

## Virginia Woolf's Postcolonial Feminism

TERRA CRITICA I

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When in 1928 she is invited to deliver a series of lectures on the relation between Women and Fiction, Virginia Woolf feels she is asked to talk about something that is not there. Looking for a spotlight on this something that is not there, she resorts to fiction because, as she asserts, the work of the imagination on this subject is likely to contain "more truth fact" (Woolf 1977, 6). She therefore introduces a fictional character, the writer Mary Carmichael, and has her explore the history and conceivable future of female readership and authorship.

(.....)

Most likely, it is not without meaning that the fictional author in Woolf's essay receives her legacy from the colonies together with the right to vote. Being the middleclass white woman that she is, the access this fictional author gains to British citizenship is accompanied by the whole gamut of colonial connotations. Nineteenth century England, in other words, can excel in rationality, emancipation, and progressiveness also because of the identity constitutive conquest of British India. Woolf drew that connection 1928. She saw something that not many people saw with her with so explicitly. Participation in the system of society also involves bearing responsibility for the compromising legacies of that system. And we in turn need a postcolonial feminist sensitivity to see these two signs as extremely meaningful in the constitution of white female authorship.

## The Moth and the Bonfire: Virginia Woolf's anti-militarism

TERRA CRITICA II

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Two-and-a-half years later, to be precise on 21 January, 1931, Virginia Woolf delivered a lecture that once again in the history of feminism would turn out to be both agenda-setting and revolutionary. This time, the occasion was provided by the London and National Society for Women's Service (the LNSWS), where Pippa Strachey acted as secretary. "Professions for Women," as the lecture was titled, is an historic text because it would procure the foundations for Woolf's essay *Three Guineas* that was to appear in 1938. The LNSWS had asked her to share her experiences as a professional novelist. Just as in *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf must take recourse to her imagination in order to sketch a scenario that has only partially been realised: women do have access to most professions, but this is as far as social equality will go for the moment. Once again Woolf calls attention to the implications of lacking an historical tradition which undisputedly grants the rights of existence in the public sphere. So it is also on this occasion that Woolf tells the "welldressed, keen & often beautiful young women" ( Lee 1997: 599 ) that an essential part of the early twentieth-century female author's genesis involves overcoming two obstacles: the (by now proverbial and much cited) "Angel in the House" and the (less often cited because much more complex) "rock" that proves to be a veritable stumbling block (Woolf 1981: 68). The Angel in the House refers to the image of women as selfless, chaste beings. Destroying the Angel and liberating oneself

from its concomitant restrictions is something the female author can eventually accomplish, according to Woolf. It requires self-examination, self-awareness, and discipline, but it can be done. Much harder to handle is the experience of the ever-looming rock which is firmly anchored in the system of patriarchal institutions and which at any moment, both expectedly and unexpectedly, can obscure a woman writer's self-awareness. The rock appears just as one's imagination threatens to run wild, just as the woman writer begins to be aware of her passions, her body, her potential, her existence as a thinking, desiring, and feeling subject (Woolf 1981: 67). Dodging it or slaying it is a task the first generation of working women is burdened with for the remainder of their working lives; Woolf foresees that each newly acquired freedom in the process of emancipation will immediately cause a reaction of restraint and containment.

How to disrupt that sticky process of internalised and institutionalised constraints is the basic question of every feminist and emancipatory practice. The task at hand is always to ask that critical question over and over again and to analyse the individual answers collectively, in order to arrive at possible strategies and solutions for normalising the social presence of women. Alluding to her earlier manifesto, Woolf states that now a room in the patriarch's home has been acquired, the next step is to inhabit it free from patriarchal conditions.

Such is easier said than done. In *A Room of One's Own* Woolf had already demonstrated that the strands of British citizenship, financial independence, and colonial exploitation are thoroughly intertwined. The conundrum of participating in the publishing industry, as Woolf did, while keeping up critical awareness with regard to the rules of the game, is clear from the difference between the final version of the text for the Professions for Women lecture and notes made by Woolf while preparing it. As Hermione Lee observes, the eventual lecture, although a powerful statement, is a far cry from the passions that originated it. By way of example Lee quotes from Woolf's notes such as they were published by the Hogarth Press in *The Pargiters* (Leaska 1978). Here is just one of the impeding patriarchal rocks that made it impossible for Woolf to express what she really had to say:

For instance about the war. If I were reviewing books now, I would say that this was a stupid and violent and hateful and idiotic and trifling and ignoble and mean display. I would say I am bored to death by war books. I detest the masculine point of view. I am bored by his heroism, virtue, and honour. I think the best these men can do is not to talk about themselves anymore.

