

A note on the text

Full bibliographical references are listed at the end of the book. Throughout the text parenthetical documentation has been limited to give only the amount of information needed to identify a work in the list of references. At times no parenthetical reference has been needed. For example, 'Janine Chasseguet-Smirlé has discussed the problem of female creativity' refers to the only work by Chasseguet-Smirlé included in the list of works cited. Parenthetical references to the actual book or article have thus only been supplied when the final list of references include more than one work by the same author.

Introduction: Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf? Feminist readings of Woolf

On a brief survey, the answer to the question posed in the title of this chapter 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 this 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 from the tradition of women writers she lovingly uncovers in her book.

In this chapter I will first examine some negative feminist responses to Woolf, exemplified particularly 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 point of this exercise will be to illuminate the relationship between feminist critical readings and the often unconscious theoretical and political assumptions that inform them.

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, which Showalter defines as 'full balance and command of an emotional range that includes male and female elements' (263), was a 'myth that helped her evade confrontation with her own painful femaleness 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*.

In opening her discussion of this essay Showalter claims that:

What is most striking about the book texturally 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. (282)

Showalter gives the impression here that Woolf's use of 'repetition, exaggeration, parody, whimsy, and multiple viewpoint' in *Room* contributes only to creating an impression of 'strenuous charm', and therefore somehow distracts attention from the message Woolf wants to convey in the essay. She goes on to object to the impersonality of *Room*, an impersonality that 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, multiple perspectives built up by these techniques evidently exasperate Showalter, who ends by 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 the book 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.

(285)

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 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 impatience with the essay is 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 that 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 a text should reflect the writer's experience, and that the more authentic the experience is felt to be by the reader, the more valuable the text. Woolf's essays fail to transmit any direct experience to the reader, according to Showalter, largely because as an upper-class woman Woolf lacked the necessary negative experience to qualify as a good feminist writer. This becomes particularly evident in *Three Guineas*, Showalter argues:

Here Woolf was betrayed by her own isolation from female mainstream. Many people were infuriated by the class assumptions in the book, as well as by its political naiveté. More profoundly, however, Woolf was cut off from an understanding of the day-to-day life of the women whom she wished to inspire; characteristically, she rebelled against aspects of female experience that she had never personally known and avoided describing her own experience.

(294)

So Showalter quotes Q. D. Leavis's 'cruelly accurate *Scrutiny* review' with approval, since 'Leavis addressed herself to the question of female experience, making it clear that from her point of view, Woolf knew damn little about it' (295).

Showalter thus implicitly defines effective feminist writing as work that 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 a major champion of the realist novel, which he viewed as the supreme culmination of the narrative form. For him, 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', Lukács 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). He reads the great classical tradition in art as the attempt to sustain this ideal of the total human being even under historical conditions that 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 be attained only through the representation of *types*. Lukács argues that the type is 'a peculiar synthesis which organically binds together the general and the particular both in characters and situations' (6). He then goes on to insist 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. (6)

Given this view of art, it follows that for Lukács any art that represents 'the division of the complete human personality into a public and private sector' contributes to the 'mutilation of the essence of man' (9). It is easy to see how this aspect of Lukács's aesthetics might appeal to many feminists. The lack of a totalizing representation of both the private and the working life of women is Patricia Stubbs's main complaint against all novels written by both men and women in the period between 1880 and 1920, and Stubbs echoes Showalter's objection to Woolf's fiction when she claims 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 this demand for new, realistic images of women takes it for

granted that feminist writers should want to use realist fictional forms in the first place. Thus both Stubbs and Showalter object to what they regard as Woolf's tendency to wrap everything in a 'haze of subjective perceptions' (Stubbs, 231), perilously echoing in the process Lukács's 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 subject of capitalism.¹ For him, futurism as well as surrealism, Joyce as well as Proust, were decadent, regressive descendants of the great anti-humanist Nietzsche, and their art thus lent itself to exploitation by fascism. Only through a strong, committed belief in humanist values could art become an effective weapon in the struggle against fascism. It was this emphasis on a totalizing, humanist aesthetics that led Lukács to proclaim as late as 1938 that the great writers of the first part of the twentieth 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 a liberal-individualist kind. Where Lukács sees the harmonious development of the 'whole person' as stunted and frustrated by the inhuman 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 naively that once communism had been constructed everybody, including women, would become free beings. But it is equally true that Showalter in her own criticism takes no interest in the necessity 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 for having elaborated a highly original theory of the relations between sexism and fascism in *Three Guineas*; nor does she appear 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.

