POLITICS AND AESTHETICS IN THE DIARY OF VIRGINIA WOOLF

Joanne Campbell Tidwell

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Introduction

"Almost a face of its own"

The Diary of Virginia Woolf

In December 1919, Virginia Woolf wrote, "Oh yes, I've enjoyed reading the past years diary & shall keep it up. I'm amused to find how its grown a person, with almost a face of its own" (I.317).[1] Relatively close to the beginning of her long career as a diarist, Woolf had already recognized the power and possibility to be found in writing a diary. She went on to keep a diary for 22 years, for a total of approximately 38 years, depending on how one categorizes her early journals. Through her diary she was able to craft her personality and her writing.

Virginia Woolf's main diary was published in five volumes between 1977 and 1984. They were edited by Anne Olivier Bell—scholar and wife of Quentin Bell, Woolf's nephew and former co-literary executor of Woolf's estate—with assistance from Andrew McNeillie on volumes three, four, and five. The five volumes cover 30 handwritten manuscripts, many of which were hand bound by Woolf; they consist of entries for the years 1915 to 1941. These volumes begin when Woolf is 33 years old, with the last entry made days before she drowned herself. She sporadically kept a diary earlier in her life, starting at age 15, and these entries vary in form more so than those in Bell's series, which usually feature regular, dated entries. The earlier diary, edited by Mitchell Leaska, was published in 1990 as *A Passionate Apprentice: The Early Years, 1887–1909.*

Quentin Bell considers Virginia Woolf's diary to be a masterpiece, remarking in 1977: "I would say that in calling it a masterpiece I mean to indicate that it is a literary achievement equal to though very different from *The Waves* or *To the Lighthouse,* having the same accurate beauty of writing but also an immediacy such as one finds only in diaries; it is in fact one of the great diaries of the world" (xiii). Critics who have written about Woolf's

diary as an independent text confine their analyses to short articles about specific sections or to the diary as a monolithic work. Most scholars have used the diary for information about Woolf's life, her attitudes toward writing, and her development as a writer. I want to look at the diary as primary text, rather than as a corollary to her fiction and essays. I will consider the diary as the site of Woolf's conflict between aesthetics and politics. Woolf, like many women writers, struggles for a balance between aesthetic and political issues in her fiction. Contemporary views of the aesthetic goals of fiction encouraged her to distance herself from her subject matter and employ a tone of disinterest. Her political views, however, demanded that more personal subject matter be incorporated and required the inclusion of more domestic topics. Throughout her fiction Woolf struggles to maintain a balance between her aesthetic standards and her political views. Woolf anticipated Rita Felski's discussion in *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (1989) by attempting to find a writing style that would further women's interests and still remain aesthetically sound. Her diary is especially appropriate to this struggle because as a genre the diary straddles the fence between the literary and non-literary, fiction and nonfiction, masculine and feminine, personal and public. The diary informs the rest of her work by discussing her writing process and the early inspiration for each novel, but the diary is more than the sum of its parts. Many of the conflicts and tensions that Woolf teases out in her fiction and essays first appear in the diary, and therefore the diary functions as a maternal, nurturing space for Woolf's intellectual development. The diary not only illuminates and informs her other writing, but it also operates as an originative document.

In *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (1989), Rita Felski identifies a central dilemma in feminist literary thought. As feminism develops as a social movement, literature emerges as one of the primary methods of conveying women's issues and identifying women's problems with current social systems and techniques of representation. Early second wave feminism, as represented by Sandra Gilbert's and Susan Gubar's *A Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), examined the portrayal of women in literature and analyzed the roles women were reduced to in literature of the past. They also analyze literature written by women and show how the writers encode a harsh portrayal of society. Feminists recovered women's writing that had been dismissed by the literary establishment as second rate or sentimental. Critics such as Kate Millet reveal gender bias that led critics to dismiss otherwise good literature because of the gender of the author or because the subject matter was judged to be "feminine" and therefore unworthy of critical notice. As feminists revealed gender bias in established aesthetic systems,

feminists were accused of merely tearing down classic literature and leaving nothing behind. They were charged with aesthetic relativity and nihilism.

To counteract such claims, feminists attempted to develop new aesthetic systems. They also endeavored to define what feminine and masculine writing look like and what feminist literature should accomplish. Do women write differently from men because of their gender? Have women been molding patriarchal language to their own needs, even though it can not fully tell their stories? Some critics claim that the genre of the diary is inherently feminine. Felski argues that "it is impossible to speak of 'masculine' and 'feminine' in any meaningful sense in the formal analysis of texts" (2). To determine what feminist literature is, a feminist aesthetic must be defined. First, what is meant by the term *aesthetics?* In its simplest form, aesthetics is "the study or philosophy of the beautiful in nature, art, and literature" ("Aesthetics" 7). The study of aesthetics is divided into considerations of how we define beauty and of how we recognize and perceive beauty. By Felski's definition, a feminist aesthetic is "a normative theory of literary or artistic form that can be derived from a feminist politics" (2). If politics alone directed literary theory, critics would harshly scrutinize female characters with an eye for misrepresentation and distortion of women's lives and how they are treated. Critics would censure writers who show women as sex objects, play toys, or princesses on pedestals. Literature that depicted women as strong and capable would be praised, and to be sure, much feminist criticism has examined literature in such a way. Felski demonstrates, however, that such a theory is implausible:

> A purely content-based feminist aesthetic which argues that texts can be adequately understood in terms of their mimetic and utilitarian function remains blind to questions of artistic form and technique and is unable to account for the pleasure gained from literature and art in cases where the ideologies of text and feminist reader cannot be said to coincide. (4)

There is more to literature than the ideologies that are conveyed. Indeed, realistic portrayal of women sometimes demands a portrait of a less than exceptional woman. Felski questions the ability of a politically-based aesthetics to pass judgment on formal aspects of literature. Literature that does not agree with the reader's own politics can still be fine literature if it is written well. A reader can appreciate the quality of the writing even if the ideas are not personally attractive.

Instead of looking at literature from a purely political point of view, feminist literature can be defined as the literature that best expresses how