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Postmodern and Poststructuralist Approaches to Virginia Woolf

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"In or about December 1985, Virginia Woolf criticism changed" (Caughie 1991, 1). Thus begins my book, *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism* (1991), which demonstrates how postmodern and poststructuralist theories can change, and have changed, the way we read Woolf—that is, the kinds of questions that motivate our readings, the objectives that guide our analyses, and the contexts in which we place her works. 1985 was the year Toril Moi published *Sexual/Textual Politics* and first articulated the opposition between French feminist *theory* and Anglo-American feminist *criticism*, establishing "feminist postmodernism" as a new methodology that disrupted the cultural consensus among feminist critics of the 1970s. In her introduction, "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?", Moi interrogates the "theoretical assumptions about the relationship between aesthetics and politics" that made so many American feminist critics resistant to Woolf's modernist style. Relying on a "realist aesthetic," these critics, Moi argues, assess Woolf's writing and politics in terms of whether "the right content [is] represented in the correct realist form" (Moi 1985, 3-4, 7). (The relationship between form and content, as we will see, is one of the first casualties of a poststructuralist critical reading.) In contrast, Moi locates Woolf's politics "*precisely in her textual practice*" (16), focusing on the *politics of language* rather than on the politics *expressed* by Woolf's language. Although Moi's rigid division between the French and the Anglo-Americans may lead to reductive readings, in which all American feminists are represented by Elaine Showalter, Moi was the first to articulate the difference French theory makes for feminist literary criticism. What this change in thinking means for reading Woolf is the subject of this chapter.

Poststructuralism

Imagine giving or receiving the following assignment: choose any work by Woolf and write a critical essay on its stylistic features. Although vague, the assignment would probably be comprehensible to most English students. Now, what if the assignment were worded somewhat differently: choose any text by Woolf and write a critique of its discursive conventions. Are these assignments asking the student to do the same thing but simply using different terminology? Or do the different terms—*text* v. *work*, *critique* v. *criticism*, *discourse* v. *style*—make a difference in what is expected? To grasp the significance of "the linguistic turn" in literary criticism, the phrase used to designate the emergence of structuralist and poststructuralist theory, one must understand the difference between what these two assignments are asking students to do.

"The linguistic turn" dates from the writings of Ferdinand de Saussure, or more accurately, the transcriptions of his lectures produced from his students' notes. *Course in General Linguistics* (first published in French in 1949 and translated into English in 1960) changed the way linguists and literary critics think about language. Along with Sigmund Freud in psychology, Emile Durkheim in sociology, and Claude Lévi-Strauss in anthropology, Saussure helped to found structuralism, a methodology that attends to how events or objects function within a system rather than to what they mean in themselves. Saussure's *Course* gave us the concept of the *sign* that led to the development of a general science of signs called *semiology* (Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* [1957] is one of the best examples) as well as to the distinction cited above between *work* and *text*.

The sign is composed of a *signifier*, a form that signifies or carries meaning, and a *signified*, an idea or concept. The relation between the signifier and signified, which are inseparable, is arbitrary, by which Saussure meant unmotivated. A sign has significance or value

in terms of its place within a system of language—that is, in terms of its relation to other signs within the system—not in relation to some preexisting thing in the world or concept in one's head. The advantage of *sign* over *word* is that the sign consists of a relationship between two elements so that meaning is understood to be *relational* and *differential* (a sign carries meaning because of its difference from other signs), not *referential* (pointing to something in the world). In language, Saussure says, "there are only differences *without positive terms*" (Saussure, 120). That is, nothing has value or meaning in itself. A good example of this is our monetary system. An American dollar bill, for example, no longer carries value because it represents a certain amount of gold in the U.S. Treasury; rather, it has value because of its function within a system of exchange.[1] For Saussure, signs, not words, are the basic components of language.

One cannot grasp the significance of Saussure's concept of the sign if one translates *signifier* and *signified* into *word* and *meaning*. Yet it is the very inevitability of that mistake among beginning students of theory that can help us understand why Saussure needed the concept of the sign in the first place: namely, to challenge precisely the notion of language bound up with word-meaning.[2] The initial slip in translating the theoretical concept into familiar terms is a necessary one in order to conceptualize the difference a theory of the sign makes. Saussure's relational, as opposed to referential or expressivist, theory of meaning challenges our common sense thinking about language. The concept of the sign shifts our understanding of meaning from word-world relations (the reference theory of meaning) to signifier-signified relations, where meaning obtains from the relations among elements within a system. For we tend to think of a word's meaning as "pointing to" something beyond language; the sign, in contrast, conceives meaning as something that is produced by and within the system of language itself. Whenever you have an explanation of meaning in terms of the place, function, or relations of elements

within a system—rather than in terms of intrinsic value, characteristic features, or authorial intention—you have a structural analysis. In *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, for example, Freud analyzes slips of the tongue not in terms of their content, the secret truth about the subject that the slips reveal, but in terms of unconscious processes, such as displacement and condensation, which describe relations of substitution and combination.

Because structuralism, especially Saussure's linguistics, isolates or "brackets" everyday social practices in order to focus on the functioning of the system itself, it is a type of formalism. Formalist critics, such as the New Critics of the 1940s and 1950s, analyze genres and individual works apart from their specific historical and cultural contexts. In literary studies, this focus was in part a reaction against nineteenth-century criticism that read literature as expressive of the author's biography and the work's historical moment. Formalists sought to isolate the conventions of writing that were specifically literary, categorizing different types of writing into distinct genres.

Poststructuralism is sometimes understood as a reaction against the rigidity of formalist or structural analysis that sought to identify and codify structures or sign systems conceived as coherent, complete, and relatively stable. However, as Jonathan Culler says, "when so many of yesterday's structuralists are today's poststructuralists, doubts arise about the distinction" (Culler 1982, 25). Some of those early identified with structuralism, such as Barthes and Foucault, have become key figures in poststructuralist theory. More important than the distinctions between them (which vary widely in different disciplines) are the ways poststructuralists have acted on the implications of structuralism. Where structuralists explain how sign systems work, poststructuralists analyze how they came about, what exclusions were necessary to their formation, and how their power to organize reality might be resisted and changed. That is,

poststructuralists focus on how something comes to be an object of interpretation rather than interpreting the meaning of the object itself or concentrating solely on how meanings are produced within signifying systems. Put differently, whereas structuralists are concerned with systems of meaning, poststructrualists are concerned with relations of power.

Some key texts can serve to illustrate the turn from structuralism to poststructuralism. Barthes's *S/Z* (1970) marks the turning point for some scholars who date poststructuralism from the student revolt in France in May 1968, the year Barthes began the series of lectures that culminated in this booklength essay. In *S/Z,* he sets out to do a structuralist analysis of a story by Balzac only to find that the five codes into which he had divided the text didn't hold. That discovery gave rise to a series of digressions (*les divagations*) that interrupt and disrupt the structural analysis. What began as an analysis of the text's structure turned into a long meditation on reading. "To interpret a text," Barthes writes, "is not to give it a … meaning, but on the contrary to appreciate what *plural* constitutes it" (Barthes 1970, 5). Appreciating the plurality of the text means attending to the play of meanings. As translator Richard Howard writes, Barthes's conviction is "that all telling modifies what is being told, so that … what is told is always the telling" (xi).

Foucault's *Les Mots et les choses* (literally *Words and Things* but translated into English as *The Order of Things*), published in 1966, is another example of the shift from structuralism to poststructuralism. Foucault argues that Reason is an historical invention—that is, a kind or style of thinking, not the triumph of thinking over superstition or received opinion—and this kind of thinking gave us the notion of language as a means of re-presenting a world apart. Thus, what seems "natural" (language reflects reality, literature represents life) is understood as historical and cultural. Although *The Order of Things* retains a structuralist concern with the system of

rules that determine what a given discourse can do, such as the systems of classification that characterize Enlightenment thinking, Foucault considers as well the way various systems of thought justify a certain economic and social order.[3]

Jacques Lacan's *Ecrits*, also published in 1966, rereads Freud through Saussure, moving from a structuralist analysis of unconscious processes to a poststructuralist analysis of the place of the subject in the broader cultural domain. Language speaks us, Lacan declares, in that we become subjects only through entry into the Symbolic order of language and culture.[4] The unconscious is not the seat of instincts or the receptacle of repressed desire; rather, it is a structure that functions like a language. That is, unconscious processes reveal themselves in our linguistic practices. Culture is not what lies outside the subject, in the social institutions and practices of everyday life; on the contrary, culture is what structures the very emergence of the subject.