(295)

Showalter's traditional humanism 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, integrated self-identity. Both Woolf and Lessing radically undermine the notion of the unitary self, the central concept of Western male humanism and one crucial to Showalter's feminism.

The Lukácsian case implicitly advocated 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 that 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 criticism is the assumption that good feminist fiction would present truthful images of strong women with which the reader may identify. Indeed it is this that Marcia Holly recommends in an article entitled 'Consciousness and authenticity: towards a feminist aesthetic'. According to Holly, the new feminist aesthetic may move 'away from formalist criticism and insist that we judge by standards of authenticity' (4). 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 humanist, and therefore revolutionary. Revolutionary art is that which roots out the essentials about the human condition rather than perpetuating false ideologies.

(42)

For Holly, this kind of universalizing humanist aesthetic

leads straight to a search for the representation of strong, powerful women in literature, a search reminiscent of The Soviet Writers' Congress's demand for socialist realism in 1934. Instead of strong, happy tractor drivers and factory workers, we are now, presumably, to demand strong, happy *women* tractor drivers. 'Realism', Holly argues, 'first of all demands a consistent (noncontradictory) perception of those issues (emotions, motivations, conflicts) to which the work has been limited' (42). Once again, we are confronted with a version of Showalter's demand for a unitary vision, with her exasperation at Woolf's use of mobile, pluralist viewpoints, with her refusal to let herself be identified with any of the many 'I's in her text; the argument has come full circle.

What feminists such as Showalter and Holly fail to grasp is that the traditional humanism they represent is in effect part of patriarchal ideology. At its centre is the seamlessly unified self – either individual or collective – which is commonly called 'Man'. As Luce Irigaray or Hélène Cixous would argue, this integrated self is in fact a phallic self, constructed on the model of the self-contained, powerful phallus. Gloriously autonomous, it banishes from itself all conflict, contradiction and ambiguity. In this humanist ideology the self is the *sole author* of history and of the literary text: the humanist creator is potent, phallic and male – God in relation to his world, the author in relation to his text.² History or the text become nothing but the 'expression' of this unique individual: all art becomes autobiography, a mere window on to the self and the world, with no reality of its own. The text is reduced to a passive, 'feminine' reflection of an unproblematically 'given', 'masculine' world or self.

Rescuing Woolf for feminist politics: some points towards an alternative reading

So far we have discussed some aspects of the crypto-Lukácsian perspective implicit in much contemporary feminist criticism. The major drawback of this approach is surely signalled in the fact that it proves incapable of appropriating for feminism the work of the greatest British woman writer of this century, despite the fact that Woolf was not only 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 cannot produce a positive political and literary assessment of Woolf's writing, then the fault may lie with their own critical and theoretical perspectives rather than with Woolf's texts. But do feminists have an alternative to this negative reading of Woolf? Let us see if a different theoretical approach might rescue Virginia Woolf for feminist politics.³

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 that engages with and thereby 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. According to the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, language is structured as an endless deferral of meaning, and any search for an essential, absolutely stable meaning must therefore be considered metaphysical. There is no final element, no fundamental unit, no *transcendental signified* that is meaningful *in itself* and thus escapes the ceaseless interplay of linguistic deferral and difference. The free play of signifiers will never yield a final, unified meaning that in turn might ground and explain all the others.⁴ 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 underlying patriarchal ideology, which hails God, the Father or the phallus as its transcendental signified.

But Woolf does more than practise a non-essentialist form of writing. She also reveals a deeply sceptical attitude to the male-humanist 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* as much as presence is the foundation of meaning? The humanist concept of identity is also challenged by psychoanalytic theory, which Woolf undoubtedly knew. The Hogarth Press, founded by Virginia and Leonard Woolf, published the first English translations of

Freud's central works, and when Freud arrived in London in 1939 Virginia Woolf went to visit him. Freud, we are tantalizingly informed, gave her a narcissus.

