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symploke, Volume 22, Numbers 1-2, 2014, pp. 293-302 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sym.2014.a566845>

symploke
editor
Jeffrey S. Bell

AUSTERITY

Volume 22 Numbers 1-2

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THE REVISIONARY MUSE IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *ON BEING ILL*: ON LITERARY POLITICS, MODERNIST-STYLE

DANIEL T. O'HARA

The figure I intend to evoke in the beginning of my title appears more fully at the end of the essay, in its last few lines: "And so it was, that winter's morning; [her husband's] horse stumbled; he was killed. She knew it before they told her, and never could Sir John Leslie forget, when he ran downstairs on the day of the burial, the beauty of the great lady standing to see the hearse depart, nor, when he came back, how the curtain, heavy, mid-Victorian, plush perhaps, was all crushed together where she had grasped it in her agony" (28).¹ We will return to this apparently simple final figure, later. First, I want to say why this little essay is important and what good it will do to recognize that and understand how it is so.

Revisionism is the environment in which we all live. It is not a fashion of the moment of theory. The history of religions shows us case after case of revisionism, as do politics, especially revolutionary politics, because in these contexts revisionism is so often accompanied by spectacular violence and terror. Smaller scale violence and terror is the stuff of much of our daily lives, as Woolf's essay shows. So, how revisionism operates in large and small, then as now, is important to comprehend and know in one's bones because the patterns of its rhetorical operations are semi-independent by this time in human history, "second nature," and less like a paradigm and more like a passion; revisionism at a minimum colors every perception and action. Before there are politics in the common sense there are imaginative or literary politics. Woolf's apparently slight essay is actually a strong case in point. We are all sick from revisionism, and no amount of being sick of it and of escaping into a heaven free of it can rid ourselves from it, because revisionism

¹Woolf (2002, 28). This is a reprint of the 1930 Hogarth Press edition. Another reprint of this edition, keeping the same pagination of the essay, I also consulted closely: Woolf (2012, 28). See also Lee (1996; 363, 441, 491).

is also how the disconnection between words and meaning, in modernity especially, is repeatedly sutured together, not once and for all, but, at times, moment by moment. The plank over the abyss may be transparent at times, blood-red at others, but it is all there is. Shall we dance?

Published as a small book by Hogarth Press in 1930, Woolf's *On Being Ill* speaks of how it feels to be laid up in bed by sickness and what such passion, such suffering, reveals about how the body is in charge, not the soul, reversing all expected oppositions like this one, in the process:

Literature does its best to maintain that its concern is with the mind; that the body is a sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks straight and clear, and, save for one or two passions such as desire and greed, is null, and negligible and non-existent. On the contrary, the very opposite is true. All day, all night the body intervenes; blunts or sharpens, colours or discolours, turns to wax in the warmth of June, hardens to tallow in the murk of February. The creature within can only gaze through the pane—smudged or rosy; it cannot separate off from the body like the sheath of a knife or the pod of a pea for a single instant; it must go through the whole unending procession of changes, heat and cold, comfort and discomfort, hunger and satisfaction, health and illness, until there comes the inevitable catastrophe; the body smashes itself to smithereens, and the soul (it is said) escapes. But of all this daily drama of the body there is no [literary] record. (Woolf 2002, 4-5)

In this manner of inside-out chiasmus, more modernist than deconstructive, as we will see, Woolf clears or opens a space in which we can read, as if momentarily in her skin, how the imagination, both for better and worse, takes flight or dives into the abyss in ways that rival Shakespeare in *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, or *Macbeth*, allowing us to feel as well the physical dimension, the materiality, of the words we use, as if we were like foreign speakers of our native tongue: ("The Chinese must know the sound of *Antony and Cleopatra* better than we do," [22]), and so making the famous Shakespearean commentators, even Coleridge at his finest, sound like distant mice scurrying around the giant's statue (23).

Woolf is here breaking somewhat new ground, opening up what is then rather new territory, especially since the essay first appears in 1926 in Eliot's *Criterion*.² He asks her for something, she gives him this essay, having just gone through a prolonged bout of illnesses—influenza, arrhythmia, and "breakdown" (the medications given for which would be enough to knock Conrad's steady Captain Mc Whirr overboard), after *Mrs. Dalloway* appears

²See Coates (2002) and Coates (2012). Coates tracks down the review Woolf did in 1916 of Henry David Sedgwick's "On Being Ill," in Sedgwick (1916), which serves as one contrapuntal springboard for Woolf's essay, along with the many scattered chapters in Proust, as she herself notes (2012, 6). "The raptures of transcendentalism" and other allusions to Emerson and the Americans (4) refer back to Sedgwick and the influences upon him.

in May, 1925—and he is not happy with it, but he publishes it, seemingly displeased by its being “too wordy,” as Woolf tells Leonard, her husband and co-publisher. This is one reason that Leonard prevails upon her to have their press publish it in 1930 as part of their Hogarth Press Essays series.

