

# WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF ? FEMINIST READINGS OF WOOLF\*

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On a brief survey, the answer to the question posed in the title of this paper would seem to be: quite a few feminist critics. It is not of course surprising that many male critics have found Woolf a frivolous bohemian and negligible Bloomsbury aesthete, but the rejection of the great feminist writer by so many of her Anglo-American feminist daughters requires further explanation. A distinguished feminist critic like Elaine Showalter for example, signals her subtle swerve away from Woolf by taking over yet changing Woolf's title. Under Showalter's pen *A Room of One's Own* becomes *A Literature of Their Own*, as if she wished to indicate her problematic distance to the tradition of women writers she lovingly uncovers in her book.

In this paper I will first examine some negative feminist responses to Woolf, particularly as exemplified in Elaine Showalter's long, closely argued chapter on Woolf in *A Literature of Their Own*. Then I will indicate some points towards a different, more positive feminist reading of Woolf, before finally summing up the salient features of the feminist response to Woolf's writings.

## **The Rejection of Woolf**

Elaine Showalter devotes most of her chapter on Woolf to a survey of Woolf's biography and a discussion of *A Room of One's Own*. The title of her chapter, "Virginia Woolf and the flight into androgyny", is indicative of her treatment of Woolf's texts. She sets out to prove that for Woolf the concept of androgyny was a "myth that helped her evade confrontation with her own painful femaleness

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and enabled her to choke and repress her anger and ambition" (264). For Showalter, Woolf's greatest sin against feminism is that "even in the moment of expressing feminist conflict, Woolf wanted to transcend it. Her wish for experience was really a wish to forget experience" (282). Showalter sees Woolf's insistence on the androgynous nature of the great writer as a flight away from a "troubled feminism" (282) and locates the moment of this flight in *Room*.

Showalter starts her discussion of this essay by stating that:

What is most striking about the book textually and structurally is its strenuous charm, its playfulness, its conversational surface . . . The techniques of *Room* are like those of Woolf's fiction, particularly *Orlando*, which she was writing at the same time: repetition, exaggeration, parody, whimsy, and multiple viewpoint. On the other hand, despite its illusions of spontaneity and intimacy, *A Room of One's Own* is an extremely impersonal and defensive book.

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Showalter here gives the impression that Woolf's use of "repetition, exaggeration, parody, whimsy and multiple viewpoint" in *Room* only contributes to creating an impression of "strenuous charm", and therefore somehow distracts attention from the message Woolf wants to put forward in the essay. She then goes on to object to the "impersonality" of *Room*, an impersonality which springs from the fact that Woolf's use of many different personae to voice the narrative "I" results in frequently recurring shifts and changes of subject position, leaving the critic no single unified position but a multiplicity of perspectives to grapple with. Furthermore, Woolf refuses to reveal her own experience fully and clearly, but insists on disguising or parodying it in the text, obliging Showalter to point out for us that "Fernham" really is Newnham College, that "Oxbridge" really is Cambridge and so on.

The steadily shifting and multiple perspectives built up through these techniques evidently exasperate Showalter, who ends up declaring that: "The entire book is teasing, sly, elusive in this way; Woolf plays with her audience, refusing to be entirely serious, denying any earnest or subversive intention" (284). For Showalter, the only way a feminist can read *Room* properly is by remaining "detached from its narrative strategies" (285); and if she manages to do so, she will see that *Room* is in no way a particularly liberating text:

If one can see *A Room of One's Own* as a document in the literary history of female aestheticism, and remain detached from its narrative strategies, the concepts of androgyny and the private room are neither as liberating nor as obvious as they first appear. They have a darker side that is the sphere of the exile and the eunuch.

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For Showalter, Woolf's writing continually escapes the critic's perspective, always refusing to be pinned down to one unifying angle of vision. This elusiveness is then interpreted as a denial of authentic feminist states of mind, namely the "angry and alienated ones" (287), and as a commitment to the Bloomsbury ideal of the "separation of politics and art" (288). This separation is evident, Showalter thinks, in the fact that Woolf "avoided describing her own experience" (294). Since this avoidance makes it impossible for Woolf to produce really committed feminist work, Showalter naturally concludes that *Three Guineas* as well as *Room* fail abysmally as feminist essays.