Of course, none of this would be printed (Lee 1997: 601)

So in the run-up to the reading, Woolf had already made the connection between women's limited access to the power of definition and the hegemony of the male discourse of heroism and warfare. Although Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* also connected the personal and the political, including global politics, and did so very explicitly, it would still take seven years before the practice of warfare as such and its concomitant gender specific rituals and conventions would be transformed into the point of departure for *Three Guineas*. The central issue in that polemical and at times furious essay is that the world in which women aim to participate by putting their oar in, the world in which they wish to acquire financial independence and professionalism, is also a world in which men measure their degree of masculinity, professionalism, and happiness against the benchmark of their role in actual or

symbolic warfare. As she did in *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf demonstrates in *Three Guineas* how the meaning of masculinity and femininity is inevitably intertwined with the organization of national and world politics: "the public and the private worlds are inseparably connected" (142). The desire to be involved in society therefore once again in this essay implies the risk of dirtying one's hands. However, in the latter pamphlet the emancipatory argument of the LNSWS lecture is no longer addressed exclusively to a highly educated female audience. The argument for exploiting the potential of women is instead developed, in *Three Guineas*, in response to this global question: how in your opinion are we to prevent war?

This question, whether it is possible to prevent war, lands on Woolf's desk by way of a fictional letter writer. In the letters she consequently writes in reply to that question, she distributes a guinea each for three possible contributions to a solution. Since women at the time of writing had no access to the army or navy, war is a man's business. Uniforms, gowns, cortèges, parades, decorations, titles, or medals: they are, Woolf argues, the paraphernalia of nationalism, competition, and narcissism; of social struggle, of inclusion, and exclusion. They are the visible manifestations of traditions that in extreme cases could lead to war and in which women in the late 1930s had hardly participated at all. If we want to prevent war, we must on the one hand understand the loyalties and emotions that cause men to engage in war, while on the other hand we must also consider potentially innovative insights on the part of women. A gender specific problem requires a gender specific answer. This perception causes Woolf to meticulously analyse the early twentieth-century mechanisms of social and symbolic inclusion and exclusion. The prism of gender difference is needed to answer the question of how war can be avoided.

The ensuing thought exercise, mind-blowing and matchless, has three fictional protagonists writing letters that incite the author to lay bare hitherto invisible phenomena and relationships. This leads for example to a priceless deconstruction of the processions, dress codes, and decorations of important and even more important men, which causes Woolf to conclude that the major public garment in the life of a man is his uniform, whereas in the case of a woman it is her wedding dress. In answering the letter writers' questions, though, Woolf does not only address the issue of how the loyalties of warmongering men should be understood. She also revolutionizes the genre of cultural criticism, just as she did in *A Room of One's Own*. Her two-pronged analysis in *Three Guineas* is based on what only decades later would come to be known as semiotics and affect analysis.

Central to her breakdown of the underpinnings of warfare is the question that also propelled *A Room*: what exactly do we see when we look around us? And how does this seeing affect us, how does it affect women and men? In *A Room of One's Own* the fictive woman author observes the gendered public sphere in quasi fictional places like the Oxbridge college campus, while in *Three Guineas* critical reflection begins at home with the reading of biographies and opening the newspaper. Woolf's use of biography as source for an historical survey of inclusion and exclusion and her method of reading between the lines in order to unearth the untold story has been pointed out elsewhere. Here, I intend to supplement those insights by looking more closely at Woolf's rhetorical use of that other source: war photography.

During her work on *Three Guineas* in 1936 and 1937, the main news in the daily papers was centred on the Spanish Civil War with the opposing factions of fascist nationalists and anti-fascist republicans. Germany, Italy, and the Soviet Union all in one way or another became involved in this national conflict, which meant a substantial heightening of international tension during the interbellum period. For this reason, the Spanish Civil War in retrospect looked like a dress rehearsal for World War II. Woolf does not address the content of the conflict such as it is described in the newspapers. She does mention the fact, however, of the photographs of dead bodies and collapsed houses that were weekly sent to the British newspapers. Her observation on the never-ending flow of war pictures is more significant than it might appear from our contemporary perspective which has left us all but completely numb and helpless in face of the relentless exposition to images of mangled bodies and houses shot to pieces. The Spanish Civil War, however, was the first war in history that was widely recorded by visual means. Photographers, some of whom remained anonymous, while others gained renown for their commitment, such as the first female war photographer Gerda Taro and the later Magnum founder Robert Capra, documented the tragedy and romance of the struggle against evil, capturing images of ruins, citizens adrift, and the bodies of dead soldiers; of men, women, and children.



