

“That fiction is a lady”: Gendering Fiction in Virginia Woolf’s Essays

Anne Besnault-Levita

► **To cite this version:**

Anne Besnault-Levita. “That fiction is a lady”: Gendering Fiction in Virginia Woolf’s Essays. Genres/Genre dans la littérature anglaise et américaine : Volume 1, 2015. hal-02374987

HAL Id: hal-02374987

<https://hal-normandie-univ.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-02374987>

Submitted on 21 Nov 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Anne Besnault-Levita
 Université de Rouen - Eriac

“That fiction is a lady’:
 Gendering Fiction in Virginia Woolf’s Essays”

In her 37-year long career as reviewer and essayist, Virginia Woolf addressed the question of “genre” many times, whether directly — in such texts as “The Decay of Essay Writing” (1905), “The Poetic Drama” (1906), “Romance” (1917), “Modern Novels” (1919), “A Talk about Memoirs” (1920), “The New Biography” (1927), “Poetry, Fiction and the Future” (1927) — or indirectly, in the course of critical “conversations” on reading, writing, literary history, and the role of the critic.¹ In her revised version of her essay “How Should One Read a Book”, for example, Woolf explains that “since books have classes —fiction, biography, poetry— we should separate them and take from each what it is right that each should give us” (*Essays* V 573). In other prose pieces, she states that poetry, drama, biography, the romance or the novel are “peculiar form[s]” — “sorts”, “varieties” or “shapes”,— controlled by “principle[s]”: each of them “distinct from any other,” those “forms” being “the proper depository” of “a peculiar substance” through which the author “will choose to say whatever [the form] says best.”²

From 1904, when her first review for *The Guardian* was published,³ to the end of her career, Woolf regularly wrote about drama, poetry and biography, and extensively about fiction. 1918-1929 was a particularly prolific period during which she published three novels — *Night and Day* (1919), *Jacob’s Room* (1922), *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) — a collection of short stories — *Monday or Tuesday* (1921) —, the first volume of *The Common Reader* (1925), a mock-biography — *Orlando* (1928) and *A Room of One’s Own*. She also wrote her major contributions on “The Art of Fiction,” taking position in a critical debate dating back to the 18th century and “the rise of the novel” in the hierarchy of genres. Woolf’s quarrel with the Edwardian novelists and her theories of the modern have been well documented. However, Woolf’s choice of words in categorizing prose narratives, and her gendering of “fiction” rather than the “novel” has not attracted enough attention, probably because the two “labels” seem interchangeable at first sight. In this paper, I propose to look at a selection of essays and reviews (including *A Room of One’s Own*), where Woolf makes the choice of gendering “fiction” (“she”) rather than “the novel” (almost always referred to as “it”), and disingenuously adopts a polemical persona while transforming discontent into parody. With its feminine construed attributes — such as “dusky draperies” (*Essays* II 208), “finery” or “smile and witchery” (*Essays* III 341), “fiction” returns on the dialogic scene of her critical prose pieces as a “lady” provoking the tyranny of male critics who should nonetheless “break her, bully her, honour her and love her” (*Essays* III 36). I argue that such an allegorizing process provides new insights into Woolf’s vision of literary history and criticism, and into her conception of the links between women and fiction, genre and gender.

In order to examine the context of utterance and reception of this gendered battle of stereotypes and to question the political value and pragmatic effect of such a rhetorical tactic, a few preliminary remarks are necessary. First, most of the critical prose pieces I am about to consider do not directly address Woolf’s favourite subject of women and fiction. Then, in some of them, the choice of “fiction” or “novel” seems to be determined more by the publication context and interdependence of essayist, audience and reviewed author than by Woolf’s purposeful strategy. Thus “The Feminine Note in Fiction” published in 1905 is a review of *The Feminine Note in Fiction*, a book by philosopher and journalist W.

¹ I’m referring here to Woolf’s idea, if not theory, of conversation as the necessary “intercourse” in which the “writers of England and the readers of England” “must be forever engaged” (*Essays* III 499); as a mode of criticism inherited from Samuel Johnson— yet the only one “worth having at present;” as the proper tone and style for an essayist or as the “turn and turn about method” (*Diary* II 247).

² “Poetry, fiction and the Future,” 1927 (*Essays* IV 429); “The Modern Essay,” 1925 (*Essays* IV 216-217); “On Re-reading Novels,” 1922 (*Essays* III 344).