My own view is that "remaining detached from the narrative strategies" of *Room* is equivalent to not reading it at all, and that Showalter's impatient reactions to the essay are motivated much more by its formal and stylistic features than by the ideas she extrapolates as its content. But in order to argue this point more thoroughly, it is necessary first to take a closer look at the theoretical assumptions about the relationship between aesthetics and politics which can be detected in Showalter's chapter.

Showalter's theoretical framework is never made explicit in *A Literature of Their Own*. From what we have seen so far, however, it would be reasonable to assume that she believes that texts should reflect the writer's experience, and that the more authentic the experience is felt to be by the reader, the better the text. Woolf's essays fail to transmit any direct experience to the reader, according to Showalter largely because Woolf did not as an upper-class woman have the necessary negative experience to qualify as a good feminist writer.<sup>1</sup> Showalter implicitly defines effective feminist writing as work which offers a powerful expression of personal experience in a social framework. According to this definition, Woolf's essays can't be very political either. Showalter's position on this point in fact strongly favours the form of writing commonly known as critical or bourgeois realism, precluding any real recognition of the value of Virginia Woolf's modernism. It is not a coincidence that the only major literary theoretician Showalter alludes to in her chapter on Woolf is the Marxist critic Georg Lukács (296). Given that Showalter herself can hardly be accused of Marxist leanings, this alliance might strike some readers as curious. But Lukács was the great champion of the realist novel, which he saw as the supreme culmination of the narrative form. For Lukács, the great realists, like Balzac or Tolstoy, succeeded in representing the totality of human life in its social context, thus representing the fundamental truth of history: the "unbroken upward evolution of mankind" (Lukács 3). Proclaiming himself a "proletarian humanist", he states that "the object of proletarian humanism is to reconstruct the complete human personality and free it from the distortion and dismemberment to which it has been subjected in class society" (5). Lukács reads the great classical tradition in art as the attempt to uphold this ideal of the total human being even under historical conditions which prevent its realization outside art.

In art the necessary degree of objectivity in the representation of the human subject, both as a private individual and as a public citizen, can only be attained through the representation of *types*. Lukács states that the type is "a peculiar

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synthesis which organically binds together the general and the particular both in characters and situations" (6). He then goes on to make the point that "true great realism" is superior to all other art forms:

True great realism thus depicts man and society as complete entities, instead of showing merely one or the other of their aspects. Measured by this criterion, artistic trends determined by either exclusive introspection or exclusive extraversion equally impoverish and distort reality. Thus realism means a three-dimensionality, an all-roundness, that endows with independent life characters and human relationships.

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Given this view of art, it follows that for Lukács any art which exclusively represents "the division of the complete human personality into a public and a private sector" contribute to the "mutilation of the essence of man" (9). It is easy to see that precisely this point of Lukács aesthetics would have great appeal to many feminists. The lack of a totalizing representation of both the private and the working life of women is, for instance, Patricia Stubbs's main complaint against all novels written both by men and women in the period between 1880 and 1920, and Stubbs echoes Showalter's objection to Woolf's fiction when she states that in Woolf "there is no coherent attempt to create new models, new images of women" and that "this failure to carry her feminism through into her novels seems to stem, at least in part, from her aesthetic theories" (231). But the demand for new, realistic images of women takes it for granted that feminist writers should want to use the form of the realist novel in the first place. Thus both Stubbs and Showalter object to what they see as Woolf's tendency to wrap everything in a "haze of subjective perceptions" (Stubbs 231), thus perilously echoing Lukács' Stalinist views of the "reactionary" nature of modernist writing.

Modernism, Lukács held, signified an extreme form of the fragmented, subjectivist, individualist psychologism typical of the oppressed and exploited human being living under capitalism.<sup>2</sup> For him, futurism as well as surrealism, Joyce as well as Proust, were decadent and reactionary descendants of the great anti-humanist, Nietzsche, and their art therefore lent itself to exploitation by fascism. Only through a strong and committed belief in the values of humanism could art become an efficient weapon in the struggle against fascism. It was this emphasis on a humanist, totalizing aesthetics which led Lukács to proclaim as late as 1938 that the great writers of the first part of the 20th century would undoubtedly turn out to be Anatole France, Romain Rolland and Thomas and Heinrich Mann.

