think...'

And sitting here surrounded by gynaecology we might also have pause to consider the ghostly voice of Lil, the poor woman who appears in 'The Wasteland', the Soldier's wife who sitting in a pub late at night defends herself against accusations that she has let herself go:

'I can't help it,' she said, pulling a long face/ It's them pills I took, to bring it off, she said/

...the chemist said it would be all right but I've never been the same'

A glance at the original manuscript of 'The Wasteland' shows that, as well as Pound's edits, Vivien also made revisions and suggestions to improve the initial draft and it was Vivien's suggestion that Eliot's use of the word 'medicine', was substituted for 'pills'. At the time the poem was written a combination of War and social upheaval meant that there was a proliferation of unwanted pregnancies and the commonest method of dealing with this were tablets obtained at the chemists, euphemistically known as Lunar pills. Vivien, like all women of her generation would have been aware of this, but it is astonishing how few social histories of the First World War cover this fact, or indeed the Second.

It was no crime to be herself and during the 1930's, before she was reduced to 'the ghost of a street child', she would occasionally rally and go in search of her fugitive spouse. Although Eliot was determined to never see or live with his wife again he refused to tell her this out right and so fixated on him - her only love object, she started to believe, and hope, he was being kept apart from her by hostile forces. Then, she would dress up, a gallant liberator, and booted and spurred, in a long serge cloak and velvet turban, brandishing a cigarette holder set out to find her errant husband; for here was a woman who at the time, contemporary commentators all agree: *simply would not be subdued*. A woman who because an unpalatable truth was being withheld from her and faced by the connivance of all Eliot's friends and acquaintances (some of whom had been her friends) refused to bow to hypocrisy and accept the polite social veneer that everyone - especially her husband- prayed she would, that he had simply vanished and would not be back.

We have progressed -though not as much as we might have done. Mental illness is still often almost as much of a mystery today as it was in Vivien's time, and the taboo of talking openly about it - even something as common as depression- is only just being lifted. There is scant understanding of the complicated interplay between mind and body, so that Holistic therapies, even counselling, are still viewed with suspicion, while sex education is, unbelievably, not routinely offered here to children in school. Meanwhile across the Atlantic women's autonomy over

their bodies is once more under threat. So, let us courageously, both men and women, commemorate Vivien Eliot's life and consider how often more pain and suffering is caused through acts of repression and secrecy than its opposite. And let us celebrate the positivity of menstruation, bringer of fertility, new beginnings, a prime ingredient in Medieval Love potions and source of the Divine Feminine. Surely a good place to start.