Virginia Woolf and Poetry by Emily Kopley (review)

Rudolph Glitz

Modernism/modernity, Volume 31, Number 1, January 2024, pp. 184-187 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/mod.2024.a935456

helps frame Spitzer's conclusion, in which she reflects on the ethical dimensions of the so-called "method wars" of the present, our correlative literary-theoretical conflict.

Co-creators of "the modern category of the psychological," literary modernism and psychoanalysis prove difficult to disentangle (5). Spitzer demonstrates that it is not only possible, but edifying to do so—not simply because certain modernists insisted that we read their work *against* Freud and against the tide of popular Freudianism sweeping Europe and the US in the twentieth century, but because aspects of modernists' quarrels with psychoanalytic hermeneutics resurface in the critical contexts and institutional crises of the twenty-first. She explains:

> Literary studies scholars (not unlike their modernist precursors) are anxious about their conceptual authority being superseded by a range of actors and factors: by cognitivist approaches, by the social sciences, by statistical and quantitative methods (including the digital humanities), by social media, by amateurism . . . such dynamics reappear in periods in which literature perceives itself as embattled. (150-151)

Secret Sharers encourages literary scholars to examine closely the disputes between modernism and psychoanalysis that underwrite our own "postcritical" moment. While psychoanalysis has continued to evolve in fields adjacent the study of literature—for example, in trauma studies and affect theory—it never presented the existential threat some modernists feared. Austerity, however, is another matter.

***Virginia Woolf and Poetry*. Emily Kopley. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. 393.**

Reviewed by Rudolph Glitz, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam

The question of Virginia Woolf's relationship to poetry is one that even non-specialist readers of the great modernists are bound to run into sooner or later. *To the Lighthouse* (1927) alone—Woolf's arguably most canonical text—raises it in several memorable ways. At the level of content, the novel features the enigmatically looming presence of the poet Augustus Carmichael as well as Mr. Ramsay's disconcerting tic of reciting verse loudly and without paying heed to his surroundings. At the level of form, the novel—or "psychological poem" as Woolf's husband called it to her delight—has long been celebrated for its innovative lyricism and intricately patterned web of textual and motivic echoes. Other publications of Woolf's are even more strongly evocative of the genre of poetry, and so are quite a few of her private writings. Emily Kopley's *Virginia Woolf and Poetry* discusses these instances comprehensively and in admirable scholarly detail. In the process, as the book's dustjacket and introduction promise in slightly vague academese, it "clarifies a major prompt for Woolf's poetic prose," "exposes the rivalry between genres that was creatively generative to many modernist writers" (i.e. that between prose fiction and poetry), and "details how holding an ideology of a genre can shape literary debates and aesthetics" (4).

In addition, and this collateral benefit deserves a preliminary mention, the book reassures the reader that Woolf's uses of the term "poetry" are indeed varied, inconsistent, and contradictory at times, and did not emerge from any elaborate genre theory one might have missed, either of Woolf's or any of her contemporaries. Kopley's analyses reveal that, on the one hand, Woolf's own definition of the term remained "unfixed" (193). Rather than systematic, disinterested, and theoretically motivated, her invocations of it were idiosyncratic, instrumental, and driven by her particular artistic goals. On the other hand, this inconsistency does not rule out similarities and continuities between Woolf's nods to the genre, and Kopley usefully generalizes the ways in which, throughout the novelist's writing life, poetry served her as both "rival and muse" (3). On some occasions, we learn, Woolf distanced herself from the formal limitations, traditionalism,

and masculine egotism she associated with poetry, whereas on others she embraced poetry as an aesthetic model with the distinctive qualities she associated with great literature of all genres and aimed to replicate in her prose.

Unsurprisingly, given the extent to which Woolf's conceptions of poetry depend upon the contexts in which she uses the term, Kopley's study prioritizes the historicity and nuances of its expressions over any single synthesizing claim, narrative arc, or progressively unfolding argument. The book stretches over roughly 300 richly footnoted pages and is organized, for the most part, chronologically. In proportions that vary from chapter to chapter, Kopley "blends biography, formal analysis, genetic criticism, and literary history" (4). The resulting series of methodological cocktails will appeal to scholars of different interests and theoretical commitments, although some readers may occasionally wish for stronger doses of their favoured ingredient or even have preferred the latter neat.