Showalter is not of course, like Lukács, a *proletarian* humanist. Even so, there is detectable within her literary criticism a strong, unquestioned belief in the values, not of proletarian humanism, but of traditional bourgeois humanism of the liberal-individualist kind. Where Lukács sees the harmonious development of the "whole person" as stunted and frustrated by the inhuman

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social conditions imposed by capitalism, Showalter examines the oppression of women's potential by the relentless sexism of patriarchal society. It is certainly true that Lukács nowhere seems to show any interest in the *specific* problems of women's difficulties in developing as whole and harmonious human beings under patriarchy — no doubt he assumed that once communism had been constructed, everybody, including women, would become free beings. But it is equally true that Showalter in her criticism takes no interest in the necessities of combatting capitalism and fascism. Her insistence on the need for political art is limited to the struggle against sexism. Thus she gives Virginia Woolf no credit whatsoever for having elaborated a highly original theory of the relations between sexism and fascism in *Three Guineas*; nor does she seem to approve of Woolf's attempts to link feminism to pacifism in the same essay, of which she merely comments that:

*Three Guineas* rings false. Its language, all too frequently, is empty sloganeering and cliché; the stylistic tricks of repetition, exaggeration, and rhetorical question, so amusing in *A Room of One's Own*, become irritating and hysterical.

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Showalter's humanist individualism surfaces clearly enough when she first rejects Woolf for being too subjective, too passive and for wanting to flee her female gender identity by embracing the idea of androgyny, and then goes on to reproach Doris Lessing for merging the "feminine ego" into a greater collective consciousness in her later books (311). Both writers are similarly flawed: both have in different ways rejected the fundamental need for the individual to adopt a unified, whole and integrated self-identity. Both Woolf and Lessing radically undermine the notion of the unitary self, the central concept of individualist humanism and one thus crucial to Showalter's feminism.

The Lukácsian line implicitly defended by Stubbs and Showalter holds that politics is a matter of the right content being represented in the correct realist form. Virginia Woolf is unsuccessful in Stubbs's eyes because she fails to give a "truthful picture of women", a picture which would include equal emphasis on the private and the public. Showalter for her part deplores Woolf's lack of sensitivity to "the ways in which [female experience] had made [women] strong" (285). Implicit in such critical comments is the assumption that good feminist fiction would present truthful images of strong women with which the reader may identify. Indeed it is this which Marcia Holly recommends in an article entitled "Consciousness and Authenticity: Towards a Feminist Aesthetic". According to Holly, the new feminist aesthetic must move "away from formalist criticism and insist that we judge by standards of authenticity" (40). Holly, again quoting Lukács, also argues that as feminists:

We are searching for a truly revolutionary art. The content of a given piece need not be feminist, of course, for that piece to be

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humanist, and therefore revolutionary. Revolutionary art is that which roots out the essentials about the human condition rather than perpetuating false ideologies.

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For Holly, this kind of universalising humanist aesthetic leads straight to a search for the representation of strong, powerful women in literature, a search reminiscent of The Soviet Writers' Congress' demand for socialist realism in 1934. Instead of strong, happy tractor drivers and factory workers, we are presumably to demand strong, happy *women* tractor drivers from now on. More seriously, Holly makes explicit one of the fundamental requirements of the kind of realism both she, Stubbs and Showalter seem to favour. She states that "Realism first of all demands a consistent (noncontradictory) perception of those issues (emotions, motivations, conflicts) to which the work has been limited" (42). We are in other words again confronted with Showalter's demand for a unitary vision, with her exasperation at Woolf's use of multiple and shifting viewpoints, with her text; the argument has come full circle.

