Mapping the Epistemic Terrain in Virginia Woolf's Fiction

By

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Chapter One

Introduction

> [T]he germ of a theory is almost always the wish to prove what the theorist wishes to believe. Theories then are dangerous things. All the same we must risk making one this afternoon. (CE2:163)

With this warning, Virginia Woolf introduces a discussion of the connections among economic privilege, war, and writing in her 1940 essay "The Leaning Tower." These reflections on the cultural conditions that produce published literature illustrate her thoughts on the more general processes that produce knowledge. The endeavor of the writer or artist is, in many ways, an epistemological endeavor to know the world. In order to understand the relationships among prosperity, power, and literature (or more generally, knowledge), Woolf first sketches a picture of the writer as knower: "a person who sits at a desk and keeps his eye fixed, as intently as he can, upon a certain object." She then insists on inspecting the object itself which "moves [and] changes … an object that is not one object but innumerable objects. Two words alone cover all that a writer looks at—they are, human life" (CE2:162). Then she directs close attention to the writer's "chair that gives him his attitude towards his model; that decides what he sees of human life; that profoundly affects his power of telling us what he sees. By his chair we mean his upbringing, his education" (CE2:168). Finally, she probes the effects of the privileged writer's elevated status— "built first on his parents' station, then on his parents' gold"—on his view of life: "it decides his angle of vision; it affects his power of communication." Furthermore, such an elevated

knower is "scarcely conscious of his high station or of his limited vision" (CE 2: 169).[1]

The epistemological concerns that Woolf expresses in this essay are present throughout her fiction and nonfiction. She focuses on the economic basis for the production and dissemination of knowledge, the inextricable complicities of wealth and war and their effects on knowers, the distortions of privileged views and their transparency(or lack of) to the privileged, and the reduction and objectification of human life in habitual epistemic practices. Woolf's pervasive use of the masculine pronoun throughout this discussion reveals the latent feminist content of her broader epistemic discussion: women have been effectively eliminated from the production of published literature and legitimate knowledge.[2] Her clarity about which issues require examination does not lead her to posit definitive conclusions, but rather to sketch a process. She recommends that sympathetic inquirers "collect a few facts before we launch out into the dangers and delights of theory," that those who intend to create new literature and new knowledge must be critical of their own processes as well as of established knowledge, and that writers and knowers sample life voraciously as they trespass class and national boundaries seeking models (CE2:165,181). From now on, she promises in "The Leaning Tower," "we are not going to leave writing to be done for us by a small class of well-to-do young men who have only a pinch, a thimbleful of experience to give us. We are going to add our own experience" (CE2:181). Woolf's introductory warning of the danger of theories

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[1] In his review of "The Leaning Tower" Desmond MacCarthy suggested that Woolf was, herself, one of the privileged writers in the tower. She vehemently contested this interpretation in a letter: "I never sat on top of a tower! Compare my wretched little £150 education with yours, with Lytton's, with Leonard's. … I assure you, my tower was a mere toadstool, about six inches high" (King 616).

[2] Her audience for the original paper was the Workers' Educational Association of Brighton, so she attended more to distinctions of class than of gender.

applies to new theories of knowledge as well, but she apparently believed that the possible benefits of innovative epistemological models are worth incurring the dangers and risks.

This book will examine Virginia Woolf's "dangerous" lifelong process of exploring and advancing feminist theories of knowledge to revise the flawed masculinist epistemology of her time. I will offer critical readings of the five novels that most fully illustrate these lifelong concerns and experiments: *The Voyage Out* (1915), *Jacob's Room* (1922), *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and *The Years* (1937). My central contention is that Woolf articulates and rearticulates a sustained feminist theory of knowledge that reveals the grave consequences of deprivation of educational and cultural opportunities for women and formulates possibilities for feminist resistance and revision. In describing Woolf's feminist epistemology, I will also show that Woolf anticipates contemporary feminist philosophers in connecting the treatment of women in the home and family with international politics, in replacing the ideal of an isolated human knower with a portrayal of communities of knowers, and in revising the legitimating processes and categories of knowledge. Woolf's groundbreaking engagement with the politics of knowledge serves as a largely unacknowledged fountainhead of contemporary feminist epistemology. At the same time, many of the rigorous challenges, definitions, and alternatives being formulated today reflect, illuminate, and expand upon Woolf's own antecedent campaigns to sketch the social and political territories of knowledge. Contemporary feminist epistemology reassesses and revises the assumptions of knowledge production and the consequences of knowledge reception, both as Woolf experienced them and as she re-envisioned them. The character of this reassessment is radical, but never more than partial for there is no wholesale negation possible, no universal skepticism feasible. The cultural locus of the feminist critic is always, to some extent, within the

very society she is re-envisioning. Jacques Derrida offers a description of such a critical position:

> It is not a question of junking these concepts, nor do we have the means to do so. Doubtless it is more necessary, from within … to transform concepts, to displace them, to turn them against their presuppositions, to reinscribe them in other chains, and little by little to modify the terrain of our work and thereby produce new configurations. (24)

In her painstaking building of bridges between individuals and among modes of perceiving and knowing, Virginia Woolf was always aware of the necessity—but not always optimistic about the possibility—of transforming the society within which she lived and worked.