The biographical roots of Woolf's reservations against poetry, which reach all the way back to her childhood and home life, are unearthed most expansively in the first two chapters of the book. Kopley shows that the budding author "experienced poetry as linked with patriarchy and with mental instability" (35) by adducing extensive quotations from Woolf's early writings, references to well-known nineteenth-century poems about "powerless women" (41), and vivid accounts of the pompously poetry-obsessed men in the Stephens' family circle. The latter in particular include new and amusing findings from the archives. The following lines by Woolf's cousin J. K. Stephen, for instance, might not only have planted the seed of some of Woolf's later comments on poetry, but they also hold an antiquarian appeal of their own:

> A sentence, lacking rhyme and measure,
> But none the less a work of art
> Costs greater pain, gives greater pleasure
> Than much that's dearer in the mart. (quoted on 58)

Here, as well as in a later chapter that skilfully reconstructs Julian Bell's literary disputes with his aunt, Kopley's archival findings suggest plausible biographical motivations behind Woolf's thinking about poetry. Her appeals to the first-hand aura of these findings may seem excessive in places, for example when she provides photographic reproductions of bookplates that contain nothing but signatures, dates, or brief dedications to Virginia Stephen, but then again they also testify to Kopley's scholarly meticulousness and may well be appreciated by hard-core Woolfians and Bloomsbury aficionados.

Alongside Woolf's gender-inflected reservations against poetry in a narrow sense, Kopley also discusses her occasional disparagement of it as an outdated literary medium. Both form the background to Woolf's strategic reinterpretation of poetry and simultaneous endorsement of it in a broad sense, namely one that comprises practically any form of writing in line with her aesthetic ideals. Informed by a post-war culture of mourning, self-conscious modernity, and the deaths of the "male tastemakers" around her (82), Woolf's reframing and qualified "embrace" of poetry (68) formally manifest themselves in her experimental novels from *Jacob's Room* (1922) onward and are made strikingly explicit in essays such as *A Room of One's Own* (1929). Kopley's chapter-long reading of Woolf's feminist classic is particularly insightful and showcases the strengths of her multi-pronged approach. It centers on the essay's dialogic subversion of contemporary literature textbooks such as, most prominently, Arthur Quiller-Couch's *On the Art of Writing* (1916). Highly alert to the poetological debates to which Woolf responded, Kopley illuminates the novelist's gender-and-class-political repurposing of Quiller Couch's rhetoric. Her reading impressively clarifies the aims of Woolf's call for a new literary form, for a poetry of prose rather than versified hero-worship that is both democratic in spirit and eminently suited to women writers.

Kopley's analysis of *Orlando* (1928) proceeds along similar lines. It shows that Woolf's treatment of her protagonist's literary endeavours aligns the birth of the female author with the decline of poetry and rise of the novel—although the centuries-old, sex-shifting Orlando clings to the older genre even after the literary zeitgeist has turned against it. Once again, Kopley deftly traverses a thick web of intertextual allusions to meta-literary treatises Woolf might have or demonstrably had encountered at the time. Even more rewarding at least to this reviewer, is

the attention she pays to Vita Sackville-West's then-popular poem *The Land* (1927), the undisputed real-life model for Orlando's "The Oak Tree." As Kopley reveals in detail, Woolf's mockery of her former lover's self-consciously traditionalist answer to Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) is prompted by a mix of post-breakup resentment, misgivings about her own commercial interest in securing the poem for the Hogarth Press, and, of course, her partly poetry-inspired but still distinctly modernist aesthetic.

Woolf's repeated calls for a poetic, "saturated" prose untrammelled by the "machinery" of traditional narrative (164, 184) are curious and eventually addressed head-on in Kopley's chapter on *The Waves* (1931). Drawing on Woolf's diary entries about her most "lyrical" novel (194) as well as some instructive corrections in her manuscript, this chapter identifies the novelist's primary poeticizing devices as "a permeable lyric 'I,' rampant figurative language, and an aural recurrence distinguished by [. . .] parallelism" (165). Each of these formal characteristics is traced in detail through selected passages from *The Waves*, which shed light, respectively, on Woolf's experimental rendering of her characters' communal consciousness, her "sly two-step" of "unassuming simile followed by overwhelming metaphor" (175), and her musically patterned syntax and word choices.

Taken for what it is, Kopley's characterization of Woolf's poetic prose is once again insightful and persuasive. Yet it also points to a general limitation of her study that needs dwelling on even in a laudatory review. For although it is certainly justifiable given the space constraints of a monograph, this limitation is not made explicit in the introduction and hence runs the risk of disappointing readers' expectations. It has to do with Kopley's closeness to her material and is perhaps best described as a reluctance to venture outside Woolf's intellectual lebenswelt and the immediate discursive contexts of her writings.

In the chapter on *The Waves*, for example, Kopley's critical vocabulary remains close to Woolf's own and makes frequent use of literary metaphors. Thus the "final 'n'" of a sentence about music is described as "droning into silence like the last stroke of a cellist's bow," after which "we feel aurally" that the sentence in question "is true" (182). Does this effect—assuming "we" indeed experience it—really depend on said "n" and the various syntactic features that precede it as opposed to, say, our preconceptions about music? How does Kopley know? And could time-worn lies not be conveyed with similar rhythm and sonority? In Pope's *Essay on Criticism* (1711), which Kopley quotes with approval, the "Sound" of poetry may indeed echo some structural features of, and familiar associations with, a limited range of simple concrete actions, but what does it mean for abstract, complex, and even novel ideas to be "reinforce[d]" by the literary forms they take (193)? Some readers might expect a more technical linguistic analysis here—as well as, perhaps, a delineation of Woolf's poetic strategies vis-à-vis those of other, more prosaic stylists. On what language-philosophical grounds can her sentences be seen as more "full of meaning" (165) than those written by, say, George Eliot, Henry James, or Arnold Bennett?

