Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and the Unlikely Tradition of Women's Writing

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> They had no tradition behind them, or one so short and partial that it was of little help. For we think back through our mothers if we are women.
>
> *Virginia Woolf*
> *A Room of One's Own*

Virginia Woolf in her widely known feminist text *A Room of One's Own* (1929) addresses, in the form of a series of lectures to a women's college, the issue of women and writing in terms of the lack of a consistent tradition of women's writing in English literature.

The essays that Woolf presents at this college, however, are far from embodying the traditional form of lectures. In *A Room of One's Own*, not only does Woolf deconstruct several stereotypical assumptions about the tradition of women's writing, but she also adapts her own text to function as a form of transgression by refusing to conform to the standards of male discourses. By producing a text that intermingles the theoretical, the fictional, the poetical, and the political, Woolf ironically mimics and parodies traditional male conventions of a theoretical discourse. Her text questions and disrupts the power of

language through its very means of expression – through a discourse that resists confinement and rigidity.

In *Three Guineas* (1938), a later essay that reiterates some of the main themes of *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf expresses the belief that the "lecture" encompasses a form of traditional education that should be rejected by women (1992:37). She adds in a footnote that "psychologically, eminence upon a platform encourages vanity and desire to impose authority" (1992:155). Authority is precisely what women writers should strive to overcome and this is what Woolf does by subverting the lecture form in her address about women and fiction at this women's college. Woolf claims that she can never come to a conclusion on the subject about which she is asked to lecture. She adds that she will never be able to fulfill "the first duty of a lecture – to hand you after an hour's discourse a nugget of pure truth to wrap up between the pages of your notebook and keep on the mantel-piece for ever" (1989:4). Claiming that fiction is "likely to contain more truth than fact" she proceeds to subvert the lecture form even further by giving the reader instead a fictitious account of what a woman is likely to encounter when she decides to become a writer (1989:4).

Woolf offers the readers an ironic, creative and insightful argument concerning the "unlikely" tradition of women's writing. For Woolf, the silence to which women writers have been confined is due to materialistic conditions: "a woman must have money and a room of her own to write fiction" (1989:4). Besides acknowledging the historical and materialistic problems women have had to face, Woolf urges them to make their writing a means of resisting and subverting the imposed order of society (1989:109). She cites several women writers who have managed to engender new texts against all odds, especially those she considered to be the four great novelists of the nineteenth-century: Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Emily Brontë, and George Eliot. The eighteenth-century poet, Anne Finch, known as Lady Winchilsea, is viewed as one

of the most important forerunners for her sensitive perception of the position of a woman who dares to assume the role of a writer:

> Alas! a woman that attempts the pen,
> Such an intruder on the rights of men,
> Such a presumptuous creature is esteemed,
> The fault can by no virtue be redeemed.
> They tell us we mistake our sex and way;
> Good breeding, fashion, dancing, dressing, play,
> Are the accomplishments we should desire;
> To write, or read, or think, or to enquire,
> Would cloud our beauty, and exhaust our time,
> And interrupt the conquests of our prime;
> Whilst the dull manage of a servile house
> Is held by some our utmost art and use.[1]

Over the years, women have consistently been banned from the literary scene by a theory of literature that serves the patriarchy by reinforcing a tradition of literary "paternity." The pen has conventionally been seen as a metaphorical penis and women, destitute of this requirement, considered incapable of being "adequate" writers. The woman writer, therefore, is deemed "lacking" in the physiological and sociological requisites necessary to become an artist, as the above poem demonstrates. Lady Winchilsea outlines the gloomy situation that women writers of her time had to face: they were placed either in the position of the "angel" or the "monster" in the house.[2] They were angels if they complied with patriarchal rules. On the other hand, if they transgressed their assigned roles, they received the epithet of "monsters" and "unnatural mothers." Such a prejudice was not limited to a historical past, the eighteenth-century. In fact, it can be argued that the woman writer's situation changed little over the following century. Only recently have women writers of the past received as much attention as their male counterparts.

Virginia Woolf in "Professions for Women" (1979:60) strongly advocates that for women writers to be liberated from patriarchal limitations they

must surpass the extreme roles that the patriarchy has created for them: "Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer." The image of the "Angel in the House," from Conventry Patmore's poem that emphasizes the Victorian ideal of submissive women, as well as its opposite, the "Monster in the House", had to be slain before they destroyed female creativity. Although in the nineteenth-century some women writers were able to publish and establish a name for themselves, they still had to cope with society's labeling them as either "angels" or "monsters." An example of this tradition of oppression is the pervasive need for women writers in the nineteenth-century to adopt a male pseudonym (Currer and Ellis Bell, and George Eliot) or an euphemism to hide their true identity (Jane Austen maintained her anonymity by publishing her novel under cover of the expression "by a lady"). The slaying of these engulfing myths is, Woolf argues, paramount for women writers' development of a literature of their own.