It is the writings of Jacques Derrida, however, and the style of reading known as deconstruction, that epitomizes poststructuralism for scholars and lay persons alike. Derrida's "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (also 1966) and *Of Grammatology* (1967), among other publications, critique the "logocentrism" of the Western philosophical tradition (literally, centered on the word, but referring more broadly to notions of grounds or essences) and its "metaphysics of presence," the notion that a rational individual consciousness is at the center of all communication. In logocentric thinking, speech is primary and writing derivative because in speech the intending subject is present and thus there is only a single source of authority linking the subject to his words. To deconstruct a text is to show how the devalued term in binary oppositions, such as speech/writing, always already inhabits the privileged term.

What all these various writings do is to expose the essential difference, division, disorder, or discontinuity that gives rise to the seemingly unified, self-sufficient, coherent identity, whether of the individual or the system. Thus, poststructuralism concerns itself more with "unraveling" systems of meaning than with explaining them.[5] Where structuralism was concerned with discovering the big structure that explained all others, poststructuralism reveals how every structure leads to yet another structure.

Saussure once said "it is often easier to discover a truth than to assign it its rightful place" (68). It is one thing to understand Saussure's concept of the sign; it is quite another to determine precisely what this new concept means, how it changes what we do, not just how we talk. The structuralist revolution produced a shift in the *locus* of explanation, from the nature of meaning to the place of the signifier in a system of differential relations. Thus, structuralism required a new object of study. In literary studies, this object is the *text*, named and conceptualized by poststructuralists.[6] In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) Foucault argues that one of the first unities or familiar concepts that scholars must question is that of the book (or work): "The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences; it is a node within a network"(qtd. in Rivkin and Ryan, 423). Julia Kristeva provides a name for this textual network, *intertextuality*, which she defines as "a field of transpositions of various signifying systems" (Kristeva 1974, 60).

The notion of the *book* or the *work* is bound up with hermeneutics, the practice of exegesis or the finding of meaning in a work, and with the metaphysics of presence, the idea that a rational human mind is at the center of human communication. Such thinking makes authorial

intention a privileged concept in literary criticism. Even the New Criticism, which dismissed authorial intention as a fallacy, retained the notion of the *work* as opposed to the *text*, for its close attention to form and its bracketing of meaning kept the form/content dichotomy intact. Poststructuralism changes the concept of the object itself, which requires a change in the very nature of what readers and critics do. In other words, the shift from *work* to *text* entails a shift in the definition of writing itself, from a mode of communication to a signifying system. "Writing is read," writes Derrida, "it is not the site … of hermeneutic deciphering, the decoding of a meaning or truth" (Derrida 1988, 21). Thus, poststructuralists are concerned not with questions of meaning but with forces of production. Barthes identifies the *work* with consumption and the *text* with production. When critics take Derrida's well-known statement, "There is nothing outside the text," to mean that there is no social, historical, or material reality outside the pages of the book, they are reappropriating the notion of *text* to the concept of the *book*. There is nothing outside the text because text means a field of relations, not a physical object or self-contained system of meaning. The concept of the text dissolves the boundaries between types or genres of writing (central to New Criticism), and between literary and nonliterary cultural productions (central to the institutionalization of literary studies).

This change in the concept of writing and in the object of study explains Barthes's infamous phrase, the "death of the author." Often misunderstood as simply dismissing authorial intention, as if what the author thought was irrelevant, the phrase refers to a particular historical conception of the author (as Foucault's essay "What is an Author?" helps to make clear). To declare the death of the author, to displace the author as the center or origin of meaning, is to affirm that language as a signifying system precedes and conditions thought. The notion of the author as the conscious, intending subject wholly responsible for the work's creation and

meaning makes no sense in terms of the notion of a text conceived as "a methodological field" (Barthes, "From Work to Text" 157), as a "field of forces" and "not the book" (Derrida 1986, 167-168). When Barthes writes in "The Death of the Author," "it is language which speaks, not the author" (143), he is following the structuralist notion of language to its logical conclusion (one Lacan also reached). Barthes and, more directly, Foucault treat *author* as a concept, not a person, and one that is related to other concepts (such as *originality*, *genius*, *oeuvre*) that function in a certain discourse of literary interpretation called hermeneutics.

Discourse, for poststructuralists, refers not simply to a way of speaking or a certain genre of writing, but to a systematic mode of inquiry defined by certain kinds of practices, based on certain shared assumptions, and producing a certain kind of knowledge, thereby legitimizing certain kinds of questions and invalidating (or ignoring) others. A minister can pronounce you husband and wife, a medical doctor can pronounce you cured, but if the doctor proclaimed you were married and the minister asserted you were well, one might well challenge the legitimacy of such statements. In "Teaching Ignorance," Barbara Johnson shows how textbook questions about literary readings focus students' attention on certain kinds of questions ("Is Molière a feminist?") that deflect attention from other kinds of questions ("Who would want to call him that and why?"). Discourses entail power relations, linking power to knowledge, institutions, and disciplinary practices. Those symbolic systems that enable us to conceptualize ourselves as subjects and that establish the possibilities of meaning in a culture at a certain historical moment are discourses. To study discursive conventions, then, is to study the practices that produce, and legitimate, knowledge.

For poststructuralists, the relevant question is not "what does it mean?" but "how does it function within a system to produce meanings?" Whereas literary *criticism* concerns itself with

exegesis, determining the meaning of a work or else bracketing its meaning to analyze its form (that is, the stylistic features, figures of speech, or rhetorical strategies employed to produce certain effects in the reader), poststructuralist *theory* concerns itself with *critique*, a detailing of the systematic ways in which meanings are produced by certain discourses. A critique recognizes that reading is "deeply involved in questions of authority and power" (Johnson 1990, 46). As opposed to an interpretive practice oriented toward the revelation of meaning or truth, a critique interrogates the effects of designating something as the origin of meaning or truth, noting how what we think of as an origin or cause is the effect of certain historical, material, and institutionalized practices.

Gayatri Spivak's 1980 essay, "Unmaking and Making in *To the Lighthouse,*" provides an example of a poststructuralist—specifically, deconstructionist—reading, as signaled by its title. Spivak begins by insisting that she is not interpreting the novel: "This essay is not necessarily an attempt to illuminate *To the Lighthouse* …. It is rather an attempt to use the book by deliberate superimposition of two allegories—grammatical and sexual—and by reading it, at moments, as autobiography" (Spivak 1988, 30). Her approach "produces a reading," Spivak says, not "the 'truth' of the text" (30). Spivak plays with (that is, produces plural readings of) the concept of the "copula," the fundamental structure of grammar and logic. The copula links two things, as in the statement "Beauty is truth," and thus forms the basic grammar of the logical proposition: e.g., P is Q. But "copula" also "carries a sexual charge," Spivak says, "copulation," a coupling not of ideas or grammatical elements but of persons. Structurally, Part II of *To the Lighthouse* serves as the copula, linking the first and third parts of the novel, yet the language of Part II, which Spivak calls the language of madness, "uncouples" the logic of the narration. Any effort to read the novel linearly, as progressing from the pre-war narrative of Part I to the post-war narrative of

Part III, must necessarily elide the equivocating language of Part II. "Time Passes" marks the limit that makes the narration of Parts I and III possible. Spivak writes, "I should like to propose that, whatever her writing intent, 'Time Passes' narrates the production of a discourse of madness within this autobiographical roman à clef. In the place of the copula or the hinge in the book a story of unhinging is told" (35). (Note that the phrase, "whatever her writing intent," does not deny that Woolf had intentions in writing the novel, but implies that such intentions, even if recoverable, no longer govern the reading of a text.)