Three related preoccupations shaped Virginia Woolf's lifelong exploration of the politics of knowledge: war, death, and literature. War came to represent for Woolf the forces of patriarchal culture that contribute to tyrannies of all kinds, including the oppression of women. The general cultural attributes that Woolf sees throughout her work as culminating in war include not only aggressive, militaristic values, but also distorted notions of education and civilization, and rigid conceptions of knowledge. Woolf protests a cluster of masculinist epistemic practices: strict authoritarian knowing, knowledge limited to books, economic restrictions on knowledge, artificial restraints on what women may study and know, and the elimination of the experience and point of view of women in producing new knowledge. She suggests deep connections between masculinist epistemology and war in *Jacob's Room*, where young men educated to think of other cultures (and women) as "flowers ready for picking" die "uncomplainingly" by the dozens, "with composed faces … [l]ike blocks of tin soldiers" (JR:78,155). Even in her first novel *The Voyage Out*, in 1915, Woolf caricatures stereotypical male knowers—Mr. Pepper, Mr. Ambrose, and St. John Hirst—but her ability to create female characters who embody

independent resistance and successful alternatives only developed later and evolved gradually throughout her career. In contrast, Woolf's anger about women's restricted access to education and knowledge is clear from the start and persists as an unmitigated protest throughout her career. In *The Voyage Out*, Helen Ambrose, a mature woman who did not marry until the age of thirty, expresses Woolf's passion on the neglect of education for women in a letter:

> 'The question is, how should one educate them? The present method seems to me abominable. This girl, though twenty-four, had never heard that men desired women, and, until I explained it, did not know how children were born. Her ignorance upon other matters as important … was complete. It seems to me not merely foolish but criminal to bring people up like that. Let alone the suffering to them, it explains why women are what they are--the wonder is they're no worse … Keeping them ignorant, of course, defeats its own object, and when they begin to understand they take it all much too seriously.' (VO:96)

Woolf's anger extends to mature women like Helen Ambrose and Mrs. Ramsay who, despite their own frustrations, educate their daughters to be compliant with the patriarchal order or endeavor to transform them into masculinist knowers.

The fullest and most direct expression of Woolf's anger appears in her 1938 pamphlet *Three Guineas*. In this work, characterized by Carolyn Heilbrun as "far from ladylike [and] wholly unconciliatory," Woolf traces the contours of the established educational system and shows how it is defined by political and economic factors ("Virginia Woolf in Her Fifties" 241). *Three Guineas*, ostensibly an answer to the question "How can we prevent war?" also reinforces Woolf's connection of war and epistemology. She worries that women who prosper in a masculinist society will acquire the values of tyranny along with the

classics and professional status. In "Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid" (August, 1940), she calls for women to root out in themselves and in men "the subconscious Hitlerism that holds us down … the desire for aggression; the desire to dominate and enslave" (DM:245). At the end of her life, Woolf acknowledged the complicity of women in reproducing the cultural values that lead to war. In a letter to Shena, Lady Simon on January 25, 1941, just two months before her suicide, Woolf agonized, "I don't see what's [to] be done about war. It's manliness; and manliness breeds womanliness—both so hateful" (L:6:464). In life she often felt devastating despair, but in her fiction she conceived of a number of modest, viable alternatives that allowed Lily Briscoe and Eleanor Pargiter to survive the culture's reproduction of tyrannical men and compliant women, even though their author could not.

Death, as much as war, inspired Woolf to challenge traditional approaches to knowledge. The untimely losses of her mother, Julia Stephen, in 1895, her stepsister, Stella Duckworth Hills, in 1897, her brother, Thoby Stephen, in 1906, and others thread through her novels. These losses and the subsequent efforts of memory evoked her life-long quest to create artistic memorials that could offer sustained knowledge of another person. At first, Woolf distrusted her own deep need and endeavored to show that we can never know another person, especially after they die. But from *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) on, she gradually revised her epistemology to incorporate a mode of partial understanding that allows knowers to approach, though never to fully reach, certainty of others. In her novels, both death and illness are often the result of oppressive cultural forces: men are killed and maimed physically and psychologically by war, and women who survive induction into the patriarchal order are often debilitated by "an existence squeezed and emasculated within a white satin shoe" (JR:152). Woolf's own torturous nervous breakdowns supplied her with direct experience of the coercive tendencies of the medical establishment and profound insight into the mental processes and

perspectives of the sick. While her experiences with death and illness motivated Woolf to understand and to imagine revised processes of knowing and memorializing others, they also provided metaphors for the restrictive and oppressive epistemic practices in place.

Woolf's elegiac purposes intersect with her technical experiments in narrative. In her emphasis upon fluid, subjective life, Woolf departs from her literary predecessors by abandoning the "materialist" recounting of exclusively external details of social class and physical appearance to create character. In challenging a tradition of realism in the English novel from Dickens and Trollope through Bennett and Galsworthy, she challenges the former epistemology that relies upon descriptions of setting and possessions to constitute knowing a human person. In her 1919 essay, "Modern Novels," Woolf proposes that, instead of describing rooms and clothing, a novelist should record the "myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent" that the mind receives. She asks, in a revised version of the essay, "Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display …?" (E:3:33, CR:154).[3] In her writing during the 1920s, Woolf contends that fiction can facilitate the expression of this elusive consciousness, this "luminous halo," much more than factual writing. She claims in *A Room of One's Own*, published in 1929, that "fiction … is likely to contain more truth than fact" (RO:4). Several years later, however, when she was preparing to write *The Years* and *Three Guineas*, she felt the necessity to marshal facts to support her arguments on the connection of sexism and fascism. Woolf relates the effort in a letter, "I took more pains to get up the facts and state them plainly than I ever took with anything in my life" (L6:243). In turning to

[3] Woolf revised and published the "Modern Novels" essay as "Modern Fiction" in The Common Reader in 1925. Many of the same ideas are expressed in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," published in the New York Evening Post in 1923 in response to Arnold Bennett's essay, "Is the Novel Decaying?"

facts for her increasingly urgent purpose of exposing the conditions that undermine peace, Woolf did not abandon her commitment to the epistemological value of fiction as a means of discovering truth. Late in her career, the counter-claims of facts and fiction stood in creative tension. Although she could not interweave facts and fiction according to her original plan for *The Pargiters*, she did produce *Three Guineas* and *The Years* as companion pieces, the factual and fictional expressions of her belief that the roots of war are found in a culture based on masculinist epistemology.