This exchange is clearly a fraught one, and no wonder. Although they publish his *Poems* (1921) and also, most famously a year later, *The Waste Land*, when Eliot is hired by Faber and Gwyn (later Faber and Faber), he secretly authorizes their publication by his new bosses (they own *The Criterion*), without telling the Woolf’s. This gesture of inviting her to write an essay for the *Criterion* under its new editor, himself, is then his way of somewhat making amends. But he cannot help himself and indicates to her his displeasure with the essay, as we have seen. That it is an informal personal essay in the style of Lamb, Hazlitt, De Quincey, deliberately late romantic, mid-Victorian, given how it ends by recounting “the history of two noble lives”—a 19th century bio of two women and their life-long “friendship”—and focuses in her own way on the sources of modern inspiration not in the digestive tract, perhaps, as the advice Eliot gives in “The Metaphysical Poets” notoriously puts it—and the Hogarth Press publishes this essay in its essay series—but in the body nonetheless: the brain and eye of the patient, the holistic state of body-in-mind. All of this implicit (and not so implicit) dimensions must have seemed an effrontery to the highly sensitive albeit self-absorbed editor, and cannot make it any easier for him, despite his being, with the hindsight of history, blatantly in the bigger wrong, in light of the particulars of this incident.

The nine paragraphs of the essay make a striking formation. The first and last paragraphs are, in the small book format of the Hogarth Press edition, pages and pages long. Even shrunk for compilation’s sake, they stand like a bulky frame around the seven remaining paragraphs, which break into a three-one-three pattern in terms of the topics and logic of the essay. SOS? Seriously, though, the formal analogy that comes to my mind for this pattern recalls that of the revisionary romantic crisis lyric that Harold Bloom systematizes down to the letter, as it were, via his theory in *The Anxiety of Influence*, with his six revisionary ratios broken down into two sets of three by his “inter-chapter” on his new imaginative form of criticism, “antithetical criticism.”³ There is no need to take things so far, and so literally, I think. Suffice it for the reader to notice, despite the generally genial if at moments poignantly satiric tone of the narrator, Woolf’s ambitions do show through, to good effect, when promoting “being ill” as the primary passion in “a new hierarchy of passions” (2002, 7) for the modern subject. Like modernists in general, she would break apart and down traditional binaries by reversing them first, but then she would displace them all to produce her new hierarchy, along as yet unknown lines, out of the anarchic realities returned to their state of pure possibility, pure power. That these unknown lines are so

³Bloom (1997).

reduced and could take the form of a hierarchy, our critical time no doubt takes uneasily, if not suspiciously reacts to, informed as it by deconstruction and poststructuralism. But I would caution caution here.

The essay's rhythmical, even musical pattern combines with the intensely visual character of the essay—not that the other senses are ignored—smell, taste, and sound are strongly and repeatedly touched upon—to create a comprehensive and coherent, a unified effect amidst all the noted variety of the imagery, especially that of the clouds and the waves, but also the rose and the pure sky, the forest and the weather, as if Woolf were channeling Shelley, from his poetry and, with her speculations in mind, also from his *Defense*. For she actually speculates about, in the sixth and seventh paragraphs of this experimental essay, when she advances the proposition that the poets' primary function is "imagining heaven" for us, that the office of the poet laureate itself should have attached to it, explicitly, this function (18-19). This intentionally whimsical proposition is nevertheless quite serious, too, when, after giving short-shrift to traditional images of heaven and hell à la Dante or Milton, Woolf, perhaps taking a page (and revising it in her own fashion) from Yeats' 1925 publication of *A Vision*, or Nietzsche's doctrine of "the eternal recurrence," or perhaps, even, Eliot's own then well-noted flirtation with eastern religions, she stresses how the modern poets may just envision us, in our afterlives after being ill, reverting to the earth, and choosing,

since there is no harm in choosing, to live over and over, now as a man, now as a woman, as sea captain, or court lady, as Emperor or farmer's wife, in splendid cities and on remote moors, at the time of Pericles or Arthur, Charlemagne, or George the Fourth—to live and live till we have lived out those embryo lives which attend about us in early youth until "I" suppressed them. But "I" shall not, if wishing can alter it, usurp Heaven too, and condemn us, who have played our parts here as William or Alice to remain William or Alice for ever. Left to ourselves we speculate thus carnally. We need the poets to imagine for us. The duty of Heaving-making should be attached to the office of the Poet laureate. (2002, 18-19)