Such a reading cannot be summed up by the logic of the proposition: i.e., "Spivak's reading argues that the novel means such-and-such." Instead, one must pay attention to how the essay proceeds, the kinds of moves it makes. Spivak attends closely to the grammar of the novel. For example, quoting the passage in Part I in which Mrs. Ramsay, knitting, looks up to see the third stroke of the lighthouse, and thinks, "It was odd … how if one was alone, one leant to inanimate things; … felt they expressed one; felt they became one …," Spivak notes that *one* "can be both an 'identity' (the word for the unit) and 'difference' (an impersonal agent, not she herself)" (33). This is a characteristic poststructuralist move, noting how grammar functions to disrupt the notion of identity as sameness, revealing its dependence on difference. What Spivak's reading elucidates is how "knowledge as noncontradiction (identity) is put in question" throughout the novel, "unmaking" meaning to expose the suppressed elements giving rise to it (43). In another example, citing passages from Part II that carry a "sexual charge," Spivak notes how "the disappearance of reason and the confusion of sexuality are consistently linked" (38), again playing on the relation between the copula and copulation as well as noting the way the novel undermines the binary oppositions on which the logic of noncontradiction depends.

Spivak's reading of the copula brings to mind another key text in the emergence of poststructuralism, even though no one would call the text itself poststructuralist. J. L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), based on the William James Lectures Austin delivered at Harvard University in 1955, challenges the tendency of grammarians to think of statements as describing some state of affairs. Such statements Austin terms "constatives" and distinguishes them from another category of statements he calls "performatives." Performatives bring into existence something that did not exist prior to the utterance itself. Austin's most famous example is the marriage ceremony, where the statement "I now pronounce you husband and wife" brings the couple into being. Another often-used example is the U.S. Declaration of Independence, which begins, "We the people of the United States." The act of declaring independence from Britain brings into existence the "we" of this statement, the people of the United States that the pronoun seems to refer to. Performatives are conventional acts, produced by certain persons in certain circumstances following certain practices or procedures. As such, they are evaluated in terms of their effects rather than their accuracy or truthfulness. By the end of the book, however, Austin has muddled the distinction between these types of statements by declaring that all speech acts, even constatives, are conventional.

What Austin's theory of the performative does, far more radically than declaring that certain statements bring something into being through the utterance itself, is to undercut the integrity of the subject, and this move in particular provides the poststructuralist connection. The "solid moralist," Austin says, believes that "accuracy and morality alike are on the side of the plain saying that *our word is our bond*" (10, original italics). Austin's performative decouples the copula of that formulation, for a performative statement, as a conventional act, does not belong to the speaker. A performative act, such as promising, is accomplished in the language itself. By

introducing a category of statements that are not capable of being evaluated in terms of truth or accuracy (what Austin terms the true/false fetish of the Descriptive Fallacy), and then suggesting that all speech acts, insofar as they are conventional, are performatives, Austin drives a wedge between word and bond, undercutting our tendency to attribute positions to the speaker alone (thereby ignoring the force of language and convention) and thwarting our desire for a guarantee that the speaker means what she or he says. The necessary connection between word and bond can no longer be assumed because assessing the truth or falsity of a statement can never be done "outside" the performative dimension of language.

This is the kind of reading presented in Derrida's "Signature Event Context" (1972), which pushes Austin's theory of the performative to the limit. Derrida's reading of Austin has given us the concept of performativity so central to postmodern theory, a concept which has profoundly changed contemporary thinking about identity formation. Performativity conceives identity as the *effect* of the subject's performance of various cultural practices, a *product* of various discursive regimes (e.g., linguistic, psychological, sexual).[7] One reason poststructuralists speak of the *subject* rather than the *individual* is that the individual is an embodied person conceived as an autonomous, inviolable self, whereas the *subject* is a linguistic concept signifying a position within a structure (e.g., the subject of a sentence). *Individual* and *subject* are two very different ways of conceptualizing an object of study. Thus, poststructuralists challenge not just a way of thinking about language but, as Culler puts it, the very "priority of the subject itself"(1997, 111). No wonder Catherine Belsey refers to the linguistic turn as a "'Copernican' revolution" (130).[8]

Postmodernism

At the time of this writing, postmodernism has been receiving quite a bit of coverage in the press. In the weeks following September 11, 2001 many commentators and columnists read in the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and on the pentagon in Washington D.C. the demise of postmodernism. In article after article, bearing such titles as "Attacks on U.S. Challenge Postmodern True Believers" (*The New York Times*, September 22, 2001) and "After the Attack, Postmodernism Loses its Glib Grip" (*Chicago Tribune*, September 27, 2001), writers proclaimed postmodernism the latest victim of the horror of the terrorist attacks. Why would an assault on symbols of U.S. economic and military hegemony be interpreted as the end of a type of theory?[9] Insofar as postmodernism is identified as challenging objective notions of truth, rejecting foundationalist thinking and universal values, and conceiving reality as a "fiction" or "cultural construction," the argument goes, it leaves us with no position from which to respond, morally or militarily, to the terrorist attacks. If there is no reality, if values are relative (which is often misunderstood as "subjective" rather than as "contingent" and "arbitrary," in Saussure's sense of that term), if all distinctions (fact/fiction, good/evil, truth/falsehood) are unstable and untenable, then, the argument continues, we have no way of justifying our condemnation of terrorism.[10] And since we all must condemn these attacks, postmodernism is given the lie.

Although these critics rightly point to some common themes identified with postmodernism, they fail to *read* any of the array of theories subsumed under this term and instead reduce the theories to a handful of propositions. In this way, they recuperate postmodernism through the very kind of thinking it challenges. Rather than argue with specific positions attributed to postmodernism in response to its critics, we can look, as we did with poststructuralism, at its emergence as a discourse and its relation to poststructuralist theory.

Some scholars insist on a distinction between poststructuralism and postmodernism while others conflate the two. What creates confusion is the grammar of the coordinating conjunction (poststructuralist *or* postmodernist theory, poststructuralist *and* postmodernist approaches) that suggests at once that one term is an alternative to the other and that the two terms are equivalent. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan assert that in or about 1979 "Post-structuralism changed names" and became "Post-Modernism" (352). Frederic Jameson argues for keeping the two terms distinct. Unlike "poststructuralism," which is tied to certain disciplines and takes as its "fundamental component" the critique of interpretation, "postmodernism" is a much more general term that describes an era rather than a theory or practice (xiv). Understood as a cultural dominant, postmodernism designates "macrolevel" changes, such as in information technologies, global economies, biological and digital cloning, and life on line. Jeffrey Nealon understands poststructuralism as a new logic, specifically, the logic of the postmodern (20-21). But perhaps the best formulation of the connection between the poststructuralism emerging from the structuralist revolution and the broader implications of this revolution that now go by the name of postmodernism is Lacan's statement in "The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious" (1957): "The slightest alteration in the relation between man and the signifier, *in this case in the procedures of exegesis*, changes the whole course of history by modifying the lines which anchor his being. … everything involving not just the human sciences, but the destiny of man, politics, metaphysics, literature, advertising, propaganda, and through these even the economy, everything has been affected" (321-322). That destiny is postmodernism.

As we have already seen with theorists such as Lacan and Foucault, postmodernists take language, conceived as a signifying system, as the starting point for thinking about the subject, politics, and justice rather than beginning with material reality, economic production, or social

institutions. In general, one could define the project of postmodernism as Moi describes Kristeva's project: an effort "to articulate a *politics* [and one might add, an ethics] which would constitute the logical consequence of a non-representational understanding of writing"(Moi 1986, 4). Jean Baudrillard provides one example. In a series of books from *The System of Objects* (1968) through *Simulations* (1983), Baudrillard contends that the real is a matter of signification, a "simulacrum." Whereas the system of representation presumes the sign bears some relation to the real (often conceived as a reflection of the real), simulation operates in the absence of a referent and thus, as Baudrillard puts it, simulation "bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own simulacrum" (1983, 11). Andy Warhol's seriograph of Marilyn Monroe (arguably the most famous image of postmodernism and parodied on the cover of *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism*) points to the primacy of the image, its power to produce the "real thing" it purportedly represents, even the power to usurp its place, and thereby undermining distinctions between the authentic original and the spurious reproduction. (Simone from the eponymous film by Andrew Niccol is a more contemporary example.) Reality is not so much denied by such theory as redefined: "The very definition of the real becomes: *that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction*" (Baudrillard 146).

