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Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*

A Contribution to the Essay Genre

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For Eileen Gregory, Ph.D.,

who graciously guided me through the beginning of my graduate career, and who was kind enough to tell me that my first draft of this essay needed a thorough revision.

Contents

Chapter One
Context

If Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* "provided virtually every crucial metaphor [feminists] now use" as Patricia Joplin contends, and if she provided "a possible vision of what lay behind and beyond women's silence"(4), then, as Ellen Bayuk Rosenman says in the only book-length study of *A Room of One's Own*,

> Woolf's essay has become a canonical text for the multifaceted feminist literary criticism of the last two decades. *A Room of One's Own* is a primer of feminist concepts: the experience of oppression and victimization, the importance of exclusion and marginality, the existence of a distinctive female voice and subject matter. (13)

This critical assessment of Woolf's essay presents a significant problem. Predominately feminist readings of Woolf's essay have appropriated her work too narrowly; the voluminous appropriation suggests that the primary import of Woolf's essay is as a tract maligning male literary tradition. These critics, ironically, in seeking to elevate Woolf's essay, diminish and weaken it, implicitly suggesting that the essay cannot be seriously considered outside of a feminist context, that its contribution to a large and inclusive literary canon is, therefore, limited.

This critical appropriation of Woolf's essay is similar to the gender appropriation about which Woolf herself warns her audience in *A Room of One's Own*:

> "Female novelists should only aspire to excellence by courageously acknowledging the limitations of their sex." That puts the matter in a nutshell, and when I tell you, rather to your surprise, that this sentence was written not in August 1828 but in August 1928, you will agree, I think, that however delightful it is to us now, it represents a vast body of opinion. (75)

This contemporaneous criticism is only one instance in which Woolf makes the students at Newnham and Girton colleges aware of a "vast body of opinion" that represents a ridiculous reduction of women's capabilities. In an earlier section, for example, she briefly mentions "Mr. Justice [who] commented in the Divorce Courts upon the Shamelessness of Women"(33), and "Mr. Oscar Brown [who] was wont to declare 'that the impression left on his mind after looking over any set of examination papers, was that, irrespective of the marks he might give, the best woman was intellectually the inferior of the worst man'"(53).

In many ways, current feminist reflections on Woolf's essay commit a similar injustice. The discussion of *A Room of One's Own* must expand beyond the boundaries imposed upon it by *literati* who are feminists

first and then lovers of literature if Woolf's essay is to retain the stature it deserves in the canon of English and modernist literature. A discussion of Woolf's essay must begin examining, as Ellen Carol Jones suggests, Woolf's form and style, one that "reflects and extends the argument" in which "the meaning can be discovered in the presentation itself" (235). This complex experimentation with presentation and its relationship to meaning has largely been ignored in literary studies.

It is important, then, to engage this formal discussion of *A Room of One's Own*, demonstrating that Woolf here contributes to the literary tradition not mere feminist polemic, but sophisticated experimentation and expansion of the essay form. This form, as Gyorgy Lukacs recognizes in his 1910 book *Soul and Form*, "has not yet, today, traveled the road to independence which its sister, poetry, covered long ago—the road of development from a primitive, undifferentiated unity with science, ethics and art" (13). As indicated in her many essays on the genre and its exemplary devotees, the essay, for Woolf, ideally provides the highest form of literary freedom, liberty unparalleled by that of the novel, the poem, or the play. Moreover, Woolf's broad gestures of creative freedom appear through her complex manipulation of rhetorical modes, voice, and language. In one sense, these rhetorical strategies become a metaphor for the limitless nature of the essay form and its ability to imitate the freedom of the human imagination. A thorough explanation of how Woolf achieves this liberty solidly places *A Room of*

One's Own among the century's finest imaginative achievements.

Some contemporary critics have indeed recognized that many readers have misread the essay, failing to see that the point is not the explicit feminist argument regarding 500 pounds and a room of one's own. Rosenman notes that *A Room of One's Own* "is one of the more misunderstood works of modern literature" (15), a work whose "tone and design... baffled its first reviewers" (15). Michael Rosenthal agrees, noting that the point of Woolf's essay is "the demonstration of ... a creative intelligence fashioning a work of art"(219), rather than the explicit proposition of 500 pounds and a room of one's own. And even Arnold Bennett, a contemporary of Woolf who stands as her literary antithesis, senses that the explicit thesis is not the issue: "Woolf's thesis is not apparently important to her, since she talks about everything but the thesis" (259). What Bennett does not consider, however, is that perhaps the explicit thesis is not the thesis at all.