Woolf is here revising the idea of literature, which as an institution has been by her time tied to prophecies of revolution, or a disinterested humanistic realism, or a then recently emergent game of analysis, and seeing it not as therapy for the socially (or in any other way so-called "disabled") to receive compensation for their lives, but as positively an "outlaw" state freedom available to all, one which can overcome the limits of the subject-position imposed upon us by our historical moment and cultural inheritance via the imaginative actualization of our alter egos in, first of all, the physical, material, medium of the language we speak, write, and read in from birth, and then in the habits of our daily lives. *Orlando* is a good case in point. This ultimate vision of literature's, of poetry's purpose in the largest and broadest

sense, depends on the new revisionary muse for the realization of its literary politics, modernist-style. And Woolf is a master of the art of insinuation.

The eight of the nine paragraphs of *On Being Ill* may be carefully abbreviated to eight propositions or principles drawn from them. Here they are, worded as a single argument, in what might best be called the Woolf doctrine of modern revisionism: We want “a brand new word” (7) for the experience of illness. This is because, like all modern experience, “this experience cannot be imparted” with traditional means (8). And we cannot get any useful help from those—medical personnel, especially nurses—who are most unconscious of their modern experience, all those “in whom the obsolete exists strangely side by side with anarchy and newness” (10). Instead, we must read ourselves and allow our imaginations to invent, slip the grasp of false sympathy and all self-pity, based on a narcissistic specular view of the world, and seek out rather the “virgin forest in each [of us], a snowfield where even the print of birds’ feet is unknown” (11-12). This quest, romantic in origins but modernist in execution, constitutes “an interminable experiment” (13); this phrase could stand as the centerpiece of Woolf’s revisionary activities as much as “antithetical criticism” does for Bloom’s. Such revisionary reading entails, as we have seen, “imagining heaven” (18). And, meanwhile, as we do so, by living out our embryo “I’s,” we “rifle the poets of their flowers. We break off a line or two and let them open in the depths of the mind” (20). In this penultimate paragraph, this violent sacrificial action renews our human impulses, allowing us to trump self-conscious belatedness and all social non-recognition, for a rich diet of savory words of our own because we have so rashly, admittedly, tasted them variously first and reasoned their meaning later; and rashness is no vice for Woolf.

To gloss her last remark, here is what she has to say on the subject of rashness:

Rashness is one of properties of illness—outlaws that we are—and it is rashness that we need in reading Shakespeare. It is not that we should doze in reading him, but that, fully conscious and aware, his fame intimidates and bores, and all the views of the critics dull in us that thunder-clap of conviction which, if an illusion, is still so helpful an illusion, so prodigious a pleasure, so keen a stimulus in reading the great.” (2002, 22)

Woolf continues in this vein, enlarging the moment even as she separates it off from the rest of the essay, so that it stands free as one of her moments of being—in this case, a being in the heaven of the imagination face to face with its most “prodigious” modern member:

Shakespeare is getting flyblown; a paternal government might well forbid writing about him, as they put his monument at Stratford beyond the reach of scribbling fingers. With all this buzz of criticism about, one may hazard one's conjectures privately, make one's notes in the margin; but, knowing that someone has said it before, or said it better, the zest is gone. Illness, in its kingly sublimity, sweeps all that aside and leaves nothing but Shakespeare and oneself. What with his overweening power and our overweening arrogance, the barriers go down, the knots run smooth, the brain rings and resounds with *Lear* or *Macbeth*, and even Coleridge himself squeaks like a distant mouse. (22-23)

This is a powerful set of passages and it discloses what is at stake in literary politics, modernist-style. The new hierarchy of the passions needs no mediating institutions or apparatus. It is one in which a woman, disabled by illness, just like anyone else anywhere else, may become here and now sublime, too, not just the supposed modern genius of western culture.

