



So Long, Farewell, Female Silence

Reading Woolf's Essays on Female Writing as well as Lily Briscoe's Artistic "Attempt" in Woolf's
To the Lighthouse in Light of the Writing Theories of Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva



Kerim ter Voert

5677211

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Second reader: dr. Roselinde Supheert



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and now and forever, for the sake of someone else.

(Kristeva, "Beauty" 99)

Abstract

This project pursues to portray a multifaceted image of female artistic creation, and therefore adopts an encompassing approach. Contrary to the masculine dialectical discourse as well as the feminine framework founded on criticism, in which woman (either deliberately as in the former case or unintentionally as in the latter case) vanishes in silence, it interweaves various female voices to celebrate her creative vision. Since the philosophers writing within the framework of *écriture féminine* selected for this project, Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva, like Woolf, all argue for a fluid way of writing, flowing through (bodily) feelings, contradiction, and intimacy, I read Woolf's essays regarding female writing through the eyes of these three poststructuralist feminist philosophers. Furthermore, to be as inclusive and plural as possible within the limited scope of this project, I eventually consider Lily Briscoe's painting process in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* in light of the aforementioned writing theories of Woolf and *écriture féminine*. Embracing their female ways of creating through celebrating her senses and plunging in the liquid layers of her unconscious, longing at the same time for connection and incongruity, Lily equally attains her artistic vision fluently. As an internal critique of the traditional dialectical discourse in which woman (dis)appears as a negative, I apply the Hegelian dialectical method for feminist purposes, creating a conversation between various female voices, and caressing contradiction in order to achieve unity within these differing views. Since the women writers explored in this thesis express their ideas concerning female writing through the form of their works, I implement their feelings regarding a fluid female language not only explicitly in my content, but also implicitly through writing fluently and fleshly, not feeling afraid to interlace multiple stylistic and poetic devices.

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Introduction

The present project pursues to be as plural, poetic, and encompassing as possible within the limited reach of a Bachelor's thesis. It, therefore, considers different discourses that lead to equivalent outcomes, several women writers that share similarities concerning content and style, and two branches of art that naturally amalgamate at once. It reflects on various, yet (quite) comparable ways in which woman accomplishes in creating her work of art through the writing theories of *écriture féminine* and Virginia Woolf, as well as through Lily Briscoe's painting procedure in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. Contrary to the rigid tongue of the dominant (male) discourse, the philosophers writing within the framework of *écriture féminine* appeal for a language that takes the female voice, flowing fluently like her body, into account. The fluid female language they call for thus opposes the solid structures of the masculine system, that abides by rules, laws, and linearity. Woolf similarly embraces her feelings as a woman in and through her writings, arguing for fluid forms and corporeal creativity, and gives, at the same time, her (female) characters with creative aspirations an equivalent experience, as happens with Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*.

I write within, or rather against, two different (quite diverging) discourses. First of all, I decline the traditional (male) stance of "dialectical thinking" (Adorno and Horkheimer 11), that makes a distinction between the masculine and the feminine in favour of the former, so that woman has no voice at all and merely appears as "negative" (Jones 252). Furthermore, feeling aware of the (unintentional) inherent silencing by women writers or critics themselves, I attempt to avoid the pitfalls of the feminist framework that (mainly) criticises and declines other women's work, so that the chance for the feminist framework to firmly flourish on its own fluid roots unfortunately only decreases. While I wish to celebrate the female voice in all its (or rather, her) colourful shades, my writing interweaves various female voices, bringing them in conversation with each other as well as with my own to make them all equally heard.

Instead of adopting the dialectical method in its traditional form, I apply it for feminist purposes. Following the footsteps of Hegelian philosophy and the ethics of *écriture féminine*, I caress the notion of contradiction to eventually find fusion and, thus, form the foundations of a less fractured feminist framework. Adopting Hegel's language, I consider various theses and antitheses in an attempt to synthesise them (57). The inspiration for my internal critique on the dialectical discourse derives from the women writers, discussed in this thesis, themselves, as they equally pursue fusion (as an end) while taking a contradictory course (as a means). It furthermore adopts their "immanent or aesthetic" approach (Ziarek 71), which implies that the meaning of a work of art arises from and through the artistic or stylistic choices made in the work. Phrased differently, "method" (or manner) and "matter" (or message) consciously merge in order to convey a certain content through the shape or form of the work of art itself (Wall 190). While following this (cross)road, my ethics (or the content of my writing) and my aesthetics (or the form of my writing) fluently amalgamate.

Since the female language, or rather the *fluid* language that declines the dominant (purely male) discourse and that would thus ideally actually disregard any sense of gender—as a rigid binary construction—at all, sways subtly like the sounds of a song, like the pace of a dance (Cixous, "Coming to Writing" 21-22), this thesis is full of stylistic devices and poetic phrases that invoke the imagination, call for interpretation, and (possibly) appear appealing to both eyes and ears. Fondling fluidity, caressing contradiction and confusion, we (hopefully) no longer feel uncomfortable "in the presence of the purple patch or the prose poem" by the time we reach the last page (Woolf, *Granite and Rainbow* 20), because we now know how to appreciate the artistic efforts of a writer that strives for fusion. Forcing my fingers to write fluently and fleshy, I take a tempting first step towards an affectionate feminist framework.

