BOOK REVIEW

Maren Linett, Ed. *Virginia Woolf: A Modern Fiction Studies Reader*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, UP, 2009.

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For readers of modern fiction, for critical theorists, and for feminist scholars, Maren Linett has compiled a provocative selection of essays, published over five decades in *Modern Fiction Studies* (MFS) that attest to our fascination with Virginia Woolf. No doubt Woolf has become a kind of industry: her unique stylistic contributions, combined with her intriguing personal drama, assure her a place as an adventuress in life and in art whose accomplishments merit rediscovery and reinterpretation. Linett documents not only our cultural fascination with Woolf, but on an equally significant scale, her volume illustrates recent advances made in literary theory. Specifically, *Virginia Woolf, A Modern Fiction Studies Reader* includes several articles that show how feminists have adopted this modernist as an inspirational symbol of artistic experimentation and courage. More, this anthology suggests that some of our finest literary interpretation now occurs in the name of Woolf.

Linett has selected her entries from four special Woolf issues (1955, 1972, 1992, 2004) published by *MFS* since the journal’s inception in 1954. These studies engage all of Woolf’s nine novels and several of her essays, in what amounts to a primer in the formal, psychological, historical, and linguistic approaches that represent the past half century of literary and cultural criticism. Six articles in particular attest to the increased scope of feminist thinking since the 1980s, with its focus on literary interpretation now complimented by concerns with culture, politics, and ethics.

Linett has chosen Brenda Silver’s essay, “What’s Love Got to Do With It? Or the Perils of Popularity,” published in 1992, as the opening selection for her reader. In the spirit of postmodern analysis, Silver considers the historical amalgam of high
and pop culture that has reinforced Woolf’s place as an icon of intellectualism and kitsch. Sampling evidence as wide-ranging as Woolf’s diary, Edward Albee’s infamous play, and the popular Historical Productions T-shirt, Silver ironically claims that Woolf’s belated “success” with the masses has yielded no significant “increase in knowledge” of her work (3). For feminists who “subversively laid claim to Woolf’s image” in the 1970s, that move has intensified the public discourse over Woolf’s persona (2). Examining multiple photographs of Woolf, Silver suggests that this early feminist’s womanly gaze often inspires fear from those who view her—a fear that “occurs in the necessarily intertwined realms of the political and sexual” (2).

It is these realms of sex and politics that Bonnie Kime Scott explores in her literary analysis entitled “‘The Word Split Its Husk’: Woolf’s Double Vision of Modernist Language,” originally published in 1988. Kime’s interpretation of Woolf’s two novels, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Between the Acts*, offers a cutting-edge sampling of feminist criticism, including the work of Kristeva, Showalter, Gilbert and Gubar, and Cixous. As her starting point, Kime focuses on one particularly provocative comment from Woolf’s 1940 diary: “I am carrying on, while I read, the idea of discovering, like the 19th century rationalists, agnostics that man is no longer God” (43). Scott believes that Woolf’s reflection successfully “initiated a continuing challenge to the Godlike men of literary modernism” (43). Examining the phallocentric imagery of the moderns, Scott offers the metaphorical language created by Woolf, which so often depends on the sea and natural venues, as a creative alternative to male writers’ images of “high temples, reconstructed labyrinths, and reinforcing scaffoldings” (33). Woolf’s feminine rhetoric sets the stage for reader and critic to participate in a reaffirming act where words are the “seeds” of a newer aesthetic.

The title of Karen Lawrence’s “Orlando’s Voyage Out” (1992) fuses the names of Woolf’s first and seventh novels as a representation of the progress of the writer’s early and late heroines. *The Voyage Out* tells the tale of a young woman who travels but does not survive; *Orlando* features a man who travels and becomes a woman and then realizes, through her metamorphosis, the feminine gifts of poetry and heightened sensitivity to communal order. Lawrence draws on the real-life travels of Vita Sackville-West, Woolf’s lesbian lover, to argue that Woolf’s creative powers were spurred on by Sackville-West’s exotic adventures to the East. In *Orlando*,
claims Lawrence, Woolf has created a “new plot” that “includes polymorphous desire in the attraction of Orlando to androgynous men and other women” (341). Equally interesting, Lawrence argues that Woolf’s parodic novel undermines the premises of patriarchal theories of sexuality. Invoking Freud’s infamous claim that women’s desire was an “impenetrable mystery,” Lawrence suggests that Woolf represents “the necessity of confronting one’s ‘inheritance’ and of transforming it with the new paradigms of sexual desire” (346).