Woolf employs another metaphor, that of the "looking glass," to demonstrate women's position in a repressive patriarchal society. Women have traditionally been used by men as looking-glasses so that men could judge their superiority based upon what they perceived as the "visible" inferiority of women. She ironically contends that women "have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" (1989:35). Her argument, moreover, implies that men need this image to support their claims of superiority and to emphasize women's inferior position as mere objects of "reflection" of men's desires. For Woolf, women, besides attempting to kill the Angel in the House, must also strive to shatter and destroy their position as "looking glasses" for men.

After exploring the scarcity of a tradition of women's writing in the eighteenth-century, Woolf proceeds to address the nineteenth-century as a period in which some women writers, despite the odds, were finally able to give voice to their literary abilities. She remains, however, critical of the way these writers use language and approach their subject

matters. Among those Woolf considers to be the four great female novelists of the nineteenth-century, she seems to regard Jane Austen's and Emily Brontë's writing under a more favourable light because they "alone were deaf to that persistent voice, now grumbling, now patronizing, now domineering, now grieved, now shocked, now angry, now avuncular, that voice which cannot let women alone" (1989:75). She finds fault with Charlotte Brontë's works because of the anger she articulates in her work. According to Woolf, a woman writer has to avoid expressing "personal grievances" and has to maintain her calm so that she can transgress the rules imposed on her and act as Jane Austen does: by laughing at the literary conventions that are set to limit women's literary development. Needless to say, Woolf has been criticized for this argument which has been seen as an instance of her conservative approach towards the work of pioneer women writers.

Despite Woolf's extensive exploration of the development of women's writing from the eighteenth-century to the nineteenth-century she stresses the absence of a previous tradition by fictitiously developing the character of a woman writer from the sixteenth-century, whom she names Judith Shakespeare. This fictitious character serves as a female counterpart to the mythical male genius of William Shakespeare (1989:48). According to Woolf, Judith Shakespeare's fate would be the same as that of many other women writers born with a literary gift in the sixteenth-century: "she would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at" (1989:49). While Judith is absent from the literary historical scene due to her inability to go against the established rules of patriarchy, she figures in Woolf's text not as an absence, but as a silenced existence. Her presence remains concealed but strongly felt, only to be rescued by Woolf in the end:

> "... my belief is that this poet who never wrote a word and was buried at the crossroads still lives. She lives in you and in me, and in many other women who are not here tonight ... for great

> poets do not die; they are continuing presences; they need only the opportunity to walk among us in the flesh." (1989:113)

Woolf's perception and questioning of women's historical absence from the literary scene is also implicitly explored in her refusal to speak through her own voice and her insistence upon the depiction of multiple viewpoints in *A Room of One's Own*. The female narrator through whom she chooses to speak is provided with many identities: "Here then was I (call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please)"; "'I' is only a convenient term for somebody who has no real being" (1989:4-5). Mary Beton, Mary Seton, and Mary Carmichael, to whom Woolf often refers throughout her essay, are names taken literally from a famous Scottish ballad from the sixteenth-century (during the reign of Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots) called "Mary Hamilton." This ballad has been deliberately recorded by the American folk singer and political activist Joan Baez – a song which, Baez stresses, traditionally belongs to "public domain":

> Word is to the kitchen gone
> And word is to the hall
> And word is up to Madam the Queen,
> And that's the worst of all,
> That Mary Hamilton's borne a babe
> To the highest Stewart of all.
>
> Arise, arise, Mary Hamilton,
> Arise and tell to me
> What thou hast done with thy wee babe
> I saw and heard weep by thee.
>
> "I put him in a tiny boat
> And cast him out to sea
> That he might sink or he might swim
> But he'd never come back to me."
>
> Arise, arise, Mary Hamilton,
> Arise and come with me.
> There is a wedding in Glasgow town
> This night we'll go and see.

She put not on her robes of black
Nor her robes of brown.
But she put on her robes of white
To ride into Glasgow town.

And as she rode into Glasgow town
The city for to see
The bailiff's wife and provost's wife
Cried, "Ach and alas for thee!"