³ A 1904 review of W. D. Howells’s *The Son of Royal Langbrith*, a “novel of thought” according to Woolf (*Essays* I 3).

L. Courtney's; "The Anatomy of Fiction," published in the *Athenaeum* in 1919 is a review of *Materials and Methods of Fiction* by Clayton Meeker Hamilton; "What is a Novel", published in the *Weekly Dispatch* in 1927 was initially a contribution to a symposium in *The Highway*, the journal of the Worker's Educational Association, on the question "What is a Good Novel?"

Then, on first reading, the texts in my corpus show that Woolf's use of either term is no more precise than Lubbock's in *The Craft of Fiction* (1921) or Forster's in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927). In both works, "fiction" and the "novel" appear to be almost interchangeable terms, with fiction appearing simply as a larger "class" or "species of literature" composed of "prose novels", "stories" or "tales," to take up a definition in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Last but not least, in Woolf's essays, fiction and the novel are both linked by her repeated refusal to define them through dogmatic statements or prescriptive rules. "When they write a novel," she implores in "What is a Novel?," "let [the novelists] define it. Let them say that they have written a chronicle, a document, a rhapsody, a fantasy, an argument, a narrative or a dream. For there is no such thing as 'a novel'" (*Essays* IV 416). Two years later, Woolf was to end the introduction to her lecture version of *A Room of One's Own* with the following statement: "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, as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of woman and the true nature of fiction unsolved." (*A Room* 3)

That fiction and the novel should be "unsolved problems" does not mean that Woolf renounced all attempts at description or analysis. To Woolf, "fiction" and the "novel" were discursive categories, depending on historical contexts, cultural practices and individual poetics. In "Poetry, Fiction and the Future," she explains that you cannot "force" a shape to "contain a meaning which is strange to it" (*Essays* IV 429). Woolf would certainly have agreed with Melba Cuddy-Keane that literary genres, like "good criticism," involve "a dialogic negotiation between the literary work and ourselves, as we learn to relate the expectations we bring to it to the expectations it creates" (Cuddy-Keane 181).

But if "fiction" and the "novel" are discursive sites, the idea that they are interchangeable categories becomes questionable. Like the words that designate them, "fiction" and "the novel" are sites of intense writing and reading negotiations with critical rules, hierarchies and judgements. In this respect, a rapid survey of her use of the two terms in *A Room of One's Own* reveals how Woolf is inclined to both reproducing the discursive paradigms they refer to and complicating them. "Fiction", which is, with "women", Woolf's subject of investigation here, is included in the lecture's framing device, appearing in its introduction and its conclusion both as "an unsolved problem" and as a discursive mode enabling Woolf to gain narrative agency and rhetorical persuasion: "Fiction is here likely to contain more truth than fact," she explains at the outset of her talk. "Therefore I propose, making use of all the liberties and licences of a novelist, to tell you the story of the two days that preceded my coming here" (4). Woolf's open use of fictionalization as the only way of accessing some kind of truth, mixed with the ambiguous generic value of her statement – is she going to tell a true, i.e., biographical story or an invented one? — provocatively steers her audience to the old definition of fiction as opposed to truth and fact, a definition which she challenges from the start.

Woolf goes on playing with words and situations, for example when, evoking the October "mist" stealing over "the gardens and the river" around Fernham, she wishes she could describe "lilacs hanging over garden walls, crocuses, tulips and other flowers of spring." Ironically assuming the voice of a generation of anonymous critics for whom "the truer the facts, the better the fiction," Woolf, or rather her fictional persona, allegorizes fiction for the first time: "I dare not forfeit your respect and imperil the fair name of fiction by changing the season" she explains; in October, there are no "lilacs [...] hanging over garden walls, [and] tulips and other flowers of spring." Woolf seems to lay the blame on Rossetti: "perhaps the words of Christina Rossetti were partly responsible for the folly of the fancy." Obviously, though, she praises the Victorian poetess, poetry and fiction at the same time. In the end, the initial idea "that fiction must stick to facts, and the truer the facts the better the fiction" has become a debatable critical statement (*A Room* 14-15).⁴

Indeed, facts are usually "disappointing" (39). You cannot find them when they are needed, and

⁴ Woolf quotes the first four lines of "A Birthday."

