

VIRGINIA WOOLF AND THE MADNESS OF LANGUAGE

Daniel Ferrer

ROUTLEDGE LIBRARY EDITIONS:
VIRGINIA WOOLF



ROUTLEDGE LIBRARY EDITIONS:
VIRGINIA WOOLF

Volume 3

VIRGINIA WOOLF AND THE
MADNESS OF LANGUAGE



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

VIRGINIA WOOLF AND THE MADNESS OF LANGUAGE

DANIEL FERRER

Translated by
**GEOFFREY BENNINGTON AND
RACHEL BOWLBY**

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published in 1990 by Routledge

This edition first published in 2018

by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 1990, Daniel Ferrer, Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-138-54104-7 (Set)

ISBN: 978-1-351-01117-4 (Set) (ebk)

ISBN: 978-1-138-54094-1 (Volume 3) (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-351-01215-7 (Volume 3) (ebk)

Publisher's Note

The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this reprint but points out that some imperfections in the original copies may be apparent.

Disclaimer

The publisher has made every effort to trace copyright holders and would welcome correspondence from those they have been unable to trace.

VIRGINIA WOOLF AND THE MADNESS OF LANGUAGE

Daniel Ferrer

translated by
Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby



Routledge
London and New York

The translators would like to thank Daniel Ferrer for his collaboration at every stage.

First published 1990
by Routledge

11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge

a division of Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc.
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

© 1990 Daniel Ferrer, Geoffrey Bennington, and Rachel Bowlby

Typeset in 10 on 12pt Palatino by Columns of Reading

Printed in Great Britain by

T J Press (Padstow) Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Ferrer, Daniel

Virginia Woolf and the madness of language.

1. Fiction in English. Woolf, Virginia, 1882–1941 – critical studies

I. Title

823'.912

ISBN 0-415-03194-X

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Ferrer, Daniel.

Virginia Woolf and the madness of language / Daniel Ferrer :

translated by Rachel Bowlby and Geoffrey Bennington.

p. cm.

Translation of author's thesis from the French.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-415-03194-X

1. Woolf, Virginia, 1882–1941—Criticism and interpretation.

2. Literature and mental illness. 3. Psychoanalysis and literature.

4. Modernism (Literature) I. Title.

PR6045.072Z628 1990

823'.912—dc20 89-10957

To Hélène Cixous



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>Abbreviations and Note on Texts</i>	xi
1 INTRODUCTION	1
2 MRS DALLOWAY	8
3 TO THE LIGHTHOUSE	40
4 THE WAVES	65
5 BETWEEN THE ACTS	97
6 CONCLUSION	141
<i>Notes</i>	149



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author and publishers would like to thank the Executors of the Virginia Woolf Estate and The Hogarth Press for permission to reproduce excerpts from the following: *To the Lighthouse*, *Between the Acts*, *Moments of Being*, and *Mrs Dalloway*. Excerpts from the following works by Virginia Woolf are reproduced in the USA by permission of Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.: *Mrs Dalloway*, copyright 1925 by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc. and renewed 1953 by Leonard Woolf; *To the Lighthouse*, copyright 1927 by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc. and renewed 1955 by Leonard Woolf; *Between the Acts*, copyright 1941 by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc. and renewed 1969 by Leonard Woolf; *Moments of Being*, copyright © 1976 by Quentin Bell and Angelica Garnett.



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

ABBREVIATIONS AND NOTE ON TEXTS

References to texts by Virginia Woolf are included within the main text, using abbreviations and editions as in the following list. The date given is that of the first publication.

- VO *The Voyage Out* (New York: Harcourt Brace & World 1915)
ND *Night and Day* (London: Duckworth 1919)
JR *Jacob's Room* (St Alban's: Panther 1922)
MD *Mrs Dalloway* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1925)
TL *To the Lighthouse* (New York: Modern Library 1927)
W *The Waves* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1931)
Y *The Years* (London: Granada 1937)
BA *Between the Acts* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1941)
WD *A Writer's Diary* (London: Hogarth Press 1947)
CE *Collected Essays*, 1–4 (London: Chatto & Windus 1967)
MB *Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings* (London: Hogarth Press 1976)
L *Letters*, 1–6 (London: Chatto & Windus 1980)
D *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, 1–5 (London: Hogarth Press 1984)

The *Collected Essays* were edited by Leonard Woolf; *Moments of Being* by Jeanne Schulkind; the *Letters* by Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann; the *Diaries* by Anne Olivier Bell, assisted for three of the volumes by Andrew McNeillie.

Unless otherwise indicated, all italics and ellipses in quotations have been added.



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

1

INTRODUCTION

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:
And on the pedestal these words appear:
'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'¹

If Shelley, the anonymous first-person narrator, and the traveller are all to be believed (but this is already begging the question), the features of the broken sculpture 'tell' us something about the sculptor before they tell us anything about the model. What we read on the stone sends us back to a previous reading ('tell that its sculptor well those passions read'); and though we know nothing of the original 'text' (the face of the living Ozymandias), the quality of this reading can be taken as proof that the sculptor was perceptive, skilful, and sincere (not a flatterer: 'mocked' is more than a synonym of 'imitated'). This in turn proves that the sculpture is a reliable representation of the model.

