“HISTORY”: THE STRONGEST NARCOTIC

Courtney Sy

On a sunny September day in London, a group of women defiles the neatly-kept, uniformly green grass of a golf turf by pouring acid onto it in such a way that the decayed sections of grass spell out “Votes for Women.” The year is 1910. These women call themselves Suffragettes, and they are members of the Women’s Social and Political Union which advocates for universal female suffrage. Less than a day later, the radical Suffragettes continue their campaign of direct action, aimed at what liberal Britain values most: the security of property. They throw bricks through windows and slash pictures in art galleries; eventually they resort to hunger strikes—to utilizing their own bodies as a medium of revolt. Government officials quickly respond to these strikes by force feeding the protesters, for how could they let Lady Britannia starve? Eighteen years later, in 1928, all women over the age of twenty-one are enfranchised.

The same year, Virginia Woolf delivers a series of lectures at Cambridge University entitled “Women and Fiction.” A year later, she puts ink to paper and, drawing from these lectures, writes A Room of One’s Own. Often assuming the role or narrating the story of an imagined character, Woolf—through the work—takes us on a partly historical, partly imagined journey that reveals the interconnectedness of fact, fiction, and truth. “Fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact,” Woolf points out; accordingly, the “I” that she uses “is only a convenient term for somebody who has no real being” (4). Ironically, Woolf’s fictionalized “I” unmask important truths about the patriarchal society that has kept women unseen and unheard for so long. Her sentences, often lengthy and filled with interjections—whether asides or lists of names—read as though she is letting loose a turbulent, angry stream of thoughts that have been “locked up, beaten and flung about the room” for years (42). This style gives Woolf’s writing a sense of urgency, as she is dealing with the legacy of a long-standing societal refusal to acknowledge...
women’s equality and humanity. It is as if there is not enough time, not enough space for Woolf to answer her own questions: “What effect has poverty on fiction? What conditions are necessary for the creation of works of art?” (25). Acknowledging the enormity of her task, Woolf professes—adopting a false humility that belies her pervasive biting sarcasm—that all she can offer is “an opinion upon one minor point—a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (4). This claim becomes the foundation of Woolf’s essay, as its frequent repetition binds together all of her characters, fictional and real.

Woolf quickly establishes that women’s fiction will be the focus of her exploration into the effects of poverty on fiction, for “[w]omen are poorer than men” (41). Poverty’s effect on women’s writing has never been solely a financial matter; “poverty” is also a deficiency of education, of opportunity, of life experience, and of agency. Woolf laments that she cannot find “some authentic fact” to account for this gender-specific disadvantage (41). She turns to Professor Trevelyan’s History of England in an effort to understand “under what conditions women lived” in the past and thereby gain insight into women’s ongoing state of poverty (41). Trevelyan, she remarks, “records not opinions but facts,” and so Woolf hopes his work might explain the absence of female authors from the shelves of great literature (41). The facts she finds therein about women’s historical status are dismaying few: “’Wife-beating,’ I read, ‘was a recognised right of man’” in “1470, soon after Chaucer’s time” (42). The History’s next reference to the position of women in society occurs “some two hundred years later,” when “’[i]t was still the exception for women of the upper and middle class to choose their own husbands’” (42). Woolf feigns surprise at women’s lack of representation in history books, despite their ubiquitous presence in classic works of literature written by men. A paradox thus emerges: a woman “dominates the lives of kings and conquerers in fiction; in fact she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger” (44). Woolf’s consultation of recorded history has not provided the illuminating facts with which she might have answered her own questions; rather, it has highlighted the extent to which women’s poverty now is but a continuation of the rights denied to women, always.
Woolf’s dissatisfaction with historiography is shared by her contemporary, the German critic Walter Benjamin. While Woolf is writing in Britain, Benjamin is in France writing his *Arcades Project*, an enormous collection of observations on city life in Paris. In this unfinished project—cut short by his suicide in 1940—Benjamin criticizes the “classical historical narrative” form as restrictive in its monomaniacal drive to portray things “‘as they really and truly were’” (863; O’, 71). According to Benjamin, “this work . . . is supposed to liberate the enormous energies of history,” which he calls “the strongest narcotic of the nineteenth century” (863; O’, 71). History, to Benjamin, is not the distant “‘once upon a time’” to which we are accustomed (863; O’, 71). We cling to the illusion that “an earlier time is in the now,” he claims, when “[i]n truth: the now <is> the inmost image of what has been” (865; O’, 81). But the image of “what has been” is filled with white spaces—historical gaps that Woolf strives to fill with her fiction. In her mind, fictive stories—rather than facts—can often help us come closer to certain forms of truth. “[S]ince facts are so hard to come by,” Woolf uses her imagination to take us back in time and conjure up the extraordinary character Judith Shakespeare (46). Judith possessed the same genius and talent as her brother, but she did not share his education or opportunities. Perhaps “[s]he picked up a book” every so often and fumbled through its pages, “[b]ut then her parents came in and told her to mend the stockings or mind the stew” (47). Judith, feeling trapped not just by the physical walls of her home, but by the gendered domestic sphere to which she had been relegated, “let herself down by a rope one summer’s night and took the road to London” (47). She found no better luck away from home. “She had the quickest fancy,” and “a taste for the theatre,” but “no woman,” a theatre manager told her, “could possibly be an actress” (48). Ultimately, the young protagonist met a fate similar to that of Shakespeare’s Juliet when she “killed herself one winter’s night” (48).

