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VIRGINIA WOOLF: TURNING THE CENTURIES

**Selected Papers From the Ninth
Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf**

**University of Delaware
June 10-13, 1999**

Edited by Ann Ardis & Bonnie Kime Scott

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John Young

Canonicity and Commercialization in Woolf's Uniform Edition

This paper considers Virginia Woolf the publisher alongside Virginia Woolf the author. While the Hogarth Press has long been known for making Woolf "the only woman in England free to write what I like," it also made her free to be published as she liked. Hogarth, Jane Marcus argues, "gave Woolf a way of negotiating the terms of literary publicity, and a space somewhere between the private, the coterie, and the public sphere" (144-5). I will examine one such negotiation, the Uniform Edition of Woolf's works, a series designed to capitalize on her growing recognition and marketability. Once the Woolfs had become, in Leonard's words, "more or less ordinary publishers" (Rosenbaum, 7), they began marketing their books in "more or less ordinary" ways, and these included a construction of Woolf through the Uniform Edition as both canonical and commercial, a crucial combination, I will conclude, for modernist women writers.¹

Focusing on the publishing dynamics of Woolf's books offers a more fully historicized portrait of her career. I address the Uniform Edition through what George Bornstein calls the "textual aura" (226), a version of Walter Benjamin's aura updated to include the notions of textual materiality emphasized by Jerome McGann and Peter Shillingsburg. Reproductions which ignore a book's textual aura, Bornstein demonstrates, "tend to set the text free from its original time and place, locating it in our own principally as an aesthetic rather than historicized object" (225). There is a certain irony in applying Benjamin's original notion of aura to mechanically printed books, which

can never be "authentic" objects in his sense. But while books may exemplify Benjamin's maxim that "the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility" (224), publishers still manufacture some mark of originality in first, and especially limited, editions.² A book that appears in "only" 100 copies, for example, creates in its consumers a sense of authenticity, if on a smaller scale than other art objects. Since all Woolf's books from *Jacob's Room* on bore the line "Published by Leonard & Virginia Woolf at the Hogarth Press," by investigating the Woolfs' publishing decisions we can also interpret her texts' material codes.

The Uniform Edition made Woolf's works more accessible than ever before, creating a textual aura that manifests itself in the books' own commodification. Hogarth historian J. H. Willis, Jr., explains:

To put a living novelist's works into a standard edition is to make a claim for the permanence and importance of the writer's work, to establish a canon, suggest the classic. All the more interesting and revealing is such a development when the novelist is in mid-career, forty-seven years old, and a partner in the publishing firm. By their editorial decision, the Woolfs seem to have declared publicly the commercial value of Virginia's novels and their claim to artistic greatness (156).

Hogarth's Autumn 1929 catalog announced five new publications from its most prominent author: the first four Uniform Editions (*The Voyage Out*, *Jacob's Room*, *Mrs Dalloway*, and *The Common Reader*) and *A Room of One's Own*. Perhaps surprisingly (from our contemporary perspective), the catalog lists the reprint series first. The Uniform Edition appeared with this blurb (probably written by Woolf herself): "The Hogarth Press begins this autumn the publication of a cheap uniform edition, of small and convenient size, of the works of Virginia Woolf. Of the four volumes now published *Jacob's Room* and *Mrs Dalloway* have been out of print for some time." At 5s. each, the Uniform Editions were the same price as the regular first edition of *Room*, a reduction designed in response, we can assume, to that book's £2 2s. special edition, limited to 100 copies and signed by the author.

In this catalog, we see Hogarth's twin engines of literary commodification at work: the Uniform Edition, frequently advertised as "New and Cheap," capitalizes on Woolf's growing marketability and recognition to encourage the consumption and collection of all her works. At the same time, the limited edition of *Room* motivates a different consumer response, the desire to own a special literary object, signed by the author herself. By no small coincidence, 1929 was Woolf's second-most profitable year as an author, earning her nearly £3000 (or enough for six rooms of her own), and surpassed only slightly by the enormous success of *The Years* (Lee, 550). Woolf's new readers, who had discovered her in *To the Lighthouse* or in the very popular *Orlando*, could now easily and inexpensively begin retracing their steps through her career. As the catalog notes, *Jacob's Room* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, the two most desirable entries so far, were then out of print, thus making them par-

ticularly appealing to readers who had come lately to Woolf's work. By issuing the Uniform Editions as part of an expanding set—the back jacket for each publication lists both those titles already published in the series and those that were “In Preparation”—Hogarth fosters its consumers' desire to own an entire collection.