### **Rescuing Woolf for Feminist Politics: Some Points Towards an Alternative Reading**

So far we have been discussing various aspects of the crypto-Lukácsian perspective implicit in much contemporary feminist criticism. The major disadvantage of this approach is surely the fact that it proves itself incapable of appropriating for feminism the work of the greatest British woman writer of this century, despite the fact that Woolf not only was a novelist of considerable genius but a declared feminist and dedicated reader of other women's writings. It is surely arguable that if feminist critics can't come up with a positive political and critical appreciation of Woolf's writing, the fault may lie with their critical and theoretical perspectives, rather than with Woolf's texts. But do feminists have an alternative to this negative way of reading Woolf? Here I must embarrassedly admit that I have found no critical text at all which takes up this challenge.<sup>3</sup> There are however some partial, minor attempts at a more positive appraisal of her work, and I will refer to these in this section of my paper. But my main concern here is to indicate some elements of a theoretical approach which will allow us to accomplish the urgent task at hand: the task of rescuing Virginia Woolf for feminist politics.

Showalter wants the literary text to yield the reader a certain security, a firm perspective from which to judge the world. Woolf, on the other hand, seems to practise what we might now call a "deconstructive" form of writing, one which engages and exposes the duplicitous nature of discourse. In her own textual practice, Woolf exposes the way in which language refuses to be pinned down to an underlying essential meaning. If the French philosopher Jacques Derrida is right, language is structured as an endless deferral of meaning, and any search for or belief in essential and absolutely stable meaning, must therefore be considered metaphysical. There is no final element, no fundamental unit, no

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*transcendental signifier*, which is meaningful *in itself* and thus escapes the ceaseless interplay of deferral and difference. The free play of signifiers will never yield a final, unified meaning which in turn might explain all the others.<sup>4</sup> It is in the light of such textual and linguistic theory that we can read Woolf's playful shifts and changes of perspective in both her fiction and in *Room* as something rather more than a wilful desire to irritate the serious-minded feminist critic. Through her conscious exploitation of the sportive, sensual nature of language, Woolf rejects the metaphysical essentialism which forms the basis of patriarchal ideology, which hails God, the Father or the phallus as its transcendental signifier.

But Woolf does more than practise a non-essentialist form of writing. She also reveals a deeply sceptical attitude to the classical concept of an essential human identity. For what can this self-identical identity be if all meaning is a ceaseless play of difference, if *absence* and not presence is the foundation of meaning? The concept of identity is also challenged by psychoanalytic theory, which Woolf undoubtedly knew. The Hogarth Press published the first English translations of Freud's central works, and when Freud arrived in London in 1939 Virginia Woolf went to see him. Freud, we are intriguingly informed, gave her a narcissus. For Woolf as for Freud, the unconscious drives and desires constantly exert pressure on our conscious thoughts and actions. For the psychoanalyst the human subject is a complex entity, of which the conscious mind is only a small part. Once one has accepted this view of the subject, however, it becomes impossible to argue that even our conscious wishes and feelings originate within a unified self, since we can have no knowledge of the possibly unlimited unconscious processes which shape our conscious thought. Conscious thought, then, must be seen as the overdetermined manifestation of a multiplicity of structures which intersect to *produce* that unstable constellation the liberal humanists call the "self". These structures encompass not only unconscious sexual desires, and unconscious fears and phobias, but also conflicting material, social, political and ideological factors of which we are equally unaware. It is this highly complex network of conflicting structures, the anti-humanist would argue, which produce the subject and its experiences, rather than the other way round. This does not of course render individuals' experiences in any sense illusory or insignificant, but it does mean that such experiences cannot be understood other than through the study of their multiple determinants — determinants of which conscious thought is only one, and a potentially treacherous one at that. If the same approach is taken to the literary text, it follows that the search for a unified individual identity (or gender identity) or indeed "textual identity" in the literary work must be seen as a highly reductive and selective approach to literature.

This, then, is what I meant when I said that to follow Showalter and "remain detached from the narrative strategies" of the text is equivalent to not reading it at all. For it is only through a careful examination of the detailed strategies of the text on all its levels that we will be able to uncover some of the conflicting and contradictory elements which contribute to make it precisely *this* text, with precisely these words and this configuration. The humanist desire for unity of

vision or thought (or as Holly puts it, for a "noncontradictory perception of the world") is, in other words, a demand for a sharply reductive reading of the literary text, a reading which, not least in the case of an experimental writer like Woolf, can have little hope of grasping the central problems posed by her kind of textual production. A "noncontradictory perception of the world", for Lukács' great Marxist opponent Bertolt Brecht, is precisely a reactionary one.

