

## WRAPPED IN THE STARS AND STRIPES: VIRGINIA WOOLF IN THE U.S.A.

by *Jane Marcus*

“As a woman I have no country; as a woman I want no country; as a woman my country is the whole world,” Virginia Woolf wrote in *Three Guineas*, defiantly claiming an international identity as a direct response to the problematic citizenship of women in England. Her feminist, socialist and pacifist claim to a global self, the global self whose work we celebrate and critique here this week, is both a challenge to her countrymen and the boast of an embattled and frustrated would-be patriot with “attitude.” Its tone is belligerent, and if there were such diacritical marks in the language, certain gestures—like the toss of the speaker’s head or the stamp of her foot—seem to be called for. Much as she claimed kinship with the world’s socialist intellectuals, peace activists and local and foreign feminists, there is no more English writer than Virginia Woolf, and none more ill at ease with her country’s failure to meet her need (as a woman) for national identity. As a European intellectual Woolf belonged to an imagined community of like-minded progressives. But, unlike other nomadic intellectuals—Walter Benjamin, for example, always comes to mind—her homelessness was also largely imaginary. Her radicalism was so firmly grounded in English culture that one can only imagine her chagrin at the history of her literary reputation, hostage to the culture wars, and its making in the U.S.A. (and all other parts of the globe except in her homeland). Is she breathing a sigh of relief, so long critically captive in foreign lands, that we are now shipping that unmistakably English figure, body wrapped in the stars and stripes, with full anti-military honors, back to a country beginning to claim her as their own?

Perhaps I am being premature, but it seems like a good time for American feminists to quit holding Woolf hostage, now that her name has done its cultural work as the sign of feminist literary and political culture in the U.S., as well as the icon of Women’s Studies and Feminist Theory as fields. Are we finished fetishizing her? No, I don’t think so. She names our bookshops, T-shirts and even Susan Friedman’s academic chair at the University of Wisconsin. I have followed Woolf’s fetishization with some interest, and am not entirely innocent of the move to claim her as the face that launched American feminism, not to mention a thousand dissertations, of what quality who can say? Perhaps it was my essays, such as they are, in *SIGNS*, *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, and *The Women’s Review of Books*, under titles like “Lycanthropy,” “Pathographies,” which inspired Wayne Chapman to ask me to speak on this topic.<sup>1</sup> But it is clear that I have already had my say about the uncanny way in which Virginia Woolf has served as a cultural icon for all the changing cultural narratives of female madness in the ’70’s and ’80’s, from Quentin Bell’s construction of the life around Woolf’s suicide, her canonization as a

dangerous hysteric, her status as a cult object with Sylvia Plath for the Dead Mad Woman Poet's Society, the paradigm first for lesbian deviance and then for lesbian romance, the various scenarios of victimology from Roger Poole's blaming Leonard, to Louise DeSalvo's incest victim. There have been many culprits in what I have called "The Crimes Against Virginia Soap Opera." Her image has served to represent the fortunes of American feminism and its changing interests in forms of female pathology. Woolf has played a major part in the cultural narratives of anorexia and child abuse, as victim and saint; she is the site of syndromes of desire and despair, a hunger artist and a schizophrenic. Her formidable face has been used to manipulate different kinds of cultural fear, from acting as the class enemy in Hanif Kurishi's film *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* to signifying the myth of the female monster and the absolute icon (this time in partnership with Sojourner Truth) of women's collective historic martyrdom. Her hooded eyes and hollow cheeks have signed an English upper-class culture she despised. At the same time her image is fetishized as the asexual inverse of Madonna's pointed breasts and gartered thighs. She is not a real woman because she wasn't a mother, but she is too much woman for many versions of Modernism to manage to place as a serious writer, let alone as a Public Intellectual.