Woolf's lifelong intellectual engagements with the complex issues surrounding war, death, and literature generated a number of specific challenges that inspired and shaped her novels. While all the novels share the general epistemological concerns I have identified, each work also focuses upon a particular epistemological problem or inquiry. *The Voyage Out* is a pessimistic experiment in the correction of a typical young woman's education in deliberate ignorance. In this novel Woolf dramatizes the search by a newly self-aware adult woman for a mode of knowledge that allows for individual integrity and accomplishment along with fruitful connection to other knowers. Rachel Vinrace successively contemplates solipsistic reverie; isolated, masculinist knowing; communal knowing; feminist friendship; and marriage as possible models of epistemic practice. The strongest role models she encounters are Helen Ambrose, who encourages her development as a patriarchal knower, and Terence Hewet, who wants to marry her and raise a daughter who will "be required from infancy to gaze at a large square of cardboard, painted blue, to suggest thoughts of infinity, for women were grown too practical" (VO:338). The marriage that seemed, at first, to promise more expansive experience and knowledge left Rachel "in a position to despise all human learning" (VO:336), then filled with "vague dissatisfaction" (VO:346), and finally "detached and disinterested as if she had no longer any lot in life" (VO:362). In Chapter Two, "Shifting Perspectives: Travelogue

as Epistemology in *The Voyage Out*," I compare the epistemological styles of the most fully characterized knowers in Woolf's first novel: Helen Ambrose, Terence Hewet, St. John Hirst, Evelyn Murgatroyd, Miss Allen, and Rachel Vinrace. I hope to show that Rachel's fatal illness is evident from the beginning of the novel and that her death is precipitated by the lack of a viable epistemic paradigm for women.

In *Jacob's Room*, Woolf endeavors to answer the question, "Can we ever really know anyone?" Even though she ultimately answers, "No," the novel sets forth a complex network of processes that the mind uses to simulate knowing others, particularly those we memorialize from the distances of time and death. Chapter Three, "'Venerable, … infinitely brave, forlorn, and lost': Problems of Memory and Knowledge in *Jacob's Room*," discusses Woolf's strategies for conveying the life of a young man through the consciousness of a female narrator who survives after his death. Woolf's technique reveals not only the elusive nature of human consciousness, but also the concrete specificity of innumerable cultural restrictions on women's knowing. Woolf sketches the cultural spaces that enclose Jacob and the other young men in a way that also reveals the neglected and constricting "rooms" left over for women. In addition to discussing the epistemic dimensions of memory and memorial writing, this chapter also examines the peripheral female characters whose lives reveal the cultural factors that shape both dominant and marginalized figures in the novel.

Mrs. Dalloway is Virginia Woolf's first novel to acknowledge that persons can know one another, albeit in a partial and sometimes frustrating way. In this novel, Woolf turns away from the goal of a classical masculine education as an indispensable requirement for the improvement of women's lives and explores the alternate possibilities of intersubjective knowing. Woolf suspected that the concept of an isolated knower is partially a masculinist fiction designed to exclude women from the production and possession of "legitimate" knowledge.

Like feminist epistemologists, she acknowledges and examines the different cognitive allegiances that restrict or sustain knowing in general, but especially women's knowing. In this novel, she explores intersubjective knowing through the characters who come in contact with Clarissa Dalloway on the day of her party. In Chapter Four, "Of Proportion and Parties: Intersubjective Knowing in *Mrs. Dalloway*," I will show that Clarissa's moment of complete intersubjective empathy with Septimus Smith affirms both the possibility and the desirability of intersubjective epistemology for improving the lives of women and other oppressed people.

In *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf anticipates more fully than in any of her previous work the paradigms of knowledge articulated by feminist philosophers. In this chapter I will focus on Woolf's depiction of Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe as knowers, not simply in relation to the male knowers in the novel and the orthodox epistemology these males represent, but especially in light of the work of current feminist thinkers. Mrs. Ramsay lives in a world shadowed by the authoritarian, hierarchical knowing of her husband; nonetheless, she inspires some of her daughters, including Lily, to dream stories in which they transcend this world to another where "Women can paint. Women can write."

Like Woolf, Lily Briscoe faces the developmental challenge of distinguishing herself from an idealized ancestral mother. Woolf creates Mrs. Ramsay as a knower on the cusp between full complicity in replicating patriarchal epistemological practices and a feminist consciousness that resists and even subverts the practices and patterns of the past. Lily struggles to find an epistemological standpoint that mediates between her attraction to Mrs. Ramsay, who as the "Angel of the House" has the power to create a momentary work of art out of the flux and multiplicity of beings at the dinner table, and the feminist disruptions of patriarchal tradition that motivate her own creative art. In Chapter Five, "'Nothing was simply one thing:' Subject-Subject Knowing in *To the Lighthouse*," I will show how Lily rejects both Mr.

Ramsay's subject-object paradigm of knowledge and Mrs. Ramsay's model of dissolving intimacy, discovering instead the fluid interactions of subject-subject knowing through the model of her friendship with William Bankes.

