VIRGINIA WOOLF

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VIRGINIA WOOLF

Clare Hanson

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vi
<i>Editors' Preface</i>	vii
<i>Preface</i>	ix
1 Introduction	1
2 Moving Out: Rachel and Jacob	28
3 Romancing the Feminine: <i>Mrs Dalloway</i> and <i>To the Lighthouse</i>	56
4 Imaginary Lives: <i>Orlando</i> and <i>A Room of One's Own</i>	94
5 Generation(s) in <i>The Waves</i> and <i>The Years</i>	126
6 Coins and Mirrors: <i>Three Guineas</i> and <i>Between the Acts</i>	168
<i>Notes</i>	201
<i>Bibliography</i>	209
<i>Index</i>	213

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Editors' Preface

The study of women's writing has been long neglected by a male critical establishment both in academic circles and beyond. As a result, many women writers have either been unfairly neglected or have been marginalised in some way, so that their true influence and importance has been ignored. Other women writers have been accepted by male critics and academics, but on terms which seem, to many women readers of this generation, to be false or simplistic. In the past the internal conflicts involved in being a woman in a male-dominated society have been largely ignored by readers of both sexes, and this has affected our reading of women's work. The time has come for a serious reassessment of women's writing in the light of what we understand today.

This series is designed to help in that reassessment.

All the books are written by women because we believe that men's understanding of feminist critique is only, at best, partial. And besides, men have held the floor quite long enough.

EVA FIGES
ADELE KING

Preface

Virginia Woolf haunts feminist criticism. There have been countless studies of her life and work, each seeking to define the 'real' Virginia Woolf; also, perhaps, to appropriate this person and her writing for their own purposes. So we have a range of current versions of the cultural phenomenon 'Virginia Woolf', from the engagé, socialist-feminist critic produced by Jane Marcus¹ to the writer of psychic theatre analysed by Daniel Ferrer in his recent study of the relations between Woolf's writing and madness.² Of course, this study is not exempt from the objection that it is driven and limited by a particular ideological perspective: to help the reader to identify this as rapidly as possible, I want here to outline briefly the argument of this book.

Much recent feminist criticism has positioned itself in relation to Lacan's influential reworking of Freudian psychoanalytic theory and in particular his account of the workings of the 'symbolic order' of language. Lacan's work suggests that 'women' are excluded *by* the symbolic order: by this he means that they are not represented within it, although this does not mean that they are excluded *from* it.³ French feminist theorists such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray have responded to this by arguing that women must insert femininity-as-difference into the symbolic order, in order to destabilise and subvert that order. The writing of Virginia Woolf seems to offer a prelude to this endeavour: her texts inscribe femininity as unfixed, problematic yet full of possibility. Her writing

often seems to anticipate Cixous' experimental *écriture féminine*, or Irigaray's concern with a 'feminine morphology'.

My argument here is that in Woolf's early work this is indeed the case. In their exploration of the relationship between gender and representation and in their attempt to redefine the 'I' in writing, Woolf's texts overlap suggestively with those of Cixous, while she also maps out some of the territory later theorised by Irigaray in her exploration of relationships between women. I trace some of these connections in the first half of this book. However, I also suggest that in writing *To the Lighthouse* – a pivotal book – Woolf became increasingly conscious of the difficulties attendant on an exploration/celebration of femininity as difference. In her later work she is thus more wary about 'the feminine' as a category, recognising, I think, the dangers of (re)creating a category which is exclusive, restrictive and divisive, as limiting as any masculine construction of 'femininity'.

In Woolf's later work there is, then, a shift in emphasis, which might be defined as a movement away from an interest in *the difference of femininity*, towards an interest in *femininity as difference* in a wider, philosophical sense. Woolf's later texts invent shifting patterns which seem to enact the idea of meaning itself as difference, against the monism of what we would now call the phallogocentric symbolic order.

I wish to emphasise the complexity of Woolf's exploration of the key issues of subjectivity and sexual difference, which she saw as constitutive of meaning itself. The sketch offered above, moving from a Cixousian to a more broadly deconstructive, or postmodern view of difference, clearly offers only one way into Woolf's extraordinarily rich and sustained meditation on the issues which still drive feminist

theory and criticism. Woolf's work could not, in fact, be more centrally focused on the question which Margaret Whitford, in a recent review of feminist philosophy, sees as the 'structuring dichotomy' of modern thought about sexuality:

the dichotomy between essentialism and constructionism (read: between Enlightenment and post-modernist paradigms, or between identity and its dissemination).⁴

It is this dichotomy which also structures this book.