Chapter One

Declining the Discourse

This chapter outlines the two different discourses, one of them masculine, the other feminine, that serve as starting points for my internal dialectical critique. First of all, the dominant male discourse, the phallogocentric tradition, finds its foundations in “dialectical thinking” (Adorno and Horkheimer 11). The dialectical patriarchal procedure constitutes a process of pairing (or rather of comparing) between the masculine and the feminine, “between the subject who confers meaning and the meaningless object” (7). Since meaning emerges through negation, and woman only occurs as “the negative and passive pole” opposed to man (Jones 252), she disappears within (t)his world, within (t)his dialectical dialogue that declines to attach any value to suggestions of “the opposite” (Cixous, “The Laugh” 887). Not only woman, but life itself, in all its liveliness, suffers from the system. Each discipline, reaching from science to aestheticism, derives from reductionist structures that consist of indisputable laws, symbols, and concepts (Adorno and Horkheimer 3-13). While all branches blend together, patriarchal politics occupies a prominent position within the aesthetic arena. Not only through the sweeping system that, synonymous to the scientific field, subsists through reduction, but also through a natural relation regarding the sensible: Whereas an artist, with an eye for detail and a feel for beauty, creates art through all senses, politics determines “the distribution of the sensible,” deciding on what can be “seen or heard” (Rancière 37-38).

Nevertheless, the second (or natural) reason for politics and aesthetics to amalgamate possibly presents an escape from the system, since rule nor formula could ever capture “the character of a sensation,” the shape of a sensory experience (Mauron qtd. in Coates 254). The “sensible itself” contains many gaps, many features without explanation or formulation, that provide the possibility to make the “unseen visible” (Rancière 38) or the “unknown” known (210). Feelings flowing from sensory experience, primarily subjective by nature, thus

transcend the arid phallogocentric field of fact and formula with their unfamiliar faces.

Uncovering the “unknown,” unearthing the buried, these feelings scrutinise the supposedly factual surface in order to unveil its actual adaptable artificiality. If woman dares to delve “deep down inside” to look for the “unknown” (Cixous, “Coming to Writing” 10), and then dares to express the feelings she finds there—in depth and in darkness—in an artistic form, her aesthetic efforts may succeed in disrupting the solid structures of patriarchal ideology and discourse. Twisting the traditional connotations of “dialectical thinking” through giving women a voice, this deviant dialectical method does justice to the essence of discourse or dialogue: allowing diverse and disagreeing sides into its debate, and caressing each equally. Hopefully, its dialectic character effortlessly coalesces with creativity, or in Lorde’s words, “our creativity can spark like a dialectic” (18).

The second discourse I aim to disrupt has, on the contrary, a fierce feminine face. As Nikolchina equally argues, the feminist discourse (predominately) dwells on criticism (33). Consequently, it beforehand deconstructs the foundations of its own framework and creates its own unfortunate fate: woman’s everlasting silence (33). If women continue to chiefly criticise rather than to cherish other women’s work, they drown and dry out their own ground, erasing not only the past or the present but also precluding any future prospects (35). In order to grasp this (figuratively) deadly discourse, we dive into four layers of criticism.

For Woolf, writing as a woman reveals a wish for someplace quiet, “for somewhere” to contemplate or fantasise in sheer solitude (Alexander 275). Therefore, she needs a room of her own, barred and bare, to accommodate to her own taste (“Professions for Women” 6). Only by being lonely in “a virgin forest” or “a snow field where even the print of birds’ feet is unknown,” her mind may find meaning in her soul forever still to be sought (“On Being Ill” 36). Yet, a woman writer finds herself haunted by whispers, hears in between the leaves of her “virgin forest” hushed tones that tell her to “be tender” and “pure” as woman is supposed to

be, and sees shadows of wings and shimmers of haloes on her no longer unpolluted “snow field” that attempt to “[pluck] the heart out of [her] writing” (“Professions for Women” 3). Only through assassinating this accursed “Angel,” through destroying this divine devil with a fierce flung of “the inkpot” (3), thus through “escaping the image of Woman” (Crater 122), may a woman writer, wisely and wilfully, write what she wants. However, Woolf notices how women writers struggle to simply take off the Angel’s wings, shake off Her words, and exchange them for her own to (paradoxical as it may seem) firmly fly away. In *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf criticises the small number of female writers that write through “a superfluity of thorns” (609), remaining in the aggressive air arising from their anger towards the Angel that advocates patriarchal ideas. Woolf, therefore, feels that women could solely write in solitude, affected by neither patronising orders nor fiery feminist feelings flowing from their fury towards the Angel. So, she advises women writers to “cross the narrow bridge of art” with only her own “tools in [her] hands” (*Granite and Rainbow* 22), tools untouched by Angels or Masters.

Kristeva, in contrast, declines the idea that “*the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house*” (Lorde 19, emphasis in original), having faith in their converting potential. Consequently, she criticises Woolf for applying remote tools, for talking from far away, from fictional feminine fields detached from factual life. From Kristeva’s angle, Woolf’s wish for “the unknown foreign land” signifies her longing for a “land of silence” (Nikolchina 31). In Woolf’s writing, “women are visionaries, dancers who suffer as they speak” (Kristeva qtd. in Nikolchina 30). Drifting in distant, “blank regions,” Woolf becomes the symbol of “the silent sister of philosophy,” her face carefully concealed behind unattainable layers (Nikolchina 31). So, according to Kristeva, Woolf herself appears as an Angel, nearly invisible and seized in silence while speaking from supernatural spheres, thus still leaving woman in the actual world without a voice.