Woolf frequently reflects on the nature of the essay, both its form and content, its purpose, its energy, its power. Her own reflections in many critical essays and reviews provide a context for reading *A Room of One's Own* as the product of her musings, emphasizing her acute self-consciousness concerning the genre. Woolf's extended reflections on the essay genre began as early as 1905 with "The Decay of Essay Writing" and continued throughout her career, her most elaborate discussions found in "Montaigne,"(1919) her most revered model; "The

Modern Essay"(1920); "Impassioned Prose" (1925); and "De Quincey's Autobiography" (1929). These are the essays in which Woolf espouses literary freedom in her own work and lauds such liberty in the work of others, writers who "puzzle the critics, who refuse to go in with the herd. They stand obstinately across the boundary lines, and do a greater service by enlarging and fertilising" ("Impassioned Prose" 362). This value of freedom is echoed by Elena Gualtieri, who, in a recent book-length discussion of Woolf's essays, contends that the essay form provides "the freedom ... for exploring and bringing to light what other genres cannot or do not want to expose" (50). Woolf's model for liberty is Montaigne, who, according to Woolf, "will act by his own light; by some internal balance will achieve that precarious and everchanging poise which, while it controls, in no way impedes the soul's freedom to explore and experiment" ("Montaigne" 75). For Woolf, Montaigne's essays capture the freedom of the soul that she, too, seeks.

> In these extraordinary volumes of short and broken, long and learned, logical and contradictory statements, we have heard the very pulse and rhythm of the soul, beating day after day, year after year, through a veil which, as time goes on, finds itself almost to transparency. (78)

In many ways, the reader of Woolf's essay feels, similarly, that he has viewed some of the complexity and mystery of her soul within a prose of contradictions and pulses and pauses.

Woolf's primary vehicle for experimentation occurs within the four modes of discourse—narration, description, exposition, and persuasion. She manipulates the modes to serve multiple rhetorical functions throughout the essay, often challenging the reader's traditional expectation for each mode, expanding its role. This creative gesture allows the reader to perceive from multiple angles. Woolf's fusion of modes has been noted by Gualtieri, who points out that "everywhere you look there is a cross-fertilization, overlap and the dissolving of divisions" (97). Moreover, using all four modes—at times independently and simultaneously—functions similarly to presenting multifarious voices; this multiplicity produces a rhapsody of form, each mode communicating with and engaging the reader, in a shared attempt to gain access to the complex and mysterious human soul.

The problem with most critical scholarship is its emphasis solely on Woolf's explicit surface content rather than on what occurs below this content—the experimentation in language and form. Woolf's content achieves value as its message is achieved in form. Much critical commentary explores how Woolf's essay delineates a variety of issues involving the female artist. One frequently discussed topic among scholars explores Woolf's implicit derision of patriarchy. In fact, Rosenman states that the essay "turns on two large, vague words: patriarchy and feminism" (30). Regarding feminism, Rosenman states that

> Woolf evolved a politics that insisted on several points: the importance of gender as a category in society, the fact of women's oppression, and the extent of women's abilities and values when left untrammeled by male domination.(34)

Others, like Julie Solomon, suggest that Woolf "advocates a tactic of compliance with the existing power structure. She recommends that women (like agile tightrope walkers) adapt themselves to the 'reality' of the dominant power structure through imitation of male practice"(Solomon 340). Other critics of the essay explain the behavior of patriarchy through a Freudian analysis of the male. For example, in her discussion of the mirror image in Woolf's writing, Susan Squier points out that "men need women to serve as magnifying mirrors in order to fight off the continuing, debilitating suspicion that they are never free of their primitive longing for that powerful mother figure" (277).

Other feminist critics laud Woolf's essay as an explicit or implicit challenge to the conventions of the literary world. Critics point to a variety of rhetorical strategies Woolf employs to subvert tradition. For instance, Jane Marcus and Jones recognize in Woolf's essay aspects of classical rhetoric, her essay following the five-part sequence of the *dispositio*—the *exordium*, *narratorio*, *confirmatio*, *refutatio*, and *peroration*. These critics believe, as Marcus states, that Woolf "masters the principles of classical rhetoric and subverts them at the same time"