The French feminist philosopher Julia Kristeva has argued that the modernist poetry of Lautréamont, Mallarmé and others constitute a "revolutionary" form of writing. The modernist poem, with its abrupt shifts, ellipses, breaks and apparent lack of logical construction is a kind of writing in which the rhythms of the body and the unconscious have managed to break through the strict rational defences of conventional social meaning. Since Kristeva sees such meaning as the structure which sustains the whole of the symbolic order — that is, all human social and cultural institutions — the breakdown of symbolic language in modernist poetry comes to prefigure for her a total *social* revolution. For Kristeva, that is to say, there is a *specific practice of writing* which in itself is revolutionary, analogous to sexual and political transformation, and which by its very existence testifies to the possibility of breaking down the symbolic order from the inside.<sup>5</sup> One might argue in this light that Woolf's refusal to commit herself in her essays to a so-called rational or logical form of writing, free from fictional techniques, indicates a similar break with symbolic language, as of course do many of the techniques she deploys in her novels.

Kristeva also argues that many women will be able to let what she calls the "spasmodic force" of the unconscious disrupt their language because of their stronger links with the pre-oedipal mother-figure. But if these unconscious pulsations should take over the subject entirely, the subject will fall back into pre-oedipal or imaginary chaos and develop some form of mental illness. The subject whose language lets such forces disrupt the symbolic order is in other words also the subject who runs the greater risk of lapsing into madness. Seen in this context, Woolf's own periodic attacks of mental illness can be linked both to her textual strategies and to her feminism. For the symbolic order is a patriarchal order, ruled by the Law of the Father, and any subject who tries to disrupt it, who lets unconscious forces slip through the symbolic repression, puts him- or herself in a position of revolt against this regime. Woolf herself suffered patriarchal oppression particularly acutely at the hands of the psychiatric establishment, and *Mrs. Dalloway* contains not only a splendidly satirical attack on that profession (as represented by Sir William Bradshaw), but also a brilliantly perspicacious representation of a mind which succumbs to "imaginary" chaos in the character of Septimus Smith. Indeed Septimus can be seen as the negative parallel to Clarissa Dalloway, who herself steers clear of the threatening gulf of madness only at the price of repressing her passions and desires, becoming a cold but brilliant woman highly admired in patriarchal society. In this way Woolf discloses the dangers of the invasion of the unconscious pulsions as well as the price paid by the subject who successfully preserves her sanity, thus maintaining a precarious balance between an overestimation of so-called "feminine" madness, and a too precipitate rejection of the values of the symbolic order.<sup>6</sup>

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It is evident that for Kristeva it is not the biological sex of a person, but the subject position he or she takes up, which determines their place within the patriarchal order. Her views on feminist politics reflect this refusal of biologism and essentialism. The feminist struggle, she argues, must be seen historically and politically as a three-tiered one, which can be schematically summarized as follows:

1. Women demand equal access to the symbolic order. Liberal feminism. Equality.
2. Women reject the male symbolic order in the name of difference. Radical feminism. Femininity extolled.
3. (And this is Kristeva's own position.) Women reject the dichotomy between masculine and feminine as metaphysical.

The third position is one which has deconstructed the opposition between masculinity and femininity, and therefore necessarily challenge the very notion of identity. Kristeva writes:

In the third attitude, which I strongly advocate — which I imagine? — the very dichotomy man/woman as an opposition between two rival entities may be understood as belonging to *metaphysics*. What can “identity”, even “Sexual identity”, mean in a new theoretical and scientific space where the very notion of identity is challenged?

(“Women's Time”, 33-34)

The relationship between the second and the third positions here requires some comment. If the defence of the third position implies a total rejection of stage two (which I do not think it does), this would be a grievous political error. For it still remains *politically* essential for feminists to defend women *as* women in order to counteract the patriarchal oppression which precisely despises women *as* women. But an “undeconstructed” form of “stage two” feminism, unaware of the metaphysical nature of gender-identities, runs the risk of becoming an inverted form of sexism by uncritically taking over the very metaphysical categories set up by patriarchy in order to keep women in their place, despite attempts to attach new feminist values to these old categories. An adoption of Kristeva's “deconstructed” form of feminism therefore in one sense leaves everything as it was — our positions in the political struggle have not changed — but in another sense it radically transforms our awareness of the nature of that struggle.

