Doris Lessing

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Doris Lessing, in her 1971 introduction to *The Golden Notebook*, famously resists the ways in which her novel was “belittled, by friendly reviewers as well as by hostile ones, as being about the sex war, or was claimed by women as a useful weapon in the sex war.”¹ In the nearly forty years since she made this complaint, Lessing has made similarly controversial comments in which she has challenged not only the critical reception of her work but also the feminist movement in its entirety.² Nevertheless, critics and common readers of Doris Lessing cannot ignore that her fiction offers an incisive critique of gender relations in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and they perceive that feminist critical and theoretical approaches may offer the best methodologies through which to examine Lessing’s oeuvre. This can leave critics in a difficult position, wherein the author whose texts they so admire seems antagonistic to their approach to her writing. Whether the critic aims to “claim” Lessing for a feminist literary tradition or canon or whether the critic aims to perform a gynocentric reading of Lessing’s fiction, the critical enterprise is complicated not only by Lessing’s ambivalence about feminism but also by Lessing’s resistance against situating her fiction as “feminist” or as embodying a female aesthetic.

Indeed, while Doris Lessing’s career develops parallel to the development of feminist criticism and theory, Lessing often resists—if not outright rejects—the ideals that feminist theory and criticism promote at various points in its history. When feminist critics take Virginia Woolf’s observation
that “we think back through our mothers if we are women”\textsuperscript{3} as a call to arms for excavating marginalized texts by women writers, Lessing traces her influence not through literary mothers but through canonical, male, European writers such as Tolstoy and Stendhal.\textsuperscript{4} When feminist critics endorse the project common to many women writers of writing women’s everyday, embodied experience, Lessing turns to space fiction. Given these tensions, feminist critics have had some difficulty in placing Lessing’s writing. Now, in the opening decade of the twenty-first century, with Lessing having been awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, the task of situating Lessing’s oeuvre within feminist theory and criticism takes on great urgency. Lessing’s fiction can assist us in finding new approaches to theorizing and critiquing women’s writing, and returning to Lessing’s aesthetic vision in \textit{The Golden Notebook}\textsuperscript{5} can work as a first step in this enterprise.

In this essay, I am particularly interested in situating \textit{The Golden Notebook} alongside one of the foundational texts of feminist literary criticism, Woolf’s \textit{A Room of One’s Own}. Like Lessing, Woolf famously criticizes feminism, even as, like Lessing, she interrogates patriarchal culture and holds feminist values. Perhaps more significantly, though, Woolf’s questions about writing and female subjectivity that ground \textit{A Room of One’s Own} seem remarkably similar to those questions that Lessing’s protagonist Anna Wulf asks. By considering Woolf’s and Lessing’s aesthetic values and preoccupations together, it becomes possible to imagine an “impersonal” aesthetic for literature that is particularly rooted in female subjectivity. As Patricia Waugh writes, “women writers, on the whole, have not felt comfortable with an aesthetics of impersonality as it appears in many modernist and postmodernist manifestos. The reason for this is the overvaluation in the first instance of exclusive objectivity, of distance, autonomy, separateness, discrete form, and the disappearance in the second instance of human connection via meaningful affection, communication, or ethical belief.”\textsuperscript{6} Both \textit{The Golden Notebook} and \textit{A Room of One’s Own} exhibit this discomfort, but the aesthetic theory that each espouses investigates the possibility of an “impersonal” aesthetic that avoids the traps of modernist and postmodernist manifestos that Waugh describes.

At the opening of \textit{The Golden Notebook}, Doris Lessing’s author-protagonist Anna Wulf has an independent income and a room of her own. She has published one novel, and, as readers learn at the novel’s end, \textit{The Golden Notebook}’s opening and subsequent “Free Women” sections are, in fact, her second novel. She writes under her own name: she does not rely on a mask of anonymity, nor does she use a pseudonym to authorize her work as a novelist. Anna is a “free woman,” and one might assume that she writes freely
2: “Anon,” “Free Women,” and the Pleasures of Impersonality

as a woman. The story of Anna Wulf in this foundational feminist novel, then, offers one account, albeit a fictional one, of what a woman writer’s life might look like if one of Virginia Woolf’s theories in her foundational feminist polemic *A Room of One’s Own* were put into practice.

Nevertheless, to reduce *The Golden Notebook* to a positive realization of Woolf’s initial argument—“a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction”—hardly addresses the complexity of *The Golden Notebook*’s narrative; nor does it account for the characterization of Anna Wulf as a woman writer who, throughout most of the novel, is literally and figuratively “blocked.” Moreover, such a reading would fail to address the ways in which *The Golden Notebook* engages Woolf’s more abstract aesthetic claims about what is required for women to produce art.

A more careful examination of *The Golden Notebook* as it responds to *A Room of One’s Own*, in contrast, indicates the ways in which Lessing’s text responds to and resists the figure of “Virginia Woolf” as a literary precursor and/or a feminist foremother. In addition, such an examination offers a way into the complicated and sometimes contradictory theory of (women’s) writing that *The Golden Notebook* seems to espouse. Finally, this examination accounts for the promience of both texts as foundational to a canon of twentieth-century women’s and feminist literature, as well as for the ambivalence that both Woolf and Lessing express about being co-opted for specific feminist agendas.

This approach allows readers to reimagine the ways in which reading Lessing’s representation of the woman writer in *The Golden Notebook* through Woolf’s theories in *A Room of One’s Own* propels a twenty-first-century revaluation of Lessing’s literary achievement. Like Woolf, Lessing 1) demands an effacement of gendered subjectivity in the service of the text, 2) promotes an “androgynous” and diffuse writing subjectivity as central to the creation of great literature, 3) interrogates those binary oppositions that ground Western metaphysics, 4) proposes pleasure as a potential mechanism through which to disrupt those oppositions, and 5) offers a critique of locating the meaning of a text in the body of a unified female subject who authors a text. These features of Lessing’s aesthetics, which seem to find a source in Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, offer a literary version of more recent work by historian of science Donna Haraway and neurologist Antonio Damasio, each of whom offers radical critiques of the reliance on binary oppositions between subject/other, mind/body, male/female, and human/animal since Descartes. In this essay, I will first tease out the relationship between Woolf’s theories in *A Room of One’s Own* and Lessing’s representations of the woman writer in *The Golden Notebook*. As I conclude, I will return to these more
recent analyses to demonstrate how such an approach to Lessing’s aesthetics confirms their continuing and perhaps even increased relevance in the twenty-first century.