("Taking the Bull" 148). When Woolf manipulates these rhetorical conventions in her "playful mocking" (Farrell 915), she attempts to "emancipate herself from the molds of conventional perception and language"(Jones 229). Another critic, Anne Fernald, believes that Woolf's essay contains "subversion and suggestion," devices "central to the rhetoric of personal criticism" (182). Lillian Bisson explains that the lecture form itself, and Woolf's use of it, "allows her to deliver a well-aimed blow at academic authoritarianism by subverting one of the mainstays of its power—the academic lecture" (202). Similarly, Dudley Marchi recognizes Woolf's use of "forms she learned from the male literary canon," forms, however, that then became "revitalized. . . in her own dynamic style" (2). Some critics, however, like Pamela Caughie, avoid labeling Woolf as subversive; rather, Caughie says, "the point of the essay is to introduce into the concept of tradition the concept of change, of instability" (45).

Though these feminist critics (Marcus, Fernald, others) seek to expand discussion of A Room of One's Own into issues of rhetoric and form, they do so only to amplify the feminist viewpoint; for them Woolf's use of rhetorical strategies deserves attention only to the extent that it undermines male literary tradition. For example, many critics discuss Woolf's use of the fictional narrator-personae. Marcus believes that Woolf creates a narrative synecdoche in which

> she is not Virginia Woolf standing on the platform but the

> voice of the anonymous female victim of male violence throughout the ages. She transforms herself in the narrative to the object of her narration. (158)

In a similar manner, Jean Long notes that the narrative personae allow Woolf to show "women who ... have reason to be angry, but never actually are" (90). This, then, as Fernald writes, "inhibits us from being distracted by Woolf the personality and allows us to enter into a sympathetic relationship with the persona" (177). Caughie, however, approaches the narrative differently, seeing Woolf's strategy as one that "illuminate[s] her conception of the artist and the artwork" (40). Moreover, Caughie states,

> the changeable "I" and flexible approach suggest that the truth we seek is not single but multiple, not subjective but intersubjective. What is "honest" about Woolf's method is its very self-consciousness. (43)

James Hoban writes, in "Rhetorical *Topoi in A Room of One's Own*," that Woolf's fictional narrator imitates a new "conception of invention" (149). The narrator Mary Beton shows the reader, for example, how one proceeds to invent topics, discovering ideas and formulating techniques for presentation (Hoban 149). Hoban's discussion, though appearing to examine Woolf's essay independently of feminist rhetoric, however, does not stray far from the issues of politics and gender:

> Woolf's essay adds to a new view of rhetoric by eliminating

> anything that smacks of a system such as the rigid ordering of topics so prized by the ancients and their followers, and offering as an alternative an approach at once individualistic and suggestive, one appealing, at least initially, to the daughters of educated men. (151)

In addition to these considerations, Bisson explains that Woolf's narrative helps her solve a contextual dilemma. Can Woolf communicate her genuine feelings regarding patriarchal mistreatment of women while she restrains a vitriolic anger? For, as Bisson remarks, Woolf wishes to "preserve her own status in the male literary establishment and ensure that her controversial message will receive a more sympathetic hearing" (198). Bisson adds that

> her solution to the problem is found in the narrative stance of her persona. That persona ... is fluid, relational, fragmented—encompassing thousands of suppressed female voices. (198)

This "problem" of context that Bisson mentions—Woolf's oblique strategy of addressing a male literary world—represents the topic of additional criticism. Some critics, like Adrienne Rich, believe that Woolf's essay is too accommodating to "male rhetoric," that the essay acquiesces to the restrictions imposed by patriarchy. For Rich, Woolf's resolution of her dilemma—as Alex Zwerdling defines it, "the conflict between angry and conciliatory impulses" (246)—disappoints the genuine feminist. In her essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-

Vision," Rich laments what she sees as Woolf's restraint, her conciliatory and guarded tone.

> It is the tone of a woman almost in touch with her anger, who is determined not to appear angry, who is willing herself to be calm, detached, and even charming in a roomful of men where things have been said which are attacks on her very integrity .... Only at rare moments in that essay do you hear the passion in her voice. (Rich 37)

Rich, however, does not appear to consider that Woolf consciously and carefully chose a strategy in *A Room of One's Own*, chose to avoid explicit polemic, not out of fear but out of artistic preference. Woolf herself was aware of her dilemma. Writing in a letter to G.L. Dickinson, she admits, "My blood is apt to boil on this subject as yours does about natives, or war" (*Letters* IV 106). Moreover, Hoban counters Rich by noting that the reader of Woolf's essay is indeed "aware of Virginia Woolf's anger, her contempt for chauvinist men" (148). In addition, Zwerdling explains that Woolf did not avoid anger in her writing generally: "Anger is not consistently denied either in Woolf's feminist books or in her novels: it is frequently given its due" (251). Zwerdling believes that Woolf was readily aware of her anger but felt that placing