Yes, you have guessed it. I have an agenda, as I always do. One last role for the famous fetish to play in American culture before she is launched out into the world again. I want to claim the Virginia Woolf of *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*, the Woolf of the literary and critical essays and the letters as worthy of world-scale interest as a social thinker. I make this claim out of fear that Woolf's re-entry into her home culture in the '90's may be like that of other public figures who emerge from captivity in clinics and rest homes and retreats, with all their appetites in permanent abeyance, brains washed and bodies reshaped, confessing all their weaknesses. An abject Virginia Woolf minus her faults does not interest me. She flaunted as a modernist of her time and her class certain racisms unbearable to us today, but they explain her relation to European Primitivism as well as her struggle to overcome the blindness of her culture. Sally Potter's ridiculous film of *Orlando* claims that great anti-imperialist text as a Yuppie tour of English Big Houses. How dare she represent Orlando as merely a straight white Englishwoman bumping into the furniture in a pumpkin suit? How dare she deny us the pleasure of the scene of love-making with Sasha? Tilda Swinton has no legs. Orlando is not Orlando without legs. This is such a sweet white movie made of marshmallow fluff that it makes my teeth ache. But *Carrington* is no better. It is really a film about Lytton Strachey and an odd girl who is never revealed as the painter of the film's exquisite scenes, played by a ding-toed Emma Thompson with a mop on her head, a yellow wig taken right off the DutchBoy paint can. Michael Holroyd, who created Carrington as the villainess of his first biography of Lytton Strachey, while he bought up her paintings very cheaply, has now emerged as her patron in the Revised Version just released to match the film, driving up the prices of her long undervalued work. He has blessed a new study of Carrington with a preface completely at odds with the art historian's claims. The film does not begin to take on the range of Carrington's bi-sexual desire and falsifies the flaming gay persona

of the legendary Lytton with flailing arms and high-pitched voice by making him as masculine as possible. The manly Strachey played by Jonathan Bryce (concerned about the war) is as romantic a lie as the dopey Dora Carrington, too dumb to be true. Carrington was a creator of a very interesting modernist pastoral primitivism, which has escaped fame because it values the country over the city, the domestic over the metropolitan. Lytton Strachey's elongated body and its grand queenly gestures were as bravely out as a homosexual as one could be at the time. Whose interest does it serve to make him a man?

Cecil Beaton, one of the major makers of modernist iconography, was not allowed to photograph Virginia Woolf, but he exempted her from visual modernism in his *Book of Beauty* (1930) as much as critics like John Carey have written her out of literary modernism. Clearly Beaton was shocked by that disturbing Man Ray photograph of Woolf with clipped hair, frightened eyes and hands and the red mouth of a vampire. He wrote "the mere knowledge that *maquillage* exists is disturbing in connection with her. For when one sees her so sensitively nervous and with the poignant beauty of the lady in the faded photograph in the oval frame, the lady who is one's grandmother as a girl, one realizes that a face can be a reverend and sacred thing." (37)

As usual, Woolf herself has articulated the process of her own iconization more brilliantly than I can begin to show. In *The Waves* (1931) Bernard imagines English Culture as "a lady at a table writing," but all the artists in his patriarchal canon are male, and the text itself is a tissue of quotations from Shakespeare and the Romantic poets. This representation of English culture as a lady is certainly not enabling for the woman artist, and Rhoda finds no way to express herself except in suicide. Bernard, the self-appointed modernist artist, feels free to rob women and other outsiders of their speech and stories in order to enrich his own writing but without allowing the socially oppressed or excluded to express themselves. The representation of culture as a "lady" persists, and it serves the interests of those who deny their own implication in the culture-making process.<sup>2</sup> Terry Eagleton can reinforce his own image as male and radical and on the side of right and justice and the working class by merely attacking something called "Virginia Woolf." That that something called Virginia Woolf is as wrong and dangerous as what Woolf called "Milton's Bogey," in *A Room of One's Own*, the vision obscuring the reader's view of reality and implying that the writer's authority comes from God, is irrelevant. Woolf's revolutionary credentials as a critic are certainly as good as Terry Eagleton's. Books on the Thirties, when some of Woolf's most iconoclastic work was done, from Samuel Hynes to Valentine Cunningham, continue to denigrate, scapegoat or ignore her contribution to social debates and political activities. Her appearance as a lady, a straw woman or an anti-Semite in these volumes of literary history, keeps her most political work unread by those who would most benefit from reading it. In these circles she may reluctantly be allowed a position as a *woman writer* of interest to other women readers and feminists, but certainly not a niche in mainstream literature. Whose interest does the repetition of this pernicious nonsense serve? Only the hegemony of those very professors at Oxbridge and its branches abroad she railed against in her work, but now their ranks include women and certified-born-into-the-working-class men and the Irish.