Yet, *écriture féminine* or feminine writing, the framework wherefrom Kristeva writes, has equally received criticism for its “idealist and essentialist” face that still reveals traditional traces by foregrounding gender difference (only now) in favour of the female (Jones 252-53). According to this critique of feminine writing, the binary structure of the masculine mind, its problematic dichotomous nature, remains merely in a reversed way (255). Essentially, gender is solely a secondary social construct that could never be captured by biological features, by male or female bodies (253). And *even if* our female bodies were capable of speaking for us, they would—as secondary social constructs—be shaped by the system that surrounds them, that keeps them secret and silent (254-55). Not only anyone who was not biologically born as a woman, but even woman herself may feel unheard in a general female language, while the words of few women philosophers are incapable of expressing all female feelings accurately (257-58). A well-grounded creation of female contours rather requires consideration of all her features, among them her “race, class, culture, and ethnicity” (Graves 161).

However, these critics equally face criticism for translating the complex theory of *écriture féminine* in too “simplified term[s]” (Taylor 48). Since the French “*féminine*” covers a number of meanings, it equally concerns a feeling of “femaleness”—a psychological state—alongside its (more obvious) interpretation as a sexual feature (48-49). In this reading, the above argument of dichotomous exclusion no longer holds, as the enigmatic shape of a feeling could effortlessly cross the boundaries of biological binarism.

Eventually, freedom in female writing seems or feels impossible, since even Woolf and Kristeva suffer silently under the Angel’s wings. Dwelling in darkness yet blinded by light, they become shadows and shimmers themselves; they become “*his shadow*,” “servant of the militant male” (Cixous, “The Laugh” 880, my emphasis). After analysing only four waves of criticism in an ocean of critical contemplation, the inherent silencing by woman herself already appears as quite a phenomenon. A phenomenon that makes women,

unfortunately, float in spirals, forever, fractured, in “the circularity of a voice speaking always in the present about a silence always in the past” (Nicolchina 35). A phenomenon that, after all, foretells woman’s quiet future, her silent fate: When Woolf condemns the Angel as well as all those women writers writing through “a superfluity of thorns” (*A Room* 609), Kristeva condemns Woolf in her turn, before being soaked in streams of criticism herself. Accordingly, the “Angel is killed and killed, the silence is enunciated and enunciated” (Nicolchina 33), leaving nothing but blanks behind, thus, leaving nothing to build on. However, as Woolf, at the same time, highlights the essence of a shared history for female writers while “a woman writing thinks back through her mothers” (*A Room* 619), and as the present project pursues to present a plurality of perspectives, it acknowledges and adopts all female voices in a caressing rather than in a critical tone. To phrase it philosophically, I adopt the *principal of charity*, and thus endeavour to consider every layer in the loveliest light thinkable. Consequently, I leave the internal critiques on Woolf and *écriture féminine* behind, so that I at least have something to build on when starting my search for female creation.

Chapter Two

Exploring *Écriture Féminine*

In “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Cixous frames the principles of *écriture féminine*: a “feminine writing” or “women’s writing” different from the dominant (male) discourse (Taylor 41). She inspires woman to flee the masculine realm that, in its dialectical character, leaves no place for the feminine perspective, and to shape her own language. This new form of feminine writing flows from the corporeal or sexual difference between men and women (41), and foregrounds the feelings felt in sensory experience as well as contradiction and intimacy. Not only Cixous, but a number of continental feminist philosophers write within this framework, later defined as *écriture féminine*. This chapter considers the ideas on female writing of three of these poststructuralist feminist philosophers, Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva, in order to creatively establish the foundations of this framework that equally declines the traditional dialectical discourse in favour of a fluid feminine one.

For Cixous, language flows in loving liquid lines, soaked in sweet streams of “milk” and “honey” (“Coming to Writing” 21). Merging white and gold in a glaring mesh, forming feminine overflowing foam, woman fractures the patriarchal “within” (“The Laugh” 887). Through fluidity she whirls his world, tastes it and transforms it through tender, timid touches of “the mother tongue” (“Coming to Writing” 49), through a little taste of her mother’s milk. Writing from her milky way, from the warmth of her womb, woman “writes in white ink” (“The Laugh” 881). Writing, then, starts from scratch, from a blank page, from the moment “when you have lost everything” (“Coming to Writing” 38). Dying this empty sheet in white wavery floods with the fragile flesh of her fingers, with “tears” streaming fluently from “wild eyes” (*The Book* 53), woman’s unconscious unfolds corporeally. Not only her mouth, mind, or heart, but her “flesh speaks true” (“The Laugh” 881). Talking with a tactile tongue, through tasting fingers, her senses blend together: Her “eyes listen” while her “flesh scans” (“Coming

to Writing” 53). If woman thinks through feeling, feels through thinking, writing naturally streams through her veins, bathing her brain in fresh breath, flooding it with blood to stir the sources of her creative soul. She thus intertwines the corporeal and the cognitive, finds a way to truly feel the touch of words and articulate “the character of a sensation” so to repair the tear between body and mind (Mauron qtd. in Coates 254).