Equally concerned with the effects of patriarchy, Mary Lou Emery invokes a class-conscious critique of Woolf’s most famous novel in “Robbed of Meaning: The Work at the Center of the Lighthouse” (1992). Emery employs Bakhtin’s theory of discourse to illustrate the privileged levels of speech in Woolf’s most famous novel, where we hear the conflicting voices of a maternal figure, a common laborer, and an artist. Though Emery applauds Woolf’s move to create a setting where “the public world of masculinity...is alluded to but absent” (282), her concern is that these women’s speech-acts continue to invoke the historical paradigms of “English colonial patriarchy” (281). In effect, women’s needs, traditionally designated by men, serve in this text to alienate one class of female from another. Particularly disturbing to Emery is the fate of the servant, whose centrality in the novel is usurped by the more attractive, romanticized artist; for the laborer, “her gaze, as well as her voice, has been robbed of its meaning” (294). With Woolf’s potentially troubling characterization of disparate women in mind, Emery concludes with a compelling challenge to her contemporaries: “With what dominant representations of womanhood does feminist theory conduct its current negotiations and to the exclusion of whom?” (296).

Two studies published in 2004 attest to the increasingly wide scope of feminist criticism. In “Consolation Refused: Virginia Woolf, The Great War, and Modernist Mourning,” Tammy Clewell considers the author’s second novel, Jacob’s Room. Conceding the centrality of mourning in Woolf’s personal life (the deaths of her mother, father, and step-brother proved formative), Clewell argues that Woolf’s more public and political view of mourning was founded on her reactions to World War I. Similar to Mary Emery’s contention that absence defined Woolf’s critique of patriarchy in To the Lighthouse, Clewell asserts that Jacob’s Room “stands out for what it withholds: no faith in religious immortality, no
applause to individual heroism, no celebration of male comradery, no stoical acceptance of fate” (176). Though the text follows the tragic path of a young British soldier, Clewell sees Woolf’s use of an older, female narrator as key, for this woman rejects the time-honored traditions of public mourning and “refuses to idealize the dead” (177). Clewell’s critique, perhaps written with an eye to America’s own legacy of war these past two decades, conjoins feminist and political viewpoints, pointing out the continuing relevance of Woolf’s suggestions that first, “the submissive and passive mourner” is a “role historically burdensome to women” (178), and second, when considering the relation between militarism and aesthetics, “art can no longer responsibly serve the purposes of transcendence, consolation, and redemption” traditionally associated with war (188).

Echoing Mary Emery and Tammy Clewell’s calls for increased social consciousness as a response to the needs of women, Jessica Berman advocates a deeper feminist exploration of morality in “Ethical Folds: Ethics, Aesthetics, and Woolf.” Using Mieke Bal’s trope of the term “fold,” Berman considers art to illustrate that a literal “fold,” found in the representation of clothing in Caravaggio’s work, and the figurative “fold” found in the androgynous makeup of the protagonist in Orlando, both suggest a bridge between differing media or characters that may help “in reading the knot of ethics and aesthetics” (266). These bridges allow intimacy, according to Berman; ultimately, Woolf depends on intimacy to instigate a “subject to subject relationship, which becomes “the basis of ethical understanding” (276). For Berman, Woolf suggests an interconnectivity between psyche and sexuality, between art and beauty, that proves the links between “ethics/politics/aesthetics cannot be severed” (276).

These six essays represent a compendium of twenty sophisticated, penetrating arguments by scholarly writers about an enduring icon of feminism. While a knowledge of Woolf’s oeuvre would certainly prove helpful, Maren Linett’s collection can be appreciated by reader and critic alike as an insightful documentation of Woolf’s remarkable legacy and as a testament to the growth and diversity of feminist critical thinking. Jessica Berman’s conclusion that for feminists there can be no severance between ethics and politics and aesthetics is an intriguing ultimatum for the future of Woolf criticism, and by implication, a signal challenge for women’s studies.