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Virginia Woolf, Genre-Bending and Feminist Life-Writing: *A Room of One's Own*

Amber K. Regis

A very queer, composite being thus emerges. Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger. Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband.

It was certainly an odd monster that one made up by reading the historians first and the poets afterwards – a worm winged like an eagle; the spirit of life and beauty in a kitchen chopping up suet. But these monsters, however amusing to the imagination, have no existence in fact. What one must do to bring her to life was to think poetically and prosaically at one and the same moment, thus keeping in touch with fact – that she is Mrs Martin, aged thirty-six, dressed in blue, wearing a black hat and brown shoes; but not losing sight of fiction either – that she is a vessel in which all sorts of spirits and forces are coursing and flashing perpetually (56–57).¹

Pondering the question of women and fiction, Mary Beton – the fictional narrator of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) – goes to her books in search of women in history. She finds an empty shelf and a striking contradiction: 'women have burnt like beacons' (55) in works of fiction but are 'all but absent' from the pages of history. Placing these books side by side, Beton imagines the hideous progeny of opposing traditions, the image of a woman emerging when one reads 'the historians first and the poets afterwards' (56). This woman is torn asunder: impossible, paradoxical, chimerical. Like Frankenstein's creature, she is pieced together from ill-fitting parts – 'a worm winged like

an eagle; the spirit of life and beauty in a kitchen chopping up suet' – and here, in turn, Woolf's text begins to rupture. Conjunctions are refused, inscribing dissonance. Sentences turn upon pivots of punctuation, with fiction and history facing each other across the neutral ground of a semicolon: presence in poetry versus historical absence, domination of kings versus marital slavery, eloquence and agency versus illiteracy and commodification. Woolf's text, like her subject, is a 'queer, composite being', an 'odd monster' whose importance lies in its return to the etymological root of monstrosity: *monēre*, to warn (*OED*). Of mythic proportions but practical insignificance, these monstrous subjectivities dramatize the extent to which women's lives are circumscribed by the narratives of others. As Mary Beton's research progresses through the centuries, she notes that women, with a few notable exceptions, are authored rather than authoring, elided from histories written by men and distorted in their fiction. Beton calls upon her Oxbridge audience to heed this warning; she challenges them to 'add a supplement to history', to fill the empty bookshelves not with more history but with some other form: 'calling it, of course, by some inconspicuous name so that women might figure there without impropriety' (58). Beton offers a clue to this different mode of representing women in her example of 'Mrs Martin', a figure who 'keep[s] in touch with fact', bounded by quotidian detail, but who does not '[lose] sight of fiction either'. Mrs. Martin is a 30-something in a blue dress, black hat and brown shoes, but she is also afforded a vital interiority: 'she is a vessel in which all sorts of spirits and forces are coursing and flashing perpetually'. To bring this woman 'to life', the breach between traditions of representation must be healed. Beton advocates a hybrid, genre-bending practice to reconcile fiction and history: 'one must [...] think poetically and prosaically at one and the same moment'.

These sentiments are familiar to readers of Woolf. Her interest in life-writing was repeatedly marked by concerns with the limits and potential for mixing genres. In 'The New Biography' (1927), for example, Woolf explored a range of syntheses required to write a life. Truth and personality, fact and fiction, dream and reality-all should be held together in a fraught, oxymoronic, 'perpetual marriage of granite and rainbow'.² Putting theory into practice, Woolf produced a series of counterfactual and metafictional life stories throughout her career. Most famously in *Orlando* (1928), Woolf appropriated the novel form to produce a 'biography beginning in the year 1500 & continuing to the present day [...]: Vita [Sackville-West]; only with a change about from one sex to another'.³ With disquisitions on the social

inscription of sex, gender and writerly identity, *Orlando* employs fantasy to test the bounds of life-writing. This is particularly clear when Orlando transforms into a troublesome female subject; Woolf's narrator-biographer engages in meta-commentary, exposing the poor fit between women's lives and dominant (read: male) biographical traditions: 'the truth is that when we write of a woman, everything is out of place – culminations and perorations; the accent never falls where it does with a man'.⁴ Here fiction and biography combine to produce a hybrid form of critical and creative practice, and while genre-bending is not exclusively feminist, Woolf demonstrates its particular usefulness, both politically and aesthetically, to women writers and subjects who are excluded from (or positioned on the margins of) the literary canon. We see this in *A Room of One's Own* as Mary Beton narrates her counterfactual biography of Judith Shakespeare. Fiction is employed to imagine the material conditions and gendered double standards that would lie in the path of such a figure:

This may be true or it may be false – who can say? – but what is true in it, so it seemed to me, reviewing the story of Shakespeare's sister as I had made it, 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 (63–64).

From the Stratford cradle to an unmarked London grave, Beton thinks 'poetically and prosaically', mixing literary forms and what is true and false, bringing Judith Shakespeare to life (and death). She does this in protest, filling the empty bookshelves and demonstrating the usefulness of genre-bending to forge new subjects and narratives. Beton identifies a literary precedent in the parallel rise of the novel and professional woman writer: 'The novel alone was young enough to be soft in her hands' (100); it had not yet 'hardened' (100) into a fixed tradition. She encourages her audience to renew this project of innovation; women writers must continue to manipulate literary forms, 'knocking that into shape for herself' (100) and providing 'some new vehicle [...] for the poetry within her' (101).

These arguments enjoy a lasting legacy, and *A Room of One's Own* has proved a landmark text for feminist life-writing on several fronts. It has provided a theoretical framework to inform the creative practice of those who seek to write women's lives by experimenting with form. In biofiction and autofiction (neologisms coined in response to texts that trouble generic boundaries,) the *graphia* of life-writing adopts the form of fiction, and new auto/biographical

plots and subjects are crafted using the novelist's tools. Such creativity has also found its way into the academy, where feminist critics have increasingly turned to personal criticism – a seemingly intimate and avowedly subjective mode of academic writing. Creative and critical writers alike have followed Mary Beton's advice 'to think poetically and prosaically at one and the same moment', producing work that defies genre conventions and exploits the malleability of new and 'soft' literary forms to write women back into the life-writing canon twice over, both as subjects and critics.

Woolf's narrator, Mary Beton, enacts her own form of counterfactual biofiction in writing her life of Judith Shakespeare, and this practice is at the heart of her plea to 'bring [Mrs Martin] to life'. Fiction affords poetic license, for auto/biography, like those poetic and dramatic traditions outlined by Beton, has 'hardened' (100) into a dominant (read: male) tradition. Sidonie Smith characterizes this tradition, and the slavish adherence to its structures and strictures, as a 'patrilineal contract'.⁵ Women reproducing these narratives in their life-writing perform a 'cultural ventriloquism'; they reinforce the 'privileged cultural fictions of male selfhood' and '[take their] place on stage, not as Eve, but as Adam'.⁶ By contrast, autofiction and biofiction have provided the means to expose, defy and break this contract.

Woolf's experiments in biofiction – such as *Orlando* and *Flush* (1933), or earlier works such as 'The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn' (1906) and 'Memoirs of a Novelist' (1909) – privilege exposure. In the case of 'Memoirs of a Novelist', Woolf integrates fragments of biofiction within the frame of a fictional book review; the narrator paraphrases and reproduces quotations from an imagined biography – of a woman, by a woman – but rails against its reticence. At the mercy of the biographer's hagiographical account of feminine 'virtue[s]', Miss Willatt, the eponymous novelist and biographical subject, is reduced to 'a wax work [...] preserved under glass'.⁷ But Woolf's narrator-reviewer spies an alternative narrative; it 'creep[s] out in the notes, in her letters' and 'discredits all the platitudes on the opposite page'.⁸ She responds by turning to speculative storytelling: 'To imagine her then, as the sleek sober woman that her friend paints her, doing good wearily but with steadfast faith, is quite untrue; on the contrary she was a restless and discontented woman, who sought her own happiness rather than other people's'.⁹ Thus reconceived, discontent lies not solely with Miss Willatt and the constraints of domestic ideology, but also with the narrator-reviewer who rejects the authority of 'official' biographical narratives. Here Woolf's defiant mixing of genres –