Such thinking has led to the characterization of postmodernism in terms of apocalyptic statements about ends that recent news reports echo: the end of reality, the end of history, the end of meaning, the dissolution of the social bond, the death of the subject, etc.. In one sense, this characterization has a certain legitimacy insofar as postmodernists critique discourses of knowledge oriented toward a *telos*, or end, where truth or meaning will be revealed (Nealon, 74-75). But in another sense, this characterization of loss assumes that there once was an organic society or an autonomous and rational self that has since suffered in a postindustrial,

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technologized, and globalized economy.[11] Those postmodernists who produce postmodern

theories (as opposed to those who analyze postmodernism) understand such concepts of society

and the self as "fictions," narratives that have gained a certain legitimacy, what Jean-François

Lyotard calls "metanarratives"(34). In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*

(1984), Lyotard defines postmodernism as an "incredulity toward metanarratives," those

legitimizing discourses or languages based on a belief in universal values, objective knowledge,

and rationalist thought that are oriented toward some end: truth, self-knowledge, freedom,

progress. For postmodernists, such concepts as *freedom* or *progress* are historical productions,

not transcendental values. Metanarratives are always narrated from the perspective of a

"metasubject," Lyotard says, not a subject "mired in the particular positivity of its traditional

knowledge" (34). Today, metanarratives have given way to micronarratives, Lyotard says, so

that "the problem of legitimation … has itself been legitimated as a problem" (27). Lyotard

adopts the methodology of language games (from Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical

Investigations*) where legitimation is a matter of a temporary consensus among players on the

rules of the game in order to get something done. "That is what the postmodern world is all

about," writes Lyotard. "Most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative. It in no way

follows that they are reduced to barbarity. What saves them from it is their knowledge that

legitimation can only spring from their own linguistic practices and communicational

interaction" (41).

Commentators on September 11th have prematurely declared the death of postmodernism.

For they mistook postmodernism for a set of beliefs, a philosophy of life that could be tested

against the reality of the terrorist attacks and found wanting. Conceiving postmodernism as a

new logic or a mode of analysis, or in terms of the problem of legitimation, provides a different

response. Given that postmodernism seeks out the conflicts and instabilities in any system of value, it challenges the "us-against-them" thinking that resulted in the terrorist attacks and justified the U.S. response to them. Lyotard defines terror as "the efficiency gained by eliminating, or threatening to eliminate, a player from the language game one shares with him" (63). Postmodernism exposes the potential terror in any practice of justice rooted in universal values or consensus (Lyotard 65).

Wittgenstein's concept of language games that informs Lyotard's theory of the postmodern helps us to understand the problem of defining a concept like "postmodernism" as a problem of grammar. As Wittgenstein puts it, the difficulty stems from our "tendency to look for something in common to all the entities which we commonly subsume under a general term" (1965, 17). Yet the change in thinking we have been discussing in terms of poststructuralism would shift the question, from "What is postmodernism?" or "What is its essential difference from modernism?" to "What is the point of the distinction between these terms? How are we using this term, in what context, and for what purposes?" (the kinds of questions raised in *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism*).[12] As we have learned from the poststructuralist revolution, when we ask the meaning of a word, we are, to quote Wittgenstein again, investigating "its use in the language" (1953, #43) or in a particular discourse. Thus, it is important to keep in mind that postmodernism is employed differently in different disciplines. In philosophy, for example, postmodernism designates the end of metaphysics and the projects of the Enlightenment. In architecture, it refers to a specific style, a "double-coding" that incorporates both new (modernist) techniques and more traditional patterns in an effort to respond to social reality (Jencks 14). In history and sociology, it functions as a periodizing concept, denoting a particular era that Jameson calls late capitalism. In literary studies, the term is used in both senses, as the

literary period that follows modernism, which dates roughly from the 1890s to the 1940s, and as a style of writing that retains some modernist traits (experimentation, irony, self-reflexivity) while rejecting other aspects of modernism (its notion of art's autonomy, its belief in individual subjectivity, its assumed resistance to mass culture).[13]

By virtue of its very name, concepts of postmodernism depend on how a discipline conceives modernism, which means that definitions of postmodernism must necessarily change as concepts of modernism are challenged and revised. Since literary history is made, not simply recorded, we cannot speak of modernism as, to borrow Foucault's language, "that which was already there" but only as something "fabricated in a piecemeal fashion" after the fact (1984, 72). When we contrast postmodernism with modernism, then, we are not comparing two things but rather different ways of conceiving writing and reading. Revisionary readings of modernism have been underway for over twenty years now, uncovering, as Jonathan Arac puts it, "an ever-receding history of postmodernism" (x-xi) by challenging received interpretations of a largely white, western, and masculine modernist tradition and its New Critical legacy that have shaped the canon of twentieth-century British and American literature.[14] Such revisionary readings make apparent what *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism* emphasizes: namely, that what we single out as "features" of modernist or postmodernist texts are not properties of the texts themselves but the values created by a particular approach to literature (16). Which brings us to the question of how to read modernist writers such as Virginia Woolf from the perspective of postmodernism.

As one example, let's return to *To the Lighthouse* and consider what a postmodern approach might entail.[15] Not surprisingly, given the affinities between poststructuralism and postmodernism, such an approach will produce a reading that looks a lot like Spivak's poststructuralist reading discussed above. Given that postmodernists attend to the way any

discourse produces its own nonknowledge, that is, the structural exclusions that make the functioning of any discourse possible, and thereby reveal, in Foucault's words, "the heterogeneity of what was imagined as consistent with itself" (1984, 82), we can begin by asking what structural exclusions does Woolf's novel produce? As in Spivak's reading, "Time Passes" functions in a postmodern reading as a problematizing disruption in the family-romance narrative constructed in Parts I and III of the novel, exposing what that developmental narrative cannot account for. But whereas Spivak focuses on the dissolution of reason in "Time Passes," with its language of madness and its associative logic, the unhinging of the copula, a postmodern reading might well focus on the inclusion of stories often left out of our metanarratives, or what Foucault calls, our monumental histories.[16]

Part II narrates the gaps between the acts of history not only in presenting the minute particulars of the passage of time (such as the fold of a shawl loosening from a boar's skull or a rock dislodging from a cliff) over major historical events (such as war and death, presented in parenthetical asides) but also in testifying to what has not been narrated in fiction or history: specifically, the memories and interior monologues of Mrs. McNab, the woman who cleans and tends the Ramsays' summer home. What matters, though, is not simply the inclusion of "others," but the way in which those others function within the narrative. Instead of recuperating Mrs. McNab's story, "Time Passes" seems to confront its own difficulties in imagining the inner life of this lower-class woman: "Visions of joy there must have been at the wash-tub, say with her children …. Some cleavage of the dark there must have been …"(Woolf 1927, 131; hereafter *TL*). Although Erich Auerbach first pointed out that such narrative uncertainty is characteristic of the novel as a whole, in his famous close reading of a scene from Part I of the novel, the objective of Auerbach's modernist reading is to describe and classify the narrative techniques;

the objective of a postmodern reading is to interrogate their function. The narrative uncertainty does not produce the same effect throughout. The narrative speculations about Mrs. Ramsay in Part I ("Was it wisdom? Was it knowledge" [*TL* 50]) endow her with an aura of secrecy and a depth of meaning denied to Mrs. McNab, who "continued to drink and gossip as before" (*TL* 131).

Vision, so important for the modernist artist, is denied Mrs. McNab. When Mrs. McNab remembers Mrs. Ramsay, she thinks of concrete things: "boots and shoes," "a brush and comb," "a grey cloak" (*TL* 136); when Lily remembers Mrs. Ramsay, she tries to imagine her thoughts and desires: "What did the hedge mean to her, what did the garden mean to her, what did it mean to her when a wave broke?" (*TL* 198). Mrs. McNab's memories consist of isolated things; Lily puts things together, "write[s] them out in some sentence" (*TL* 147), a process that, in this novel, defines vision, the ability to forge relationships out of disparate experiences. Although given some voice in this novel, Mrs. McNab is denied narrative agency, the ability to select and order events into a meaningful sequence, the power to imaginatively reconstruct the past and thus fulfill some present desire, as Lily does in one medium and Woolf in another. Thus far from recuperating Mrs. McNab into the narrative, Part II acknowledges the limits of its vision.