Many critics have performed readings of Woolf’s and Lessing’s texts alongside one another, and my work here builds on those earlier projects. Most notably, the 1994 collection *Woolf and Lessing: Breaking the Mold* offers perhaps the most comprehensive analysis of Doris Lessing’s writings as they relate to Virginia Woolf’s. Still, as Claire Sprague incisively notes in the first essay of the collection, the connection between Woolf and Lessing often appears to readers to be a tenuous one. Sprague writes, “Like many Doris Lessing and Virginia Woolf readers, I have always imagined a deep and visible connection between Lessing and Woolf. But that connection was elusive. Was it more wishful than actual? Woolf’s name never appears in Lessing’s criticism, and verifiable allusions to Woolf in Lessing’s work are almost nonexistent.” While Sprague and the other writers in the volume go on to demonstrate the strong ties between Lessing’s texts and Woolf’s, to examine these two writers alongside each other still proves a fruitful and not yet exhausted path of critical inquiry. Because Lessing has tended to distance her work from the influence of modernist precursors, to read Lessing’s texts through Woolf’s still constitutes a demonstrable critical risk.

The project that I propose here—to read *The Golden Notebook* through and against Woolf’s theories in *A Room of One’s Own*—can seem particularly problematic in light of contemporary feminist approaches to literary criticism. While it is true that *A Room of One’s Own* stands as a foundational feminist text, feminist critics have challenged the utility of some of its central theoretical claims, most notably the text’s advocacy of androgyny. Near the end of *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf argues: “it is fatal for any one who writes to think of their sex.” For this reason, *A Room* advocates an androgynous aesthetic, which explicitly characterizes writing whose purpose is to express the gendered subjectivity of its author—whether male or female—as compromised art. For Woolf, the writer must enact—explicitly and overtly in the text of the literature that he or she creates—a conceptual effacement of the self in which his or her writing subjectivity supersedes his or her gendered subjectivity. This effacement, Woolf’s argument implies, should not be a diversion that the writer creates in order to “cover” his or her real motives in the text, but rather the writer’s motivation should be to enact this effacement as the prerequisite to producing “great writing.”

If readers view Woolf’s androgynous aesthetic in these terms, Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* may at first appear to resist Woolf’s pronouncements about how to produce great writing. Whereas Woolf seems to endorse
the abstraction of the body in and by language, Lessing’s author-protagonist Anna Wulf, at least superficially, appears to aim to make sex—her body, the female body—concrete, to specify its effects and to mark its shape in and by language. Whereas Woolf’s narrator praises “that curious sexual quality which comes only when sex is unconscious of itself,” Anna Wulf in her four notebooks seeks total consciousness of her sex, which she often equates with her overall identity, and she desires completely to articulate that consciousness in writing. In spite of these apparent oppositions between *A Room of One’s Own* and *The Golden Notebook*, I contend that Virginia Woolf’s theory of an androgynous aesthetic, which promotes an effacement of sex in the service of great writing, corresponds to the aesthetic vision that Anna Wulf ultimately embraces.

Before beginning to examine the ways in which Anna Wulf’s aesthetic vision engages with Virginia Woolf’s prescription for an androgynous aesthetic, however, it is useful first to look carefully at the shape of Woolf’s claims about androgyny in *A Room of One’s Own* and at subsequent critical engagements with the androgynous aesthetic that Woolf advocates. Beginning in this way lays the foundation for examining the important theoretical effects that using Woolf’s theory to provide a context for *The Golden Notebook* might produce.

Woolf’s detour into a discussion of androgyny as a central characteristic of great writing has complicated and continues to complicate the ways in which feminist literary critics regard and use *A Room of One’s Own*. Critics tend to accept the broader material argument of Woolf’s polemic, but there has been much less consensus among critics about the utility of androgyny as a vehicle for women’s creativity. Within *A Room of One’s Own*, as well as in other of Woolf’s texts, Woolf appears to engage two competing definitions of androgyny: the first, an idea of androgyny as bisexual or hermaphroditic; the second, an idea of androgyny as a fusion of male and female perspectives. Critics have tended to emphasize one or the other definition, and, as Karen Kaivola notes, the mere consideration of androgyny, whichever definitions critics prefer, has moved in and out of “critical vogue.” Critics have tended to approach Woolf’s theory of androgyny with a variety of critical, feminist, and social agendas, and the critical reception of Woolf’s theory has reflected the feminisms and theoretical affiliations of particular critics in particular historical moments as much as it has reflected the careful reading of Woolf’s theory itself. Basically, critics of Woolf’s theory tend to fall into three camps: those who see Woolf’s androgynous aesthetic as a retreat from the more radical claims about women’s writing that *A Room of One’s Own* implies, those who see Woolf’s androgynous aesthetic as a potentially viable structure for
enabling women’s creativity, and those who see Woolf’s androgynous aesthetic as a “cover” that she uses to disguise an aesthetic of female difference.\(^ {16} \)

At first, it may seem that this critical discord amongst critics of \textit{A Room of One’s Own} has little to do with reading \textit{A Room of One’s Own} alongside \textit{The Golden Notebook} or reading “Virginia Woolf”—the speaker whom the writer Virginia Woolf creates to articulate her theories about writing in \textit{A Room of One’s Own}—alongside “Anna Wulf”—the speaker through whom Doris Lessing articulates another set of theories about writing in \textit{The Golden Notebook}. Yet it is noteworthy that the conflicts between these critical perspectives on Woolf’s polemic mirror similar conflicts that typify critical responses to Lessing’s \textit{The Golden Notebook}. Whether critics resist or embrace Woolf’s androgynous aesthetic reflects whether critics resist the idea of achieving a kind of aesthetic unity through androgyny or whether they embrace the ideal of unity as one with aesthetic potential. Similarly, as critics approach Lessing’s \textit{The Golden Notebook}, their readings reflect whether they resist the novel’s movement toward unity as a totalizing fiction or whether they see that movement toward unity as one that allows the protagonist Anna to move past the “block” against writing for publication that necessitates that she divide herself and write in the private notebooks. Ultimately, critics of \textit{The Golden Notebook} divide themselves into critical camps that mirror the three camps of criticism of Woolf’s androgynous aesthetic in \textit{A Room of One’s Own}.\(^ {17} \)

Reading \textit{The Golden Notebook} as a direct response to \textit{A Room of One’s Own} allows us to imagine a critical perspective that does not demand that we choose to locate our critiques within one of these dominant critical camps. In fact, by looking at these two texts alongside one another, examining their points of convergence and divergence, we can move through the critical impasse that requires us to choose to celebrate, to denigrate, or to excavate some “real motivation” beneath the textual mask. Such a project requires us, however, to accept three premises at the outset: 1) Woolf’s androgynous aesthetic has utility as a theory for women’s writing, and it does not necessarily require that women’s writing mimic styles, structures, and values conventionally deemed “masculine” or associated with writing by men; 2) Lessing’s protagonist values the effacement of her authorial self as a prerequisite to being a “good” writer, which indicates that her values for good writing are compatible with those articulated in \textit{A Room of One’s Own}; and 3) “Anna Wulf,” in Lessing’s \textit{The Golden Notebook}, constitutes a direct engagement with “Virginia Woolf,” the feminist and modernist icon, the character who narrates \textit{A Room of One’s Own} and the dominant figure for the “woman writer” in
In accepting these premises, it becomes possible to begin to make sense of Anna’s insistence on self-effacement in her texts, as well as to begin to see Woolf’s androgynous aesthetic as compatible with the aesthetic vision that drives *The Golden Notebook*.