Cixous relates the distinctive nature of the female body to a difference concerning her sexual drives: “A woman’s body, with its thousand and one thresholds” knows so many places of pleasure, concealed, still to be discovered (“The Laugh” 885). If woman attempts to search these secret spots of delight, and manages to formulate these unfamiliar feelings in a new language, she opens the path leading to the “unknown” (Ranci re 210). She starts a new way of writing that fractures phallogentrism, provides an escape from its “snare of silence” (“The Laugh” 881). As “the daughter of milk and honey,” in a world in which “everything” hence “nothing is metaphor” (“Coming to Writing” 50), woman flees the walls of the masculine world through multiple meanings that transcend the linear relation between literal and figurative language, being both at once, being beautiful voluptuous body filled with unfamiliar delight that now knows, feels, how to write: through thinking while feeling, and vice versa, *enfin, c’est tout pour Cixous*.

Similar to Cixous, Irigaray supports her plea for a feminine language deviant from the dominant discourse by accentuating the corporeal as well as the sexual difference between the genders. As the female genitals consist of two lips that embrace each other, of two small scraps of skin that tenderly kiss and communicate, that share space, “woman retouches herself constantly” (Irigaray qtd. in Jones 250). Since her ethics emerges from “autoeroticism” (Jones 250), woman should celebrate her skin, rather than her eyes or ears, as the most significant of her senses (*This Sex* 26). Through these biological traits, female language and philosophy find their roots in “relationality,” in *two* rather than in *one* (Tremblay 284). Consequently, Irigaray

regards “freedom as fundamentally relational” (Ziarek 79), and considers female “liberation,” above all, in light of female “community” (Lorde 18). Freedom in and through creativity thus coalesces with and arises from communication, connection, contact.

Revolving around “the encounter between the one and the other” (Tremblay 284), Irigaray’s philosophy transcends phallogentrism founded on the *one*, on the masculine and its solid machinery. Woman is “*neither one nor two*” but, dwelling outside dichotomous realms, withstands “all adequate definition” (*This Sex* 26, emphasis in original). She is contradictory, here and there, she lives “everywhere” and, all at once, wants to say: “Nothing. Everything” (“When Our Lips” 73-75). Whereas masculine movement simulates the sun, a single source of light, a “solipsism” in its strongest form, feminine motions are “luminous” (71). Women are like sunbeams shining in divergent directions during the day, while lightening the night sky as sparkling stars. Therefore, they never “separate light from night,” but rather embrace their antithetical nature that makes them “so simultaneously whole” (78). Consequently, their rays radiate between the layers of “philosophy and psychoanalysis,” of “poetry and logic,” and of “politics and love” (Martin 1). Rising above binarism, woman not merely “writes in white ink” (Cixous, “The Laugh” 881), she rather merges her mother’s milk with blood. Mingling white and red, the lava gushing from her vulvar volcanoes looks rosy, looks liquid like her lips. Blending bodies, breeding words, women create colours that complement each other, or in Irigaray’s own words: “Because we are both white and red, we give birth to all the colors: pinks, browns, blonds, greens, blues...” (“When Our Lips” 70).

Analogous to Cixous and Irigaray, Kristeva carries multiple meanings, colours, and sensory feelings inside her writing. Descending in deeper waters, diving in loving memories, woman reaches “beyond ... in order to be” (*Powers of Horror* 12). A continual stream between “conscious and unconscious processes” flows through the female mind (Taylor 44). An “endless flow” of fluid phrases (44) streams from the semiotic (the playful and poetic) to

the symbolic (the solid and syntactic), that thus loses its linearity (Ingelbien 281). Since the repetitive rhythm of the symbolic bears patriarchal patterns, relating to the endless, identical, factual sequence of nature (Adorno and Horkheimer 12), Kristeva creates her female language and literature through tainting the symbolic with tactile semiotic traces (Ingelbien 281). She consequently considers literature as “the privileged place where meaning is elaborated and destroyed” (*Tales of Love* 279), where meaning paradoxically disappears “in death and/or nonmeaning” (“Beauty” 103). Through semiotic-symbolic crossings, through streams of (un)consciousness, woman unearths a plurality of meaning inside her mind, within her mouth, meaning (simultaneously) “nonmeaning” or “true meaning” (97).

However, contrary to Cixous and Irigaray, Kristeva considers completely escaping patriarchal patterns impossible, as every concept has been created in and through the ruling system (Gambaudo 27-28). Adopting a Foucauldian approach, woman could only further her feminism within the existing framework (Foucault 781). She hence concerns herself with the question “*What [her] place in the symbolic contract [could be]*” (Kristeva, “Women’s Time” 23, emphasis in original). From Kristeva’s perspective, “a certain beyond of the traditional discipline” could only take place “within that discipline” (Ziarek 144). Therefore, a “beyond of aesthetics” entails “a beyond *in* aesthetics itself” (Gasché qtd. in Ziarek 144, my emphasis). Gendered writing, creation, and experience are always situated “along a masculine-feminine spectrum” (Gambaudo 24). Fusing masculine and feminine features, “a pure ‘woman writing’ realm” is no more than a myth (26). Consequently, she confirms Lacan’s claim that “[t]here is no such thing as Woman,” as there is no such “possessor of some mythical unity—a supreme power” (“Women’s Time” 30). Opposed to optimistic Cixous and Irigaray, who preach for a pure woman language flowing on bodily fluids, Kristeva chooses, at last, the dominant (male) discourse over motherly milky ink, while feeling sincerely sick at the thought of “that skin on the surface of milk” (*Powers of Horror* 2).