For Woolf, as for Freud, unconscious drives and desires constantly exert a pressure on our conscious thoughts and actions. For psychoanalysis 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 that shape our conscious thought. Conscious thought, then, must be seen as the 'overdetermined' manifestation of a multiplicity of structures that intersect to produce that unstable constellation the liberal humanists call the 'self'. These structures encompass not only unconscious sexual desires, fears and phobias, but also a host of 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, that produces the subject and its experiences, rather than the other way round. This belief does not of course render the individual's experiences in any sense less real or valuable; 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 a similar approach is taken to the literary text, it follows that the search for a unified individual self, or gender identity or indeed 'textual identity' in the literary work must be seen as drastically reductive.

It is in this sense that Showalter's recommendation to remain detached from the narrative strategies of the text is equivalent to not reading it at all. For it is only through an examination of the detailed strategies of the text on all its levels that we will be able to uncover some of the conflicting, contradictory elements that contribute to make it precisely *this* text, with precisely these words and this configuration. The humanist desire for a unity of vision or thought (or as Holly puts it, for a 'noncontradictory perception of the world') is, in effect, a demand for a sharply reductive reading of literature – a reading that, not least in the

case of an experimental writer like Woolf, can have little hope of grasping the central problems posed by pioneering modes of textual production. A 'noncontradictory perception of the world', for Lukács's 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 constitutes 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 conventional meaning as the structure that sustains the whole of the symbolic order – that is, all human social and cultural institutions – the fragmentation of symbolic language in modernist poetry comes for her to parallel and prefigure a total *social* revolution. For Kristeva, that is to say, there is a *specific practice of writing* that is itself 'revolutionary', analogous to sexual and political transformation, and that by its very existence testifies to the possibility of transforming the symbolic order of orthodox society from the inside.⁵ 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 strong links with the pre-Oedipal mother-figure. But if these unconscious pulsations were to take over the subject entirely, the subject would 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, in other words, is 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

her or himself in a position of revolt against this regime. Woolf herself suffered acute patriarchal oppression 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 superbly perspicacious representation of a mind that 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 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.⁶

It is evident that for Julia Kristeva it is not the biological sex of a person, but the subject position she or he takes up, that determines their revolutionary potential. Her views of 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 (This is Kristeva's own position.) Women reject the dichotomy between masculine and feminine as metaphysical.

The third position is one that has deconstructed the opposition between masculinity and femininity, and therefore necessarily challenges 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', 33-4)

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 that 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. It does so by uncritically taking over the very metaphysical categories set up by patriarchy in order to keep women in their places, 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 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 and tries as far as is possible in a still 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 such 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.

In her fascinating book *Toward Androgyny*, published in 1973,

Carolyn Heilbrun sets out her own definition of androgyny in similar terms when she describes it as the 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, her distinction seems to be based on the belief that only the first two stages of Kristeva's three-tiered struggle could count as feminist strategies. She acknowledges that in modern-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, I would stress with Kristeva that a theory that demands the deconstruction of sexual identity is indeed authentically feminist. In Woolf's case the question is rather whether or not her remarkably advanced understanding of feminist objectives 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*), the answer to this question is surely no. The Woolf of *Three Guineas* shows an acute awareness of the dangers of both liberal and radical feminism (Kristeva's positions one and two), and argues instead for a 'stage three' position; but despite her objections she ends up firmly in favour of women's right to financial independence, education and entry into the professions – all central issues for feminists of the 1920s and 1930s.

Nancy Topping Bazin reads Woolf's concept of androgyny as the *union* of masculinity and femininity – precisely the opposite, in fact, of viewing it as the deconstruction of the duality. For Bazin, masculinity and femininity in Woolf are concepts that retain their full essential charge of meaning. She thus argues that Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* must be read as being 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, conversely, advances 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, claiming that:

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. (155)

The host of 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. (139–40)

A combination of Derridean and Kristevan theory, then, would seem 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. Though her views on the 'politics of the subject' constitute a significant contribution to revolutionary theory, her belief that the revolution within the subject somehow prefigures a later social revolution poses severe problems for any materialist analysis of society. 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 that must be part of any radical social transformation. These and other problems will be discussed in the chapter on Kristeva (pp. 150–73). It should nevertheless be emphasized that the 'solution' to Kristeva's problems lies not in a speedy return to Lukács, but in an integration and transvaluation of her ideas within a larger feminist theory of ideology.