An androgynous aesthetic depends on authorial self-effacement, and I contend that Anna’s aesthetic vision does so as well. In spite of the obsessive record that Anna attempts to make of her body, her emotions, and her thoughts, what Anna values in writing is the antithesis of that record. As she writes near the close of the Blue Notebook, which serves as the most conventional “diary” of Anna’s four notebooks, “Something strange happens when one writes about oneself. That is, one’s self direct, not one’s self projected. The result is cold, pitiless, judging. Or if not judging, then there’s no life in it—yes, that’s it, it’s lifeless. I realise, in writing this, I’m back at the point in the black notebook where I wrote about Willi.” As Anna comes full circle in this passage, she discounts the ability for writing about herself to be “alive” in the way that she believes the best writing should be. Writing one’s self, Anna might argue, compromises one’s liberty as a writer. Therefore, Anna’s repeated, though intermittent, insistence on self-effacement—whether through effacing her own personality when she associates with people who have more dominant personalities, through “lapsing out” into love or sex, or through projecting herself onto another persona—denotes the main point of compatibility between her aesthetic vision and Woolf’s androgynous aesthetic. As a character, Anna is not entirely without ordinary, social, and gendered identity; rather, readers observe repeated erasures of that ordinary identity in writing. Each of these erasures takes place in language: in Anna’s texts, from the notebooks to her second novel, “Free Women,” readers witness repeated scenes of self-effacement, in which Anna’s identity is wiped out and then returns, only to be wiped out again.

Nevertheless, it is important not to confuse this impulse toward the wiping out of social and gendered identity in writing with an impulse toward anonymity or annihilation of the self. Instead, the self-effacement that I describe cuts a space between a female aesthetic that depends on self-expression and a masculinist aesthetic that doesn’t acknowledge social and gendered identity. As Trinh T. Minh-ha notes, “[b]etween the twin chasms of navel-gazing and navel-erasing, the ground is narrow and slippery.” Lessing attempts to navigate between these two chasms, and in her characterization of Anna, she makes a distinction between the female subjectivity of the person-who-is-Anna and the business of writing in which Anna engages. Minh-ha argues that “[a] distinction needs to be made between ‘Write yourself. Write your body’ and write about yourself, your body, your inner life, your fears, inhibitions,
desires, and pleasures. The first refers to a scriptive act—the emergence of a writing-self—the second, to a consolidation of writing from the self.”\textsuperscript{22} It is this consolidation of writing from the self that Anna resists and that Anna’s intermittent effacements of her self in the notebooks oppose. Thus, while this aesthetic of self-effacement to some extent participates in a conservative tradition of attempting to locate intrinsic value in art and to distinguish it from the personal, it also revises that conservative tradition and interrogates it, suggesting a personal impersonality that is firmly rooted in female subjectivity.

In this way, Anna’s conception of the relationship between writing and the self illustrates values that Patricia Waugh discerns in the work of “many twentieth-century women writers (whether consciously feminists or not).”\textsuperscript{23} According to Waugh, these writers explore “a definition of self in relationship which does not make identity dependent axiomatically upon the maintenance of boundaries and distance, nor upon the subjugation of the other.”\textsuperscript{23} When Anna effaces her self in the notebooks, she does not do so in a project of self-annihilation, but rather in a project of resistance, for she believes, as Waugh explains in her discussion of \textit{The Golden Notebook}, that “any attempt to represent feminine subjectivity will result in parody: of the ‘coy’ woman’s style of the magazines, of the sentimental fulfillment of romantic desire in the Hollywood movie.”\textsuperscript{24} Thus, Anna’s project of self-effacement fails to preserve the binary opposition between the personal and the impersonal. Rather, Anna writes from her self, but “she writes, finally not to express, nor so much to materialize an idea or a feeling, as to possess and dispossess herself of the power of writing. Bliss.”\textsuperscript{25} A Room of One’s Own endorses this same operation.

Thus, neither text aims to make “woman” anonymous, or to annihilate woman-who-writes through writerly self-erasure. Both texts dispute the potential for “Anon” to erase the subjectivity of the author in a fashion that would let the author produce literature of the highest quality. “Anon” may constitute an important figure for authoriality for both, as “Anon” has allowed those to speak who ordinarily would fear to do so, but neither text suggests that anonymity begets aesthetic virtuosity. “Anon” fails to guarantee the writerly wiping out of the self that both texts advocate. In fact, it paradoxically draws attention to that self.

For example, in A Room of One’s Own, Woolf’s narrator famously suggests “that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman.”\textsuperscript{26} The text uses Anon as the foundation for a woman’s literary tradition in England. In this way, Anon performs a necessary rhetorical function within the narrative, but the purpose that it serves—to put a woman’s face on the name “Anon”—subverts its potential to signify an author whose writing
exceeds the constraints of sex. Indeed, using Anon as a literary foremother binds Anon to sex; it genders the texts that Anon produces as feminine. Anon is not androgynous: Anon is synonymous with woman. By gendering Anon in this way, the narrator uses Anon as a generic name for the female author; it acquires what Michel Foucault would call an author-function, which the narrator then uses to support her claims about women and writing.27

In other words, deploying Anon at this point in the text serves the narrator’s rhetorical purpose, but the narrator does not associate Anon with a freeing effacement of sex; moreover, using Anon in this way renders the-name-of-the-author and the-sex-of-the-author radically unstable and unreliable categories through which to evaluate literature: the figure of Anon does not signal an effacement of identity but rather allows for readers and critics to supply a name for Anon that suits their own ideological demands. As Syd-ney Janet Kaplan explains, “With Virginia Woolf, feminine consciousness is explored as part of reality, but ultimate reality can only be perceived by going beyond it. Only in the highest form of creativity, in which there is a moment of vision caught and eternalized in form, is universal consciousness achieved. And there distinctions between sexes must disappear.”28 Thus, Woolf’s use of Anon constitutes a necessary component of her broader rhetorical agenda, but it ultimately does not constitute a strategy through which women might produce great writing. Woolf uses the figure of Anon to start tracing a history of women’s literature, which is a necessary first step in her larger theoretical project, but this move paradoxically underscores the impossibility of arriving at such a factual account. Indeed, it challenges the usefulness of such accounts in broader discussions of aesthetic merit.

Implicit in Woolf’s deployment of Anon is the message that this figure will not serve an androgynous aesthetic. The Golden Notebook corroborates this implicit message with its own explicit critique of Anon. When Anna reads the “dead, banal writing” of fellow Communists, she recognizes this writing as the inverse of the personal writing of her first novel, which she regards as an artistic failure.29 This fact notwithstanding, she regards attempts at literature from the Communist perspective as “dead stuff.” She writes: “The point is that this writing is essentially impersonal. Its banality is that of impersonality. It is as if there were a new Twentieth Century Anon at work.”30 Anna thus rejects the personality of her first novel along with the impersonality of writing that leaves no room for emotion and originality. She does not replace a “personal” aesthetic with an “impersonal” one.