Chapter Three

Reading Woolf's Essays on Female Writing through "Wild Eyes"

Like the philosophers of *écriture féminine*, Woolf affirms the notion of female absence within the male dialectical discourse. She argues that women, appearing as "negative" (Jones 252), serve simply as secondary "looking-glasses" to strengthen the primacy of man (*A Room* 581). Literature merely conveys "male virtues" and "male values" (622), leaving no room for the female perspective. In *A Room of One's Own*, she hence creates her own version of "the silent sister" (Nikolchina 31) in her formation of Judith Shakespeare, "a highly gifted girl" yet "tortured and pulled asunder" for her poetic aspirations (590). While Judith appears as "the other of aesthetic harmony" (Ziarek 76), as dark and dangerous territory, as an unfamiliar feminine face, unpredictable and elusive like death (Cixous, "The Laugh" 885), her gift is fatal to her, as any poetess would lose her life in a land of purely poets. Yet, although Judith has vanished in silence, Woolf believes that she still "lives in you and me, and in many other women" (*A Room* 629). When woman writes what she wants "to write" (625), when she feels brave enough to express what "[her] beauty means to [her]" (614), when she dares to uncover the "unknown" or unearth the "buried," in a word, when she wilfully writes "as a woman" (616), Woolf thinks, feels, that Judith will awaken. Equivalent to the ethics of *écriture féminine*, the female language Woolf calls for flows through fluidity, sensory experience, and contradiction. Therefore, this chapter reads Woolf's essays on female writing through the "wild eyes" of *écriture féminine*, considering analogies as well as incongruities between the words of these women (Cixous, *The Book* 53).

For Woolf, "heart, body and brain" are "not contained in separate compartments," but rather creatively coalesce (*A Room* 570). Accordingly, art streams from our ears and eyes to our hearts and heads to our hands in order to radiate something beautiful, something sensual, something spiritual. Fusing feelings, fingers, eyes, and thoughts, "the movement from inside

to outside, from outside to inside” flows endlessly, relentlessly, in a feminine form, in a *forme féminine* (Irigaray, “When Our Lips” 73). Consequently, art arises from “corporeal creativity” (Coates 252), from feelings flowing from sensory experience, acquiring artistic appearance underneath. As “the aesthetic experience” is equivalent to “embodied experience,” our bodies are “the aesthetic instrument” (247), ushering our brushes and piloting our pencils. Whereas aesthetics is intrinsically intertwined with “the sensible” (Rancière 37), art is part of human anatomy, derives from its depths, from somewhere “beneath the surface of our skin” (Coates 247). Arousing these “corporeal roots” (259), Woolf, as an artist, asks her audience “to stop” contemplating and simply “feel” (255). It is in these “moments of being” (Woolf, *Moments of Being* 79), which are, at the same time, “moments of transition” (Coates 256), that art appears and meaning emerges. While the internal and the external artistically amalgamate, “the soul of the individual” and “the soul of the universe” shine from a single source, simultaneously, in original shades (Parkes 36). To travel “between the inner and outer worlds,” to substitute one sphere for the other, Woolf invokes her “transpersonal imagination” (40). Like Kristeva, she finds herself “surprised by a sudden splitting off of consciousness,” exchanging the conscious for the unconscious (Woolf, *A Room* 619), which is perfect, for the artist pursues to feel “as unconscious as possible” (Woolf, “Professions for Women” 4). When sight loses sharpness, the soul, the genesis of imagination and creation, strengthens, after all.

Within these “moments of being” or “moments of transition” meaning emerges and language unfolds through “mystic” layers (Woolf, “On Being Ill” 41). Demystifying these outward layers, we reach “what is beyond their surface meaning” (41). We wish to understand “the whole landscape of life” (34) and unveil its inexpressible richness to attain “something beyond” (Woolf, *Granite and Rainbow* 141). In this demanding yet rewarding process, “the words give out their scent, and ripple like leaves, and chequer us with light and shadow, [so that], if at last we grasp the meaning, it is all the richer for having travelled slowly up with all

its bloom upon its wings” (Woolf, “On Being Ill” 41). Rather than appearing as “single and separate,” words now carry contradictory colours on their wings: “Beauty is part ugliness; amusement part disgust; pleasure part pain” (Woolf, *Granite and Rainbow* 16). Fusing with their counterparts, concepts connote meanings that complementarily oppose their factual denotations. When Lily Briscoe, for example, fixes her gaze at “the flowers,” that ordinarily induce cheerful feelings in all their softness, smells, and shades, they seem “standing there, looking before them, looking up, yet beholding nothing, eyeless, and so terrible” (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 147). While Lily loses herself in the subjective streams of her soul, “the stillness and brightness of the day” seem similar to “the chaos and tumult of night” (147). Searching the shadows of dawn, the light of night, Lily shows that “she was not a skimmer of surfaces merely, but had looked beneath into the depths” (Woolf, *A Room* 616).

On the other hand, since female creation caresses contradiction, it simultaneously fixes its stare towards the touch, towards “the texture of the object itself” (Coates 258). Denuding words, forms, and objects of their associative layers and declining those “otherwise exhausted symbols and metaphors” attached to language (258), we find the “freedom to think of things in themselves” (Woolf, *A Room* 583), in order to “grasp something hard” and in order to “cut real ice” (Woolf, *Granite and Rainbow* 13). Contrary to Lily who considers flowers through her feelings rather than from plain observation, Woolf asks us to, at the same time, analyse “the rose” as it is, as “it stands, still and steady, throughout an entire afternoon in the earth” (“On Being Ill” 38). Fully forgetting about its (conservative) connection “with beauty in its prime” (38), we now know, feel, how to celebrate its “sensual origins” as well (Coates 258).