Whereas a poststructuralist reading analyzes the language and structure of the text, a postmodernist reading considers as well the motivated, noninnocent nature of reading. It draws attention to the structural exclusions created by any reading that, like Auerbach's, emphasizes continuity in history, unity and closure in narrative, and commonality in culture. A postmodern reading is less concerned with defining a modernist classic like *To the Lighthouse* than with interrogating how and why it has been defined as it has; less concerned with tracing the evolution of modernism than with tracing the conflicts and motives behind its emergence as a literary

concept; less concerned with interpreting the novel than with scrutinizing what is at stake in any interpretation. Aesthetic appreciation is occluded by such a reading; notions of beauty and truth become irrelevant—or rather, they are understood to be imposed notions of value, not qualities of the text itself.[17]

(Re)reading Woolf

It seems appropriate at this point to ask, in the opening words of Part III of *To the Lighthouse*, "What does it mean then, what can it all mean?" (145). What difference does it make for what we do as Woolf scholars, literary critics, and teachers of literature? What happens to literary criticism when we stop thinking of texts in terms of form and content, and when we acknowledge the "undecidability" of writing, the inability to reduce a text to its themes? We can begin to answer these questions by contrasting some of the different ways critics have responded to the challenge of rereading Woolf in the aftermath of poststructuralist and postmodernist theories.

As early as Harry Levin's "What Was Modernism?", published in that decisive year of 1966, critics began comparing modernist writing with the *nouveau roman* of the 1950s and the American postmodernist literature of the 1960s. Initially such readings tended to mine modernist texts for postmodernist features, intimating the ways modernist writers anticipated postmodernism. Such readings might emphasize, for example, the metafictional devices in *Jacob's Room*, where the text calls attention to itself *as* a text as in "What do we seek through millions of pages? Still hopefully turning the pages—oh, here is Jacob's room" (Woolf 1922, 97). Or they might cite the line from "Time Passes" quoted by Spivak, "The mirror is broken," and elaborate on the poststructuralist implications of such a line, suggesting the end of

representation and mimesis. Yet, as *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism* shows, to begin with a

general definition of postmodernism and then to identify isolated instances of postmodern

themes and strategies in modernist writings may change thematic emphases but not necessarily

the motives and objectives for reading. The assumptions that the text is an autonomous entity

existing prior to and apart from our reading of it; that all texts grouped under the same rubric

share certain common features; that these features are properties of the texts themselves; and that

the text bears a reflective relation to its historical moment belong to a *modernist* paradigm.

More recently, in the aftermath of the linguistic turn, postmodernist approaches tend to

recontextualize modernists, not just to challenge the inherited critical tradition established by

modernists like Eliot, but also to bring together otherwise separated cultural discourses through

the text itself. That is, postmodern readings (as opposed to readings that discuss modernists in

terms of postmodernism) move through poststructuralism to change the kinds of questions that

may be productively raised in a reading and thereby to reconsider what a text might do.[18]

Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism was the first booklength study of Virginia Woolf to

bring the various strains of poststructualist and postmodernist theory to bear on Woolf's writings

and to change our thinking about what texts do. What is most distinctive about the book is its

way of proceeding. Chapters do not move chronologically through Woolf's major novels and

essays; instead, each chapter sets up a particular problem in Woolf criticism and reads several

works (both primary texts by Woolf and secondary texts on her) against each other to illustrate

how poststructuralist theories of language and postmodernist theories of narrative can get us

unstuck from certain habitual modes of thinking that give rise to the problem to be resolved. That

is, the book does not set out to explain postmodernism, nor to do poststructuralist readings of

individual works (as Spivak does with *To the Lighthouse*), nor to claim Woolf as a

postmodernist. Instead, it demonstrate how to read differently in response to poststructuralist insights. "Through a series of related explorations," *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism* enacts "a way of thinking about and responding to narrative discourse that considers different ways of relating things rather than the distinction between two things" (Caughie 1991, xii).

      Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism opens by showing that even Woolf's deconstructing feminist critics, who challenge modernist readings of her works, rely on critical assumptions and methods bound up with the modernist aesthetics they claim to reject. What would it mean to act on a different set of assumptions is demonstrated in subsequent chapters. Chapters 1 and 5 can provide examples. Chapter 1 argues that as long as we accept authenticity, autonomy, permanence and uniqueness as our aesthetic standards, we will interpret a novel that is fragmentary, contradictory, or imitative either as a failed endeavor or as an accurate reflection of the chaos or banality of life itself. Yet in much postmodern fiction, as in Woolf's last novel, what was once narrated—the doubts and difficulties of the artist—in modernist novels (such as Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*) becomes the *structural* principle of the works themselves. Thus, *Between the Acts*, with its numerous breaks and interruptions, its cacophony and banalities, need not be read as the artist's loss of faith in the efficacy of art or as reflecting the social disruptions caused by the advent of war; rather, these structures are the *logical consequence* of a novel that makes error, uncertainty, frustration, and discontinuity elements of—not obstacles to—the reading and writing of literature, and one that seeks to engage the public in the production and preservation of art (55). What we find in Woolf's writings, then, are not her ideas about art or patriarchy or gender expressed through her particular style, but the theoretical, political, and aesthetic implications of her changing textual practices. In this late novel, Woolf no longer conceives art as unifying a culture because, as she writes in a 1927 diary

entry, national divisions are being eroded by new technologies, such as airplanes and airwaves (Woolf 1980, 145). In the cacophonies of Woolf's novel one can hear the sounds of a unified and univocal audience dispersing.[19]

Chapter 5 takes up the question of aesthetic value by reading what is perhaps the least valued of Woolf's novels, her mock biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's dog, *Flush* (1933). Woolf's best-selling novel in England, and a Book-of-the-Month Club selection in the U.S., *Flush* is often dismissed as simply a commercial venture not a serious work of art meriting critical attention. Those who do take the novel seriously read through the surface joke to the serious subtext beneath: its critique of London's class and sex oppression. However, insofar as postmodernism bears a different relation to the categorical distinction between the serious and the commercial, or high art and popular culture, rereading *Flush* from the perspective of postmodern art can change our way of valuing so that distinguishing absolutely between the high and the low, the canonical and the marginal, the serious and the spurious is no longer worthwhile, no longer a valuable service rendered by critics and teachers of literature (Caughie 1991, 145). Instead we can read *Flush* as the waste product of a canonical economy, what has been discarded from Woolf's modernist canon, and in doing so expose the functioning of that valuational system. For in terms of its own valuational history (that is, the history of choices Woolf made in producing the novel and that readers and critics have made in consuming it), *Flush* reveals that aesthetic value (defined as intrinsic) and economic value (determined by exchange worth) are mutually dependent (147) and, further, that readings, texts, and canons are never pure but always the product of divergent systems of value. As a waste product (at once necessary to the process of production and a superfluous by-product) *Flush* exposes the illusion of purity, prestige, and consensus that shores up a canonical economy.

Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism sets out to change our critical responses, not to codify a poststructuralist or postmodernist critical approach. As such, the book provides an example of a *performative* approach, one that sets out to enact the difference poststructuralism and postmodernism make to our ways of proceeding, to stage an engagement between Woolf and postmodernism that changes our ways of reading, not just our readings of Woolf.