Critics often overlook this aspect of Anna’s theory of writing, focusing instead on her rejection of the personal in her first novel. For example, Jeannette King reads Anna’s rejection of the aesthetic potential of “personal”
writing to reflect a larger argument implicit in the text—that one cannot liberate oneself through art: “Does art represent freedom, or is it simply another discourse? Since every discourse is inscribed within the values of a particular ideology, there appears to be nowhere for the individual voice to be heard. The notion of ‘free speech,’ like freedom itself, is an illusion, as is the Romantic concept of the artist as the voice of the free individual speaking out against society’s conventions and values.”

King’s analysis of the role of art and the artist implies that Anna’s rejection of the personal writing that characterized her first novel constitutes a response to the futility of individual expression in the face of the structures of oppression that inscribe the individual in modern life. By extension, this analysis implies that Anna’s turn toward self-effacement indicates her subjection within those structures of oppression. This dark view, however, ignores Anna’s statements about the fact that an entirely impersonal aesthetic, too, produces bad writing. Anna wants to forge a form for writing that is both personal and impersonal—and neither. She imagines a form of “impersonal” writing that emerges from “deep, suddenly stark, undiscguisable private emotion.”

But if anonymity does not signal erasure of sex or the self, an “impersonal” approach that allows for a “curious sexual quality” to come through, then what does? Interestingly, both A Room of One’s Own and The Golden Notebook align the effacement of the writing body that lays the ground for great writing with a diffuse sexual pleasure that permeates the text. As Roxanne J. Fand notes, “[a]lthough Woolf’s narration lacks explicit bodily content, her poetic style is driven by the semiotics of the body, whereas Lessing often speaks about the body in the disembodied voice of an omniscient narrator.” Both texts conjoin the personal and impersonal: both the personal and the impersonal are necessary in each.

Additionally, both texts do define pleasure separately from penetration and/or ejaculation, which may at first seem to indicate a specifically “female” aesthetic, but both texts still seem to insist that the woman writer must “free” herself from her specifically female subjectivity. Thus, both texts display a tension between an aesthetic that is appropriate to individual female creativity but that simultaneously demands the effacement of individual identity and radically undermines the integrity of individual subjects as artists. Both texts interrogate the conventional ways in which Western culture genders and divides the categories of “personal” and “impersonal,” “individual” and “collective,” and they do so through the theories about writing that they present.

As Fand explains, the “very designations of ‘impersonal,’ for transcending or integrating subjectivities, and ‘personal’ for limited subjectivities, are
deeply implicated in gendered discourses.”

For Fand, one of Woolf’s great achievements is the way that she attempts to “achieve liberation from the personal—constructed as narrowly feminine—both in her writing and in her life.” Still, this move on Woolf’s part, as Fand notes, can challenge readers who come to Woolf seeking a model for feminist creativity whereby the truth of female identity might be revealed. “The female reader who comes to Woolf’s work seeking some model whereby to affirm a female self will not be given a simple answer to an identity crisis,” writes Fand. “Instead, she will be treated to a way of seeing multiple possibilities within the given conditions of her culturally constructed experience.” Thus, if readers take Woolf’s narrative in *A Room of One’s Own* on its own terms, they see that the figures that the narrator engages, from Anon to Judith Shakespeare, serve not to provide ultimate models for female creativity but rather to demonstrate the ways in which creativity is inflected by culturally constructed experience. For Woolf, the terms of that culturally constructed experience must be challenged—and not necessarily celebrated—in order for women and men to make great art.

For example, using the figure of Anon alongside Judith Shakespeare, Woolf’s narrator links the prohibition against writing women to the prohibition against sexually free women in patriarchal culture, and in this move, the narrative explicitly connects cultural norms for women’s access to pleasure to cultural norms that deny women writers access to entering the canon of great literature. According to Woolf, “Chastity had then, it has even now, a religious importance in a woman’s life, and has so wrapped itself round with nerves and instincts that to cut it free and bring it to the light of day demands a courage of the rarest. To have lived a free life in London in the sixteenth century would have meant for a woman who was a poet and playwright a nervous stress and dilemma which might well have killed her.”

Making this connection, Woolf demonstrates how a social endorsement of sexual chastity for women can lead to a literary chastity for women writers. Readers may at first suppose that this claim enforces a one-to-one relation between the person who creates a literary text and the text that is created: “woman’s writing” is defined by the body of the woman who writes. Ellen Carol Jones explains it this way: Woolf believes that “art comes out of and reflects the artist. The artifact itself originates from the body of the artificer. The male’s insistence on female chastity, then, prevents the woman artist from creating because it denies her the freedom to write fully and honestly about her passions and her body, and, more important, it ultimately denies her the very right to create, to ‘give birth’ to a work of art.” For Woolf, norms for femininity come to produce norms for feminine writing: “feminine” writing can never attain the “freedom,” the promiscuity, that great art demands. Moreover, ever con-
scious of maintaining her chastity, the woman writer is also ever conscious of her sex, and this precludes the effacement of sex that an androgynous aesthetic promotes. Because the woman writer has chastity on her mind, she cannot move beyond her femaleness into an artistic space that is both masculine and feminine, both male and female. If this is the case, however, the question then becomes, how can a woman writer hope to create great art?

Woolf does not provide a clear answer. After the brief meditation on the relationship between chastity and creativity, the narrative leaves the subject, seeming to skip a step that would offer women writers a map for how to proceed. The narrator does not suggest alternatives through which women writers could escape the double bind between social norms for femininity and aesthetic ideals, but instead the narrative changes course and asserts that “the mind of an artist, in order to achieve the prodigious effort of freeing whole and entire the work that is in him, must be incandescent, like Shakespeare’s mind [. . . ]. There must be no obstacle in it, no foreign matter unconsumed.” Woolf quickly leaves the idea that the body determines creativity, abstracting the body of the artist, characterizing that body, whether male or female, as an obstacle to art. Perhaps Woolf’s own historical gender position informs this rhetorical skip, enforcing the gap between a discussion of the relationship between sexuality and creativity for women who write and an analysis of what constitutes literary merit in texts once they have left the control of the author.