In *The Years*, Woolf examined, more directly than ever before, the consequences of androcentric epistemological assumptions within her culture as she described the destructive effects of a masculinist educational system upon generations of women and men. Woolf's biographer Lyndall Gordon describes the 1930's as a period marked for Woolf by conscious political purpose. "After nearly a lifetime of personal, elegiac work, written for a small circle … she resolved to frame a public voice … she would show herself as reformer and question the abuses of power" (252, 249). Anticipating the discourse of feminist epistemologists, Woolf examines gender differences in professional opportunities and the political consequences of these differences. In *Three Guineas*, she explains her intention to "discover where the difference lies … we think differently according as we are born differently [both class and gender] … Law and practice have developed that difference, whether innate or accidental" (TG:18,9,6). In Chapter Six, "'Old Eleanor, Wandering Eleanor, Eleanor with the Wild Eyes': Women and Knowing in *Three Guineas* and *The Years*," I will consider Eleanor Pargiter as the central epistemological study of the novel. She inherits two traditions upon the death of her mother—traditional femininity and a latent epistemic authority—and she succeeds, where Rachel Vinrace failed, in negotiating alternative methods of acquiring life-sustaining knowledge.

Virginia Woolf's commitment in the 1930s to expose political inequalities and her focus on the consequences of unfair educational opportunities led her to recapitulate all the epistemological concerns of her career in *The Years*. In 1934 she wrote in her diary, "I want to give the whole of the present society . . . millions of ideas but no preaching — history, politics, feminism, art, literature — in short a summing up

of all I know, feel, laugh at, despise, like, admire, hate and so on." (WD:191). Woolf considered *The Years* and *Three Guineas* as a single creative effort, and taken together, they provide the fullest and most comprehensive expression of her feminist epistemology.[4]

Virginia Woolf was a relentless inquirer who was prone to theorize, but not to conclude. She demonstrated her lifelong commitment to the feminist goal of self-critical, non-totalizing epistemic practices with a characteristic statement: "the facts which we have discovered … have raised questions which make us wonder" (TG:58). The concluding human gesture and spoken phrase of *The Years* also resonate with Woolf's goals of feminist inquiry. With the words "And now?" Eleanor Pargiter invites her brother Morris (as Woolf invites all of her readers, both male and female) to bring his embodied perspective to the pursuit of knowledge oriented toward an improved future (TY:275). Feminist epistemologists are among those who respond to Woolf's invitation and carry on her inquiry.

Mapping the Epistemic Terrain in Virginia Woolf's Fiction examines Woolf's passionate lifelong interest in the problematic relationship of women and knowledge. Moving beyond, but including, her interest in the education of women, Woolf's interest in epistemology is multifaceted. She is concerned with the ways women receive knowledge, what is considered knowledge, women's developing autonomy in evaluating and legitimating knowledge, the effects of different types of knowledge on women (and on men), and the contexts and communities that generate and are generated by knowledge. My study differs from much literary Woolf scholarship in its specific focus on epistemic processes and the social and political aspects of the validation, acquisition, and dissemination of knowledge. A full, sustained,

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[4] She writes in her diary on Friday, June 3, 1938, "Anyhow that's the end of six years floundering, striving, much agony, some ecstasy: lumping The Years and Three Guineas together as one book - as indeed they are" (WD:284).

and evolving feminist epistemology is part of the texture of Woolf's fiction, and it can be mapped by a close study of the novels with reference to selected essays, diaries, and memoirs and through accounts of Woolf's life by those who knew her and by her biographers.

This perspective on Virginia Woolf's fiction is illuminated by the work of feminist philosophers working in the theoretical disciplines of knowledge, including epistemology and philosophy of science. An early generation of feminist philosophers such as Nancy Hartsock, Sara Ruddick, Sandra Harding, Donna Haraway, Lorraine Code and others created a language for articulating observations concerning all aspects of knowledge, especially as it affects women. In addition, they offered various possibilities for establishing feminist epistemic practices that are "less partial and distorted," to use Sandra Harding's phrase. Woolf both anticipates these theoretical frameworks and retrospectively benefits from their insights.

Feminist Scholarship

A review of feminist scholarship on Virginia Woolf will provide a context for my approach through feminist epistemologies. Almost no feminist studies of Woolf were written until the 1970s. Before that time the prevailing perspective of "New Criticism" avoided the biographical and political dimensions of literature, and thus Woolf was evaluated primarily for her contributions to an innovative modernist style.[5] Beginning in the 1980's however, feminist literary scholars have

[5] Non-feminist work on Woolf includes studies on the possibility of various philosophical influences, primarily G.E. Moore and Henri Bergson. Scholars offer contradictory interpretations of the extent of any one influence. Important work would include Guiguet, Hafley, Fleishman, and Rosenbaum. Mark Hussey's 1986 book *The Singing of the Real World: The Philosophy of Virginia Woolf's Fiction* does not trace Woolf's intersections with existing philosophies, but explores her themes and experiments as constituting a philosophy.

claimed Woolf as one of their founding "mothers." In a related area of study, feminist philosophers may not reference Virginia Woolf at all, but we can cross academic boundaries and find common threads of inquiry. With or without explicit reference to Virginia Woolf, there are resonances that cross the generations and categories of scholarship. These endeavors to understand and limn human experience, in particular the experience of women, are relevant to both literature and life. Several thematic areas and a broad overview of scholarship will be explored in this introduction.

The category of androgyny and the lesbian body includes work that treats biographical themes—in particular, Woolf's relationships with other women—in connection with the fiction. Possible lesbian themes and relationships in the novels are noted and analyzed; for example, the relationships of Clarissa Dalloway and Sally Seton and of Lily Briscoe and Mrs. Ramsay. Critical work on *Orlando* most often reflects this perspective, drawing on Woolf's relationship with Vita Sackville-West.