Another excellent example of a performative reading is Peggy Kamuf's essay, "Penelope at Work: Interruptions in *A Room of One's Own*" (1982). Kamuf reads Woolf through Foucault, pointing to both the similarities and differences in their writings. Her purpose is less to shed light on either author than to set up a confrontation between the two to see what might emerge from the encounter. As in Spivak's reading of *To the Lighthouse*, Kamuf's reading concerns the way Woolf's essay "entails as well its own undoing" (Kamuf 1982, 7). Interruptions and digressions structure *A Room of One's Own*, its movement forwarded by "unruly associations" (8) rather than by logical connections, "always deferring the promised ends of its labor" (10)—that is, withholding any final signified. "Through these deflections," Kamuf writes, "*A Room of One's Own* defines a novel position in relation to the locked room of history" (9). Kamuf emphasizes the "place" (7) or "space" (9) of women's writing, its *position* and function rather than its *meaning*. "Since women's writing," she continues, "cannot be studied in the library," because women have been written out of (literary) history, "it will have to be read into the scene of its own exclusion" (9). That is, the history of women's writing, as Woolf shows, will have to be "invented" not simply discovered (9).

To illustrate how this might work, Kamuf interrupts her own reading of Woolf's essay with a turn to Foucault's writings, specifically the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*. This engagement between these writers exposes the "fault lines" (10) or omissions in each. If we read

Woolf's essay as a model for a feminist practice that attacks male authors and "the authority of masculine privilege," the interruption by Foucault gives us pause. For Foucault's writing exposes the masculine subject and its privilege as the effect, not the origin, of "an historical production" (10). That is, that masculine subject is a product of history, not its determining source. Thus, Foucault's analyses of power and subjectivity provide another context in which to read Woolf's essay, showing us how "to read *A Room of One's Own* as turning away from [the] historical preoccupation with the subject, closing the book on the 'I'" (11). The encounter with Foucault marks an interruption or hiatus in the history of both the Enlightenment subject and the woman writer.

Kamuf's essay does not end with this Foucauldian reading of Woolf, however. Rather, Kamuf offers another digression, this time by reading Foucault through Woolf. Where Woolf's essay proceeds by interruptions and digressions, Foucault's writing brooks no distractions, Kamuf says (12). Thus, the one who theorizes power relations occupies the historical position of power by following "a train of thought which has been trained … to think without interruptions" (13). Despite his theorizing, Foucault retains the place of the privileged, undivided subject, the "I" of Cartesian discourse from which *A Room* has turned, even as he argues that the Cartesian subject of Reason comes into being through "an exclusion—of unreason, of madness" (13). In contrast, Woolf's essay actually accomplishes a disruption of power by interrupting its narrative with fictionalized scenes of what has been excluded from history, such as the imagined (and historically inaccurate) scene of Jane Austen hiding her manuscripts from visitors, or the scene of the great scholar leaving his study for the nursery to find his mind revitalized by his wife's creation in "a different medium from his own" (qtd. in Kamuf 14). Such fictionalized

interruptions function to throw power off course, so to speak, by inventing moments when power is dislodged from discourse (14).

If Kamuf were to end her essay here, explaining how these two writers differ, she would risk turning her performative reading into a discursive one. Instead, Kamuf plays with the concept of interruption by interrupting her own argument, anticipating objections from the reader that "all of this is quite fanciful speculation" (16)—or as students sometimes complain, "you're reading too much into Woolf's essay." (Of course, that's precisely what poststructuralist theorists do, they read too much into texts in that they read for the excess of meanings and conceive the text as a "field of forces" not an autonomous object.) Kamuf concedes that this objection to her scenes of encounters (between Woolf and Foucault, between Jane Austen and the male intruder) is valid and professes that she will "try to conclude on more solid ground" (16). But what does she do but turn her attention to yet another interruption in *A Room* (16), performing the kind of approach that works against an argument that moves logically toward some final signified.

Such readings as Kamuf's, Caughie's and Spivak's treat Woolf's fictional writings in the same way they treat the theoretical texts, rather than taking the theory as offering explanatory paradigms for the fiction. In this sense they are *performative*. Reading Woolf in relation to poststructuralist discourses also entails more *discursive* approaches. Makiko Minow-Pinkney's *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject* (1987), the first full-length study of Woolf in terms of poststructuralist theory, draws heavily on the writings of Lacan and especially Kristeva and other French feminists, such as Hélène Cixous. Minow-Pinkney explains the significance of the principle of *difference* as opposed to the logic of identity in understanding the intimate relation between Woolf's "aesthetic innovation and [her] feminist conviction"(Minow-Pinkney 1987, 8). Woolf's feminist writings call into question precisely the notion of identity that would

conceive the subject as separate from and confronting an external reality, and presenting a more poststructuralist understanding of the subject as "constituted in and by" a network of sign systems. Androgyny becomes, in Minow-Pinkney's reading, not "false transcendence of sexual identity" or an "evasion" of reality, as it is for Elaine Showalter, but a "play of heterogeneity, a fertile difference" that rethinks unity as multiplicity (12).[20]

Similarly, in *Imagination in Theory: Culture, Writing, Words, and Things* (1999), Michèle Barrett argues that reading Woolf through poststructuralism enables us to see, for example, that for Woolf the problem of femininity takes root at an unconscious level rather than in social convention (Barrett 1999, 41). Barrett identifies poststructuralism with what Foucault calls "dispensing with things," understood as anterior to discourse, and instead focusing on the formation of objects that emerge only in discourse (18). Barrett points out the many ways in which Woolf's writing lends itself to a poststructuralist reading, as in Woolf's questioning of the assumptions of unitary, uncontradictory identity and her exploration of a multiple, divided consciousness. In her chapter "Virginia Woolf Meets Michel Foucault," Barrett explains how Foucault's account of the history of the reason/madness division helps to explain critics' obsession with Woolf's madness (186-187). This area offers "resonances" between the works of these two writers; both are "pre-eminently interested in words, in language, in what is said and can be said" (187). Yet there is another side, what Barrett terms a "mystic" side, to Woolf that still believes in those Enlightenment values of freedom, truth, and vision (45). Poststructuralism may illuminate aspects of Woolf's thinking, but Woolf is no poststructuralist.

Such critics as Minow-Pinkney and Barrett advance a poststructuralist understanding of Woolf by explaining how these theories can better account for Woolf's feminist beliefs, her changing narrative strategies, and the political implications of her writings. They are *discursive*

insofar as they set out to explain the relation between Woolf and poststructuralism or postmodernism. (*Discursive* is one of those ambiguous words poststructuralists love, meaning both a rational analysis that moves coherently from topic to topic and an explanation that rambles. Although I mean it here in the first sense, a poststructuralist would remain sensitive to the implications of the alternative meaning, which cannot simply be set aside but which marks the difference within this concept. Thus, the distinction I am drawing here between the discursive and the performative is useful, not ontological. A performative approach is not an alternative to the discursive but rather one that brings out the double meaning of that concept.) Both Barrett and Kamuf caution us about forcing parallels between Woolf's and Foucault's writings, but Barrett emphasizes the values or arguments in Woolf's writing that work against a poststructuralist reading whereas Kamuf notes the insights that emerge as much in the contradictions as in the affinities between Woolf and Foucault. Both readings, the discursive and the performative, run risks. If you perform the difference postmodernism makes, you risk that your readers or students won't get it; if, instead, you explain postmodernism, reducing it to a set of themes or positions, then you would seem not to grasp the difference it makes. Perhaps one final example can make this clear.

Kamuf's essay and my book implicitly raise the issue of how to situate Woolf in a literary history delineated as a movement from modernism to postmodernism. This is the problem Patricia Waugh faces directly in *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern* (1989), which contains a chapter on Woolf. Acknowledging that feminism and postmodernism share the goal of "deconstructing both the subject and the 'master narratives' of history," Waugh cautions that any effort to bring these two discourses together must also contend with "their historical differences" (Waugh 1989, 16). In the 1960s, when postmodernists were proclaiming the death of the author

and undermining the unified subject, women writers were beginning, "*for the first time in history*," Waugh says, to construct a unified subjectivity that would give them "a history and agency in the world" (6, original italics). Drawing on object-relations theory, Waugh argues that women writers have developed a relational and collective concept of identity. While this concept may appear to be the same as a poststructuralist concept of identity, as expressed in Lacan's "The Mirror Stage," for example, Waugh argues that for women writers, this sense of identity must be seen in terms of women's material lives and a history of women's writing. To those marginalized by society and by history, Waugh says, "a sense of identity as constructed through impersonal and social relations of power"—that is, a "postmodern" sense of identity—has been part of their self-concept all along (3, 10, 14).