since history cannot provide the genuine researcher with some “authentic fact” on the subject of women and fiction in the Elizabethan age, Woolf needs to turn to fiction again. As she discusses the paradox of women’s “highest importance” in literature and their absence from history (41), the word “fiction” acquires a different meaning: no longer a specific genre. It is now an “imaginative work” contrasting with “science” and “history” in its “attachment” to life and truth: “fiction is like a spider’s web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners” (39). The first example of this valued “attachment” offered by Woolf is Shakespeare’s plays, but soon another binary appears. The representation of woman in the “fiction written by men” (40) is opposed to the real women those men never wrote about — the “Mrs Martin[s]”. These anonymous women should at long last be brought to life “by thinking poetically and prosaically at one and the same moment, thus keeping in touch with fact [...]; but not losing sight of fiction either — that [Mrs Martin] is a vessel in which all sorts of spirits and forces are coursing and flashing perpetually” (41-42).

But as literary history unfolds, the glorious days of fiction as a genre are soon to be waning, as Woolf suggests chapter IV. When she deals with nineteenth-century literature, the word “fiction” is replaced by “the novel,” a change that illustrates the new status of this now domineering genre, associated with “great names” in a period described as “that purely patriarchal society” where “it is the masculine values that prevail” (68-69). And although Woolf acknowledges that “the novel alone was young enough to be soft in [a woman’s] hands,” she nonetheless wonders whether “this most pliable of all forms is rightly shaped for her use” (72). As she reaches the end of her talk, Woolf is thus led to question the “conditions of possibility” for Mary Carmichael, her allegory of the past, present and future female writer, to become a modern novelist at the turn of the twentieth century since all “novels, without meaning to, inevitably lie” when it comes to seeing “women as they are” (82-83).

However, when Woolf’s lecture draws to a close, “fiction” occupies centre-stage again. Directly addressing her audience of “young women” again, Woolf returns to her original question (“women and fiction”) and makes a “fantastic” suggestion of her own for the future. This suggestion is put “in the form” of a utopian “fiction” and allegory: “Now my belief is that this poet who never wrote a word and was buried at the cross-roads still lives. She lives in you and in me, and in many other women who are not here tonight, for they are washing up the dishes and putting the children to bed. [...] I maintain that [Shakespeare’s sister] would come if we worked for her” (*A Room* 104-106).

As expected then, “fiction” in *A Room of One’s Own* appears to be a more “pliable” (to use a Woolfian adjective) category than the novel, a more flexible form. Maybe less expectedly, fiction also emerges as a (wide) discursive site haunted by a genealogy of debates, almost trapped, like women themselves, or rather their representation, in a binary system: fact and fiction, truth and imagination. As real and as imagined as Mrs Martin in the lecture, or Mrs Brown in Woolf’s essay “Character and Fiction”, fiction is a literary and critical obsession that comes from the past and becomes a pervading presence whenever Woolf tries to understand the present in “relation to the future” (*Essays* III 359). Above all, as an allegorized form and idea, fiction seems to be more willing than the novel to resist the assertive male critics’ assaults. And yet, “she” always manages to escape.⁵ Interestingly, according to Gordon Teskey in *Allegory and Violence*, it is when “meaning” needs “a place to occur [...] which does not become meaning itself” that the “enlightening or witty analogy between two things” that we usually call allegory might take place (Teskey 18; 1).

“That fiction is a lady and a lady who has somehow got herself into trouble, is a thought that must often have struck her admirers” (*Essays* IV 457).⁶ It is also a thought that should surprise us no more than it did Woolf’s readers who were probably used to the cliché and to the centuries of debate on the feminization of the novel that such clichés implicitly referred to. Woolf’s use of the gendered allegory is an intriguing rhetorical instrument more than a frequent one. It occurs in “Philosophy in Fiction,” a 1918 review of several “tales” and “stories” by L. P. Jacks; in “Modern Novels,” an essay published in 1919 in the *Times Literary Supplement* that she later revised and published in the first volume of *The Common*

⁵ In “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown,” later revised as “Character in Fiction,” Woolf writes: “And it is from the ruins and splinters of this tumbled mansion that the Georgian writer must somehow reconstruct a habitable dwelling-place; it is from the gleams and flashes of this flying spirit that he must create solid, living, flesh-and-blood Mrs Brown. Sadly he must allow that the lady still escapes him.” (*Essays* III 388)

⁶ “Is Fiction an Art?,” a signed review in the *New York Herald Tribune* of *Aspects of the Novel*, by E. M. Forster.