“Those photographs are not an argument; they are simply a crude statement of fact addressed to the eye,” Woolf writes (p. 11). Writing twenty years before Roland Barthes’s ground-breaking milestone of cultural criticism, *Mythologies* (1957), Woolf might be one of the first cultural critics to base a cultural-political argument on a thorough analysis of the emotions and thoughts evoked by looking at a picture. Her argument hinges on what is presented as just a sample; she describes an everyday picture in the papers. Everyone can see it. Choosing this particular object, a war photograph, implies that with the advent of war photography women as well as men now for the first time in history can witness war scenes that take place elsewhere. Women and men see exactly the same images: “For now at last we are looking at the same picture, we are seeing with you the same dead bodies, the same ruined houses” (11). And she goes on to say that watching those photos fulfils both sexes with disgust and horror.

But then: what can be done with such disgust? Which strategies are available to men and which to women if they want to act on that disgust? This is the question that starts off Woolf's probing analysis of gender inequality in the exercise of citizenship and (inter)national solidarity. Men can actually take up arms and fight back, women cannot. Men can exert influence using politics and the economy, women only in a very limited way. Then again all the means men can dispose of to exert influence are part of the system that leads to war. Whether it be capital, education, or culture: everything is geared to keeping nationalism, competition, and narcissism firmly in the saddle. What women might offer the anti-war lobby, then, is far from the pursuit of equality or the goal of participating in the hegemonic power to define which men so easily have access to. What women truly can offer is the fact that they can think outside the weight of tradition. What women *can* offer therefore is this: their difference.

In the first two essays Woolf had demonstrated with great perseverance how the pursuit of equality would lead to the inevitable and compromising consequence of accepting the main principles of Western patriarchy. With that, an economy of competition, nationalism, and narcissism is accepted, one that has led to the war industry whose images now appear in the papers on a daily basis. Therefore, as Woolf argues in the third essay, the only position that women can really claim for themselves and that might lead to something new is the position of difference. In practically all aspects, women take up a different position in society because of their history of exclusion and rightlessness. That absence of a social tradition is a handicap in effectively exercising one's influence in the public sphere, but could perhaps also be experienced as a liberating force elsewhere. In the early 1970s, it was Luce Irigaray who would compellingly elaborate on this novel idea of a political zero line, of indifference towards the paraphernalia of power, with the publication of that milestone in continental difference thinking: *Speculum de l' autre Femme* (1974). Forty years previously, Woolf had in fact paved the way for this influential feminist philosophy of difference. She suggests that women who are concerned with the question of how to prevent war should in their search for effective strategies place themselves outside society, as if they are the contemporary of Antigone, who could only practice the love her brother beyond the city walls of Thebe. The recourse for women seeking to serve the cause of peace, in order to give what they really *can* give, instead of contorting their intellect in order to meet the demands that patriarchy imposes on women, is to call attention to, as well as take on, both the absence of any power of definition and the difference in tradition. Instead of prostituting the brain, as Woolf perfectly and plainly puts it, women who want to serve peace should unite in what she proposes to call an "Outsiders Society." The Outsiders Society endorses the great principles of Justice, Equality and Liberty on which every democratic society is based. The Outsiders Society does not reject the objective of this democratic endeavour; but it does reject the resources that so far have been available to reach that goal.

So when looking at the pictures of ruined houses and dead bodies everywhere, Woolf concludes that "[t]he answer to your question must be that we can best help you to prevent war not by repeating your words and following your methods but by finding new words and creating new methods" (143).

Woolf, being who she was, took this thought exercise very seriously while involved in the project of writing *Three Guineas*. One diary entry reads: "And I'm so absorbed in Two

Guineas [sic] – thats [sic] what I'm going to call it. I must very nearly verge on insanity I think. I get so deep in this book I dont [sic] know what I'm doing. Find myself walking along the Strand talking aloud" (24 March, 1936). And when she has finished it, she writes: "Am I right though in thinking it has some importance – 3 Gs – [...] I think there's more to it than to a Room" (12 April, 1938). And yet, again being in character, she also doubts the effect of her writing in the larger picture: "L. says that K. Martin says we say (the P.M.) that we will fight this time. Hitler therefore is chewing his little bristling moustache. But the whole thing trembles: & my book may be like a moth dancing over a bonfire – consumed in less than a second." (24 May, 1938).

## References

*The diary of Virginia Woolf*. Volume 5, 1936-1941. Anne Oliver Bell & Andrew McNeillie, eds. London: Harcourt Brace, 1984.