> those feelings on more prominent display would not, to her way of thinking, have produced better art... She felt that they were too unguarded, too artless. Anger could be the root but

must not be the flower. (252)

In fact, Woolf knew that her essay contained a subversive, subtle, and artful quality. In a letter to V.Sackville-West, she says, "Although you don't perceive it, there is much reflection and some erudition in it: the butterfly begins by being a loathsome legless grub" (101). Woolf's image of the "loathsome legless grub" may represent her raw anger in an artless, unbridled form.

A few critics attempt to move beyond these feminist readings and examine Woolf's rhetoric independent of political strictures. In particular, Thomas J. Farrell's examination of Woolf's essay reflects on its experimental quality. Though he uses gender terminology—labeling Woolf's use of male and female rhetoric—he does so to explore and expand the discussion of her essay beyond feminist ideology, believing that Woolf expands the essay form. Farrell explains that female rhetoric, on the one hand, is "open-ended...implicit and suggestive" (915), and it "seems to avoid unnecessary antagonism or differentiation," resulting in a mode that "appears to be more sincere, and especially in live deliberations, to be potentially (because less distracted by the contingencies of verbal combat) more centrally concerted than the male mode" (916). Male rhetoric, on the other hand, is more aggressive, combative, asserting its thesis immediately and proceeding to delineate its points in a logical fashion, believing that "it is impossible to win over the whole audience, so why try" (916). Farrell sees Woolf's essay as a

blending of these two rhetorics; moreover, he says,

> It is possible to blend the best features of the two modes of rhetoric, but to do so requires even more conscious control than what either mode in itself requires, for blending the best features necessitates consciously and knowingly choosing those features and then using them effectively. *A Room of One's Own* is an instance of such blending. (921)

Whereas Farrell seeks to use rhetoric to explore what he senses is experimentation with the essay form, Ellen Rogat's examination of rhetoric returns to a feminist appropriation of Woolf's essay. While rhetoric is Rogat's topic, it serves to emphasize what she sees as Woolf's aggressive attack on the male world: Woolf "undercuts the tone of certainty which pervades the masculine sentence" (88) because "she does not want [readers] to think of her as a rigid presence, asserting her ego and controlling their responses" (88), a characteristic more typical of male rhetoric. These critics refer to these nuanced distinctions between male and female rhetoric—what Marcus calls Woolf's "invention of a female language" ("Sapphistry" 187)—as a method Woolf uses to challenge literary tradition.

This issue of male and female rhetoric even appeared in early reviews of *A Room of One's Own*. For example, an early 1929 unsigned review from the *Times Literary Supplement* recognizes in *A Room of One's Own* a male rhetoric: "It is certainly of interest to find an artist

who has (one is tempted to say) so masculine a sense of literary form as Mrs. Woolf" (*Times Literary Supplement* 256). In another review, V.Sackville-West sees the essay as a successful blending of the masculine and the feminine, her comments anticipating those of Farrell: "You might forget that her extravagances, if they have imagination and poetry for grandparents on the maternal side, have also sense and erudition for grandparents on the paternal" (257). Finally, Bennett, the misogynist whose book *Our Woman* claims that women are naturally inferior to men, reviewed *A Room of One's Own* in the Evening Standard (1929), noting the "feminine" associational quality of the essay:

> If I had to make one of those brilliant generalisations now so fashionable, defining the difference between men and women, I should say that whereas a woman cannot walk through a meadow in June without wandering all over the place to pick attractive blossoms, a man can. Virginia Woolf cannot resist the floral enticement. (259)

Though Bennett's comments here demonstrate explicitly a criticism shallow and misogynistic, he nonetheless reflects the initial reaction that Woolf's rhetoric moves beyond traditional boundaries of exposition. Unfortunately, current criticism has not moved much past Bennet's initial recognition of Woolf's experimentation with the essay genre; in ignoring Woolf's numerous written reflections on the essay and merely reading *A Room of One's Own* within a political context,

scholars denigrate her contribution to the literary world. While neither Woolf herself nor A Room of One's Own avoids feminist issues, current scholarship has failed to discuss adequately Woolf's tremendous contribution to genre theory.