Reader under the title “Modern Fiction”; in “On Re-Reading Novels,” another essay in the *TLS* following the publication, in 1922, of the *New Edition of the Novels of Jane Austen, and Ann Brontë*; and in “Is Fiction an Art,” a 1927 signed review of E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* in the *New York Herald Tribune*. The subject of these four prose pieces is “fiction” and/or “the novel”. Each of them is polemical, or at least engages Woolf at one point in a quarrel, more than in a polite discussion, with her male predecessors or contemporaries: in order of appearance, the now obscure L P. Jacks, the Edwardian novelists (Bennett, Wells and Galsworthy), Percy Lubbock, Walter Raleigh and E. M. Forster. Each of these writers is considered as a personal interlocutor and as a representative of his “class,” whether the male critic or the male fiction writer.

In each case, Woolf stages stock-characters that seem to be performing recognizable gender-roles, although the setting varies from one allegory to the other. In “The Philosophy of Fiction”, the “dusky draperies” of fiction and the desire this feminine vestment arouses in the common reader (“us”) turn him into an unreasonable “child” or a “sultan”, sending him back to the Islamic Golden Age of the *Arabian Nights* and to the lures of Scheherazade (*Essays* II 211). In “Modern Novels”, Woolf hopes that fiction as “English fiction” will soon “turn[...] its back upon [the Edwardian novelists], as politely as may be and [will] march [...], if only into the desert, [which would be] the better for its soul” (*Essays* III 32). When she then defines the task of the modern novelist and asserts that “the proper stuff of fiction doesn't exist”, she endows fiction — this time personified as “she” and “her” — with female attributes. Fiction is a lady engaged in what could be a courtly love scenario: “All that fiction asks of us is that we should break and bully her, honour and love her, till she yields to our bidding, for so her youth is perpetually renewed and her sovereignty assured” (36). In her 1925 revised version of this essay now entitled “Modern Fiction”, Woolf's slightly watered-down conclusion suppresses the image of “fiction” “yielding to our bidding”, as if to ensure a more obvious balance between the image of fiction as an inaccessible sovereign, and the more disturbing allusion to abusive treatment and force of coercion: “And if we can imagine the art of fiction come alive and standing in our midst, she would undoubtedly bid us break her and bully her, as well as honour and love her, for so her youth is renewed and her sovereignty assured.” Still, the paradox remains: the lady's integrity needs respect, and freedom from external control, but “we” — readers and critics — should help her get rid of “custom”, “falsity and pretence”, even if this should harm her a little (*Essays* IV 164).

The background, costumes and protagonists change again in “On Re-Reading Novels”, an essay in which Woolf engages in an imaginary conversation with Percy Lubbock and discusses his vision of “form” in *The Craft of Fiction*. To suggest that Lubbock “loses touch with the novel as life,” as Melba Cuddy-Keane rightfully puts it (181), Woolf imagines fiction in the guise of a Victorian, middle-class, “voluminous” yet ordinary lady “submitted” to “scientific examination”. Science here appears as a method of investigation that is both radically new and radically dangerous: the scientist can only fully grasp his subject after she is dead. Borrowed from nineteenth-century German physicist Wilhem Röntgen, Lubbock's X rays in Woolf's essay “dissolve” the respectable lady's “flesh”, her “finery”, her “smile and witchery”, together with “the umbrellas and brown paper parcels which she has collected along her long and toilsome journey”. Nothing is left of her but her “skeleton” (*Essays* III 341).

There is something inevitable here in the critic's hopelessness and incompetence, whether he belongs to the past, or to the generation of New Critics Woolf was so suspicious about. “Critics, of course, abound,” she wrote in “How It Strikes a Contemporary.” “But the too frequent result of their able and industrious pen is a dessication of the living tissues of literature into a network of little bones” (*Essays* IV 237). On the examination table, “fiction” is impossible to cure, like the female malady in the Victorian Age. You may “dissect” it like a “frog” — another allegory Woolf adopts in “The Anatomy of Fiction” — use “the inductive” or “deductive” method, “you cannot make it hop; there is, unfortunately, such a thing as life” (*Essays* III 44-45). And, like fiction and like Mrs Brown, life is “emotional”, “unamenable to discipline” (*Essays* III 341).