Here, I feel, Kristeva's feminism echoes the position taken up by Virginia Woolf some sixty years earlier. Read from this perspective, *To the Lighthouse* illustrates the destructive nature of a metaphysical belief in strong, immutably fixed gender identities — as represented by Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay — whereas Lily Briscoe (an artist) represents the subject who deconstructs this opposition, perceives its pernicious influence in society, and tries as far as possible in a still

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rigidly patriarchal order to live as her own woman, without regard for the crippling definitions of sexual identity to which society would have her conform. It is in this context that we must situate Woolf's crucial concept of androgyny. This is not, as Showalter argues, a flight from fixed gender identities, but a recognition of their falsifying metaphysical nature. Far from fleeing fixed gender identities because she fears them, Woolf rejects them because she has seen them for what they are. She has understood that the goal of the feminist struggle must precisely be to deconstruct the death-dealing binary oppositions of masculinity and femininity. For Woolf to have thought her feminism in these terms, intuitively rather than theoretically to be sure, is nothing less than astonishing.

In her fascinating book *Towards Androgyny*, published in 1973, Carolyn Heilbrun sets out her own definition of androgyny in very similar terms when she describes it as a concept of an "unbounded and hence fundamentally indefinable nature" (xi). When she later finds it necessary to distinguish androgyny from feminism, and therefore implicitly defines Woolf as a non-feminist, I believe this distinction to be based on the belief that only the first two stages of Kristeva's three-tiered struggle could "count" as being feminist. She does for example admit that in present-day society it might be difficult to separate the defenders of androgyny from feminists, "because of the power men now hold, and because of the political weakness of women" (xvi-xvii), but refuses to draw the conclusion that feminists can in fact desire androgyny. As opposed to Heilbrun here, I would stress with Kristeva that a theory which demands the deconstruction of sexual identity as we can find it in Woolf's essays and novels, must obviously be seen as feminist. In Woolf's case the question is rather whether or not her astonishingly advanced understanding of the objectives of feminism in practice prevented her from taking up a progressive political position in the feminist struggles of her day. In the light of *Three Guineas* (and of *A Room of One's Own*) I would answer no to this question. It seems to me that the Woolf of *Three Guineas* shows an acute awareness of the dangers of both liberal and radical feminism (Kristeva's positions 1 and 2), and argues instead for a "stage three" position, but despite her objections, she comes down in the end quite firmly in favour of women's right to financial independence, education and to entry into the professions — all central issues for feminists of the 1920s and '30s.

Nancy Topping Bazin sees Woolf's concept of androgyny as the *union* of masculinity and femininity — precisely the opposite, in fact, of seeing it as the deconstruction of the duality. For Bazin, masculinity and femininity are concepts which in Woolf retain their full, essentialist charge of meaning. She therefore argues that Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* must be read as just as feminine as Mrs. Ramsay, and that the androgynous solution of the novel consists in a *balance* of the masculine and the feminine "approach to truth" (138). Herbert Marder, on the other hand, presses in his *Feminism and Art* the trite and traditional case that Mrs. Ramsay must be seen as an androgynous ideal in herself: "Mrs. Ramsay as wife, mother, hostess, is the androgynous artist in life, creating with the whole of her being" (128). Heilbrun rightly rejects such a reading when she claims that:

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It is only in groping our way through the clouds of sentiment and misplaced biographical information that we are able to discover Mrs. Ramsay, far from androgynous and complete, to be as one-sided and life-denying as her husband.

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The many critics who with Marder read Mrs. Ramsay and Mrs. Dalloway as Woolf's ideal of femininity are thus either betraying their vestigial sexism — the sexes are fundamentally different and should stay that way — or their adherence to what Kristeva would call a "stage two" feminism: women are different from men and it is time they began praising the superiority of their sex. These are both, I believe, misreadings of Woolf's texts, as when Kate Millett writes that:

Virginia Woolf glorified two housewives, Mrs. Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay, recorded the suicidal misery of Rhoda in *The Waves* without ever explaining its causes, and was argumentative yet somehow unsuccessful, perhaps because unconvinced, in conveying the frustrations of the woman artist in Lily Briscoe.