To comprehend further these stakes, however, we need to understand the long ninth and final paragraph, so what follows is my attempt to summon up the ultimate proposition in Woolf's revisionary argument, the last principle of its representative working, which we can see beginning immediately after the above lines with "But enough of Shakespeare—let us turn to Augustus Hare" (23). Well, this sudden dismissal, this shooing away of Shakespeare, causes a funny shock, as she herself observes: "There are people who say that even illness does not warrant such transitions" (23). And the text she brings forward is part of the popular reading materials of the mid-Victorian generation of her parents, especially her mother. The very name itself, "Augustus Hare," like one of my favorites a name such as "Milton Beaver" (or even better, say, "Dante Cleaners"), is calculated to cause the reader to laugh, I think, even without knowing who Hare is: a once bestselling author of biographies and fiction, a famous raconteur, and through his marriage, an intimate of ruling families in politics and the professions. John Leslie, for instance, who pops up in the final paragraph is the politician and son of Sir John Leslie, Scottish mathematician and physicist who gained fame discovering the principles of radiant heat during the romantic period. Thanks to Woolf, we suddenly have all these ghosts newly blooded and on stage, with Shakespeare and his celebrated characters chased from it by her nobly dismissive invalid's gesture.

The primary point of Woolf's art in this essay, though, is quite familiar to her close readers, as she has performed it in other essays throughout her career, starting early on; and it lies in substituting for the great men's the lives of the many anonymous (or virtually so) dead women, which she is doing here by recounting her version of Hare's *The Story of Two Noble Lives* about the Ladies Waterford and Canning, their lives being every bit as worthy of remembrance as their "singularly" (23) deficient (in mind and heart), aristocrat husbands, and also as worthy of the major characters of Shakespeare, so

much does the “benignant lustre” (23) of their names shine forth in the eyes of Woolf and now her truly sympathetic readers. That Woolf is at this time at the height of her love affair with Vita Sackville-West, and the latter will be going with her well-connected diplomat husband, Harold Nicholson, to a post in India, only adds to the accumulating allusions, literary, personal, and topical. (Nicholson’s skills are needed in India after the so-called “Malabar Rebellion” and its aftermath. Since Henry James’ great ur-modernist novel, *The Golden Bowl*, is also mentioned along the way, we may also think of it, or one of his other late novels, along with these other pointed if free-floating allusions, as we read again now the final lines of *On Being Ill*:

Moreover, there was her father’s house forever falling into the sea; she must shore it up; must fill her days with all sorts of charities, till her Lord came home from hunting, and then, at midnight often, she would sketch him with his knightly face half hidden in a bowl of soup, sitting with her sketch-book under a lamp beside him. Off he would ride again, stately as a crusader, to hunt the fox, and she would wave to him and think each time, what if this should be the last? And so it was, that winter’s morning; his horse stumbled; he was killed. She knew it before they told her, and never would Sir John Leslie forget, when he ran downstairs on the day of the burial, the beauty of the great lady standing to see the hearse depart, nor, when he came back, how the curtain, heavy, mid-Victorian, plush perhaps, was all crushed together where she had grasped it in her agony. (2002, 27-28)

Admittedly, we can also see shining through this figure of the revisionary muse the tastes of professional class of Woolf’s parents, particularly that of her mother, Julia Stephens, who even writes *Notes for Sick Rooms*, a guide for those modern nurses Woolf half-laments, half-wishes for earlier in this essay, much as she famously does soon enough for her mother via Lily Briscoe’s mourning for Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* (1927). But other, perhaps Shakespearean figures can be seen, I believe, shining through here, from the plays already mentioned. No doubt, too, John Keats and his most ambitious works hover hereabouts. What is most important, however, is to focus on these pregnant words “how the curtain, heavy, mid-Victorian, plush perhaps, was all crushed together where she had grasped it in her agony” (28). This action of all crushing together, a rather unique turn of phrase, appears once before, in the essay’s first paragraph.

Before returning there, however, this tableau needs elucidating beyond its evident meaning. Why should Woolf bother to include John Leslie at all? Why should it be the male gaze of this previously unmentioned figure that captures and transmits this scene? Similarly, what do we make of the personification here, not of a mark on a wall or a slash of color down a canvas, but of a trace, an impression in “plush perhaps” found in the curtain, from the absent hand of Lady Waterford, “where she had grasped it in her agony?” The revisionary muse as a figure is this hybrid of trace and personification

(or more exactly, *prosopopeia*), and here it is intended to function both as a revisionary rival to literary characters, Shakespeare's included, and as a spectral embodiment of Woolf herself, "in her agony," where she has grasped the opportunity she formed, in "plush perhaps." The comic ruefulness of the class implications here shine forth. This impersonalizing textual incarceration constitutes the mark of a habitual psychomachia that revisionary cultures instill via socialization and education. I speak in the plural, because whether modern or traditional, all human cultures work this way, Woolf clearly assumes, and so would be, historically speaking, revisionist. Woolf's revisionary psychomachia here is, then, clearly a fully aware one, but such a conflict always occurs in any act of revisionism, however spontaneously impulsive it is. The revisionary machine "thinks" for us, especially if we do not think for ourselves. As with serial killers, every revisionist leaves a signature at the scene of the crime. Our duty, as critics following in Woolf's wake, is to read as critically as she herself wrote. As such, then, revisionism (however destructive or creative), when done as an art, offers itself up to a (self-) judgment every time, too. If every reading is a political agon, so too are we all, in the end, potentially Socrates under sentence. As Nietzsche speculates at the end of his career, Socrates may be smiling when choosing his sentence of the hemlock over life in exile.