Thus, rather than adhering to tradition or a notion of reality, rather than staying on the surface like man, a woman writing at once searches the surface as well as the subsurface for “contradictory truths” (Wall 194). She blooms, as the philosophers of *écriture féminine* argue, in “a universe of contradiction” (194). Questioning “contradictory truths,” she inquires “the

impossible” (Cixous, “The Laugh” 886). Whereas she aspires to “reach the pure fluid, the essential oil of truth,” she already accepts its “fluid” foundations, and therefore, her inevitable failure to reach “the essential” (Woolf, *A Room* 575). Contrary to man who flees his fate in solid reductionist structures, woman embraces her “fluid” fate, understanding that the “thing in itself” or “pure truth” are no more than “metaphors” or “illusions” that appear as facts when forgotten about (Nietzsche 55-56). Watching the world straight in the face, accepting that all, hence “nothing is metaphor” (Cixous, “Coming to Writing” 50), woman lives life to the fullest, in its *truthful contradictions* her bravery blossoms brightly. Accordingly, she owns two opposing lights: “the red light of emotion” and “the white light of truth” (Woolf, *A Room* 579). When she blends them together, similar to the way that Cixous and Irigaray merge their cherry blood with their creamy mother milk, her courageous rosy shades subtly surface from the subsurface. For woman, no need to choose between “the black or rosy spectacles” (610). She wears them both, proudly produces “the purple patch or the prose poem” (Woolf, *Granite and Rainbow* 20), plays it plurally or *polyvalent*, period. *Point*.

Although, equivalent to *écriture féminine*, her beautiful blush pours from a “marriage of opposites” (Woolf, *A Room* 623), Woolf’s colours concerning female writing are in the end quite different. While Cixous and Irigaray propagate a purely female language inspired by her biological features, simply maintaining that “I write woman: woman must write woman. And man, man” (Cixous, “The Laugh” 877), while Kristeva holds onto the masculine discourse, arguing for an internal critique, Woolf inventively combines the genders. For Woolf, art arises from an “androgynous” mind, from “a mind that is [neither] purely masculine [nor] purely feminine” (*A Room* 620), that is not afraid to allow love between linear and circular, vertical and horizontal lines (Stewart 82). She feels that it would be “fatal” to simply choose one side (*A Room* 623), as she understands that a woman’s words are most powerful when she eludes every form of dichotomy, especially one as persistent as gender.

Chapter Four

Reading Lily Briscoe's Artistic "Attempt" in Light of *Écriture Féminine*

There she stands, in front of her vacant canvas, assimilating its blank gaze, afraid of its "cold stare" (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 171). Where to begin, where to begin as a woman artist? Her heart echoes in hushed tones, tells her to think through feeling, to feel through thinking, to merge mind and flesh "in a golden mesh" (57), making them flash, flare, glare, here and there, "everywhere" (Irigaray, "When Our Lips" 73). In order to paint her painting, Lily has to live within life's "moments of being" (Woolf, *Moments of Being* 79), has to find regions in which she can be her creative self, completely, carelessly. Similar to the way the philosophers of *écriture féminine* find the words they wish to write, Lily achieves her artistic "attempt" (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 225) through delving in the unconscious, celebrating her senses, caressing contradiction, and cherishing intimacy. Whereas this project pursues to portray plurality as much as possible and thus adopts an encompassing perspective, this final chapter considers Lily's painting process in light of the writing theories of *écriture féminine*, hence blending two different branches of art at once in order to destruct the dichotomous discourse that forces to choose and separate, that forces to say "farewell" to either side.

To find her sincerest "streams of consciousness" and frame her work of art (Berger 18), Lily seeks for an interrelation between the surface (the external) as well as the subsurface (the internal). So, she fuses her feelings flowing from sensory experience with the surface of the sea. Like the streams of the ocean, her thoughts portray a "perpetual overflowing" or an "endless hermeneutical spiral" that infinitely moves, removes, renews (19). Harmonising inside and outside, merging the waves of her mind with the waves of the ocean, Lily's mind mirrors the tide, "rising and falling with the sea" (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 163). She even feels as if she "stand[s] up to the lips in some substance," as if she "move[s] and float[s] and sink[s] in [such] unfathomably deep [streams]" (208). Plunging in purplish pools, her sight

declined by the salty sea water, but her fingers feeling its colourful coldness, she probably wonders, similar to Cixous: “What’s the meaning of these waves, these floods, these outbursts?” (“The Laugh” 876). To find meaning in “a vista of open seas ... shedding purple beams,” she carefully follows the footsteps of Kristeva and descends into “the raptures of a bottomless memory” (*Powers of Horror* 12). She replaces present for past, because when woman ponders about “the past,” she “liv[es] most fully in the present” (Woolf, *Moments of Being* 98). Bringing her brush on a palette of “blue paint,” Lily relives former times (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 187). She skilfully models her memories in “greens and blues” (174), thus bears strokes as fine as air and as clear as water.