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So far, then, the combination of Derridean and Kristevan theory seems to hold considerable promise for future feminist readings of Woolf. But it is important to be aware of the political limitations of Kristeva's arguments. Marxist critics of Kristeva have pointed out that though her views on the politics of the subject constitute an important contribution to revolutionary theory, her belief that the revolution within the subject somehow prefigures a later social revolution is in materialist terms quite untenable. The strength of Kristevan theory lies in its emphasis on the politics of language as a material and social structure, but it takes little or no account of other conflicting ideological and material structures which must be part of any total social transformation. Her revolutionary politics therefore tend to lapse into a subjectivist anarchism on the social level. Even so, her theories of the "revolutionary" nature of certain writing practices cannot be rejected without loss. She has given an account of the possibilities as well as the risks run by the revolutionary subject, insights of crucial importance to Marxist and feminist political theory. The "solution" to Kristeva's problem lies not in a speedy return to Lukács, but in an integration and transvaluation of her ideas within a larger feminist theory of ideology.

Since Woolf's writings come so close to Kristeva's position in many respects, it is not surprising that they also bear traces of the same political weaknesses, notably the tendency to individualist anarchism. The proposal for the "Outsider's Society" in *Three Guineas* is a notable example. But Woolf does in fact devote a great deal of attention to the material and ideological structures of oppression in, for example, her essays on women writers, and only a closer examination of all of her texts would enable us to draw any conclusions as to how far she can be accused of subjectivist politics.

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A Marxist-feminist critic like Michèle Barrett has stressed the materialist aspect of Woolf's politics. In her introduction to her edition of *Virginia Woolf Women & Writing*, she argues that:

Virginia Woolf's critical essays offer us an unparalleled account of the development of women's writing, perceptive discussion of her predecessors and contemporaries, and a pertinent insistence on the material conditions which have structured women's consciousness.

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However, Barrett considers Woolf only as an essayist and critic, and seems to take the view that when it comes to her fiction, Woolf's aesthetic theory, particularly the concept of an androgynous art, "continually resists the implications of the materialist position she advances in *A Room of One's Own*" (22). A Kristevan approach to Woolf, as I have argued, would refuse to accept this binary opposition of aesthetics on the one hand and politics on the other, locating the politics of Woolf's writing *precisely in her textual practice*. That practice is of course much more marked in the novels than in most of the essays.

There is another group of feminist critics, centred around Jane Marcus, who consistently argue for a radical reading of Woolf's work without recourse to either Marxist or post-structuralist theory. Jane Marcus claims Woolf as a "guerrilla fighter in a Victorian skirt" (1), and sees in her a champion of both socialism and feminism. However, if we read Marcus' article "Thinking Back Through our Mothers", it soon becomes clear that it is exceptionally difficult to argue this case convincingly without any kind of explicit theoretical framework. Her article opens with the following paragraph:

Writing, for Virginia Woolf, was a revolutionary act. Her alienation from British patriarchal culture and its capitalist and imperialist forms and values, was so intense that she was filled with terror and determination as she wrote. A guerrilla fighter in a Victorian skirt, she trembled with fear as she prepared her attacks, her raids on the enemy.

(1)

Are we to believe that there is a causal link between the first and the following sentences — that writing was a revolutionary act for Woolf *because* she could be seen to tremble as she wrote? Or should the passage be read as an extended metaphor, as an image of the fears of *any* woman writing under patriarchy? In this case, it no longer tells us anything in particular about Woolf's specific writing practices. Or again, perhaps the first sentence is the claim which the following sentences are to corroborate? If this is the case, the argument also fails. For Marcus is here unproblematically involving biographical evidence to sustain her thesis about the nature of Woolf's writing. The reader is to be convinced by appeals to historical and biographical circumstances rather than