And yet, seeing how often the lady “has [...] got herself into trouble [...], many gallant gentlemen have ridden to [fiction's] rescue, chief among them Sir Walter Raleigh and Mr Percy Lubbock” (*Essays* IV 457). Fortunately, E. M. Forster, whose views on the novel Woolf discusses in “Is Fiction an Art?,” is less “ceremonious” in his approach, showing more “intimacy” with the subject than his predecessors: “None more suggestive [than his book] has been written about the poor lady who, with mistaken chivalry perhaps, we still persist in calling the art of fiction” (467; 463). However, like many other critics who did

not manage to “grasp [...] her firmly and define [...] her severely,” Forster, according to Woolf, fails to “draw up” rules for fiction, a failure that prevents him from conferring “dignity and order upon [his] subject” and by “admit[ting] her to a place in civilized society”. For although “rules may be wrong, and must be broken,” Woolf goes on explaining, “they have this advantage: [...] they prove that [fiction] is worthy of consideration.” Unfortunately, Forster “is not going to theorise about fiction except incidentally; he doubts whether she is to be approached by a critic, and if so by what critical equipment” (460). As Rachel Bowlby remarks, “While characteristically claiming a need for rules, Woolf also jokingly genders the rule-makers and the rule-breakers, acknowledging too that the breaking occurs through the agency of a woman who insists on slipping away from the grasp of men's attempts to hold her in one place” (Bowlby 239).

As they expose to ridicule common stereotypes, and with them, the genealogy of patriarchal discourses enacting them, Woolf's gendered allegories also re-inscribe the iconic power of “woman” in order to render intelligible this other of allegory that fiction is declared to be.⁷ Woolf's four ladies are indeed figures of parody and satire that paradoxically uncover, while blurring it, the possible — yet finally ungraspable — identity of fiction, of woman and of their associative link. Like “woman”, “fiction” thus appears as a discursive site that is fraught with contradictory ideological postures: depending on contexts, and sometimes within the same context, she is a distant sovereign, a middle-class domestic woman or a concubine, a witch, yielding to or arousing the desires of her admirers whether they be chivalrous “knights”, “gallant gentlemen”, or ordinary critics and scientists. A passive victim or a disruptive force, “inherently unruly” (Bowlby 239) yet asking for rules, she is never at the right distance, so that an “animated conversation” is rarely engaged with her. Refusing to fix either “woman” or “fiction” in their essentialized versions, Woolf contextualizes the terms, juxtaposes a “variety” of images (Essays IV 458), and as Rachel Bowlby explains, provocatively “questions[...] a reassuring association between femininity and stable values, substituting for the good woman or mother the promiscuous wench” (Bowlby 239). This is when Woolf's allegories involve a disruptive form of inversion in the symbolic order of language and representation: to be “rescued”, the lady-fiction needs more intimacy; she, herself, asks of us that we should “break her and bully her” (“Modern Novels”) and her “duskery draperies” are sometimes less “indecent” than the “brief, pointed” and pseudo-scientific words of philosophy or criticism (“Philosophy in Fiction” 208).

However, it seems difficult for fiction and woman to escape the dichotomies that trap them both within the claustrophobic discourse of binary: in Woolf's short allegorical narratives, ladies are opposed to gentlemen, submission to authority, intimacy to distance, passivity to agency, examination to conversation, life to science, the art of fiction to the practice of criticism. Momentarily, Woolf's prose is transformed into a battlefield,⁸ and Woolf's tone gets “trenchantly polemical” (Bowlby 239). In a world where “fiction” as a genre and “woman” as a sex are usually belittled, Woolf ironically fights back, dissimulating her anger under the guise of parody. But she is also careful to move beyond confrontation by subtly reconfiguring the terms of her subject and by urging her readers to rethink these terms. This is the case with the crucial yet ambivalent way the ideas of convention, hierarchy and values circulate in her texts. According to Emily Blair, in *Virginia Woolf and the Domestic novel*, the use of such notions in Woolf's essays betrays her “vexed entanglement” with “Victorian etiquette practices” and is a manifestation of her “tea-table tactics” whereby she “creates an analogy between the 'hostess' and the 'writer'” and prompts a male audience to cooperate (41-42). But if for Woolf both “genre” and “gender” imply a “code of manners,” the acceptance of “rules” and of a form of “propriety,” it does not mean that she unambiguously adopts nineteenth-century valorisation of such notions as order, stability and

⁷ It has often been argued that because allegory works by literalizing lexical effects, and because the gender of abstract nouns in Latin is feminine, then most allegories are feminine personifications (in Latin, *fictio* –onis is indeed a feminine noun). However, there are masculine allegories in Greek (Phobos, Thanatos, Ploutos and Demos) and in Latin (Amor and Furor). Moreover, literary history suggests that depending on contexts and authors, the use of feminine allegories might be accompanied “by an engagement of the trope of personification with actual female agency”, if not by a “self-conscious protofeminist” or feminist purpose. On this subject see Quilligan (165) in Machosky.