Woolf's androgynous vision emerges explicitly in *A Room of One's Own* as the ideal of being "woman-manly or man-womanly" (RO:108) and implicitly in characterizations throughout her fiction. Critical scholarship on this subject includes Carolyn Heilbrun's well-known thesis that "our future salvation lies in a movement away from sexual polarization …toward … androgyny" (ix). Heilbrun discusses Woolf's representations of the effects of pure masculinity, pure femininity, and the marriage of such polarized characters in *To the Lighthouse* and posits that, after Mrs. Ramsay's death, Mr. Ramsay "will be able to offer his children androgyny" (160). Maria DiBattista asserts that for Woolf, androgyny and anonymity are the two defining conditions of the creative mind, and that androgyny served Woolf as a "myth that … permitted her to question, if not alter, the established values" (20). Toril Moi employs the feminist theory of Julia Kristeva to argue that, for Woolf, androgyny functions to dismantle not only the binary oppositions of

masculinity and femininity but those of aesthetics and politics as well (Moi 16). Moi criticizes Elaine Showalter's thesis that Woolf's depictions of androgyny represent the author's own fearful flight from femininity, arguing instead that androgyny reflects Woolf's recognition of the debilitating effects of societal restrictions based on gender identity (7). Nancy Topping Bazin's reading of Woolf's conception of androgyny as the *combination* of masculinity and femininity is, according to Moi, distinct from and less useful than the dissolution of boundaries and polarities theorized by others.[6] This study explores androgyny as it applies to epistemic traits, which for Woolf are often related to a knower's gendered economic status. In *A Room of One's Own*, she withholds opinion on the "comparative merits of the sexes" because "it is far more important at the moment to know how much money women had and how many rooms than to theorize about their capacities" (109). Mature, able females like Helen Ambrose and Mrs. Ramsay aspire to "legitimate" epistemic status and thus incorporate into their own knowing processes such masculinist traits as objectifying human subjects, isolating knowers, and denying the validity of emotions.

Studies on the broad theme of patriarchal oppression of women also frequently employ a biographical approach to the fiction. Louise DeSalvo's book *Virginia Woolf: The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on her Life and Work* is one salient example. DeSalvo interprets Woolf's fiction through the lens of the sexual abuse Woolf suffered from her stepbrothers and from the general attitude that masculine demands on women should be met with compliance.[7] Woolf believed that mascu-

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[6] A review of critical scholarship on Woolf's conception of androgyny can be found in Toril Moi's "Introduction: Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf? Feminist Readings of Woolf," in *Sexual/Textual Politics*. Moi refers to work by Elaine Showalter, Carolyn Heilbrun, Nancy Topping Bazin, and Julia Kristeva.

[7] Rebecca West, Woolf's slightly younger contemporary, protested against the expectation that women would restrict their lives to domestic environs so that "the tranquil flame of her unspoiled soul should radiate purity and nobility upon an indefinitely extended family" (in Hall 77).

linist epistemology promotes traits that lead to violence and abuse at all levels, from the nuclear family to the colonial empire. Richard Dalloway's kiss of Rachel Vinrace and Hugh Whitbread's kiss of Sally Seton are two examples of actions stemming from epistemologies maintained by power and privilege.

Several very interesting goddess-themed studies (Cramer, Haller, Barrett) point out that Woolf avidly read the work of her friend Jane Harrison, an anthropologist and classicist. Patricia Cramer holds that Harrison's "theories about matriarchal myth and ritual significantly influenced Woolf's work" (204). These studies refer most typically to *Between the Acts*, but also develop some interesting theses in relation to the goddess potential of female characters in *The Years*. This book will *not* draw upon these studies nor comment on this theme.

A number of feminist scholars have focused on the ways Woolf's narrative styles express her female consciousness and experience. Her uses of silence and interruption, in particular, have inspired multiple studies. Patricia Ondek Laurence—suggesting that silence is not a vacuum for Woolf—explicates a "lexicon of silence" in Woolf's fiction (11). Others have linked a single theme to narrative style; for example, Susan Stanford Friedman's study of feminist subversion of patriarchal narratives in "Lyric Subversion of Narrative in Women's Writing: Virginia Woolf and the Tyranny of Plot," and Elizabeth Abel's "Narrative Structure(s) and Female Development: The Case of *Mrs. Dalloway*." Chapter Six introduces a preliminary framework to explore Woolf's narratives of inquiry (interrogative exchanges that reveal power relations between knowers) in *Three Guineas* and *The Years*.

Studies involving the subjectivity of women examine the ways female consciousness, identity, and a sense of self are constructed. Makiko Minow-Pinkney's book-length study *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject* is the most comprehensive study on this theme. According to Minow-Pinkney, "Woolf's texts disperse the transcendental unified

subject that underpins male rationality and narrative, and open new possibilities for subjective activity" (60). Minow-Pinkney's strategies are primarily psychological and draw on the work of Julia Kristeva. The approach to Woolf's epistemological concerns in this book, by contrast, is primarily social and political.

Feminist criticism of Woolf also includes sharp critiques of her alleged failure to express the political and ethical values of today's feminists, particularly in addressing the needs of women of all classes. Mary M. Childers, for example, argues that Woolf's writing sometimes includes "unwarranted generalizations about gender [and] expressions of discomfort amounting to distaste for women whose lives are so restricted by material circumstances that they do not inspire elegant prose" (62). Virginia Woolf's feminist consciousness was unavoidably shaped by her own class biases and limited perspective, as she would and does admit. In "Memories of a Working Women's Guild," one version of an introduction she wrote with much hesitation for a collective memoir of working class women, she admits that "the imagination is largely the child of the flesh. One could not be Mrs. Giles because one's body had never stood at the wash tub" (CDB 233).[8] Woolf was fairly clear in limiting the scope of her feminist agenda to the daughters of educated men.

