

A Room of One's Own: Moving In

In Virginia Woolf's feminist essay "A Room of One's Own," Woolf argues that "a woman must have money and a room of her own" (16) if she is to write fiction of any merit. The point as she develops it is a perceptive one, and far more layered and various in its implications than it might at first seem. But I wonder if perhaps Woolf did not really tap the full power of her thesis. She recognized the necessity of the writer's financial independence to the birth of great writing, but she failed to discover the true relationship to great writing of another freedom; for just as economic freedom allows one to inhabit a physical space---a room of one's own---so does mental freedom allow one to inhabit one's own mind and body "incandescent and unimpeded." Woolf seems to believe that the development and expression of creative genius hinges upon the mental freedom of the writer(50), and that the development of mental freedom hinges upon the economic freedom of the writer (34, 47). But after careful consideration of Woolf's essay and also of the recent trend in feminist criticism, one realizes that if women are to do anything with Woolf's words; if we are to act upon them---to write the next chapter in this great drama---we must take her argument a little farther. We must propel it to its own conclusion to find that in fact both the freedom from economic dependence and the freedom from fetters to the mind and body are conditions of the possibility of genius and its full expression; we must learn to 'move in': to inhabit and take possession of, not only a physical room, but the more abstract rooms of our minds and our bodies. It is only

from this perspective in full possession of ourselves that we can find the unconsciousness of ourselves, the anonymity in which Woolf believes we must write.

If I intend to say (as I do) that women can only write as Woolf asks us to write if we do such-and-such, then it falls to me to first clear up the question of how exactly she believes we should write---for the matter is not entirely apparent at first glance. Woolf gives us an example of what it means to her to write well when she speaks of Shakespeare. “[T]he mind of an artist,” she says, “in order to achieve the prodigious effort of freeing whole and entire the work that is in him, must be incandescent, like Shakespeare’s. . . . There must be no obstacle in it, no foreign matter unconsumed” (43). By this, she means that when Shakespeare wrote, he was able to “use writing as an art, not as a method of self-expression” (55). He did not use his writing to vent his frustrations with the world; he used it for nothing at all---that is, no particular end. His writings are ends in themselves. It is in this way that Woolf asks us to write.

Woolf demonstrates how women writers have often failed in this because of our frustration and bitterness with a world that presented to us and our writing not welcome, or even indifference, but hostility (41). She makes it clear that if there is ever going to be a “Shakespeare’s sister,” we must---at least while we are writing---swallow that sense of having been wronged, for it stands as an impediment to our creativity. This is the mental freedom that women writers must attain.

Her statements on this subject may seem at times to be contradictory. She says that “it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly” (67), and that “the androgynous mind is resonant and porous; that it transmits emotion without

impediment; that it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided... one of the tokens of the fully developed mind [is] that it does not think specially or separately of sex" (64). She seems to state outright that some merging of the sexes is in order, and yet she also says that "It would be a thousand pities if women wrote like men, or lived like men, or looked like men, for if two sexes are quite inadequate, considering the vastness and variety of the world, how should we manage with only one?" (59), and of the first generation of women writers that "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. It is useless to go to the great men writers for help" (53), and of Jane Austen and Emily Bronte that "They wrote as women write, not as men write" (52).

What can Woolf mean? How are we to write like women while at the same time refusing to think of our sex? I think that Woolf only appears to us to contradict herself in this if we subscribe to the false dichotomy which she is ultimately attempting to debunk: that human beings can only relate to each other as men and women. She says that we must "see human beings not always in their relation to each other but in their relation to reality... we go alone and... our relation is to the world of reality and not only to the world of men and women" (72). In other words, human beings are mistaken to define themselves in terms of each other. We should instead open ourselves to the possibility of the multitude of identities which we could take upon ourselves if we were not restricted to being men (=man) or women (=NOT man/lack of the masculine). Because we have a canon that consists of men's writings, and defines itself by that fact to the exclusion of female writings, women have no literary tradition except the male (or at least, such was the case when Woolf was writing). Because of this, it is vital that we not model our

writing after the existing tradition: if we were conscious of ourselves as women when we wrote, we would write like men or unlike men, but either way we would be forming our writing in terms of the masculine---we would not be writing as women. The only way to do that is to write as Woolf describes: "she wrote as a woman, but as a woman who has forgotten that she is a woman, so that her pages were full of that curious sexual quality which comes only when sex is unconscious of itself" (61).

This then is how Woolf asks us to write: not as men or women, but as human beings. That is what it means to transcend gender---not to ignore our differences, but also not to define ourselves by them. It is also directly related to what Woolf means when she speaks of "freedom of the mind" (47): "[T]he mind is always altering its focus, and bringing the world into different perspectives. . . . In order to keep oneself continuing in them one is unconsciously holding something back, and gradually the repression becomes an effort" (63). Not only the negative emotions surrounding the male/female struggle, but the very dichotomy itself presents an impediment to the creative action of one's mind and the development and expression of creative genius. If we are ever to consume this obstacle, we must learn to make our minds rooms of our own; we must learn to inhabit our own minds and fully possess them; we must challenge the limits previously conferred upon them and attempt, if not to redefine them, then at least to deconstruct the restraining definition projected upon them.