Kopley's account also seems biographically circumscribed with regard to the literary-historical significance of Woolf's poetics. She gives much space to writers the novelist herself read, wrote about, or corresponded with in connection with poetry—such as, for instance, the thirties poets around W. H. Auden, whose reception of her innovations is discussed instructively and at length in the final chapter. Yet apart from a brief survey in the introduction, Kopley rarely ventures beyond Woolf's immediate interlocutors. Thus, very little is said about D. H. Lawrence, the Bloomsbury-adjacent poet-novelist whose innovative prose fiction, too, relies on "rampant figurative language" and "aural recurrence." And even though Wordsworth repeatedly makes an appearance as a poet favoured by Woolf (e.g. on 231f), Kopley makes no attempt to reconcile Woolf's preference with Keats's famous disparagement of Wordsworth's "egotistical sublime." Literary historians are likely to wonder what kept Woolf from sharing Keats's assessment, given that his disparagement seems at least superficially in line with her aversion to the "egotistical 'I'" (169).

Even Kopley's largely biographical findings may call for more far-reaching discussions and contextual embedding in the eyes of some readers. How, for example, did Woolf's gendering of poetry relate to other people's stereotypical views of the genre? Was her view of it as predominantly masculine shared and promoted by feminists at large? Could it have been read as challenging the assumptions of sexologists such as Havelock Ellis or Krafft-Ebing, who counted poetry among the "decidedly feminine" occupations pursued by homosexuals?[1] Just like Woolf herself,

Kopley does not address these questions. What she does do, however, and does admirably with regard to any such queries, is construct a platform from which to launch further investigations.

No book can be everything to everybody, of course, and once one accepts Kopley's approach as not only methodologically pluralist but also biographically circumscribed, one can fully appreciate its considerable virtues and already impressive scope. *Virginia Woolf and Poetry* is thoroughly well-researched and at the same time historically conscientious: expressions of the author's own and potentially anachronistic views are always discernible as such. It does what it sets out to do reliably, sensibly, and as lucidly as its primary materials allow, and in the process yields much food for thought regarding Woolf's poetically infused fiction. In short, Kopley's study makes a substantial contribution to scholarship and provides indispensable reading for anyone interested in Woolf's complex engagement with poetry.

Notes

1. Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis, with Especial Reference to Contrary Sexual Instinct: a Medico-Legal Study*, trans. Charles Gilbert Chaddock (Philadelphia and London: The F. A. Davis Company, 1893), 307. See also Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (New York: Random House, 1905/1945), 294.

Queer Natures, Queer Mythologies. Sam See. Christopher Looby and Michael North, eds. New York: Fordham University Press, 2020. Pp. 323.

Reviewed by Scotty Streitfeld, University of California, Irvine

Recent work in queer studies is marked by methodological self-reflexivity, where rebelling against nature and subverting universalizing norms appear as critical habits now open to challenge and debate. *Queer Natures, Queer Mythologies,* which collects published and unpublished writings of the late Sam See, draws its critical energies from this self-reflexive wave, analyzing modernist literature's Darwinist thinking and its attachments to myth to reconsider queer historicist methodologies. Focusing on two key terms, nature and myth, that tend to be at odds with queer theory, the book's two parts, based on See's two planned monographs, argue that these terms are central to the construction of sexual feeling in modern culture, and to literary historiographies of sexuality. See's work offers a significant contribution to queer theory and queer modernist studies.

One of See's main aims is to challenge queer theory's tendency to reject nature, often framed as a construction of eugenics and sexology. See's introduction argues that Darwin's writings can be read as a queer theory of nature, and as grounds for an evolutionary aesthetics of non-normative sexual feeling. In this introduction, See critiques the historicist account of nature, articulated via Foucault's argument about sexology: that nature is really culture, and that it reproduces sexual normativity sifted through eugenic thought. To this second objection, See responds that the enemy is not nature but the naturalistic fallacy—"the association of nature with normativity" (16). From there, See offers a critique of Foucault's argument in *The History of Sexuality* that sexuality cohered through discourses of medicine, science, and public health. Because Foucault focuses on "logical" discourses, he tends to ignore aesthetics, especially literature, as a site of affect. By casting queer claims to nature as "reverse discourse," the Foucaultian position precludes art's status as a register of sexual feeling (19). By contrast, See emphasizes art's "status as a natural object," and extends this critique to Kant, who excludes art from nature, and aesthetic judgment from desire. Contra Foucault and Kant, See reads "queer feeling" as aesthetic and