Several broad introductions to feminist epistemologies offer multiple perspectives and resources. The 1993 groundbreaking Routledge anthology, *Feminist Epistemologies*, edited by Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter includes scholars writing on many of the themes still relevant today. Also in 1993, Josephine Donovan wrote that Virginia Woolf has achieved "a critique of the epistemology of Western science

[8] Woolf's letters concerning the writing, publications, and responses to this introduction which reflects on class differences are quite illuminating. They are in Volume III of *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, indexed under *Life as We Have Known It*, the title of the book itself, published by Hogarth Press in 1931.

and its methodology" in Chapter 4 "Everyday Use and Moments of Being" in the anthology, *Aesthetics in Feminist Perspective.* (54)

Another resource, *"Feminist Epistemologies"* by Monica C. Poole is available online. The chapter draws upon resources up to 2021 to frame "several recurring themes … All knowledge is situated knowledge . . . Lived experiences are knowledge . . . Power shapes knowledge …. With knowledge comes responsibility …. Knowledge comes through collaboration."

Also available online, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* includes a chapter on "Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science" by Elizabeth Anderson, updated in 2024. This publication includes ten sections and an extensive bibliography.

Situated Knowers
Feminist Standpoint Theory
Feminist Postmodernism
Feminist Empiricism
Interactions of Feminist Standpoint Theory, Postmodernism, and Empiricism
Feminist Science Criticism and Feminist Science
Feminist Defenses of Value-Laden Inquiry
Feminist Critiques and Conceptions of Objectivity
Epistemic Authority, Epistemic Injustice, Epistemologies of Ignorance, and Virtue Epistemology
External Criticisms of Feminist Epistemology

Anderson offers a contemporary overview and summary of feminist epistemology that traces the intersections of feminist standpoint theory, postmodernism, and empiricism. She concludes that they have "converged over time."

Many scholars now specifically include Virginia Woolf in studies of literature and epistemology, including Thomas Nail (*The Philosophy of Virginia Woolf: Moments of Becoming)* and Naomi Black (*Virginia Woolf as a Feminist)*. Thomas Nail focuses on "the *one concept* she explicitly said defined her philosophy, her "moments of being"(xiii). He promises to "treat her moments as philosophical descriptions of the *process-nature* of knowledge, beauty, consciousness, and reality (xiii). Black claims that *"Three Guineas* reflects Woolf's feminism as a whole. Its subject is peace, not war."

In her introduction to an international conference and subsequent publication, "Virginia Woolf Among the Philosophers," Chantal Delourme activates an approach animated by the "preposition 'among' …that would authorize a plurality of approaches [to] the conversations between literary texts and philosophical discourses" in conjunction with literary criticism of Woolf's body of work.

One of the themes of this book and of feminist epistemology in general, is the conception of knowledge as communal or interpersonal versus isolated and individual. In "Epistemological Communities," Lynn Hankinson Nelson offers a range of "feminist arguments that point to the deep implausibility of 'epistemological individualism'" (122). In a discussion of epistemic injustice, Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr. points out the ways "knowers are intersubjectively constituted" (18) and how injustice results from "exclusions that keep epistemic agents isolated from one another" (18). In another publication, Pohlhaus shows that "the sociality of the knower is epistemically significant" in two ways: "her situatedness" and "her interdependence insofar as epistemic resources, needed to make sense of those parts of the world to which she attends, are by nature collective" (716). Nancy Daukas states that

> "knowers are fundamentally *interdependent:* knowledge production and possession are largely social and involve multiple individual knowers pooling, questioning, inte-

> grating, building on, and trusting one another's work . . . The conventional idea of the autonomous knower therefore conveys a misleading image of epistemic agency and practices, an image that valorizes traits associated with authority and power at the expense of accuracy" (382).

In his book, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, José Medina devotes a section to "Epistemic Justice as Interactive, Comparative, and Contrastive." Within this section, he writes, "Like many epistemic qualities, credibility has an *interactive* nature" (61). In a later chapter focused on "Interconnectedness," Medina comments, "There are indeed blurred boundaries between self-knowledge and social knowledge" and "Self-knowledge and knowledge of others are interrelated" (130-131). Miranda Fricker, in her groundbreaking book, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, states that "the root cause of epistemic injustice is structures of unequal power and the systemic prejudices they generate" (7-8). Virginia Woolf's fiction reveals and tackles all of the above issues and problems. She is a valued interlocutor of past, present, and future feminist philosophers!

In addition to exposing the androcentric bias in science, the work of these feminist philosophers provides methodologies and vocabularies that can be used to examine themes that Woolf expresses directly in *A Room of One's Own*, *Three Guineas*, and elsewhere, but that have been inadequately revealed in her fiction in the absence of a fully developed framework for expression. Woolf develops in her fiction a critique of the prevailing epistemology of her culture that is as extensive, or perhaps even more extensive, than the one she develops in her nonfiction. Her fiction provides an extensive range of consequences, alternatives, resistance strategies, and ameliorative practices in relation to the established culture of knowledge.