Delving in deeper streams while beholding the surface, Lily pursues to fuse “everyday reality” with “elsewhere” (Crater 134), she aspires to experience the “ordinary” as “a miracle” (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 218). Therefore, she has to accept that curious feeling of division (Stewart 84), her longing for “the thing itself” as well as her longing for an interpretation of “the thing itself” (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 209), that constitutes the “still and steady” yet subjective, slippery roots of her work of art, of her firm but fluid flower (Woolf, “On Being III” 38). After a failed attempt to follow her voice with her pencil that tells her “undeniable, everlasting, contradictory things” (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 29), Lily feels a thirst to grasp “the truth of things,” to write down unwavering words “over the grey-green walls” and so secure essentials within the blanks, blurs, and blots of her mind (161). Subsequently, she makes “stony fields of the purpler spaces” and “hillocks of the blue bars of the waves” (197). Solidifying the liquid, she establishes “an equilibrium between the fluid and the rooted” (Viola 285), between “granite and rainbow” (Woolf, *Granite and Rainbow* 155). Her painting eventually contradictorily connects the surface and the subsurface, the soft and the firm, like a butterfly with compound wings: “Beautiful and bright it should be on the surface, feathery and evanescent, one colour melting into another like the colours on a butterfly’s wing; but

beneath the fabric must be clamped together with bolts of iron” (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 186). As her painting calls for composition, Lily’s “search of essences” eventually crumbles and collides in contradiction, in a fusion of fluid and solid (Matro 212).

Since female creation operates “gestationally, co-creatively, constantly” like the waves of the sea or the mind (Berger 24), Lily’s aesthetical quest for “organic unity” is as much an affectionate or psychological search (Matro 214). Her human relations resemble her aesthetic relations, both characterised by an “ambivalent” attitude towards the nature of attachment or intimacy (Proudfit 31), conveying at the same time a longing for “liquid fusion” as well as a sound awareness of the importance of “distance” (Viola 279-80). In her relationship with Mrs. Ramsay, Lily similarly finds herself lost in confusion when searching for fusion. Her hunt for truth only opens up an endless ocean of questions:

Was it wisdom? Was it knowledge? Was it, once more, the deceptiveness of beauty, so that all one’s perceptions, half-way to truth, were tangled in a golden mesh? ... What device for becoming, like waters poured into one jar, inextricably the same, one with the object one adores? Could the body achieve it, or the mind, subtly mingling in the intricate passages of the brain? or the heart? (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 57)

While “heart, body and brain” collaborate thoughtfully (Woolf, *A Room* 570), Lily wonders whether any of them could fuse “with the object one adores,” could fuse with Mrs. Ramsay. Feeling “tangled in a golden mesh,” questioning whether Mrs. Ramsay’s gaze rays with “wisdom” and “knowledge” or merely with “beauty,” she merges the epistemological with the aesthetical, just as she merges these realms with her “ethics of intimacy,” her desire for fusion (Berman 159). Ultimately altering her craving for “knowledge” into a cry for “unity” (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 57), Lily accepts the idea that her ethics and aesthetics simply arise from “intimacy” (Berman 152), from “the one, the other, and the air between us” (Irigaray qtd. in

Tremblay 288). To articulate the “emotions of the body” that emerge from such relations, and to, then, “express that emptiness there” take both time and psychological struggle (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 194). To think through feeling, to feel through thinking, to amalgamate mind, body, and heart in order to unfold life (love) to the fullest, is a tough task, a painful process.

Consequently, Lily feels at first overwhelmed by “the wellsprings of [her] souls” that she only feels but fails to see (Cixous, “Coming to Writing” 10). How could she ever convey such feelings in her vision? Standing in front of her easel, she feels completely empty, or at least incapable to “express that emptiness,” and asks herself: “For really, what did she feel, come back after all these years and Mrs. Ramsay dead? Nothing, nothing – nothing that she could express at all” (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 159). As long as her heart remains empty, her canvas stays blank as well. Her “painting process” could therefore only proceed through a “grieving” or a “preoedipal” process, through an interior process in which the blank voids of her heart gain a little colour, that could then be conveyed to the exterior, as expressed in her painting (Crater 129). Through unconscious streams, she needs to reconnect with Mrs. Ramsay, with her “sea-mother” waiting for her in the warm waves of the “womb” (Cixous, “Coming to Writing” 22).

However, since Lily feels emotionally overwhelmed and empty, her “sea-mother” rather appears like a “sea-monster” whereas the warm washing waves feel like cold “hostile waters” (Viola 272-73). In this shape, Mrs. Ramsay represents the image of Woman, the Angel in the House, the “looking-glass” (Woolf, *A Room* 581) that “[g]iving, giving, giving ... had died” (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 163). To achieve anything aesthetically, Lily feels (or thinks) that she has to make Mrs. Ramsay “merely a part of the system of formal relations” (Proudfit 32), that she has to reduce the radiant sensations of her soul “to abstract quantities” (Adorno and Horkheimer 4). If Lily mutes the lively memories of her “sea-mother” in straight abstraction, thereby losing all affection, she generates representation out of something as

“unrepresentable” as woman, and (archaically) associates “femininity ... with death” (Cixous, “The Laugh” 885).