In contrast, The Golden Notebook fills this gap in a more direct fashion. As Fand explains, “Doris Lessing, like Virginia Woolf, cycles and recycles the impersonal through her personal experience as a woman. Her work takes up where Woolf’s leaves off around mid-twentieth century, and continues to demonstrate that the subjectivities of women are not confined to narrow domesticity and immediate personal relations, but may encompass larger social collectives in the material historical world and in the imaginative ahistorical world of the collective unconscious, which extends to visions of the cosmos.” Nevertheless, Anna’s personal experiences as a woman and particularly her experiences of sexual pleasure prove crucial to her articulation of an aesthetic vision that depends on the effacement of the self rather than the expression of it. Anna’s experience of sexual pleasure within her “texts,” whether as “Anna” or as “Ella,” whether in terms of its physical experience or the intellectual experience of recounting it, depends on an effacement made possible by Anna’s lived rejection of a double standard in which women must be chaste while men might be promiscuous. Rejecting this double standard in her life, even though her socialization in Western culture makes this difficult for her, allows Anna to try to reject it in her art.
And yet, living as a “free woman” in her personal life doesn’t necessarily facilitate the easy translation of that freedom into her work as a writer. In the Yellow Notebook, Anna writes: “Sex. The difficulty of writing about sex, for women, is that sex is best when not thought about, not analysed. Women deliberately choose not to think about technical sex. [ . . . ] [T]hey want to preserve the spontaneous emotion that is essential for their satisfaction.” Anna makes two related claims: first, that women have difficulty writing about sex because language forces them into an analytical model, and, for women, this model is antithetical to pleasure; second, that women resist thinking technically about sex because to do so forecloses their potential for physical satisfaction. In other words, women resist not only writing about sex but also thinking about sex analytically. At the root of this resistance is a desire to preserve pleasure.

For Anna, a viable aesthetic would honor pleasure, as well as produce aesthetic pleasure. Anna hopes to create freely, promiscuously. Anna seeks integrity in her writing that her first novel, which emerged solely from her personal, individual experience, did not have. Significantly, Anna explicitly connects her definition of integrity to female orgasm. In the Yellow Notebook, Ella, Anna’s alter ego, thinks: “for women like me, integrity isn’t chastity, it isn’t fidelity, it isn’t any of the old words. Integrity is the orgasm.” For Ella, “real” orgasm “is a dissolving in a vague, dark, generalised sensation like being swirled in a warm whirlpool,” an erasure of her individual subjectivity. According to Kaplan, “Much of the concern with sexuality expressed throughout the notebooks is based on very conventional notions of women’s supposed sexual passivity,” but the fact that these representations are conventional does not empty them of their significance as markers of Anna’s aesthetic vision. Anna’s erasure or effacement through sexual pleasure has value precisely because it suggests that individual subjects can move within a collective, universal sensation. Sexual pleasure depends, for Ella and for Anna, on the momentary dissolution of individual subjectivity, and this definition of pleasure directly influences Anna’s aesthetic vision. Anna may not be a “free woman”—indeed, the text’s use of this terminology is deeply ironic—but by disputing the possibility of becoming a free woman through writing, Anna’s texts allow for greater potential freedom for the writing subject within discourse, within power. Moreover, when Anna distinguishes between integrity and chastity, readers remember A Room of One’s Own’s critique of chastity, and they suspect that Anna Wulf picks up where Virginia Woolf leaves off.

The question for current readers of A Room of One’s Own and The Golden Notebook becomes, then, how to put the aesthetic claims of these texts, which indicate a movement through pleasure toward an effacement of
gendered subjectivity in the service of great art, into a workable theoretical context in the twenty-first century. This proves crucial to any conclusions we might reach about the relationship between these two texts and the significance of that relationship. Moreover, it proves central to coming to terms with these two texts as foundational to a feminist canon of literature, for the choices that we make in situating these texts within theory threaten to limit the ways in which we can negotiate the convergences and divergences between them.

It seems clear that both *A Room of One’s Own* and *The Golden Notebook* advance a vision for great writing that does not necessarily demand that great writing empower disenfranchised or marginalized subjects, even though such a move may seem contrary to much contemporary feminist theory and perhaps to our own personal feminisms. Woolf famously dismisses Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* because “it is clear that anger was tampering with the integrity of Charlotte Brontë the novelist. She left her story, to which her entire devotion was due, to attend to some personal grievance.”45 Similarly, Anna dismisses her first novel, *Frontiers of War*: “I said nothing in it that wasn’t true. But the emotion it came out of was something frightening, the unhealthy, feverish illicit excitement of wartime, a lying nostalgia, a longing for licence, for freedom, for the jungle, for formlessness. It is so clear to me that I can’t read that novel now without feeling ashamed, as if I were in a street naked.”46 In both cases, the narratives distinguish between the author-as-real-person and the writing subject; in both cases, the narratives regard the expression of the emotions of the author-as-real-person within the text of a novel as contrary to the aims of great art. Neither sees the writing of the self as a valuable aesthetic aim. In fact, such writing in both is constituted as failure. Instead, each promotes writing *from* the self, in which the writer “must learn to forget” her personal identity.47

This learned forgetting of the self has the potential to enable freer movement of writing subjects within discourse. Significantly, however, this freer movement does not constitute liberation from patriarchal power structures in a simple way, but rather it suggests that writing subjects have the power to navigate within these structures in the service of the text. Ultimately, both Woolf and Lessing position the liberty of the text within dominant discourses as above the liberation of real women from patriarchy. Indeed, the “freeing” of real women from patriarchy constitutes only an inversion of ideologies in which women are subjected within patriarchy, a reification of the binary oppositions that we inherit from Cartesian philosophy. This accordingly offers no “real” escape. Thus, I would like to propose an alternate approach to these texts that privileges a writerly erasure of the body, an erasure that...
opposes constructing the body as the center of meaning, which in the case of female bodies constitutes a reinscription of patriarchal modes of controlling the feminine.

Nevertheless, to propose such an alternate model does not, as critics of androgyny might have it, do away with the centrality of bodies to texts, nor does it privilege the mind over the body or oppose the mind to the body. Indeed, it proposes a way of thinking of the relationship between bodies and texts as one that is not expressive—in which the body comes before the text and causes the text but one that is simultaneous and symbiotic. Instead of thinking of texts as “feminine” and equating the feminine with subversion, it proposes that we think of texts in the way that Roland Barthes proposes: in terms of pleasure and of bliss. Barthes defines the text of pleasure as “the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading.”

The impulse toward aesthetic unity in both A Room of One’s Own and The Golden Notebook corresponds to Barthes’s ideas about what a text of pleasure includes, while at the same time this impulse does not eliminate or undercut representational modes inscribed within patriarchal discourses.