Woolf and Judith’s lives are certainly unlike in terms of actual events, but one cannot be so quick to draw a sharp line between the mind of a writer and the lives of her characters, for the latter are products of the former. Judith’s may not be the story of any real, historical person, built upon any real fact, “but what is true in it,” Woolf writes, “is that any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half
wizard, feared and mocked at” (49). Though Woolf is separated by centuries from the character she creates, her imagination of Judith is so intimate that one senses Woolf’s empathy for, and identification with, her fictional character’s plight. Noting the strength of Woolf’s bond to her character, one may even feel compelled to wonder whether it was a similar kind of despair to that felt by Judith that drove Woolf to commit suicide in 1941.

Woolf probably would not want us to know the answer to such a question. In her deliberation on Shakespeare’s mind, she reveals what she considers “the state of mind that is most propitious to the act of creation”: an artist’s mind must be private and unimpeded, “[t]here must be no obstacle in it, no foreign matter unconsumed” (51, 56). Shakespeare’s mind was such, according to Woolf, because we know so little about him—“his grudges and spites and antipathies are hidden from us” (56). Woolf may have hoped to shroud her own life in mystery by speaking through her fictional females, by denying the person behind her “I’s.” Her characters are, in essence, also rooms of Woolf’s own, from whose window she can safely peer out at us.

At this point, it is helpful to look back to Woolf’s words in the very first chapter of her essay, soon after she issues her famous dictum: “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (4). Here, Woolf writes as herself, warning readers that “when a subject is highly controversial . . . one cannot hope to tell the truth” (4). Yet soon after, she states that “[l]ies will flow from my lips, but there may perhaps be some truth mixed up with them” (4). Speaking as herself, Woolf directly challenges us to see the veracity, the plausibility, of her succeeding fictional stories and to apply the lessons behind her fables to the reality of the world in which she, and now we, live. And faced with a world that was only just giving women the right to vote, that still discouraged them from going to university, that barred the few women at university from walking on the grass like their fellow male scholars or from entering the college library without a male escort, it is not surprising that Woolf recognized the reality of a woman’s need for a room of her own—a literal and metaphorical place for women to escape to and cultivate their minds to the best of their abilities.

Nevertheless, Woolf had a vision of a future that she hoped would replace these isolating “rooms,” which she crafts via metaphor in the work’s last chapter. Woolf condemns the binary theory that there are “male” and
“female” parts of a mind, “separated into different chambers; not a sound carried from one to the other” (101). To write well, she posits that “one must be woman-manly or man-womanly” rather than writing from the mind of one sex, “for anything written with that conscious bias is doomed to death” (104). Woolf suggests that a “communion” between this gendered pair, a “marriage of opposites,” is needed for the creation of great works of art, because—as she mentions in an earlier chapter—“masterpieces are not single and solitary births . . . the experience of the mass is behind the single voice” (104, 65). Woolf urges us to see that if we embrace both the masculine and feminine elements in all of our minds, not as two halves of a whole, but rather two wholes conspiring to make another magnificent whole, only then will we have accomplished something wonderful.

In the final pages of A Room of One’s Own, Woolf recalls Judith: “I told you in the course of this paper that Shakespeare had a sister,” but that even with all her talents, “alas, she never wrote a word” (113). Despite the tragedy of Judith’s life and death, Woolf presents us with a hopeful possibility: “my belief is that this poet . . . lives in you and me, and in many other women who are not here tonight, for they are washing up the dishes and putting the children to bed” (113). Woolf is suggesting the potential that lies in all of us, which many females of Judith’s—and Woolf’s—time were not given the chance to tap into. Woolf now suggests the limits of inhabiting a room of one’s own and postulates that “if we live another century,” and “if we escape a little from the common sitting-room and see human beings not always in their relation to each other but in relation to reality . . . then the opportunity will come and the dead poet who was Shakespeare’s sister will put on the body which she has so often laid down” (113-14). It is a tough world that we share with Judith, Woolf, and all of her characters—for Woolf’s writing reveals Benjamin’s truth that “the new” is “what has been”—but if we persevere and press on, then the world might just open up for us and allow us to leave our fortified domains. The result of such actions, even if done “in poverty and obscurity, is worth [our] while,” as we cease to be seen as characters in a story someone else writes and become real people in an equally real world (114).
WORKS CITED