But the scapegoating of Woolf is serving another purpose in England, the purpose sometimes served by baiting Jews or foreigners — it always works for a certain solidarity or insiderness — which can link a feminist like Angela Carter with a misogynist leftist like Eagleton and an Irish poet like Tom Paulin. If they share the same enemy, they must have something in common. Bernard's "lady at a table writing" is also the figure of a nationalist Britannia in whose interest the male poet and hero make war and poetry about war. She is both inspiration and excuse. The feminization of culture and suspicion of its demands may then be a common practice which would explain the simultaneous scapegoating of the *figure* of Virginia Woolf in England and the denial of her place in the canon of Modernism.

Again, I believe that only reading Woolf will dissipate her negative image. North and South Americans, Indians and Australians and the French and Japanese, Africans and Afro-Americans — all continue to be mystified by the immense hostility generated by mentions of Virginia Woolf or "Bloomsbury" as serious or politically committed writers, another convenient cultural myth for bashing supposed upper-class effete elite artists. (Present-day students might want to think about the attacks on Bloomsbury as a form of gay-bashing by the cultural Left and to attempt to understand whose interest it served(s) to set up this particular "us and them" paradigm. The student may also wish to look at the commodification of Bloomsbury's lives as opposed to works, the selling of socially acceptable upper-class sodomy in a repressed culture. (It certainly began before the age of AIDS and British AIDS figures are reportedly comparatively low.) What does the highbrow TV-serializing of the sex lives of Vita and Violet and Harold — oops, Hadji — and Virginia have to do with what appears to me to be the subtle creation of a narrative in which Britain's historical demise as a Great Power can be blamed on the Gay Upper Class, spies at Oxford, Harold's indiscretions at the Foreign Office? In this narrative the heterosexual middle and working classes can see themselves as the Grown-Ups. The Nicolson's, one should remember, were great supporters of Mosley's fascism; despite their promiscuity, and, despite their homosexualities, of the *institution* of marriage, which is what Woolf unpacks so devastatingly in *To the Lighthouse*. Virginia Woolf's words have not entered the literary canon in England at anything like the popular level on which she has become there the cowardly lion of lesbianism or the Woman Who Didn't. I was the only person to groan aloud at the end of a brilliantly acted and staged experimental production of *Orlando* by the Red Shift company in London in 1992. The same audience who may have winced at misquotation of Shakespeare, or even Shaw, never batted an eyelash at the chronological and political hash made of having Virginia hear the birds speaking in Latin when she went mad, saying Vita, Vita. The production was a sexy romp of in-your-face orgasms (of course Virginia in this version has no orgasms), entirely mistakenly autobiographical in its reading of the text. Not only were the essential Greeks lost, but so were the Turks, and the powerful anti-imperialist thrusts of the text were erased. Virginia's terrible dream of the birds speaking in Greek is part of her lament at exclusion from the intellectual life of her time by not having a university education, and it has become for certain readers a kind of watchword for the exclusions of others.

The extraordinary inventiveness of her experimental narrative techniques, different for every novel, has also made her texts the subject of much interesting critical debate by theorists. Her writing is often claimed as Postmodern, and Lacanian psychoanalysts like Rachel Bowlby have made stunning readings, and Makiko Minow-Pinckney has contributed a brilliant analysis of the texts using the theory of Julia Kristeva. The mistaken image of "theory" as itself elitist and hostile to values of bourgeois humanism has tended to mark Woolf as alien, difficult, snobby and out of touch with real, material or historical concerns.

The reader from outside this culture often has been attracted to Virginia Woolf for precisely the expression of radical social ideas and critiques of class, patriarchy and state institutions which her novels and essays provide. It seems to me possible to maintain views abusing Virginia Woolf as a figure of dread only if (as I also believe is true) she is widely unread, unread certainly by those who edit the literary journals and the review columns in newspapers and probably by those who teach Joyce, Yeats and T.S. Eliot. We need to communicate with each other.