Still, even stoned to death, drowned out, dwelling on the soil of the sea, woman exists as “the beautiful object[,] the one that tirelessly returns[,] following destructions and wars in order to bear witness that there is survival after death, that immortality is possible” (Kristeva, “Beauty” 97-98). Thus, Mrs. Ramsay returns as a “beautiful object,” as “the admirable face of loss” (99). Forming an inspiration for creation, Mrs. Ramsay actually appears as an ingenious subject, “a sister artist” (Crater 134), rather than as a purely alluring object. Being “just there” (Irigaray, “When Our Lips” 79), her spirit feels as natural as skin, securing the interrelation of the internal and the external as an intermediate which is necessary for female artistic creation. The painful memories of Mrs. Ramsay are moving, are meaningful in Lily’s process. At last, the moment “when [we] have lost everything” (Cixous, “Coming to Writing” 38), when we feel entirely “empty” in “the nothing-at-all, the void” (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 191), we may cry like Kristeva, shed tears like Cixous, search for intimacy like Irigaray, because our artistic chances are so much ampler in full fluidity. So please, Lily: “[Do weep.] Don’t weep. One day we will learn to say ourselves. And what we say will be far more beautiful than our tears, totally fluent” (Irigaray, “When Our Lips” 77).

After shedding quite curious tears while feeling in “perfect control of herself” (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 195), Lily strokes her painting with a last line, right in the middle (226). Whether the line interrupts her congruous composition or whether it unites both sides in perfect harmony we may never know. Nevertheless, it surely flows fluently from firm female fingers, from fingers that feel without hovering or hesitation where to go, where to go as a woman artist. Or actually, her line flows from fingers that feel the *fluid* rather than the *female* language, whereas Lily seeks “[to subdue] all her impressions as a woman to something much more general” during her painting process (60). As a creation of Woolf’s imagination, Lily

incorporates the androgynous ideal that declines any form of dichotomy. Furthermore, the line surely breathes an infinite air of love, bringing Lily and Mrs. Ramsay together, forever. After drawing that final line, Lily may truly tell herself: “How beautiful to be able to replace all perishable psychic values” (Kristeva, “Beauty” 99), as she at last proved herself able to create something “beautiful,” tactile, and lasting out of something so painful, “psychic” and “perishable.” And she may add: What an attempt of a woman hand, or really, what an attempt of a flowing hand.

Conclusion

The preceding analysis presents an attempt to decline the male dialectical discourse and the female critical framework in which woman vanishes in silence through interweaving various female voices and considering all equally valuable. The five women artists explored—Cixous, Irigaray, Kristeva, Woolf, and Lily Briscoe—share several similarities regarding, above all, the significance of the senses, their care for contradiction, colour, and confusion, and their ultimate cry for intimacy. On the other hand, they all carry their own interpretations of viable female ways of creating. Cixous and Irigaray argue for a female language that flows fluently like the female body and its (or rather, her) fluids, constituting the core of *écriture féminine*. Considering the female body as a source for artistic creation, Cixous specifically stresses the strength of maternity, whereas Irigaray foregrounds the relational nature of woman's sexual organs, of her loving lips. Kristeva and Woolf adopt quite different angles, contrary to a notion of pure femininity. Kristeva pursues an internal critique, believing that “*the master's tools*” have the potential to “*disrupt the master's house*” (Lorde 19, emphasis in original), encouraging woman to find her place in the existing (male) discourse. Woolf finally declines the dichotomous nature of gender altogether, while arguing that an artistic mind bears both feminine as well as masculine features. She moreover passes her vision onto Lily in *To the Lighthouse*, who, after all, aspires to elevate “her impressions as a woman to something much more general” (60).

However, the attempt to interweave multiple female voices and celebrate each equally proved, in practice, simply impossible. First of all, the limited scope of a Bachelor's thesis provides no room for an aim this ambitious and encompassing. To properly portray a diverse image of possible ways to create art as a woman demands much more space, probably the size of a volume. The present project rather performs a close reading of two handfuls of primary texts concerning the nature of female creation. In this small selection that focuses on Cixous,

Irigaray, Kristeva, Woolf, and Lily Briscoe, an ocean of female voices on this theme remains unexplored. Furthermore, the aspiration to merely intertwine several female voices and cherish all equally appeared truly difficult, if not impossible. At last, every writer (especially in the academic sphere) takes a stance to some extent, even by the selection of texts studied. I eventually admired Woolf most for fusing the masculine and the feminine, and so dismantling the essence of the dichotomous discourse. A final pitfall of the present project, actually due to my selection, is the focus on the idea of a female language that is inherent to the theories of *écriture féminine* (particularly as found in Cixous and Irigaray). In a world in which gender becomes more and more a subject of debate, in which sharp male-female boundaries appear more and more intolerable—as gender has complex psychological rather than straightforward biological roots—my focus on a female language seems (and feels) no longer appropriate. I therefore recommend further research that takes up the pitfalls of the present project to make a more accomplished attempt. Adopting a broader scope, it could create a more multifaceted image of female creation that carefully considers the problematic nature of gender in the first place, that this Bachelor's thesis simply had no space for.

Holding rather ambitious thoughts, I introduced this work with the following quote: “I am able to remake nothingness, better than it was and within an unchanging harmony, here and now and forever, for the sake of someone else” (Kristeva, “Beauty” 99). At the start, I longed, like Lily, for a way to “remake nothingness” into something whole. Along the road, however, I discovered that this desire was doomed for failure. I came to understand that the exceptional strength of the female, or rather, of the *fluid* language lies in facing the truth, which tells us that “the essential oil of truth” flows on “fluid” foundations (Woolf, *A Room* 575). To love liquidity, feel fine in fragments, accept our fate of feeling incomplete, seems for me the only way to “attempt ... something” (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 225). My writing will never be “an unchanging harmony,” yet feels definitely “better” than a blank page, *voilà*.

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