"Ah, you need not weep for me," she cried.
"You need not weep for me.
For had I not slain my own wee babe
This death I would not dee.
"Ah little did my mother think
When first she cradled me
The lands I was to travel in
And the death I was to dee.

"Last night I washed the Queen's feet
And put the gold in her hair
And the only reward I find for this
The gallows to be my share."

"Cast off, cast off my gown," she cried,
"But let my petticoat be
And tie a napkin round my face
The gallows I would not see."

Then by and come the King himself
Looked up with a pitiful eye
"Come down, come down, Mary Hamilton,
Tonight you'll dine with me."

"Ah, hold your tongue, my sovereign liege,
And let your folly be
For if you'd a mind to save my life
You'd never have shamed me here.

"Last night there were four Marys
Tonight there'll be but three
There was Mary Beton, and Mary Seton,
And Mary Carmichael and me."

It is interesting to notice the absence from Woolf's essay of the fourth and most prominent voice in the ballad which takes her name, "Mary

Hamilton." By intentionally omitting Mary Hamilton's voice, Woolf's text reinforces her presence in that her image and what it represents lurk throughout the essay. Her absence is emblematic of women's omission from history and emphasizes Woolf's argument. Mary Hamilton's tragic fate, like that of Judith Shakespeare's, is the product of a patriarchal society that confines women to traditional roles and leads them to death and absence from the historical process. Both Judith Shakespeare and Mary Hamilton become in Woolf's text the embodiment of the fate of women in the previous centuries: Judith is refused an outlet to her literary abilities and Mary Hamilton is victimized by the authority of the patriarchy embodied by the King who abuses her and the Queen who revenges the King's unfaithfulness through Mary's death. However, in the same way that Judith "still lives" in Woolf's text, so does Mary Hamilton. Her symbolic absence also represents the hopes for a future generation. The new heroine that Woolf devises in the end of her text will be born by "drawing her life from the lives of the unknown who were her forerunners" (1989:114) – from the lives of Judith Shakespeare and Mary Hamilton.

Woolf's text raises an important issue concerning women's writings: how can women be simultaneously absent from the historical process and present as an intrinsic tradition in women's writing? In other words, how can women write from the space of otherness, a marginal space, the locus of the exile which is also emblematic of the absence of a place, a "non locus"? For some feminist theoreticians and women writers this non-locus of the other and the marginal is not the empty, absent, bare, and sterile place reserved for women in a patriarchal system, but rather a fertile, productive, and transgressive site. Writing about, from, and through "spaces of otherness" – to use Ruth Salvaggio's term – becomes a highly transgressive strategy. Nevertheless, it is also an enormous challenge in the sense that women writers have to struggle against an inherent double-bind: the desire to subvert an imposed order and the inevitability of their being culturally and socially inscribed in this same order, and the need to represent that which is intrinsically

unrepresentable in traditional Western forms of representation. As Shoshana Felman puts it,

> ... the challenge facing the woman today is nothing less than to "reinvent" language ... to speak not only against, but outside of the specular phallogocentric structure, to establish a discourse the status of which would no longer be defined by the phallacy of masculine meaning. (1991:10)

Yet, one should be aware of the problems of such a position of resistance in that no writing or criticism can be completely outside the dominant structures. It can, however, resist incorporation and seek alternative possibilities within the existing order. Woolf implicitly addresses this complex issue when she reminds women writers in *A Room of One's Own* of "how unpleasant it is to be locked out," but she also cautions them that "it is worse to be locked in" (1989:24).

Woolf recognizes the need for women to devise a transgressive practice of writing that will allow them to speak from this ambiguous "space of otherness" as a feminist attempt to break with what has been imposed beforehand. She implies that nineteenth-century writing by women, despite their important contribution to the establishment of a tradition of women's writing, does not prefigure a complete transgressive practice. Towards the ending of *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf devises a fictitious woman writer whom she calls Mary Carmichael, a name taken from the sixteenth-century Scottish ballad, who finally manages to break up "Jane Austen's sentence.... Then she had gone further and broken the sequence – the expected order" (1989:91). Woolf hints that Mary Carmichael is able to do it because "she had done this unconsciously, merely giving things their natural order, as a woman would, if she wrote like a woman" (1989:91). Woolf advocates the production of a feminist poetics that explores the rupture of the woman writer with the values and ideals of a patriarchal society through a discourse that is in itself subversive of the "expected order." It is a discourse that manages to break with the double-bind and to speak from the place of otherness.