The semiotic artefact (be it a stone colossus or a simple verbal statement) refers in two opposite directions: upstream, towards the producer, and downstream, towards its ostensible object. Some aspects of this process are fairly well controlled: dramatists have always known that they can portray their

characters very effectively just by making them speak. Here, Ozymandias's proclamation tells us more about him as its author than as its object; and Ozymandias himself obviously thought that his 'works', whatever they might have been, would convey a clear message about their creator.

The upstream reference is necessarily an indirect one, for it implies a series of inferences. In that respect, it is similar to the reference to the model's character (Ozymandias's imperious coldness is inferred from the sneer on his face):² we read it in the same way as we recognize an imprint or a symptom.³ But it is not possible to oppose this indirect process to the apparent simplicity of the straightforward downstream reference, for there is an inevitable contamination of each by the other: the status of the referential message ultimately depends on the credibility of its enunciator, and that credibility is affected by the perception of the message itself and its referential value. This relation of mutual implication is the source of numerous interferences and unavoidable ambiguities which only the context enables us to disentangle.⁴ But context is an unreliable resource. In Shelley's poem, the final lines emphatically deny all context:

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

And even when there is one, the solutions it can provide are only provisional: ambiguity will reappear at a higher level.⁵

Since the beginning of modernity and the crisis of representation⁶ – since *Tristram Shandy*, say, in the history of the novel – it has become increasingly difficult to ignore these ambiguities or pretend they are just accidental. But different attitudes can be taken to them. Historically one of the most significant is that of the Jamesian school of subjective narration, which tries to control the interference by folding back the two referential processes on to each other, and including the subject within the representation. This is perfectly expressed in a book which Virginia Woolf read with great care (she reviewed it and considered it a landmark in criticism), Percy Lubbock's *The Craft of Fiction*:

When the point of view is definitely included in the book,
when it can be recognised and verified there, then every

INTRODUCTION

side of the book is equally wrought and fashioned. Otherwise it may seem like a thing meant to stand against a wall, with one side left in the rough; and there is no wall for a novel to stand against.⁷

Although we can understand this need for definiteness and verification, this desire to complete representation on all its 'sides' by attempting to heal the open wound of the subject, it now seems naive to hope that this might be achieved through control of the narrative point of view. We know that whether or not a point of view is included in the representation (sculpture is a form that can hardly achieve this), the work of art points towards another position, a logical construction which, to follow Wayne Booth, may be called the 'implied author',⁸ and beyond this towards the actual author. . . .

As a writer of 'stream-of-consciousness fiction', often understood as the most effective method for breaking down the distinction between subject and object, Virginia Woolf might easily be supposed to sympathize with Lubbock's dictum. Although she never directly stated her opinion on the subject, carefully avoiding the issue in her review, it is significant that her own creative experience (the writing of *Mrs Dalloway*) led her to express total disapproval of Lubbock's theories. In her diary, she says that 'the fact that I've been so long finding [what I call my tunnelling process] proves, I think, how false Percy Lubbock's doctrine is – that you can do this sort of thing consciously' (WD: 61). The displacement of the contradiction is remarkable: Virginia Woolf is not saying anything about Lubbock's prescription of an integrated point of view, only challenging the idea that the selection of the point of view and the narrative method can be made consciously. Where Lubbock's pat formalism establishes a purely abstract perspective, Virginia Woolf reintroduces the writer and thereby the unconscious which the whole system was set up to deny. What appeared to be an impregnable position of control is gently circumvented; beyond the suture, the wound is reopened on the exquisitely 'wrought and fashioned' side of the statue.

The very choice of image (a 'tunnelling process') shows that Virginia Woolf is not engaged in a work of consolidation but, on the contrary, one of undermining the basis of representation. In the last analysis, as we shall see, it is a matter of an aesthetic choice. To continue to speak in terms of sculpture,

VIRGINIA WOOLF

Virginia Woolf's work is closer to the radical incompleteness of Percy Shelley's 'colossal wreck', standing against no wall but lying against a background of hyperbolic absence, than to the perfection of Lubbock's statue, complete unto itself.⁹

In her own essay, 'Craftsmanship', Virginia Woolf takes up the problem where *The Craft of Fiction* left off. She insists on the

strange . . . diabolical power which words possess . . . to suggest the writer. . . . Why words do this, how they do it . . . nobody knows. They do it without the writer's will; often against his will. . . . Even words that are hundreds of years old have this power; when they are new they have it so strongly that they deafen us to the writer's meaning. . . . That is one reason why our judgements of living writers are so wildly erratic. Only after the writer is dead do his words to some extent become disinfected, purified of the accidents of the living body.

(CE, 2:248)

These remarks, and especially the suggestion that it is only retrospectively, after the writer's death, that his or her words can become free of the limitations imposed by the very fact of existing, take on a particular intensity, a *strange power* indeed, when we think of the extreme practical consequences which their author seems to have drawn from them. To suggest that there might be a link between what looks like a purely theoretical speculation on the subjectivity of language, and the reality of Virginia Woolf's suicide might seem to be a joke in poor taste. Of course, no one would seriously contend that she committed suicide for literary reasons or that the mental crisis which directly led to her death was anything that could be called a literary madness. But the words we have quoted insist that there *is* a link between printed words and their writer's life and death, even if the nature of the link is left unspecified; and, as we have just seen, we do sense such a connection when we read *these* words.

Virginia Woolf¹⁰ is addressing two different problems at the same time. She speaks of the relation between enunciation and its subject, of the way any sentence points towards a subjective position from which it is uttered; she also speaks of the articulation between a writer and 'his' work. Both questions are