Such a study might include a history of the publication of *Virginia Woolf Miscellany* (back issues are available from Prof. J.J. Wilson, Sonoma State University, California) and the titles and numbers of talks at meetings of the Modern Language Association, both in the Virginia Woolf Society meetings and the conferences at large. I have noticed, for instance in Suzanne Raitt's *To the Lighthouse* (Harvester, 1990) (only available to me in 1993 because I was in Europe), that her bibliography reflects the availability of materials in England and in no way reflects the dissemination of ideas about Virginia Woolf and readings of her texts in the United States. Readings presented at MLA meetings were circulated and challenged, revised and argued orally at regional meetings and at meetings of the National Women's Studies Association often well before they ever got into print because publishers were slow to respond to the burgeoning of Woolf studies, especially feminist interpretations of Woolf. The cultural production of the anthology of critical essays, often from a conference or sharing a critical viewpoint, by academic presses for use in graduate seminars, so common now and even taken up by trade presses, first began in the U.S., I believe, in response to feminist revisions of traditional criticism, and these anthologies were used to disseminate quickly new (especially feminist, and then "theoretical") ideas. So, while Jane Lilienfeld's classic reading of *To the Lighthouse* as a critique of Victorian family values may not have appeared in print in the U.S. until 1981, she and her brilliant reading of the text in her Brandeis dissertation were familiar figures at Woolf conferences and meetings on modernism well beforehand. North American students of Woolf often find that English readings do not acknowledge what to us are previous and common interpretations marked as so-and-so's reading, and we are shocked when familiar readings are presented as original by English without acknowledging what we see as an American source. It is not clear to me that such international misunderstandings and faulty communications occur in studies of other authors. Another cultural fact which does not appear in the chronology of national bibliography is the unpredictability of the reviewing process. One of the reasons that Virginia Woolf continues to exist as a representation of a simultaneously elite

and frighteningly feminist Figure of English Culture is that her Literary Estate has deliberately constructed her that way, and they and her publishers still do. They have continually maintained her minor status as a writer and thinker, while making money from the sale of her books. The pervasiveness of this view is evident in the figure of Woolf produced by Eileen Atkins in her reading of *A Room of One's Own*. The image one is left with is that of a pinched and proper spinster schoolmarm knowingly shaking her finger at us, petrified in the posture of scolding her audience. This is a total perversion of the humorous and multiple-voiced slippery narrative technique of the text. Critics exclaimed at the likeness — but it was a likeness to the culturally acceptable icon of Virginia Woolf — a fey, suicidal lesbian who, underneath it all, was really Mrs. Thatcher in drag.

Woolf has also been vigorously marketed as an upscale Laura Ashley English female *objet d'art*, as collectible as a faded bit of lawn and lace, faintly printed with wildflowers and certainly harmless. The Charleston Festival invited the biographer of the wrong Admiral Fisher, but it didn't matter to the anti-intellectual attitude of the crowd. She also appears with Vanessa Bell/Duncan Grant/Omega Workshop accoutrements and packaging, along with pathetic fundraising appeals from Charleston to foreign Bloomsbury fans, burying her vicious bite and scathing humor in a pastel cocoon of Edwardian campiness. All of us are condemned to read her *Diaries* and *Letters* through the patronizing or outright hostile introductions and footnotes which serve to justify the distaste the Bells and Nigel Nicolson have for her social ideas. There is much to be said now for the instigation of a native English (rather than American feminist) study of Quentin Bell and the Literary Estate. Why do Tom Paulin and Terry Eagleton continue to bash Virginia Woolf whatever chance they get? (See *TLS* Feb 1, 1991.) In the year in which she died what prompted Angela Carter to join them on the TV Program *J'Accuse* to denounce *Orlando*, only the most obvious Woolf novel to which her own work is deeply indebted? Have Marxist men invested all their fear and loathing of feminism as a competing totalizing ideology on the figure of Virginia Woolf?