The transformation of feminist epistemology consists, in part, of challenges to the alleged universality and objectivity of knowledge gained

by processes that have marginalized women (but not only women) as knowers and as decision-makers at every step in the process of defining, producing and disseminating knowledge. A comparison of traditional and feminist epistemological paradigms will illuminate Woolf's struggles to resist the patriarchal schemes that were in place and to imagine more just epistemic practices.

The knowing subject of feminist epistemology differs profoundly from the knowing subject of modern Western epistemology (after René Descartes, 1596-1650) in several ways. The paradigmatic knower of modern epistemology is an individual who "has struggled to free himself from the distortions in understanding and perception that result from attachment" to other knowers and to his own physical, emotional, and psychological being (Longino 104). Such knowers assume that their motives, assumptions, and expectations are completely recognizable and separable from the processes of discovering and justifying knowledge. Since, like Descartes, they seek to purge from their epistemic practices all personal attachments, emotions, and backgrounds, the knowledge they produce is assumed to be value-free or neutral. This means that it is theoretically applicable to and true for all other knowers of past, present, and future and is thus considered universal knowledge. Knowers shorn of their unique, identifying selves through this process become interchangeable sites of epistemic production. In this scheme, "subjective" knowledge is that which is tainted by emotion, specific historical and relational connections, and the unique economic and social circumstances of the knower. Ordinarily it is denigrated as mere opinion due to the knower's specificity. Objective knowledge— resulting from the knower's anonymity—is deemed to be free of subjective influences. Feminist scholars, multicultural scholars and other critics call the ideal of universal, objective knowledge the "view from nowhere." These critics have revealed the ironies of a scheme of knowledge in which no one in particular, situated nowhere in particular, supposedly yields true, objective knowledge.

The story of philosophical tradition is complicated by countertraditions. The dominant epistemological tradition in modern Western philosophy stems from the rationalist project of René Descartes, on one side of the Channel, and the empiricist project of John Locke on the other. This tradition bequeathed to late modern thought a subject-object split so wide that it is effectively unbridgeable. Much late modern thought is an attempt to resolve this distinctively modern dilemma (Passmore 58-9, 198-201, 334-6). On the one hand, the recognition of subjectivity remains irreversible. On the other hand, the manner in which subjectivity is affirmed—the status which the "I" is accorded—unleashed the threat of solipsism (the self imprisoned within the circle of its own ideas or within the sphere of its own consciousness without possibility of transcendence). So mainstream modern philosophy from Descartes to Kant has been largely defined by its efforts first to distinguish subject and object, and then to show how they might be related (in particular, related epistemically). Post-Kantian philosophy moves in a variety of directions, one dominant direction being that of absolute idealism represented, above all, by Hegel and Berkeley. But for commonsensical philosophers like G. E. Moore, the Hegelian Absolute (the all-inclusive totality in which subject and object are identified and unified once and for all) is too high a price to pay for overcoming the subject-object split. Like post-Kantian philosophy, post-Hegelian philosophy moves in various directions, two prominent ones being, on the one hand, the processive pluralism of thinkers like Henri Bergson and William James and on the other the radically modified Hegelianism of British idealists like John McTaggart and F. H. Bradley.

Virginia Woolf was, perhaps, as philosophically literate or at least, aware, as many contemporary feminist philosophers, for she knew of some of these countertraditions. By contrast, some feminist epistemologists focus exclusively on the dominant epistemological tradition from Descartes to Kant. Even though the crucial concerns of feminist epistemology might be complicated by bringing in a fuller cast of char-

acters, they are not eradicated. McTaggart denies the reality of time, and Bradley argues strenuously for the self-contradictory character of all subject-object relations. While some philosophers are devoted to overcoming the subject-object split, they do so in ways that generate irresolvable conceptual difficulties beyond the knowledge problem they supposedly resolve. Bergson and James are another matter entirely. These two philosophers anticipate some of the defining strategies and commitments of feminist theory, but they are mostly neglected by feminist thinkers today.[9]

In their challenge to the dominant epistemological tradition, feminist epistemologies are based on "a conception of cognitive agency for which intersubjectivity is primary and 'human nature' is ineluctably social" (Code 72). Feminist thinkers have long argued that human biology "dictates an interdependency" among different individuals that common sense corroborates (Nelson 123). Even if unacknowledged, resisted, and denied, the process by which subjects constitute one another begins at birth and continues throughout life. Apart from this process, we would exist as dumb organisms, but there is, in fact, no being apart from this process; we exist only in relation to other subjects. Teresa de Lauretis designates this ongoing process as "experience," that is:

> a process by which, for all social beings, subjectivity is constructed. Through that process one places oneself or is placed in social reality, and so perceives and comprehends as subjective (referring to, even originating in, oneself) those relations—material, economic, and interpersonal—which are in fact social and, in a larger perspective, historical. The process is continuous, its achievement unending or daily renewed. For each person, therefore, subjectivity is an ongo-

[9] The foregoing discussion of philosophical traditions is based on *A Hundred Years of Philosophy* by John Passmore and conversations with Vincent Colapietro.