It is for this reason that feminist critics can have difficulty placing these texts, which feel so grounded in feminism, within specifically feminine theories of creativity. If, as Barthes contends, “a writer is not someone who expresses his thoughts, his passion, or his imagination in sentences, but someone who thinks sentences: A Sentence-Thinker (i.e., not altogether a thinker and not altogether a sentence-parser),” then that leaves little room for a theory of writing that presupposes that the woman writer of merit will by nature aim to express her individual female subject position in a literary text against the patriarchal culture that inscribes her, to speak feminist truth to power. Barthes’s theory may seem to indicate that this androgynous aesthetic aims to absent real women from agency in writing. Minh-ha suggests, however, that the woman writer as sentence-thinker “radically questions the world through the questioning of how-to-write,” and this constitutes a useful formulation through which to consider what both Woolf and Lessing achieve. Indeed, both Woolf and Lessing value the craft of writing, and the craftsmanship that each emphasizes is “a self-confessed, sometimes self-reflexive, form of art for art’s sake that holds pragmatic bourgeois activity up to ridicule and, at best, invalidates it. By laying bare the codes of literary labor, it unequivocally acknowledges the writer’s contradictory stand—her being condemned to do ‘good work’ in choosing to ‘write well’ and to produce Literature.” While it is true that Barthes’s theory disputes the possibility that one can get outside the structures of power, and thus nullifies feminist theoretical approaches
that insist that feminist writing enables liberation, if we read Barthes through Minh-ha, it becomes possible to see room for feminist writing that does not depend on writing the woman writer’s experiences into the text. Instead, feminist writing might include what Barthes would call “texts of pleasure,” texts that come from culture and do not break with it.

Still, readers should not assume that the idea of the text of pleasure is the only guiding idea within Woolf’s and Lessing’s texts. Indeed, both texts seem to engage not only a model of the text of pleasure but also a model of what Barthes calls the text of bliss. In fact, only by considering Woolf’s and Lessing’s texts in terms of both pleasure and bliss can one account for the effacements, displacements, and disruptions of subjectivity that seem to guide the aesthetic theories of both. For Barthes, the text of bliss is “the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language.”53 It is this crisis in the writing subject’s relation with language that Woolf’s androgynous aesthetic anticipates and that Anna’s various self-effacements, and particularly those self-effacements in relation to physical pleasure, indicate. The personal-impersonal aesthetic that both Woolf and Wulf imagine, which on the one hand articulates emotion but on the other depends on an objective correlative, might ultimately be positively filtered by readers through Barthes’s notion of the text of bliss.54

Emotion, for Barthes, is not “antipathetic to bliss,” but rather constitutes “a disturbance, a bordering on collapse: something perverse, under respectable appearances; emotion is even, perhaps, the slyest of losses, for it contradicts the general rule that would assign bliss a fixed form: strong, violent, crude: something inevitably muscular, strained, phallic.”55 Thus, when Woolf imagines the mind of the writer, through Coleridge’s theory of androgyny, as “resonant and porous; that it transmits emotion without impediment; that it is naturally creative, incandescent, and undivided,”56 and when Anna Wulf is “forced to acknowledge that the flashes of genuine art are all out of a deep, suddenly stark, undisguisable private emotion” and that “even in translation there is no mistaking these lightning flashes of genuine personal feeling,”57 both imagine and acknowledge that the text of true literary merit is the text of both pleasure and bliss. As Barthes writes, “the text of pleasure is not necessarily the text that recounts pleasures; the text of bliss is never the text that recounts the kind of bliss afforded literally by an ejaculation.”58 Nevertheless, Barthes affiliates the text of pleasure with intellectual experience and the text of bliss with embodied experience. In imagining a text of literary merit as encompassing both pleasure and bliss, both intellectual and
embodied emotional responses, Woolf and Lessing envision the possibility for literature to break apart the opposition between mind and body, and they offer that this might be achieved through the abjection and effacement of the subject, whether male or female.

In fact, both A Room of One’s Own and The Golden Notebook constitute the relationship of the subject—the “I”—to the text as one that is by turns arbitrary and problematic. In A Room of One’s Own, Woolf considers the effect of the “I” on the text. First, in the opening pages of the polemic, the narrator “Virginia Woolf” asserts: “‘I’ is only a convenient term for somebody who has no real being.” She continues: “Here then was I (call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichel or by any name you please—it is not a matter of any importance).” In this introduction, by disputing the utility of the “I” to confer authority on a text, Woolf radically undermines the relationship between author and text. Instead, ideally, the text would take on a life of its own: the subject is critiqued, split, and effaced, and, in the words of Barthes, “then perhaps the subject returns, not as illusion, but as fiction. A certain pleasure is derived from a way of imagining oneself as individual, of inventing a final, rarest fiction: the fictive identity. This fiction is no longer the illusion of a unity; on the contrary, it is the theater of society in which we stage our plural: our pleasure is individual—but not personal.” Thus, for Woolf, the point is not to realize some truth of individual subjectivity through writing, but rather to imagine a writing subjectivity through which the individual subject is dispersed. The ideal subjective position for the writer—if not for the woman—is one in which she loses consciousness of her self. Instead of imagining the potential for a woman writer to speak her truth, her anger, her pleasure, Woolf instead imagines the perfect image of a writing subject as a man and a woman getting into a taxicab: a plural image in which the writing subject appears as both male and female and—significantly—as mobile.

In contrast, when the writing subject is construed through the idea of an individual “I,” aesthetic virtuosity becomes unattainable. This becomes most clear in the famous passage near the end of A Room of One’s Own in which Woolf’s narrator discusses Mr. A’s novel. She describes her thoughts as she reads, and initially she reacts positively. As she gets further into the novel, however, she becomes frustrated: “a shadow seemed to lie across the page. It was a straight dark bar, a shadow shaped something like the letter I.” This shadow, the reader infers, blocks Mr. A’s novel from attaining the androgynous aesthetic that the narrator earlier ascribes to all great literature. Mr. A’s intrusive “I” impedes a full transmission of emotion. Mr. A’s mind is not, we infer, “incandescent and undivided”; indeed, the shape of the “I” divides Mr. A’s text from its reader. In spite of the direct quality of the writing to which the nar-
rator responds positively, the “I” interrupts that pleasure, and she must begin “dodging this way and that to catch a glimpse of the landscape behind it.”

As the narrator accuses Mr. A’s “I” of blocking her view of the story at hand, readers often perceive an indictment of masculine subjectivity for obscuring truths that the androgynous aesthetic would make available. According to this interpretation, phallic “I” becomes not only the enemy of women but also the enemy of great literature. This implicit claim for many readers signals *A Room of One’s Own*’s significance as a foundational feminist text. Nevertheless, if we take the reading of Mr. A’s novel alongside the earlier considerations of the “I” in the text—the relationship of individual subjectivity to great writing—it becomes clear that the charge against Mr. A’s novel is more expansive than just a charge against his masculine subjectivity. The point, as we look more deeply into *A Room of One’s Own*’s consideration of subjectivity, seems to be that writing subjects—whether male or female—must absent their egos from the text in order to achieve great writing.