Waugh's book goes a long way toward explaining how and why women writers have largely been written out of the historical narrative of modernism's evolution into postmodernism, and toward creating an alternative literary history that can accommodate women's writing. But Waugh's is not a postmodern reading, as I will explain. Waugh reads retroactively from our postmodern moment to show how women writers anticipated what will have been a postmodern critique of the subject.[21] "It is the gradual recognition of the value of construing human identity in terms of relationship and dispersal," a recognition that came with the failure of feminism's essentialist stage and feminists' growing awareness of women's heterogeneity, "which has led feminist writing closer to a 'postmodernist' concept of subjectivity" (12-13), Waugh states. Yet the syntax here—"it is the gradual recognition"—posits a collective agency. That is, the very sentence in which Waugh acknowledges the heterogeneity of women posits feminists as a single entity coming to share the same awareness. Likewise, when Waugh says that Woolf was "among the first feminist writers" to recognize the inauthenticity of unitary concepts of identity and to

move closer toward a postmodernist concept, she reveals the tension in the revisionary history she has been creating. For Woolf was writing long before feminism's essentialist phase of the 1960s, which Waugh says was a necessary stage in the emergence of a relational concept of identity. In other words, Waugh's revisionary history is narrated in traditional terms. To provide a coherent, continuous history of women's writing, Waugh must eschew historical specificity (for example, by neglecting the historical changes informing postmodernism, reifying it as a set of propositions, as well as the historical conflicts informing feminism, such as the conflict between women's rights and women's desires). In Waugh's history, a belief in a unitary concept of identity is not so much proven inauthentic as it is displaced, from individual, empirical subjects to collective, historical agents—that is, from the "I" to the "we."[22]

What happens to a narrrative of history once the collectivity is called into question, as it is in Lyotard's definition of postmodernism as an incredulity toward "metanarratives"? For one thing, it means a change in the kinds of narratives we create, both fictional and historical. In narrating a story of the progressive liberation of women's writing, in constructing a plot that reveals women's writing as moving from the inauthentic to the authentic, the limited to the inclusive, Waugh's revionary history relies on a particular kind of narrative, a story of conflict between the subject and her society, a story of the quest for a new, more equal society that can better accommodate a new sense of self. It is a distinctively *modern* plot, a logical progression of events toward some *telos*. One consequence of this history is that Waugh praises *To the Lighthouse* (that pillar of modernism) for its movement toward an authentic concept of self and slights Woolf's last novel, *Between the Acts* (1941), for its "partial and extremely tentative" vision of social change (123). But what might make *Between the Acts* resistant to Waugh's reading is that it puts into question the very concept of history and narrative that informs it.[23]

If "make it new" was the catchphrase of modernism, Woolf's "dispersed are 'we'," a refrain from *Between the Acts*, might serve as a slogan for postmodernism.[24] In her last novel, Woolf confronts her own belief, as expressed in her contemporaneous essay, "The Leaning Tower," in the ability of outsiders to come together in a shared collective vision. The discontinuous structure of that novel, with its numerous breaks and interruptions and its incompatible interpretations, puts into question the expectation of shared meaning, questioning, as Rachel Bowlby puts it, "the supposed collectivity of 'ourselves'"—"dispersed are 'we'" (Bowlby 1988, 152-153).[25] *Between the Acts* confronts the tension between the historical need to recognize diversity in the polity that was increasingly thrust upon modernist writers in the interwar period, and the equally compelling psychological need to seek identity in the collectivity, especially when facing war or creating a movement such as feminism. In confronting the possibility that outsiders may not come to share a social vision, Woolf was compelled to face what postmodernists recognize as the crisis of the collectivity. Such a realization does not necessarily result in despair but rather can serve to create a willingness to tolerate the incompatibilities and discontinuities that any collective concept engenders. Woolf's artist, Miss La Trobe, is no longer the isolated individual coming to terms with her artwork, or a spokesperson for a culture or a constituency. Like Miss La Trobe's play within the novel, Woolf's narrative raises questions about who can produce art and for what audience, and who can provide narratives of our past.[26]

This is the kind of critique presented in *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism*, with which I began this section. In seeking to change the way we approach Woolf's writings in the wake of postmodernism, not to argue that Woolf was a postmodernist *avant la lettre*, it does not attempt to narrate a continuous history, explaining how Woolf's writing comes to resemble a postmodern

aesthetic or theory of the subject. Rather, each chapter interrogates a different set of texts and a different set of problems that postmodernist theories can help us to unravel. In trying to free us from certain habitual ways of thinking about language, literature, history, and politics, *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism* attempts to change the structure of debate informing Woolf studies that has trapped us in certain kinds of arguments, to remove the impasses created as much by our own descriptions as by the object of study, and thereby to open up new questions to pursue. Its objective is best described by Wittgenstein's phrase, "Now I know how to go on" (#154).

Where Do We Go from Here?

No one today would call her or himself a structuralist critic, and increasingly identifying oneself as a poststructuralist, deconstructive, or postmodernist critic is becoming equally passé. Instead today we hear scholars identified with movements such as cultural studies, gender studies, and queer theory. Still, such approaches have evolved from poststructuralism, however much they may also diverge from it, by taking its notion of the text to the limit. Once we conceive our object of study as the text rather than the work, and turn our attention from a criticism of literature to a critique of discourse, the field of analysis for literary scholars opens up. Once we conceptulize subjectivity in terms of difference rather than identity, traditional distinctions, such as masculine/feminine and heterosexual/homosexual, break down, giving rise to a proliferation of gender and sexual identities.

We can see the effects of questioning traditional boundaries between discourses, such as literary studies and popular culture, in Woolf studies as well. Scholars such as Brenda Silver, Jennifer Wicke and Jane Garrity, for example, have explored Woolf's place in popular and mass culture.[27] In *Virginia Woolf Icon* (1999), Silver takes as her subject the proliferation of images of

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Woolf, both in academic scholarship and in popular culture, that the cover of *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism* flaunts. Her purpose is less to shed light on Woolf as a woman or a writer than to interrogate the significance of her iconicity, reading beer ads and book covers along with Woolf criticism. Wicke's discussion of *Mrs. Dalloway* moves beyond a focus on Clarissa's shopping to analyze the "marketing" of modernism and Bloomsbury as "an experiment in coterie consumption" (6). Reading Woolf's image in *Vogue* magazine, Garrity analyzes not just the relation between high and popular culture, but also the relation between Bloomsbury as a "mass-market phenomenon" and the formation of a nationalist identity ("Selling" 29). These writings show that "there is nothing outside the text," nothing that cannot be read as text, conceived as a "field of forces" and relations of power and production, and thus nothing that falls outside the purview of the Woolf scholar. While some fear that cultural studies is opening the floodgates, undermining the distinctiveness of literary studies,[28] one can also see this change more positively, as a rethinking of inherited notions of aesthetics, the kind of rethinking that has long sustained humanistic inquiry. This change in the object of study, this shift from literary studies to cultural studies, attests to the continued influence of poststructuralist and postmodernist theories.

Notes

[1] Michel Foucault discusses the functioning of the monetary system in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of* the *Human Sciences*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1970).

[2] For a fuller discussion of Saussure's significance to the linguistic turn in literary criticism, see Pamela Caughie's *Passing and Pedagogy: The Dynamics of Responsibility*, chapter 2, "Dead Subjects," 68-80.

[3] Expressive realism in literature is another example. "Still the dominant popular mode in literature, film and television drama," Catherine Belsey writes, and often used as the standard against which modernist and postmodernist literature is measured, expressive realism "coincides chronologically with the epoch of industrial capitalism" and works with other systems of meaning to shore up the ideology necessary for the functioning of that economic system. Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London and New York: Methuen, 1980), 13, 67 ff.

[4] "Language speaks us" is a characteristic expression that captures Lacan's theory of language and subjectivity. For example, in chapter 4 of seminar XVII Lacan states, "When I say, 'the use of language', I do not mean that we use it. It is language that uses us." I am grateful to Levi R. Bryant of Loyola's Philosophy Department for this reference. The quotation in question can be found on page 75 of Seminar XVII, L'envers de la psychanalyse. Russell Grigg translates it in *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* (forthcoming).

