

Creation and critique

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Those experiments will not be merely critical but creative
Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas*

More than forty years ago Roland Barthes welcomed 'the multiplicity of writing' which would disentangle the power of 'ordinary culture' so 'tyrannically centered on the author' (143). The same gesture, with which Barthes welcomed intertextuality, he expelled the critic, because the 'reign of the Author has also been that of the Critic' (147). Among the few writers who received the grace of Barthes was Marcel Proust for the particular reason that he was 'concerned with the task of inexorably blurring, by an extreme subtilization, the relation between the writer and his characters' (144). Not only this argument can be regarded as a plea to admit yet Virginia Woolf a posteriori to Barthes' pantheon. It is in fact her sophisticated invention of an intimate and subtle relation between the author and the critic that makes her even more favorite.

Her practicing of critique is, so to speak, deeply rooted in her talent to call into question ceaselessly the two particular categories 'man' and 'woman', without prioritizing one over the other. This makes her not much of a militant feminist, but indeed, as Morag Shiach expresses it accurately: "Woolf explores the imaginative and political resources of the concept of androgyny" (xvii). In this respect Woolf should be regarded as a writer who practices, as I would call it, transcriticism. This concept is closely connected to Foucault's definition of the artistic practice of Constantin Guys (Baudelaire's hero): 'His transfiguration does not entail an annulling of reality, but a difficult interplay between the truth of what is real and the exercise of freedom' (41). Foucault hints at the open duality of critical and creative aspects in the movement of self-transgression when he, in the first place, states that for 'the attitude of modernity, the high value of the present is indissociable from a desperate eagerness to imagine it, to imagine it otherwise than it is' (41). And secondly, when he characterizes the two moments of his concept of 'limit-attitude': 'the principle of a critique *and* a permanent creation of ourselves' (44, my emphasis). Obviously, 'within' the act of transgression the aspects of 'imagining it otherwise' and the 'permanent creation of ourselves' seem closely linked. Foucault calls this 'difficult interplay' a 'historico-practical test of the limits that we may go beyond' (47). These limits should not be annulled, because they belong (partly) to ourselves, but they should be tested 'as work carried out by ourselves upon ourselves' (idem). In other words, transcriticism is driven by a desire or the inventive eagerness to work upon our real or natural self, regardless whether this limited 'natural self' is understood in a kantian aprioristic or a foucauldian historico-practical way. This dynamics of the 'work carried out by ourselves' upon our real or natural self calls for a thorough rereading of Woolf's novel *Orlando* (1928) in close relation with *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938).

Things must be perceived significantly different in every stage or topos in which Woolf situates and works upon her androgyny. The interconnection between the works could even possibly be understood as an androgynology. That is, the writer and her critical

performance are not only more or less simultaneously born in the text – in a creative act that engendered her andro-genius – but are just a year later resituated and transformed, after the birth of a ‘joke’ (as Virginia Woolf called *Orlando* in her diary), as a critical power that demarcates her relation towards the world of fiction; ten years after that she transformed her critical fiction again, in her essay *Three Guineas*, in the guise of critical experiments, which should not be understood as ‘merely critical but creative’ (321). Woolf performs a language that ceaselessly calls into question origins: the creator of imaginative prose considers herself not limited to fiction, the critic is not confined to facts. The facts of a room and an income of one’s own are with regard to the practice of creative critique necessary conditions. But these conditions seem of minor importance when it comes down to the sources of her transcritical authorship: the imaginary transformation of her natural female limits, and the critical force which seem to deconstruct heterosexuality as a natural given: ‘It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly’ (136).

References

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