> ing construction, not a fixed point of departure or arrival from which one then interacts with the world. On the contrary, it is the effect of that interaction—which I call experience; and thus it is produced not by external ideas, values, or material causes, but by one's personal, subjective, engagement in the practices, discourses, and institutions that lend significance (value, meaning, and affect) to the events of the world. (159)

De Lauretis here replaces the Cartesian concept of a fixed autonomous self with a fluid and radically interdependent "subjectivity."[10] These radical interdependencies include embodiment—the inescapable relationship of human knowers with their own physical beings.[11] Feminist interpretation intentionally blurs the long-held distinction between subjective and objective knowledge. What appears to be "subjective" is, in fact, the partially knowable and inextricably interwoven network of relationships of knowers with the world. What was once deemed "objective" is now called insufficient or weak by thinkers like Sandra Harding who demand a "strong objectivity" in order to reveal what knowers previously disregarded as "subjective" factors: the "broad historical social desires, interests and values that have shaped the agendas, contents and results" of epistemic processes like science and philosophy ("Rethinking" 70).[12] One of the implications of this femi-

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[10] A number of other philosophical traditions engage in this same project. Kaja Silverman notes "the impact of Marx, Nietzche, and Freud as radical critics of the claims of the Cartesian cogito: each can be seen as questioning … the reliability of consciousness as 'transparent to itself.'" Each of them dismisses the concept of a unified self and proposes instead a sense of the self as "a fractured and fragile set of processes" (38). The works of Louis Althusser and Edmund Husserl also contribute to this discussion.

[11] Cartesian knowers believe that the mind in its knowing can dismiss the body. This is called disembodied knowing.

[12] Objectivity is weak insofar as it fails to own its own biases, prejudices, and preferences. It is strong insofar as it "weigh[s] all evidence for or against a hypothesis, including a systematic examination of background beliefs" (Sells 206).

nist notion of "knowledge through interactive intersubjectivity" is the demise of the "view from nowhere" (Longino 113). Helen Longino suggests that we can better conceive of the new paradigm as "views from many wheres." Knowing subjects in feminist epistemologies are embodied, specific, unique, active, multiple, and enmeshed in networks of natural and social relationships. There is no "universal" knowledge, but only views that can become "less partial" and "less distorted" through persistent efforts to discern and eliminate unjust biases. The feminist understanding of intersubjectivity as a pervasive facet of human existence conflicts with the literary use of the term to describe the singular moments when Woolf's characters seem to transcend the boundaries between selves. In the feminist sense, selves are constructed in and through relationships with others, so there are no absolutely separate selves that suddenly achieve connection across previously impermeable boundaries. The difference between those who *don't* and those who *do* experience these moments of connection appears to be that between denial of connection and responsibility, on the one hand, and a conscious acceptance of intersubjectivity as not merely a fact, but as a *goal* of human existence, on the other. It may be unconventional to approach Woolf's exquisite moments in this way, but the context of the fiction supports such an interpretation.

Feminist epistemologies insist on the primacy of intersubjectivity in two distinct but compatible senses. In the most basic sense, this insistence is upon an inescapable fact about human existence: all unique subjectivities emerge out of an intersubjective matrix. Different networks of relations within specific economic, historical, and personal circumstances result in different subjectivities. De Lauretis suggests that we must pay particular attention to "how the female subject is en-gendered" by historical and social circumstances (159). Virginia Woolf and contemporary feminists insist that what is initially (and, for the most part, remains) unacknowledged must become a conscious ideal. This suggests a second sense of the primacy of inter-

subjectivity; for if intersubjectivity is unacknowledged, knowers resist admitting both the ways subjects constitute each other and the ways they are responsible for their own beliefs and actions. If knowers consciously and voluntarily accept intersubjectivity as a goal of human knowing, they will be more willing to assess the impact of their beliefs and actions on other knowing subjects.

Sandra Harding refers to scholarship by other feminists, including Nancy Hartsock and Donna Haraway, in identifying several additional challenges within the feminist effort to develop a conceptual model of epistemology that includes "more adequate and theoretically less partial and distorted descriptions and explanations of women, men, gender relations, and the rest of the social and natural worlds, including how the sciences did, do and could function" (*Whose Science* 1). The challenges Harding notes can be summarized as follows:

- Knowledge production is *always* political, and, at the same time, it undoubtedly generates reliable information about the world. Its processes are not value-free, disinterested, nor impartial as conventional cultural assumption would hold.
- Knowledge production contains both progressive and regressive tendencies. This implies a disbelief in the commonly held maxim that science is inherently good.
- Knowers, as well as the objects of their inquiries, are socially situated entities susceptible to the influences of specific historical situations.
- The exclusive perspective of white, privileged women as knowers must be challenged while, at the same time, we must preserve specific perspectives originating from actual women's lives.

- Knowers must seek a viewpoint from which the biases and influences on methodologies once thought to be value neutral may become visible.

My thesis is that Virginia Woolf was entirely dedicated to the political nuances of knowledge well in advance of Harding and other contemporary thinkers. Woolf believed that inherited structures of patriarchal belief restricted women's access to knowledge, and she scrutinized all forms of knowing. I will apply Harding's systematic challenges in my analysis of Woolf's fiction in order better to explain the novelist's own challenges to masculinist epistemology.

In addition to issuing challenges that promote more just epistemic practices and standards, feminist thinkers have outlined auxiliary concerns with the characteristics of those acknowledged to be knowers. Harding is one of the primary spokespersons for a view called "standpoint epistemology" which posits that, unless the particularities of the knower are taken into account, the validity of the knowledge proposed must remain in doubt. For Harding, the underlying advantage of standpoint epistemology is that thought starting from the perspective of multiple, different, marginalized lives is likely to ask questions, raise challenges, and set goals that ultimately "generate less partial and distorted accounts of nature and social life" ("Rethinking" 65). Woolf's conviction about the value of "outside" epistemic practices and her insistent critique of knowers led her to a position similar to Harding's standpoint epistemology and "strong objectivity" some sixty-five years earlier in *A Room of One's Own*.

> When a subject is highly controversial--and any question about sex is that one cannot hope to tell the truth. One can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold. One can only give one's audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions as they *observe the limitations, the prejudices, the idiosyncrasies of the speaker*. (emphasis added, 4)