⁸ Woolf, “Modern Novels”: “Whatever stage we have reached we are still in the thick of battle.” (Essays III 30).

decorum.⁹ Rules and conventions are indeed as dangerous as their absence: they are “the prelude to the more exciting intercourse of friendship.” They “bring [...] order into our perceptions” (*Essays* V 580), without them, no dialogic co-operation between writer and readers, authors and critics, men and women is possible; yet they should be incessantly historicized, challenged, reconfigured because they are essentially contingent, like the labels and definitions we ascribe to genres and individuals.

Woolf's gendered allegories undoubtedly form a dangerous rhetorical weapon. If they might have enabled her prose to stop being praised for its “sensitive” and “exquisite” nature, or for its “sufficiency and freshness,”¹⁰ Northrop Fry's review of Woolf's *The Moment and Other Essays* and his reaction to her “fiction is a lady” trope suggests that Woolf was taking some risks here. Fry openly criticizes her “self-conscious delicacy of perception”, and her “arch female cuteness and irritating female trick of avoiding the straight abstract line of argument in order to dither the metaphor” (Frye 81). Woolf indeed took the risk of starting a new war between the sexes that until *Three Guineas* she had kept saying she wanted to avoid, and this, by letting the feminist's anger (“her”) cover the voice of the common reader (“us”); she also took the risk of overestimating her audience's intelligence; last but not least, by reactivating old clichés, she ran the risk of perpetuating them.

But I imagine Woolf thought the risk was worth it. Besides, risk is an idea she kept valuing, especially when “women” and “fiction” were concerned. It first enabled her to take position as a literary critic and historian outside the Academy, and to increase her reader's receptivity to the controversies that started in the eighteenth century and culminated in the late nineteenth century. In her essays, Woolf implicitly answers back a genealogy of writers: eighteenth century essayists and critics preoccupied with the novel being “entirely engrossed by the ladies,”¹¹ by its opposition to the romance, by its so-called “feminization” around the 1740s or by the emergence of “domestic” fiction leading to its decline in the hierarchy of genres around the same period;¹² their followers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: George Henry Lewes, for example, and his 1852 essay on “The Lady Novelist”; George Eliot and her 1859 essay entitled “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists”, W. R. Greg, writing on “The False Morality of Lady Novelists”, John Ruskin's “Fiction—Fair and Foul” on the ugliness of most modern fiction, and of course Henry James's 1884 “Art of Fiction” establishing form and technique as the critic's proper focus.¹³

To take rhetorical and ideological risks also allowed her to raise her voice above the humdrum of other, more assertive, critical discourses, and to produce a pragmatic counter-discourse, implying a problematized utterance and situated readers asked to participate actively in a form of empowering “creation of knowledge” (Rosenberg xviii). But beyond the well-known trope of “conversation” as a writing and reading method, what Woolf looked for here, it seems to me, is a form of discomfort provided by the way the rhetorical figure of allegory is meant to encode meaning. Indeed, although “genre” and “gender” — “fiction” and “woman” — enable Woolf to refer her reader to a body of traditional thought and apparently recognizable patterns, this reader is soon provoked out of his potential passivity by the three-fold effect of allegory's poetics. As Teskey reminds us, “an allegory means something other than what it says and says something other than it means”; as such it is a “figure of deferral”; then, it always implies some kind of “rift between heterogeneous others” (164), between the philosophical “categories of the material and the ideal”, brought together by “force of meaning” (1).

⁹ Woolf, “Character in Fiction,” (*Essays* III 434): “At the moment we are suffering, not from decay, but from having no code of manners which writers and readers accept as a prelude to the more exciting intercourse of friendship. The literary convention of the time is so artificial [...] that, naturally the feeble are tempted to outrage, and the strong are led to destroy the very foundations and rules of literary society.”