A Marxist-feminist critic like Michèle Barrett has stressed

the materialist aspect of Woolf's politics. In her introduction to *Virginia Woolf: Women and 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.

(36)

Barrett, however, considers Woolf only as 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.

Another group of feminist critics, centred around Jane Marcus, 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. Marcus's article 'Thinking back through our mothers', however, makes it abundantly clear that it is exceptionally difficult to argue this case convincingly. Her article opens with this assertion:

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 which case it no longer tells us anything specific about Woolf's particular writing practices. Or again, perhaps the first sentence is the claim that the following sentences are meant to corroborate? If this is the case, the argument also fails. For Marcus here unproblematically evokes biographical evidence to sustain her thesis about the nature of Woolf's writing: the reader is to be convinced by appeals to biographical circumstances rather than 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 emotionalist argument surfaces again in Marcus's 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 might wish her private life to be? Marcus's biographical analogies strive to establish Woolf as a remarkable individual, and so fall back into the old-style historical-biographical criticism much in vogue before the American New Critics entered the scene in the 1930s. How far a radical feminist approach can simply take over such traditional methods untransformed is surely debatable.

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 polemicized. 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 post-structuralist thought is written by a man, Perry Meisel, and though it is by no means an anti-feminist 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, 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).

The paradoxical conclusion of our investigations into the feminist reception of Woolf is therefore that she has yet to be adequately 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 that seem to exclude her fiction. By their more or less unwitting subscription to the humanist aesthetic categories of the traditional 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 that would do both justice and homage to its great mother and sister: this, surely, should be our goal.

Part I: Anglo-American feminist criticism

In the years following the First World War women's organisations, mainly within national and international political bodies in the Western world, Many women now became involved in radical socialist politics, particularly because of the fact that the American women were becoming increasingly militant. This gave them an important post-war identity. The suffragettes had given way to a more militant organization known as suffragettes who took up arms in the civil rights movements and were also from women involved in protest actions against the war in Vietnam. Thus the later feminists were politically conscious activists who were not afraid to take a stand and hold a vigil. The link between feminism and women's suffrage for example was not just a new and powerful social movement. Many prominent figures, American feminists, women like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, were first active in the struggle for the abolition of slavery. Both in the sectional and transnational contexts women in freedom campaigns against racism, sexism and patriarchy, the values and attitudes that encouraged keeping black in their place, current racists and segregationists, worked to keep women subservient to men. In the civil rights movement, women rightly and often with great risk and hardship, demonstrated their right to extend their ideas to the oppressed black. Barbara and Linda Brown, Black Churchgoers. The only positive to Africa in

Notes

Preface

¹ I wrote this sentence some months before the publication of Ken Ruthven's *Feminist Literary Studies*, which claims to be the 'first broad survey of both the dominant theories of feminist literary criticism and the critical practices which result from those theories'. Although I am delighted to be able to acknowledge his book as the first full-length survey of the field, I also feel that I do not really need to change my introductory sentence, not least because I never intended my own book as a survey of practical feminist criticism. *Feminist Literary Studies* discusses the field of feminist criticism as it appears to an academic engaged in the study of English literature. This approach seems to have prevented Ruthven from discussing French feminist theory, and his book can therefore not be said to engage fully with the problems of feminist theory today.

My major objection to Ruthven's study is not primarily that it is written by a man: while sharing his view that men *in principle* can be feminist critics, I disagree with his far too rash dismissal of the political reasons why they ought not to try for a leading role in this particular field today. I also object to the idea that men should enjoy certain advantages over women when it comes to engaging in rational criticism of feminist theory: 'In some respects it is easier for men than for women to object to the more ridiculous manifestations of feminist criticism', Ruthven argues, 'simply because the intimidatory rhetoric of radical feminism designates any woman who is sharply critical of feminist discourse as a female equivalent of the "white arsed nigger" of separatist black rhetoric' (14). But surely

feminists are perfectly capable of intervening in their own debates without having to hire male liberals to take the flak on their behalf?