A widely-held misreading of her attitude toward class obtains in Anthony Burgess's memoirs excerpted in *The New York Times Book Review* (April 21, 1991). She stands for everything he hates about "ladies and gentlemen" of literature, claiming that he lives abroad so the chip on his shoulder will not be so visible. He blames "Old Bloomsbury" for lack of recognition of his own work in England and identifies with "That great provincial," the "ungentlemanly" William Shakespeare. Why can't he identify with Virginia Woolf's similar projection in her portrait of Shakespeare's sister in *A Room of One's Own*? or with the outsider to the universities she created in *Three Guineas*? (He hasn't read them? His skills as a reader are limited and he couldn't identify with a woman?) "It is the damnable class structure of Britain, and the centralizing influence of London, Oxford and Cambridge, that impose a single literary language. . . . D.H. Lawrence raged against British bloodlessness. . . . The British literary ideals are E.M. Forster and Virginia Woolf, who kept sex out of the novel, reserving perversions of it to private life, and confirmed the prejudices of the British ruling class. Virginia Woolf called 'Ulysses' 'the book of a self-taught working man . . . of a queasy undergraduate scratching

his pimples.' Naturally this would not be an Oxford or Cambridge undergraduate but some workingman's son. It would have done her good to be seduced in a Manchester back alley." Where does one begin? The term "class structure" also appears in Tom Paulin's tirade. Why this hysterical conflation of Virginia Woolf with class oppression? She was an active socialist, a feminist, a pacifist. She had no university education and my students at the City College of New York, mostly new immigrants and people of color, delight in her denunciation of Oxbridge. Back alleys are not places where people get seduced, rather they are sinister places where they get raped. What process of thinking allows Burgess to fantasize punishing Woolf for her dislike of Joyce with the weapons of his violent masculine sexual brutality? Why does the *New York Times* publish the rape fantasies of deluded English authors?

In the U.S. the trajectory of Woolf's reputation is very different, and it follows the curve of the fortunes of feminism, now seemingly on the wane, but in the '70's and '80's Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* was a major text for integrating women writers into the all-male university English curriculum, and *To the Lighthouse* along with a Jane Austen novel and sometimes a poem by Emily Dickinson became the classic token works by women used to broaden the minds of American undergraduates. *A Room of One's Own* was (and still is) the primary text in Women's Studies courses at U.S. colleges and universities as well as an important text in Feminist Theory courses.

Before my cultural chauvinism gets out of hand, let me wrap my personal icon of Woolf in the stars and stripes and hoist the union jack and all the other flags of countries where Woolf has readers to begin the work of an international criticism of Bloomsbury. As I prepare to let go, to abandon a stubborn claim to a U.S. feminist hegemony over Woolf, I see a sobering image. It is a Grimm's Fairy Tale Woolf/wolf, its belly opened and filled with stones after it has eaten Red Riding Hood's grandmother, and is thrown by the huntsman into the river. Is this a demonized Virginia, her pocketful of stones, thrown by her biographers into the river Ouse? Or does it simply reveal my territorial fears as an American feminist as the tide turns and the icon returns to her home culture and the world? I do have one last request. We desperately need a new biography. A biography of Virginia Woolf as a Public Intellectual. I hope several of you are writing it now.

## NOTES

1. Reprinted in *Art and Anger: Reading Like a Woman* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1988) are three pieces on the state of Woolf Studies: "Tintinnabulations," "Storming the Toolshed," and "Quentin's Bogey." "Lycanthropy" appears in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 8.1 (Spring 1989), 101-110; and "Pathographies" appears in *SIGNS*, 17.4 (Summer 1992), 806-819. "A Tale of Two Cultures" appeared in *The Women's Review of Books*, Jan 1994, 11-13; "An Embarrassment of Riches" *WRB*, March, 1994, 17-19; "Domestic Interiors: The Art of Dora Carrington," *WRB*, October, 1994, 11-12.
2. See "Britannia Rules The Waves," in *Decolonizing Tradition: The Cultural Politics of Modern Literary Canons*, ed. Karen Lawrence (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1991), 136-162, rpt. in *Twentieth Century Views*, ed. Margaret Homans (New York: Prentice Hall, 1993).