¹⁰ Lord David Cecil's words reported by Leila Brosnan in *Reading Virginia Woolf's Essays and Journalism*, (Brosnan 96).

¹¹ A comment found in the *Monthly Review* (48, 1773: 154) and quoted by Katherine Binhammer and Jeanne Wood in *Women and Literary History: “For There She Was”*, Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2003, 116.

¹² See Allott.

¹³ George Henry Lewes, “The Lady Novelists,” *Westminster Review* (Olmsted 45-58); Maria Evans [George Eliot], “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists,” *National Review* (Olmsted 145-154); W. R. Greg, “False Morality of Lady Novelists,” *National Review* (Olmsted 145-154); John Ruskin, “Fiction—Fair and Foul,” *The Nineteenth Century* (Olmsted 297-308); Henry James, “The Art of Fiction”, *Longman's Magazine* (Olmsted 317-332).

Thus, by personifying “intractable conceptual dilemmas”, allegory becomes a complex artistic transaction. It “opens a schism in consciousness — between a life and a mystery, between the real and the ideal”: it renders an analogy visible, yet allows its truth to escape. Last but not least, when it figures, as it so often does, the appropriation of a female body by male abstraction, it implies a form of epistemological violence, a hidden process of “capture” whereby female materiality is submitted to masculine desire, while simultaneously “being raised up from its logical place, which is beneath the lowest species, into the realm of abstractions” (Telsey 22). I consider that such a process is at stake in Woolf’s gendered allegories.

Works Cited

- Allott, Miriam (ed.). *Novelists on the Novel* (1959). London, Routledge and Kegan Paul: 1962. Print.
- Blair, Emily. *Virginia Woolf and the Nineteenth-Century Domestic Novel*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007. Print.
- Bowlby, Rachel. "'A More than Maternal Tie': Woolf as a Woman Essayist." *Feminist Destinations and Further Essays on Virginia Woolf*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. Print.
- Brosnan, Leila. *Reading Virginia Woolf's Essays and Journalism*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997. Print.
- Cuddy-Keane, Melba. *Virginia Woolf, the Intellectual and the Public Sphere*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Print.
- Forster, E. M. *Aspects of the Novel*. London: Edward Arnold and CO., 1927. Print.
- Frye, Northrop. "A Review of Virginia Woolf's *The Moment and Other Essays*." *Canadian Forum*, 27 (March 1948): 284-85. In Glen Robert Gill, ed. *Northrop Frye on Twentieth Century Literature*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010, 80-81. Print.
- Lubbock, Percy. *The Craft of Fiction* (1921), New York: Viking, 1957. Print.
- Machosky, Brenda (ed.). *Thinking Allegory Otherwise*. Stanford (CA): Stanford University Press, 2010. Print.
- Olmsted, John Charles (ed.). *A Victorian Art of Fiction. Essays on the Novel in British Periodicals*. New York and London: Garland, 1979. Print.
- Rosenberg, Beth Carole. *Virginia Woolf and Samuel Johnson: Common Readers*. New York: St Martin's Press: 1995. Print.
- Quilligan, Maureen. "Allegory and Female Agency." *Thinking Allegory Otherwise*. Brenda Machosky ed. Stanford (CA): Stanford University Press, 2010, 163-187.
- Teskey, Gordon. *Allegory and Violence*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996. Print.
- Woolf, Virginia. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*. Anne Olivier Bell ed. Vol. I (1920-1924). London: The Hogarth Press, 1978. Print.
- The Essays of Virginia Woolf*. Andrew McNeillie ed. Vol. I (1904-1912). London: Hogarth Press, 1986. 6 vols. Print.
- The Essays of Virginia Woolf*. Andrew McNeillie ed. Vol. II (1912-1918). London: Hogarth Press, 1987. 6 vols. Print.
- The Essays of Virginia Woolf*. Andrew McNeillie ed. Vol. III (1919-1924). London: Hogarth Press, 1988. 6 vols. Print.
- The Essays of Virginia Woolf*. Andrew McNeillie ed. Vol. IV (1925-1928). London: Hogarth Press, 1994. 6 vols. Print.
- The Essays of Virginia Woolf*. Stuart N. Clarke ed. Vol. V (1929-1932). London: Hogarth Press, 2009. 6 vols. Print.