Certainly Woolf saw the importance of this point, but it is not clear that she had its place in relation to the rest of her argument worked out exactly. She seemed to think that 'freedom of the mind' is a characteristic of creative genius rather than a precondition for it, and that one must attain economic freedom (the room and the money) before one

can really set one's mind free. The narrator in Woolf's essay found that for her, financial independence was necessary before she could really let go of all the fear and bitterness that lay like chains upon her mind and her creative capacity. But this cause and effect relationship of the two freedoms is not necessarily the case for everyone. It is this oversight that accounts for the possibility of Jane Austen's genius within the framework of Woolf's ideas: Woolf herself notes that Austen exhibited the 'freedom of mind' characteristic of genius, but could not understand how it came to be without "the room and the money" (49, 16). She seems to regard this as a curious and singular phenomenon, and attributes it to Austen's peculiar psychological disposition. A better explanation might be that Austen had a room of her own, but that it was her own mind. It was simply not necessary for her to achieve economic freedom because even without it, she was able to set her mind free.

So much for 'freedom of the mind'; but what about the freedom of the body mentioned earlier? Feminist philosophy in recent years has made much of this issue, but Woolf's essay bears only a cursory acknowledgment of it. Some of the most vocal spokswomen of this movement are Luce Irigaray, Adrienne Rich, and Helene Cixous. The basic elements of the theory are as follows: female sexuality, like everything else female, has long been defined in terms of the masculine---desire, for instance. Whereas men are expected to desire women, women are expected to desire to be desired by men. A subject-other construction emerges rather forcefully, and women literally become sexual objects. This happens because in almost every culture, women have been placed in the social structure in terms of their function as baby-producers/carriers. Men seize power, and women are useful to them only in our reproductive capacity. We are then

defined as essentially sensual; we are seen as passionate, emotional, and materialistic while men define themselves as rational, reasonable, and transcendent (note that all of the former qualities are a lack of the latter ones). The values placed on these qualities originate in the tradition of mind/body dualism prevalent in virtually all of Western (=patriarchal) philosophy and religion---Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Descartes, the Bible---all of them saw the world in terms of a strict mind/body dichotomy. The unification of knowledge through the transcendence of reason = good, and the acceptance of the material world---and consequently our own material selves, our bodies---in all of their plurality = bad/vulgar. Plato had his belief that the material is only an imperfect representation of the ideal, Kant had his ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ pleasures, Descartes had his declaration that the senses and the material world which they report cannot be trusted, and the Bible has its insistence on the denial of the flesh. All of these work together to foster a very strong moral preference---or at least a sympathy for---the qualities of mind, and a sense that the qualities of the body are somehow inherently flawed and twisted. When the former gets conferred upon the male half of the species and the latter upon the female, it is easy to see how the belief in the inferiority of women came to be seen as reasonable. The basic thrust of feminist philosophy concerning this issue (regrettably oversimplified here) is usually that women should ‘take back’ their bodies; that we should deconstruct our position as a reproductive tool for men’s use and construct some other ‘embodiment’ of ourselves.

Woolf’s feelings on this subject are not as developed as all of this. She makes a number of vague references to the ideas addressed, but when looked at in the light of this sort of feminist philosophy, these allusions are confusing and contradictory. She notes

that “It is part of the novelist’s convention not to mention soup and salmon and ducklings, as if soup and salmon and ducklings were of no importance whatsoever, as if nobody ever smoked a cigar or drank a glass of wine” (19). There is also a passage in the first paragraph of the second chapter which mentions the “confusion of the body” (27), but I am inclined to think that here Woolf is waxing satirical. She is describing her reasoning for journeying to the British Museum: she wants answers, and who better to go to for answers than “the learned and unprejudiced, who have removed themselves above the strife of tongue and the confusion of the body” (27)? If truth cannot be found in these gentlemen’s words, then where is truth---or so her (sarcastic) questions run. From this, it would seem that Woolf is trying to cast doubt on the idea that the realm of the body (as opposed to the transcendent) is confusing and somehow vulgar, and inferior to the realm of the mind.

There is a long passage in the fifth chapter where Woolf discusses the creative power of women---something which later feminists will argue is inseparable from the female body and female eroticism (58-9). This discussion concludes with the statement that Mary Carmichael (one of the generic female personas Woolf develops in the essay) “will still be encumbered with that self-consciousness in the presence of ‘sin’ which is the legacy of our sexual barbarity” (59). This is certainly an acknowledgment of the predicament that women have been got into (“the self-consciousness of the presence of sin”) as a result of their banishment to the realm of the body and the renunciation of that realm as sinful and/or inferior---though, to be sure, “the legacy of our sexual barbarity” is quite an inadequate phrase to encompass the complexity of the problem.

But it is not at all clear that Woolf grasped the underlying philosophical problem as it is outlined today. She makes the comment that “The human frame being what it is, heart, body and brain all mixed together, and not contained in separate compartments as they will no doubt be in another million years” (24); thus implying that the body and brain can be and “will no doubt be” separated, and so though they are “all mixed together” now, that entanglement is merely temporary and physical---not metaphysical. She also notes, “who shall measure the heat and violence of the poet’s heart when caught and tangled in a woman’s body?” (39). Both of these comments carry a strong predisposition to mind/body dualism.

Thus it is up to us as the readers and critics of Woolf’s essay to read into it the full force of her thesis; to allow it to follow the path of its own inertia, all the way through to the critical image: “my aunt’s legacy unveiled the sky to me, and substituted for the large and imposing figure of a gentleman, which Milton recommended for my perpetual adoration, a view of the open sky” (34). In this, the message is clear: women’s perspectives of the world should not be framed by the figure of a man; we should not allow the limits of our minds to be dictated to us by a patriarchal social structure, nor should we allow ourselves to be defined by the function that is prescribed for our bodies. We should instead transcend the struggle to find our right relation to men, and move in to our own minds and bodies; regain possession of them, inhabit them, and from these rooms of our own we should look for our place, our room, our right relation to reality. Only then will our glances upward be greeted with an incandescent, unimpeded view of the open sky.