The main problem with *Feminist Literary Studies*, however, is the way in which it seeks to depoliticize feminist critical discourse. For Ruthven, feminist criticism consists in 'rendering visible the hitherto invisible component of "gender" in all discourses produced by the humanities and the social sciences' (24). This, *pace* Ruthven, is not necessarily a feminist act: it might just as well be an example of patriarchal aggression. His definition would make the sentence 'You say this because you are a woman' unambiguously feminist. My point is simply that only a political definition of feminist criticism and theory will enable us to analyse the difference between feminist and sexist uses of that and similar statements.

Introduction: Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf? Feminist readings of Woolf

- ¹ Anna Coombes's readings 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).
- ² For further discussion of this point, see the section on Gilbert and Gubar pp. 37–69.
- ³ The term 'Anglo-American' must be taken as an indication of a specific approach to literature, not as an empirical description of the critic's nationality. 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 her 1984 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 *La Révolution du langage poétique*.
- 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 in my view 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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Feminist Literary Theory**

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TERENCE HAWKES

Preface

This introduction to feminist literary theory, the first full introduction to this field, I believe, to be published in English, is intended for the general reader as well as for students of literature.¹ I have aimed to present the two main approaches to feminist literary theory, the Anglo-American and the French, through detailed discussion of the most representative figures on each side. Though I hope to have given an accurate and comprehensive account of the main tendencies within the field, the book does not set out to provide a survey of the vast number of feminist critical studies published since the late 1960s. Nor does it offer a survey of different feminist readings or interpretations of literary works. Its main concern is to discuss the methods, principles and politics at work within feminist critical practice.

One of the central principles of feminist criticism is that no account can ever be neutral. My own presentation of the feminist field is therefore an explicitly critical one. Arguing as I do from a position that often leads me to disagree with other feminists, it would seem that I expose myself to accusations of lack of solidarity with other women. Should feminists criticize each other at all? If it is true, as I believe, that feminist criticism today is stifled by the absence of a genuinely critical debate about the political implications of its methodological and theoretical choices, the answer to that question is surely an

unqualified affirmative. The suppression of debate within the camp has been a prominent feature of precisely the kind of male leftist politics to which feminists have objected. To let the idea of sisterhood stifle discussion of our politics is surely not a constructive contribution to the feminist struggle. When Simone de Beauvoir was asked whether one ought to criticize women as severely as men, she answered: 'I think one must be able to say, "No: no, that won't do! Write something else, try and do better. Set higher standards for yourselves! Being a woman is not enough"' (*Simone de Beauvoir Today*, 117).

The principal objective of feminist criticism has always been political: it seeks to expose, not to perpetuate, patriarchal practices. I have therefore tried to situate my critique of the theoretical positions of other feminists clearly within the perspective of feminist politics: it is after all primarily on that terrain that we as feminists must be able to legitimate our own work. Constructive criticism should, however, indicate the position from which it is speaking; simply to say that one is speaking as a feminist is not a sufficient response to that responsibility. Like many other feminist academics, I speak as a woman with only a tenuous foothold in a male-dominated profession. I also speak as a Norwegian teaching French literature in England, as a stranger both to France and to the English-speaking world, and thus as a woman writing in a foreign language about matters to which in many ways she remains marginal. Any marginalization is of course relative: I also speak as a white European trained within the mainstream of Western thought, which is why I feel that the issues raised by continental, British and American feminism are still of crucial importance to my own critical and political practice.

A final point: the terms 'Anglo-American' and 'French' must not be taken to represent purely national demarcations: they do not signal the critics' birthplace but the intellectual tradition within which they work. Thus I do not consider the many British and American women deeply influenced by French thought to be 'Anglo-American' critics.

I would like to thank Clare Hall, Cambridge for awarding me their Hambro Fellowship for 1981/2; though I did not in fact

write the book there, my year in Cambridge gave me the time to think through many of the issues raised in this text. Kate Belsey's energetic support was instrumental in getting the project off the ground in the first place. I am also grateful for the stimulating response from my many Australian audiences in the summer of 1983: they gave me much-needed encouragement and self-confidence. I would also like to thank Penny Boumelha, Laura Brown, Terry Eagleton and my editor, Terence Hawkes, for their constructive criticism.

*Lady Margaret Hall
Oxford*

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