

PASSAGES

P A S S A G E N

A SWISS CULTURAL MAGAZINE **Number 10** **Spring 1991** **Subject: 'Women and Culture'** **Personal Views: Femininity and Creativity** **In Support of Women's History** **You Have to Live in Utopia as if It Were Already There** **Giving Emotions Back Their Responsibility** **Portraits** **Literary Essay by Fleur Jaeggy: John Keats – a Physiognomic Biography** **Faces, Names and Gestures** **Survey: Fourteen Women Artists**



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Reflections on creativity and femininity



The question Virginia Woolf pondered in October 1928 as she strolled through the streets and parks of Cambridge, went to restaurants, parties and libraries, tackled dozens of authors and mountains of books was ostensibly simple, but proved increasingly complex. Again and again she asked herself the same question. And though the answer came to her quite spontaneously, she sensed it to be so important that she wanted to test it

against men's and women's role behaviour and men's and women's writings about women: "*What conditions are necessary for the creation of works of art?*"¹ – works of art created by women, of course, not only by men. For with respect to men the question had long been answered, not only by a host of masculine theories of art but by the indisputable superabundance of artistic creations produced by men.

As Virginia Woolf explored streets and books in search of female traces documenting more than the unavoidable necessity of everyday life, she imagined the strain of imposed muteness, the accumulation of untold lives. At the end of the quest that had taken her so far afield, through streets and libraries, she arrived at the same answer that had come to her so easily at the start: "*A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.*" Virginia Woolf did not restrict "fiction" to novels or invented stories, however; for her, fiction was any kind of creative, individual treatment of reality entailing subjective interpretation, penetration, transformation and re-creation. "*That is what remains over when the skin of the day has been cast into the hedge; that is what is left of past time and of our loves and hates... the world seems bared of its covering and given an intenser life,*" she wrote. And, addressing her women readers, she continued: "*...when I ask you to earn money and have a room of your own, I am asking you to live in the presence of reality,*" this transmutable, intenser, impartable reality.

Virginia Woolf formulated her appeal to women more than fifty years ago. She never wasted a moment considering whether women actually felt compelled to create works of art, nor would she have even thought to reflect on the notion that this urge might simply be fashionable and a by-product of the age. In her judgment, creative and artistic ability – the quality we term "creativity" – is equally fundamental to, and equitably distributed between, the sexes as Cartesian reason. She points out, however, that poverty and role constraints were so successful in stifling women's creativity that ultimately the majority of women no longer believed in it themselves. Or then if they did sense a – perhaps suddenly awakened – urge to give reality a new, self-created form, they repressed it. Thinking it

perverse, they even punished themselves for it, scrubbing, cooking, planting, harvesting, sewing and mending, giving birth, nursing, cradling, raising and burying their children all the more energetically and mutely. And they went on scrubbing the house, filling the pantry, economizing, cooking, scurrying hither and thither, and being at their husband's constant beck and call – until, mutely and without a trace, they vanished from the reality that dominated them.

That, Virginia Woolf established, was fact. A highly gifted woman born in the 16th century – say Shakespeare had had a sister as brilliant as himself – would "*certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village*", ostracized and shunned; she would have starved and would surely not have been able to create a great work. Even women who were not fettered by material difficulties, such as Lady Winchilsea, born in 1661, were prohibited from artistic work. Lady Winchilsea was made "*harassed and distracted*" by this constant repression.

"*Alas, a woman that attempts the pen,
Such a presumptuous creature is esteemed,
The fault can by no virtue be redeemed.
They tell us we mistake our sex and way;*" she complained, and went on even more despairingly: "*My lines decried, and my employment thought
An useless folly or presumptuous fault.*"

Virginia Woolf is convinced that the creative turning point for women in the late 18th century was linked with the fact that they could now earn money with their writing. "*Money dignifies what is frivolous if unpaid for. It might still be well to sneer at 'blue stockings with an itch for scribbling', but it could not be denied that they could put money in their purses.*" She regards that turning point as "*of greater importance than the Crusades or the Wars of the Roses.*" And, she tells her audience, if she were rewriting history, she would describe the change that enabled middle-class women to begin writing in greater detail than any war.