Let us compare, then, Woolf's imaginative signature, the crushing hand-print, a self-consciously ironic and comically creative one, if ever there was one. Woolf speaks in the very first paragraph about the need of the modern writer for her own word, specifically when mounting an agenda to displace traditional hierarchies and replace them with new ones, more open, even popular, but still shaped by the strength of the imagination of any and all peoples (as her allusion attest), and particularly by their unacknowledged legislators, the poets:

Finally, to hinder the description of illness in literature, there is the poverty of the language. English, which can express the thoughts of Hamlet and the tragedy of Lear [in conventionally glossed, erudite figures), has no [living] words for the shiver and the headache. It has all grown one way [towards abstraction]. [Thus,] The merest schoolgirl, when she falls in love, has Shakespeare or Keats to speak her mind for her; let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry. There is nothing ready made for him. He is forced to coin words himself, and, taking his pain in one hand, and a lump of pure sound in the other (as perhaps the people of Babel did in the beginning), so to crush them together that a brand new word in the end drops out.... Yet it is not only a new language that we need, more primitive, more sensual, more obscene, but a new hierarchy of passions." (6-7)

Of course, these forceful assertions are extreme and deliberately so, to provoke and stir the thin blood of such readers as her editor, T. S. Eliot, for whom only Milton is more anathema than Shelley. Woolf's formulations,

“so to crush them together that a brand new word in the end drops out” (paragraph 1) “and how the curtain, heavy, mid-Victorian, plush perhaps, was all crushed together where she had grasped it in her agony” (paragraph 9), strongly suggest, whether referring to taking tea with too much sugar and staining the curtains with the print of her hand, that both externalization and internalization are being configured ironically in this text. Bloom, borrowing from Freud, calls this textual process an inter-textual one, and gives it the name of repression. Nietzsche makes due with the generic term internalization, as memory-in-the-making in the deepest sense. For me, like the symbol, the image partakes of the non-imagistic reality of which it is apparently a part and for which no other term or set of terms will do. But this informing reality, unlike Coleridge’s theory, and more in line with Woolf’s idea, is as much the force of embodiment as anything else. In this respect, Woolf is not producing allegory. Perhaps, the best figuration to name this textual process for is catachresis, that figure for which no literal referent is ever really available, even as the object in question is staring us in the face, like the leg of a table. In any event, this creative crushing all together that Woolf underscores is not so much a forging (in any sense); or a fusing (it is much less refining a process, despite the possibly plush curtains); as it is the squeezing into a ball of an unsatisfactory page of a draft that, as it loosens up a bit, you see has ironically inscribed a pucker of lines crisscrossing the embryonic formulation you decide you do want to elaborate, after all.

Even more importantly for her specific revisionary project, however, for what Woolf reveals and performs here and throughout *On Being Ill*, is a return to hidden “mythic” origins (she says passim “mystical”), not so much to Babel after the tower falls, as to Eden our first preternatural – not supernatural – heaven before the apple is eaten, or even offered by the serpent; that is, to the moment in the garden when God tells Adam to name the animals and to take dominion over the earth. Woolf would both start over from the beginning again and follow the path not taken, make a new beginning out of the other possible beginning whose potential remains, until now, “inexistent,” Badiou’s and before him Beckett’s technical term, derived from medieval theology, for possibilities never fully activated in the mind of God.⁴

Literary politics, modernist-style, then, are the politics of such “impossibilities.” For, in the secular heaven of the imagination, we can choose to fully live out, over and over again, those embryo lives cut short, aborted, by history and other catastrophes in acts that internalize our own new words as the passionate, embodied standards – aesthetic, political, ethical – that matter for us from now on. “The co-operative imagination” of humankind “must have drawn some firm outline” (17), Woolf stresses, as it envisions this heaven of imagination, over time, on the earth, an earth of more and more life, repeating itself in perpetually new lives, free of the “I,” “I,” “I” of tradition, without end. In whatever the medium of (virtual) representation,

⁴See O’Hara (forthcoming).

and with Woolf and Shakespeare (among us all) reciprocally displacing each other at an ever-make-shift-center—as if doing a highland fling together, perhaps—we now call that “place”: modern literature.

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