[5] "Unravel" is used by many critics to describe a deconstructive approach. See, for example, Peggy Kamuf's essay discussed below.

[6] See, for example, Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text" in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).

[7] Here it is important to distinguish "performativity" in this poststructuralist sense from the use of "performativity" meaning maximum efficiency in production, with an emphasis on results.

[8] Lacan tells us that Freud himself referred to his discovery of the unconscious as a Copernican revolution. See "The Insistance of the Letter in the Unconscious" (311).

[9] As Stanley Fish writes, "it seemed bizarre that events so serious would be linked causally with a rarefied form of academic talk." See "Condemnation without Absolutes," *The New York Times*, October 15, 2001: A23.

[10] Judith Butler says such characterizations of postmodernism are "articulated in the form of a fearful conditional" that "warn[s] against an impending nihilism." See "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodernism'" in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Butler and Joan W. Scott. (New York and London: Methuen, 1992), 3.

[11] This is Jameson's historicist argument in *Postmodernism*, which he contrasts with the "poststructuralist" argument that such a subject never existed "but constituted something like an ideological mirage" (15).

[12] Another excellent poststructuralist analysis that raises these questions is Eleanor Honig Skoller's *The In-Between of Writing: Experience and Experiment in Drabble, Duras, and Arendt* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1993).

[13] Linda Hutcheon defines postmodernism as both period and style along these lines. See *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988).

[14] We might date these revisionary readings from Robert Kiely's edition, *Modernism Reconsidered* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1983), though as far back as the 1960s and 70s critics were rereading modernist writers through postmodernist discourses. See, for example, Ihab Hassan, *Paracriticisms* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1975) and Harry Levin, "What was Modernism?" in *Refractions: Essays in Comparative Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966).

[15] Here I am drawing on two of my essays: "Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism: Returning to the Lighthouse" in *Rereading the New: A Backward Glance at Modernism*, ed. Kevin Dettmar (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1992): 297-323, and "Returning to the Lighthouse: A Postmodern Approach" in *Approaches to Teaching Woolf's* To the Lighthouse, ed. Beth Rigel Daugherty and Mary Beth Pringle (New York: Modern Language Association, 2001): 47-53. In *Rereading the New* Dettmar points out that what we call postmodern criticism is not a unified movement but a "loose affiliation" of a variety of theories (11).

[16] Foucault defines monumental history as "a history given to reestablishing the high points of historical development and their maintenance in a perpetual presence, given to the recovery of works, actions, and creations through the monograms of their personal essence" ("Nietzsche" 94).

[17] I elaborate on the occlusion of aesthetics in the shift from criticism to critique in "How Do We Keep Desire from Passing with Beauty?", *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 19.2 (Fall 2000): 269-284.

[18] This is Kevin Dettmar's characterization of a postmodern reading in *The Illicit Joyce of Postmodernism* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996). Other examples of poststructuralist and postmodernist readings of modernists include: Derek Attridge and Daniel Ferrer, eds. *Post-Structuralist Joyce: Essays from the French* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Caughie, *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism* (1991); Kevin J.H. Dettmar, ed., *Rereading the New: A Backward Glance at Modernism*; Rainer Emig, *W.H. Auden: Towards a Postmodern Poetics* (New York: Macmillan, 2000); Ihab Hassan, *Paracriticisms* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1975); Leonard Orr, ed. *Yeats and Postmodernism* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1991); Bonnie Kime Scott, *Refiguring Modernism,* vol. II: *Postmodern Feminist Readings of Woolf, West, and Barnes* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); and Patricia Waugh, *Practicing Postmodernism, Reading Modernism* (London: Edward Arnold, 1992).

[19] Other critics who read this novel in terms of postmodern theories of language, subjectivity, and aesthetics (respectively) are Marilyn Brownstein, "Postmodern Language and the Perpetuation of Desire" (1985), Magali Cornier Michael, "Woolf's *Between the Acts* and Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*: From Modern to Postmodern Subjectivity" (1994), and Beth Rigel Daugherty, "Face to Face with 'Ourselves' in Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*" (1993).

[20] Other full-length studies that explicitly read Woolf through poststructuralist theories of language and subjectivity, especially Lacanian theory, are Daniel Ferrer's *Virginia Woolf and the Madness of Language* (1990) and Emily Dalgarno's *Virginia Woolf and the Visible World* (2001). Dalgarno's book in particular illustrates the direction

poststructuralist criticism has taken since the 1980s by moving beyond a more formalist focus on Woolf's texts themselves and reading her writing in relation to events, technologies, and ideologies of the early twentieth century. Though relying heavily on Lacan and acknowledging its indebtedness to Minow-Pinkney, Dalgarno's book covers a wide range of topics, from photojournalism to astronomy to Woolf's Greek translations, in exploring Woolf's understanding of language and subjectivity. Molly Hite's "Virginia Woolf's Two Bodies," *Genders* 31 (2000) also presents a reading of Woolf's representation of female sexuality informed by poststructuralist theories.

[21] Michael similarly argues that in focusing on womens' lives and subjectivities, modernist women writers anticipate the more radical critiques of subjectivity that we have come to associate with postmodernism.

[22] A critique along the lines of the one I offer here is not meant to prove a writer wrong, but to show what a reading necessarily excludes and what difference those exclusions might make. Any reading, including mine of Waugh, can be deconstructed to reveal the suppress differences within.

[23] It is postmodernism's different understanding of history, rather than Woolf's place in literary history, that informs some critical discussions of Woolf and postmodernism. In "Virginia Woolf's Postmodern Literary History" (2000), for example, Beth Carole Rosenberg offers an implicit critique of Waugh's approach in demonstrating how Woolf constructs an alternative concept of literary history, one that focuses more on the process of historical production, especially the production of readers, than on history as a continuum. "By viewing Woolf's historical project as postmodern," she writes, "that is, as a method removed from time and the historical moment--we are freed from the burden of trying to establish the 'truth' of Woolf's writing of the past" (1115). Instead, we can see how Woolf's history, as presented in *A Room of One's Own*, "is a constructed fiction." It is the way Woolf "makes us read history as a series of unrelated moments, moments whose unity comes through a narrative that tells us more about its own construction than it does about the past" (1128) that makes Woolf postmodern, Rosenberg argues, not her position in literary history as a transitional figure between the modern and the postmodern. This notion of history as a constructed fiction makes Woolf's *Orlando*, along with *Between the Acts*, a popular topic in discussions of Woolf and postmodernism, especially with the release of Sally Potter's campy film version of the novel in 1993. See, for

example, Roberta Garrett's discussion of Potter's "'postmodern' interpretation" of the novel in "Costume Drama and Counter Memory: Sally Potter's *Orlando*" (1995) and Suzanne Ferriss, "Unclothing Gender: The Postmodern Sensibility in Sally Potter's *Orlando*" (1999).

[24] "Maybe the target nowadays," says Foucault, "is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are" by resisting those "techniques of power" that attach the individual subject to an identity. See "The Subject and Power" in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 212-216.

[25] Bowlby's book is another excellent example of a reading of Woolf informed by poststructuralism and postmodernism. In her first chapter, she connects her controlling metaphor of the train with Saussure's example in *Course*.

[26] For a more elaborate postmodernist critique of Waugh, among other modernist and feminist critics, see Caughie, "Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism: Returning to the Lighthouse" in Dettmar, cited above.

[27] Brenda R. Silver, *Virginia Woolf Icon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Jennifer Wicke, "*Mrs. Dalloway* Goes to Market: Woolf, Keynes, and Modern Markets," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 28.1 (1994): 5-23, Jane Garrity, "Selling Culture to the 'Civilized': Bloomsbury, British *Vogue*, and the Marketing of National Identity," *Modernism/modernity* 6.2 (1999): 29-58, and "Virginia Woolf, Intellectual History, and 1920s British *Vogue*" in *Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, ed. Pamela Caughie (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000): 185-218.

[28]See, for example, Stanley Fish, *Professional Correctness: Literary Studies and Political Change* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1995) and Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).