What Virginia Woolf – herself a middle-class woman writer – can hardly have wanted to say is that advances in the recognition of feminine creativity 'simply' materialized out of the new opportunity to earn money by writing. What she does not, however, describe is the protracted struggle that went before, the women who rose up against the pressures of muteness, working-class women, who invested all their creative powers in bringing about an awareness of the political injustice of this imposed muteness, this "condition féminine":

– There was, for example, Olympe de Gouges, who grew up in wretched surroundings and could barely write properly (today she would be termed functionally illiterate). But thanks to her

keen mind and unerring sense of justice, she recognized the so-called *Declaration of the Rights of Man* of 1789 to be a "Declaration of Men's Rights", with women and slaves continuing to be excluded from all personal as well as civil rights. In response she drew up and publicly proclaimed a *Declaration of the Rights of Women and Female Citizens*. This so enraged Robespierre, whom she had publicly denounced, that he had her thrown into prison and executed. – Or Mary Wollstonecraft, who in 1792, one year before the murder of Olympe de Gouges, published *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, a protest against the inadequate education and professional training available to women, which she perceived as the source of both their deprivation of rights and their material dependence on men. Though a countrywoman with no more formal education than provided by the village school, she was an autodidact and brilliant analytical thinker. And it was no bashful littler treatise but a response to one of Talleyrand's writings on education that she composed, arguing that if men and women were not offered equal education, all theoretical and practical progress would be pointless; that there were no rational arguments for men having rights and women having none; that children could be brought up to respect others only if their mothers had grown up in the same spirit; that power had feet of clay and served to subjugate women and imprison them in domesticity; that forcing women to occupy themselves exclusively in the household was as demeaning as slavery. What did Mary Wollstonecraft experience as a result? Persecution and defamation – on the part of men and women.

– Or then there was Flora Tristan, who came across Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1840 and recognized its timeliness because it attacked so many prejudices and unmasked all the lies and inequalities. Half Peruvian, half French, Tristan – herself a woman with no independent means but with a violent husband who pursued her and even shot at her in public – investigated the exploitation of the workers and denounced their lack of rights, described child labour, the high rate of child mortality and the appalling living and working conditions of her time. But she did not leave it at that; she went on to work out measures to redress the situation in her book *Workers' Union* (1843/44), published only a few months before she collapsed and died of exhaustion – measures intended particularly to improve the lot of women, whom she considered the proletarians of the proletariat and creatures whom even the most oppressed man could still oppress. She demanded the right to equal education and professional training for women, and to equal money-earning opportunities and material independence – what ultimately comes down to "money and a room of one's own".

Awareness of the history that preceded *A Room of One's Own* renders all but political reflections on creativity and femininity impossible. Certainly Virginia Woolf will have been aware of the historical context, for she considered the history of men's resistance to the emancipation of women far more interesting than the history of emancipation itself. She may or may not be right in that. In my opinion the history of those in possession of power is never as interesting as the history of the oppressed, particularly when that history is still under way. If for centuries men claimed creativity as their exclusive preserve and relegated women to the biological role of childbearing and the social function of doing men's bidding, thus consigning women to virtual slavery, it was in the jealous attempt to resist suspected or even recognized equality – the arrogant defence of power with feet of clay.

This does not mean that having and raising children is not one of the outstanding distinctions of women's life, that there is no

– perhaps unique – creative potential to be fulfilled there. But this creative commitment – for a child is a commitment and, unlike other works or objects, is not at the woman's disposal to do with as she pleases – should be able to be chosen like any male creative activity. It is precisely in this freedom of choice that there should be no difference. For freedom of choice, individual responsibility, autonomy and respect for this autonomy are the ultimate foundations of the dignity and uniqueness that characterize human existence.

Creativity and autonomy are so closely related as to be virtually congruent. Both of them focus on the subjective fulfilment of a design for living, on the creation of one's own reality within overall reality.

In her book *Schwierige Freiheit* (Difficult Freedom), Jeanne Hersch writes: "Then comes the moment when one suddenly says: That is what my life has been like. I have had no children, for example. That was a terrible deprivation. When I was a child and when I was growing up, I wanted to have six children. I have had trouble accepting that."

The expression of suffering found here may be likened to Lady Winchilsea's lament – three hundred years ago – over the stifling of her creative-poetic urges. And it is this very correspondence that seems to me to make the essential principles intrinsic to any reflection on creativity and femininity clear: whether it is a question of artistic expression or the scientific penetration and transformation of reality, whether executed by means of language, music or painting, whether by intellectual work, handicrafts or motherhood, whether alone or in a sharing partnership, the underlying needs are always of equal subjective urgency and thus of equal existential "justification". No hierarchical or gender-specific criteria can make one acceptable and another unacceptable. Where there is mutual respect, all of them can contribute to an exhilarating stimulating, colourful, adaptable and peaceful society – a reality of the future, where gender differences will no longer be frightening but stimulating, above all with regard to the urgent solution of the great problems that have been created by centuries of men's struggle for power and women's imposed muteness.

"Life for both sexes – and I looked at them, shouldering their way along the pavement – is arduous, difficult, a perpetual struggle," wrote Virginia Woolf after she had searched the streets and courts for an answer to her question about the conditions needed to create a work of art. The struggle demands "gigantic courage", she continued. And what else? "Self-confidence", she answers: courage and self-confidence to inspire and nourish feminine creativity so that women can more effectively transform and diversify reality in line with their own needs. ■

Translated from the German
by Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart

Translator's note: All quotations from Virginia Woolf are from *A Room of One's Own*, Hogarth Press 1929.

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