appropriating and combining fiction, review essay and biography – anticipates later theorizing of feminist life-writing practice. For Sidonie Smith, who takes her cue from second-wave French feminism – ‘the *écriture féminine* of Hélène Cixous, the *womanspeak* of Luce Irigaray, the *jouissance* of Kristeva’ – this ‘shifting of generic boundaries’ is at the heart of any emancipatory life-writing practice; she advocates genre-bending as the means to ‘[claim] the legitimacy and authority of another subjectivity [...] a new system of values, a new kind of language and narrative form [...], an alternative to the prevailing ideology of gender.’¹⁰ And feminist writers have been quick to recognize the subversive potential of autofiction and biofiction. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), for example, Gertrude Stein performs a species of inverted life-writing; she collapses the distance between self and relational ‘other’, making use of Toklas’s appropriated and ventriloquized ‘I’ to inscribe and playfully encode their heterodox intimacies. More recently, and more explicitly, Jeanette Winterson has incorporated fantastical and carnivalesque interludes into her autobiographical novel, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985). This coming-of-age narrative, in which the protagonist, Jeanette, achieves maturity through sexual heterodoxy and an escape from familial authority, now sits alongside Winterson’s more recent memoir, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (2011). A complex intertextuality results, with straight facts and queer fictions irrevocably intertwined.

Feminist life-writing criticism has followed suit, seeking to trouble genre as a means to break and reject Smith’s ‘patrilineal contract.’ Responding to second-wave pronouncements that the personal was indeed political, feminist criticism in the 1980s and 1990s turned increasingly to autobiography as a locus of academic utterance. Encapsulating Cixous’ demand in ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ that ‘Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, [...] must put herself into the text’, the emergence of personal criticism has performed a redoubled insertion of women’s writing ‘into the text.’¹¹ This practice takes the writing subject’s life, from the anecdotal through to more extended autobiographical acts, and establishes it as a legitimate site for literary analysis and commentary. Recent developments in feminist personal criticism can be traced back to Jane Tompkins’s 1987 essay ‘Me and My Shadow’, which meditates upon the false distinction between ‘two voices’ within her, public and private, professional and personal, where the latter term in each binary pair is relegated to some illicit hinterland beyond the academy.¹² Along the way Tompkins alludes to personal relationships, bodily

functions, her anger and emotions; she does this to expose the fiction, the 'authority effect', of depersonalized academic personae.¹³ This privileging of one voice (public, professional) over another (private, personal) is necessarily ideological, and the result is a chorus of white, middle-class and heterosexual voices.¹⁴ To join these ranks, the critic must 'take the stage as Adam' (to borrow the words of Sidonie Smith) and efface individuality. But the personal critic refuses to conform, favouring instead the modal and subjunctive, the embodied and subjective.

Personal criticism has thus proved a powerful and productive tool for those writing from positions of difference, and in their brief survey of 'Autocritical Practices', Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson draw upon black feminist, postcolonial and transgender narratives.¹⁵ For Nancy K. Miller, reflecting upon the spectre of essentialism haunting feminism since the second-wave, personal criticism provides a significant opportunity to abdicate 'representativity', alleviating anxieties over 'speaking *as* and speaking *for*' an undifferentiated category of woman.¹⁶ The elided 'I' of academic discourse, with its pose of universality and objectivity, serves to erase difference. The personal 'I', by contrast, allows for diversity and inclusivity, seeming to revel in heterodoxy and heteroglossia.