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to the texts. But does it really matter whether or not Woolf was in the habit of trembling at her desk? Surely what matters is what she wrote? This kind of argument is common in Marcus' article, as witness her extensive discussion of the alleged parallels between Woolf and the German Marxist critic Walter Benjamin ("Both Woolf and Benjamin chose suicide rather than exile before the tyranny of fascism." (7)). But surely Benjamin's suicide at the Spanish frontier, where as an exiled German Jew fleeing the Nazi occupation of France he feared being handed over to the Gestapo, must be considered in a rather different light from Woolf's suicide in her own back garden in unoccupied England, however political we wish her private life to be? Marcus' biographical analogies strive to establish Woolf as a remarkable individual, and in doing so fall back into a historical-biographical criticism of the kind much in vogue before the American New Critics entered the scene in the 1930s. Her combination of radical feminism with this traditionalist critical method is perhaps indicative of a certain theoretical and methodological confusion in the field of feminist criticism.

### Conclusion

We have seen that current Anglo-American feminist criticism tends to read Woolf through traditional aesthetic categories, relying largely on a liberal humanist version of the Lukácsian aesthetics against which Brecht so effectively polemicised. The anti-humanist reading I have advocated as yielding a better understanding of the political nature of Woolf's aesthetics has yet to be written. The only study of Woolf to have integrated some of the theoretical advances of poststructuralist thought is written by a man, Perry Meisel, and though it is by no means an antifeminist or even an unfeminist work, it is nevertheless primarily concerned with the influence on Woolf of Walter Pater. Meisel is the only critic of my acquaintance to have grasped the radically deconstructed character of Woolf's texts:

With "difference" the reigning principle in Woolf as well as Pater, there can be no natural or inherent characteristics of any kind, even between the sexes, because all character, all language, even the language of sexuality, emerges by means of a difference from itself.

(234)

Meisel also shrewdly points out that this principle of difference makes it impossible to select any one of Woolf's works as more representative, as more essentially "Woolfian" than any other, since the notable divergence among her texts "forbids us to believe any moment in Woolf's career to be more conclusive than another" (242). It is a mistake Meisel concludes, to "insist on the coherence of self and author in the face of a discourse that dislocates or decentres them both, that skews the very categories to which our remarks properly refer" (242).

## TORIL MOI

The paradoxical conclusion of our investigations into the feminist reception of Woolf is therefore that she has yet to be properly welcomed and acclaimed by her feminist daughters in England and America. To date she has either been rejected by them as insufficiently feminist, or praised on grounds which seem to exclude the fiction. By their more or less unwitting subscription to the humanist aesthetic categories which have traditionally belonged to the male academic hierarchy, feminist critics have seriously undermined the impact of their challenge to that very institution. The only difference between a feminist and a non-feminist critic in this tradition then becomes the formal political perspective of the critic. The feminist critic thus unwittingly puts herself in a position from which it becomes impossible to read Virginia Woolf as the progressive, feminist writer of genius she undoubtedly was. A feminist criticism which will do both justice and homage to its great mother and sister: this, surely should be our goal.

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### Notes

1. At this point Showalter quotes Q.D. Leavis' "cruelly accurate *Scrutiny* review" (295) with approbation.
2. Anna Coombes's reading of *The Waves* shows a true Lukácsian distaste for the fragmented and subjective web of modernism, as when she writes that "My problem in writing this paper has been to attempt to politicize a discourse which obstinate [sic] seeks to exclude the political and the historical, and, where this is no longer possible, then tries to aestheticize glibly what it cannot "realistically" incorporate" (238).
3. The term "Anglo-American" as used in this paper must be taken as an indication of a specific approach to literature, not as an empirical description of the individual critic's birthplace. The British critic Gillian Beer, in her essay "Beyond Determinism: George Eliot and Virginia Woolf" raises the same kind of objections to Showalter's reading of Woolf as I have done in this paper. In a forthcoming essay: Subject and Object and the Nature of Reality: Hume and Elegy in *To the Lighthouse*, Beer develops this approach in a more philosophical context.
4. For an introduction to Derrida's thought and to other forms of deconstruction, see Norris.
5. My presentation of Kristeva's position here is based on her *Révolution*.
6. One feminist critic, Barbara Hill Rigney, has tried to show that in *Mrs. Dalloway* "madness becomes a kind of refuge for the self rather than its loss" (52). This argument finds little support in the text and seems to depend more on the critic's desire to preserve her Laingian categories than on a responsive reading of Woolf's text.

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