*The Golden Notebook* performs a similar operation, in which at first the narrative seems to critique specifically masculine subjectivity as antithetical to great art, but, when that critique is put into broader context, it becomes clear that the limitations of gendered subjectivity for both male and female writers are of greater concern than just the critique of the deleterious effects of an aggressive masculine subjectivity. This becomes clear as Anna describes an interchange between herself and Saul in the Blue Notebook: “He went on shouting, and I recognised the feeling I’d had the day before, of descending another step into willlessness. I, I, I, I, I, he shouted, but everything disconnected, a vague, spattering boastfulness, and I felt as if I were being spattered by machine-gun bullets. It went on and on, I, I, I, I, I, and I stopped listening and then I realised he had become silent, and was looking at me with anxiety. ‘What’s wrong with you?’ he said.”

Such passages often signal for feminist critics the ways in which Saul’s masculine subjectivity oppresses Anna, or they signal, as Gayle Greene argues, “that both male and female behaviors represent crippling adjustments to a destructive society, but that men are more crippled because they lock themselves into postures that prohibit change.” However, such readings of these interactions between Anna and Saul fail to acknowledge the ways in which Anna’s ability to lapse out of consciousness, to emotionally and psychologically remove herself while interacting with Saul, ultimately facilitates her return to writing for publication. One might argue that by stepping “into willlessness” and by refusing to engage with Saul on his terms, Anna can, as Sprague argues, achieve “some measure of freedom from repetition” and achieve “some release from the stereotype of woman as victim.” In fact, by refusing to engage with Saul as the female
other that confirms and reinforces his masculine subjectivity, by refusing as she does in this moment to serve as a mirror to him and, to borrow Woolf’s language, to reflect “the figure of man at twice its natural size,” she opens up a new possibility for how she will enter into discourse, as a woman and as a writer.

This new possibility is confirmed when, in the inner Golden Notebook, Saul provides Anna with the opening of her second novel, “Free Women.” As Magali Cornier Michael writes, “the ambiguity of voice and the overlapping of various fragments of The Golden Notebook problematize authorship and undermine any notion of original or ultimate meaning, so that Anna can only be approximated but never pinned down.” By the novel’s end, Anna finds a way to move within discourse as a writer that does not demand that she express herself as a female subject. She gains mobility, much as a man and a woman getting into a taxi, Woolf’s image for her androgynous aesthetic, are defined by their mobility. As a woman in patriarchal culture, the narrative seems to indicate, Anna might not achieve liberation. Nevertheless, as a writer, Anna has the potential to free herself from the demands of her female subjectivity, if only intermittently, thus allowing her to break free from the solipsism of the notebooks and to break through the block that stops her from writing her second novel for publication.

Thus, as we place A Room of One’s Own and The Golden Notebook alongside one another, each puts forward a theory that disrupts writing subjectivity from the individual gendered subjectivity of the author-who-writes. In so doing, both texts disrupt the attempts that readers might make to locate them through gynocriticism. The narratives of both the “Virginia Woolf” who narrates A Room of One’s Own and the “Anna Wulf” who narrates the various texts that make up The Golden Notebook refute the potential for literature that does not go beyond the female body of the female author to do anything but reify the opposition between masculine and feminine upon which patriarchal discourses have conventionally relied. Instead, each proposes an aesthetic vision that locates both pleasure and bliss not in the female body of the author but rather in the text itself. By positioning pleasure and bliss thus, such an aesthetic figures the literary text as a space in which binaries not only between masculine and feminine but also between mind and body might be disrupted. In contrast to Barthes, who argues that “the pleasure of the text is that moment when my body pursues its own ideas—for my body does not have the same ideas that I do,” both Virginia Woolf’s and Anna Wulf’s texts imagine a pleasure-bliss of the text in which a writerly body-mind pursues ideas without reference to the personality or identity of the author.
The idea here is not to imagine an aesthetic that depends on real female bodies or minds and their articulation but rather an aesthetic that does away with the idea of either the body or the mind as the source of meaning, truth, or existence. This would then give the writing subject greater mobility within those structures of discourse from which there is no potential for escape. In the case of both the “Virginia Woolf” of *A Room of One’s Own* and the “Anna Wulf” of *The Golden Notebook*, this is exactly the aesthetic vision that is privileged: one that allows the writer, if not the woman, to move freely within discourse, to impregnate and to contaminate, with malleable particles that nonetheless are “irreducible, indomitable.”

Throughout most of the twentieth century, this aesthetic might have seemed to directly undermine a feminist political agenda in part because of its challenge to both philosophical and scientific accounts of human subjectivity, which continued to rely on the binary opposition of mind and body as did feminists’ models for women’s empowerment. For Antonio Damasio, these tendencies in both philosophy and science can be traced directly to Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum*, which “suggests that thinking, and awareness of thinking, are the real substrates of being. And since we know that Descartes imagined thinking as an activity quite separate from the body, it does celebrate the separation of mind [. . . ] from the nonthinking body.” For Damasio, this is “Descartes’ error,” and that error remains pervasive in its influence, with many continuing to see Descartes’ views “as self-evident and in no need of re-examination.” It is for this precise reason, argues Damasio, that such a reexamination must take place: “Versions of Descartes’ error obscure the roots of the human mind in a biologically complex but fragile, finite, and unique organism; they obscure the tragedy implicit in the knowledge of that fragility, finiteness, and uniqueness. And where humans fail to see the inherent tragedy of conscious existence, they feel far less called upon to do something about minimizing it, and may have less respect for the value of life.” This more recent reading of the danger in relying on the binary opposition between mind and body corresponds neatly with some reasons that may underlie the aesthetic offered by Woolf and Lessing: most notably, the antagonism of each to war and the proliferation of the technologies of war throughout the course of the twentieth century.

Writing from a feminist perspective, Donna Haraway takes an activist stance similar to Damasio’s and similarly insists on the necessity to demonstrate the constructedness of the binary oppositions through which theories of humanity have conventionally been organized. She contends, “The dichotomies between mind and body, animal and human, organism and machine, public and private, nature and culture, men and women, primitive and civi-
lized are all in question ideologically. The actual situation of women is their integration/exploitation into a world system of production/reproduction and communication called the informatics of domination. [ . . . ] The cyborg is a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self. This is the self feminists must code.” The aesthetic that I have traced here, while it does not directly engage in contemporary scientific and technological debates about the nature of the self, does manage, nevertheless, to offer a medium through which Descartes’ error might be challenged and through which the “disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self” might be coded. Moreover, just as Haraway construes her project as one that argues “for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction,” so too is the aesthetic for literary achievement that both Woolf and Lessing advocate.

As Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs note, “the iconization of Woolf as a quintessential female author, together with her reputation as a secondary experimentalist, has clouded a sense of her total achievement.” Perhaps this is one reason why it has been a matter of some difficulty for scholars interested in making connections between Virginia Woolf’s and Doris Lessing’s texts to do so: Lessing has tended to distance herself from a tradition of women’s literature, much as Woolf herself did in positing her theory of androgyny. Nevertheless, Friedman and Fuchs continue: “although the legend of Virginia Woolf may represent a suffocating ideal, the real Woolf provided instruction and strategies for feminine narrative.” Perhaps the key to evaluating “Virginia Woolf” alongside “Anna Wulf” is understanding that the legend of Virginia Woolf constitutes a modern version of the “angel in the house,” which Woolf argues in her “Professions for Women” the woman writer must kill, “for, as I found, directly I put pen to paper, you cannot review even a novel without having a mind of your own, without expressing what you think to be the truth about human relations, morality, sex. And all these questions, according to the Angel of the House, cannot be dealt with freely and openly by women; they must charm, they must conciliate, they must—to put it bluntly—tell lies if they are to succeed.” One might argue that the legend or icon of Virginia Woolf operates similarly for the “women writers” who succeed her: they are stopped from telling “the truth about human relations, morality, sex” because the shadow of Virginia Woolf, lady novelist, novelist of interiority, stands over them.

Lessing’s author-protagonist Anna Wulf, as she attempts to write her way through her block and as she negotiates the treacherous terrain of relations between the sexes at mid-twentieth century, does not overtly cite Virginia Woolf as a literary foremother. She does not seem to see herself as a “woman
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writer.” Her texts do not seem consciously to allude to Virginia Woolf’s texts. Nevertheless, she, like Woolf, writes, struggles with madness, and takes her authorial name from a husband, and so perhaps it makes sense for readers to examine how Anna’s texts might covertly engage the very theory—the androgynous aesthetic—that is at the heart of Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own. In the end, Anna finds a way out of the room of her own, which ultimately imprisons her, and she finds it by embracing an androgynous aesthetic.

NOTES


7. Woolf, A Room of One’s Own, 4.

8. As I discuss further on in the essay, Woolf’s more abstract theories in A Room of One’s Own, to which we might refer as her “androgynous aesthetic,” have been interpreted in a variety of ways—both positive and negative—by critics. This fact does not negate the utility of Woolf’s comments related to androgyny as a way into Lessing’s novel. See also Nancy Topping Bazin’s important discussion of androgyny in Virginia Woolf and the Androgynous Vision (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1973).

9. In fact, both writers’ ambivalence about being categorized as feminist becomes clear in the examination of the texts under consideration here. See especially A Room of One’s Own (37, 99) and Doris Lessing’s 1971 introduction to The Golden Notebook.


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12. The term “great writing” is problematic because of the exclusionary, masculinist aesthetic tradition and practices of canonization that it evokes. I use it here consciously, however, to demonstrate that Woolf and Lessing both situate themselves in relation to this tradition as they attempt to theorize the relationship between female writing subjects and the texts that they produce. Moreover, Longinus’s *On Great Writing (On the Sublime)*, trans. and intro. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1991), which serves as a foundational text to discourses about aesthetics, offers a discussion of “great writing” that seems compatible with, if not identical to, Woolf’s and Lessing’s ideas. Longinus writes: “Great writing does not persuade; it takes the reader out of himself. The startling and amazing is more powerful than the charming and persuasive, if it is indeed true that to be convinced is usually within our control whereas amazement is the result of an irresistible force beyond the control of any audience. We become aware of a writer’s inventive skill, the structure and arrangement of his subject matter, not from one or two passages, but as these qualities slowly emerge in the whole work. But greatness appears suddenly; like a thunderbolt it carries all before it and reveals the writer’s full power in a flash” (4).

13. Lessing herself, however, seems to espouse similar ideals, according to her comments in a 1983 interview with Stephen Gray in “Breaking Down These Forms,” in *Putting the Questions Differently: Interviews with Doris Lessing, 1964–1994*, ed. Earl Ingersoll (London: Flamingo, 1994). [In the United States this collection is titled *Doris Lessing: Conversations* and is listed under that title in the bibliography at the end of this volume (editors’ note).] “I don’t feel at all when I’m writing that I am a woman writing. I don’t think it’s a good thing to do that,” says Lessing. “It’s another prison to think I am a woman writing this. It means that you deliberately narrow all your sensibilities” (119).


18. See Brenda Silver, *Virginia Woolf Icon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). Silver addresses the slipperiness of interpreting Woolf as an icon—how the “multiple” and “contradictory sites” Woolf “occupies in our cultural discourses” work to complicate the image (11).


20. For examples of Anna effacing her own personality when she associates with people who have more dominant personalities, pay special attention to her interactions with Molly and Mother Sugar/Mrs. Marks. For examples of Anna effacing her own personality through sex, pay special attention to Anna/Ella’s interactions with George, Paul, and Saul.


22. Ibid.


30. Ibid., 334.


34. Ibid., 44.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid., 51.


42. Ibid., 311.

43. Ibid., 204. See Suzette Henke’s discussion of this same passage in Part Four of this volume in “The Challenge of Teaching Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* in the Twenty-First Century” [editors’ note].


45. Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 73.

2: “Anon,” “Free Women,” and the Pleasures of Impersonality

47. Minh-ha, Woman, Native, Other, 27.
48. Ibid., 269.
50. Ibid., 50–51.
51. Minh-ha, Woman, Native, Other, 17.
52. Ibid., 18.
54. T. S. Eliot’s notion of an “objective correlative” through which one articulates emotional content in literature seems like a useful term through which to trace Woolf’s and Lessing’s attempts to imagine a personal-impersonal writing. Woolf, of course, was a contemporary and friend of Eliot’s; Claire Sprague makes a strong case for Eliot’s influence on Lessing in “Lessing’s The Grass is Singing, Retreat to Innocence, The Golden Notebook and Eliot’s The Waste Land,” Explicator 50.3 (1992): 177–80.
55. Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text, 25. When Barthes uses the term “phallic” to describe bliss, I do not believe that he equates bliss with male versions of desire/pleasure or subordinates female versions of desire/pleasure to male ones. I believe that Barthes’s resistance against equating bliss with ejaculation (Barthes, 55) supports this reading. Rather, “phallic” seems to refer to the economy of experiences that are valued and authorized in heteronormative, patriarchal culture, which would mean that both male and female experiences of desire/pleasure are subordinated to a phallic cultural economy.
56. Woolf, A Room of One’s Own, 98.
58. Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text, 55.
59. Woolf, A Room of One’s Own, 4.
60. Ibid., 5.
62. Woolf, A Room of One’s Own, 96.
63. Ibid., 99.
64. Ibid.
68. The publication of the “journals” that Anna writes with James Shafter, another American writer, an event that Anna records in the Black Notebook (415–17), foreshadows the vision of authorship that is promoted when Saul gives Anna the opening of her novel and she gives him the opening of his story, a vision in which the personal identity of the author seems to be displaced by the text, which has a life of its own.
70. Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text, 17.
71. Antonio Damasio, Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain
72. Ibid., 250.
73. Ibid., 251. See also Debrah Raschke, who argues that Woolf subverts binary oppositions in _A Room of One’s Own_ in order to discover a new sexual imaginary, in _Modernism, Metaphysics, and Sexuality_ (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 2006).
75. Ibid., 150.
77. Ibid., 15.