Women writers have suffered oppression by a male discourse, and, appropriately, it is through a discourse that resists the rules of the established canon that they should try to change the status-quo. Woolf addresses this issue in *A Room of One's Own* by arguing that in women's writing "the book has somehow to be adapted to the body" and that "we think back through our mothers if we are women" because it is "useless to go to the great men writers for help, however much one may go to them for pleasure" (1989:76). These statements find resonance in some contemporary notions about women's writing which stress a feminine discourse that comes from and moves towards women and that finds expression mainly through their bodies. Yet, how would one describe such a discourse?

In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf consistently declines to give a definition of "woman" and of what a feminine writing should consist:

> All I could do was to offer you an opinion upon one minor point – a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that, you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of woman and the true nature of fiction unresolved. I have shirked the duty of coming to a conclusion upon these two questions. (1989:4)

By refraining from "defining" a woman's practice, Woolf rejects the constraints of a society that labels and confines women and their literary practice.

Woolf, without attempting to define a feminine discourse, offers some insights into women's writing by contrasting it with a traditional male discourse. She opposes the multiple viewpoint that she chooses to voice her concerns about women's writing to what she sees as the self-centeredness and limitations of men's writings: "But why was I bored [with male texts]? Partly because of the dominance of the letter 'I' and the aridity, which, like the giant beech tree, it casts within its shade. Nothing will grow there" (1989:100). Woolf tries to balance the distinction

between men's and women's writings by introducing her concept of the androgynous mind: "in each of us two powers preside, one male, one female; and in the man's brain, the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman's brain, the woman predominates over the man" (1989:98). However, in her development of this concept, Woolf seems to favor the predominance of the feminine in that it breaks with the rigidity and directness of male writing. How this feminine discourse becomes articulated will not – or maybe cannot – be explicit.

A Room of One's Own is at the center of a heated debate over the nature of feminism in Virginia Woolf's work. On the one hand, she has been hailed as one of the first women to fully expose the conditions of women writers in a repressive patriarchal society. On the other, she has been accused of preserving conservative ideas about gender and class.

Elaine Showalter, in *A Literature of One's Own* (1987:286), a title obviously taken from Woolf's work, sees Woolf's efforts to develop a feminist aesthetics as a "troubled feminism." Toril Moi, however, rescues Woolf from the resentment of those critics who believe her work to be "insufficiently feminist" by proposing a reading of Woolf's writings in light of a "combination of Derridean and Kristevan theory" (1985:15-18). Woolf manages to break with symbolic language in both her essays and her fiction by rejecting a logical and objective form of writing – a notion that is at the heart of Kristeva's theories about a feminine and poetic language. It is Moi's belief that "Kristeva's feminism echoes the position taken up by Virginia Woolf some sixty years earlier" in that they both strive to deconstruct the binary oppositions of masculinity and femininity (1985:13).

I would argue that Woolf's feminist notions, besides encompassing a feminist reading in line with Kristeva's theories, display many of the feminist concepts developed later by other contemporary French feminists, such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray: the metaphor of the "looking-glass," the notion of "androgynous" writing, the need for

women to write as a means of resisting and subverting the patriarchy, the connection between women's writing and the maternal body, the importance of women's writing to attempt to parody and deconstruct the discourse of male domination, the perception of women's multiplicity, and the impossibility of defining woman and their literary practice.

In light of the many similarities with contemporary feminists, Woolf's influence and importance cannot be denied, even if one considers the criticism she has received, but, I would point out, so have many French feminists. Seen from this standpoint, Woolf's text becomes a landmark in the sense that it explores the "unlikely" tradition of women's writing while setting the standard for the development of a future "likely" tradition in women's theoretical writing. I see Woolf's *A Room of One's One* as her attempt to do what her fictitious character Mary Carmichael finally managed to do: to break the sentence and the sequence – "the expected order" of patriarchy, thus establishing a transgressive place from which women can speak and, above all, write.

Endnotes

[1] Although Woolf quotes this poem by Anne Finch in *A Room of One's Own*, I chose to use Gilbert and Gubar's version from *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* (1985:100) because Woolf, for some reason, omits what I think is one of the most relevant lines of the poem: "Such an intruder in the rights of men."

[2] For an exploration of the issues of a tradition of literary paternity and the labels of "angel" and "monster" that women have been granted over the years, see Gilbert and Gubar, 1984. p. 40-44.

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