Detractors, however, accuse personal critics of narcissism, of complicity with an emerging celebrity culture in academic life. Others object to an apparent repositioning of the reader as a disciple or devotee, languishing in the shadow cast by the personal critic's star of celebrity – a shadow replicating the erasures caused by that arid and foreboding 'straight dark bar' (130) bemoaned in *A Room of One's Own*.¹⁷ But just as Mary Beton speaks of sex and gender while declaring the practice to be fatal, so her words are often at odds with her theory. Beton is a personal critic who employs the 'I', but her 'I' is explicitly performative: an effect of language and an acknowledged fiction. Comparable to Woolf's experiments with biofiction, Beton's 'I' privileges exposure, and her outspokenness is rooted in (albeit fictive) experience and reflection. Thus she adopts a speaking position outside conventional academic authority. Although Woolf's text is based upon lectures delivered at Newnham and Girton, and although her fictional narrator addresses an imagined Oxbridge audience at Fernham, Beton nonetheless rejects 'the first duty of a lecturer': she refuses to make any disingenuous claim to offer 'a nugget of pure truth' (4). In contrast to the 'straight dark bar' (130) – the 'I', perhaps, of Sidonie Smith's 'patrilineal

contract' – Beton's 'I' probes into absence and erasure, exploring the legitimacy of subjective speaking positions.

Accusations of narcissism mark the survival of standards of 'chastity' (64) and the continuing relevance of Beton's complaint against legacies of exclusion and invisibility. Concerning chastity, Beton reflects that 'publicity in women is detestable. Anonymity runs in their blood. The desire to be veiled still possesses them' (65). Narcissism is a product of these same anxieties; the narcissist is unchaste, a transgressor of convention, and when the narcissist is a woman, she defies the anonymity that is her rightful inheritance. And so, when personal criticism is practised by women, it has the potential to constitute a powerful feminist occasion (to borrow the title of Nancy K. Miller's 1991 work, *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts*). It constitutes a refusal of silence, invisibility and ventriloquized (read: male) academic discourse. But this refusal in *A Room of One's Own* is limited and partial: Beton's 'I' remains fictive, and the result is a paradoxically impersonal form of personal criticism.¹⁸ But just as there are discrepancies between Beton's theory and practice, so *A Room of One's Own* effaces its author while railing against this same desire for anonymity.

It is more difficult to heal the breach between personal criticism and *A Room of One's Own* when it comes to anger. Beton experiences anger – against a Beadle, for example, and against a library – but she is adamant that its expression is damaging: 'Her books will be deformed and twisted. She will write in a rage where she should write calmly' (90). For Beton, these distortions are the result of writing that bends and breaks while addressing the values and standards of others. By contrast, Nancy K. Miller detects an implicit (and sometimes complicit) misogyny in strictures that seek to silence female anger. Feminist personal critics, she argues, '[cross] the line into the dangerous zones of feminine excess' by 'slipping anger into the folds of the argument'.¹⁹ Contra Beton and Woolf, Miller contends that readerly discomfort in the face of anger and excess 'is a sign that it is working'.²⁰ Reflecting upon her own acts of personal criticism, Miller admits to being 'attracted to pushing the limits of embarrassment' because previously this has been used as 'a paralyzing emotion' to limit women's agency and activity.²¹ In 'My Father's Penis', for example, Miller plays fast and loose with social taboo as a challenge to the law of the eponymous father. She inscribes her touch upon his ageing, ailing body, the memory of holding his 'soft and [...] clammy' penis while he urinates prompting reflections upon the relation between penis, phallus and patriarchal power.²²

Where Mary Beton renounces anger, Nancy K. Miller relishes its expression. But there is, perhaps, one final rapprochement to be made between the genre-bending practices of personal criticism and *A Room of One's Own*. Both seek to question the authority and prestige of the speaking 'I'. In *A Room of One's Own*, the 'I' is reduced to 'a convenient term for somebody who has no real being' (5), while Miller celebrates the liberating potential for embarrassment to '[blow] the cover of the impersonal as a masquerade of self-effacement'.²³ The elided academic 'I' is just as fictive as Beton's personal 'I' – all, it seems, is performative. Whether masculine or feminine, impersonal or personal, 'authorial voice[s]' are 'spectacle'.²⁴ By making this spectacle visible, by challenging literary conventions and defying genre, the practice and criticism of feminist life-writing has been busy filling the empty shelves regretted by Mary Beton in *A Room of One's Own*. Autofiction, biofiction and personal criticism have sought to meet Beton's challenge: 'What one must do to bring her to life was to think poetically and prosaically at one and the same moment.'