“Virginia Woolf” the brand name thus becomes legible as both canonically and commercially significant: aesthetically important enough to merit a “permanent edition” (LA 68) as Woolf called it, and popular enough to sell well in both limited and “cheap” editions. This authorial image stands in marked contrast to the one Woolf cultivates in *A Room of One's Own*, her other publication of 1929. There, Woolf portrays herself in an ongoing dialogue with her audience, the opposite version of textual authority from Charles Lamb's image of Milton. As Christine Froula concludes, texts like *Room* “actively invest authority in the audiences they both mirror and hail into being” (525). But the implicit claim of the Uniform Edition shifts its author back into a more Miltonic mode: Woolf represents herself here as the kind of stable authority for whom Lamb could think “changing the words in that poem seemed to him a kind of sacrilege” (AROO 7). Just as Woolf knows Milton's poem and Thackeray's novels in their public, stable forms, so too can her audience now engage a uniform version of her texts. Readers interested in *The Voyage Out*, for example, which had appeared in different English and American editions, now have one text stamped by the author and publisher as the standard edition. Whereas Milton's early versions of *Lycidas* were available only to the Oxbridge library's male visitors, the competing versions of *Voyage* were both, albeit briefly, in circulation from the Hogarth Press, with the Uniform Edition identified as the preferred, or “permanent,” version. (I will return to this example below.) The Woolf of the Uniform Editions thus does *not* tell her audience “call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please—it is not a matter of any importance” (AROO 5), because she must remain recognizable as “Virginia Woolf” the brand-name. Once *Room* appeared in the Uniform series, in 1930, its linguistic leanings toward feminist versions of authority began to intersect with its new bibliographical markings of a textual monument. Far from the anonymity dictated to female authors, Woolf canonizes herself in the Uniform *Room* as a timeless author for her readers to “think back through” (76).

The Uniform Edition of *The Voyage Out*, apparently the only one with significant linguistic differences from previous editions (Willis, 155), presents a special case for this kind of authorial refashioning because of its now well-known textual history. In the original edition of Woolf's first novel, published by Duckworth in 1915, Chapter XVI includes several scenes Woolf cut for its American publication in 1920. When Duckworth reissued *Voyage* and *Night and Day* in 1920, and again in 1927, he purchased the sheets from the American edition, thus keeping the shorter version in circulation. As Louise A. DeSalvo notes, the original edition “presents Rachel and Terence Hewet

together alone for the longest period of time in the novel. It is the one glimpse provided of the kind of life they might have shared had Rachel lived long enough to become Terence's wife” (344). Rachel and Terence agree to call each other by their first names and discuss the gendered division of societal roles, including Rachel's anxiety over prostitution. This version of Chapter XVI, as several critics have noted, is a more overtly feminist one in contrast to the more muted novel which crossed the Atlantic.

In 1929, Hogarth bought both sets of sheets from Duckworth and sold two different copies of the novel: first in its American version as a “Third Impression,” and then with the cut sections restored for the Uniform Edition, set from the sheets of the original Duckworth publication and listed as a “New Edition” on the copyright page. According to Woolf bibliographer B. J. Kirkpatrick there were apparently 500 copies available of the “Third Impression” (and 100 sold), compared to 3200 copies published for the “New Edition” (6). This switch has been the source of some confusion among Woolf scholars; Willis, for example, finds it “curious” that “the text so carefully reworked by Woolf was never reprinted by the Hogarth Press” (155). In Hogarth's 1990 edition, Elizabeth Heine speculates that Woolf may have “decided that the changes she had made for the American edition . . . reflected not what she had accomplished in publishing the novel in 1915, but the rejection of everyday detail and the development of new forms with which she was experimenting five years later” (400).

By examining the textual aura of the Uniform *Voyage*, we can find other explanations for Woolf's decision in the crucial difference between publishing her first novel with her abusive half-brother in 1915 and republishing it as the best-known and best-selling author of her own firm in 1929. The back jacket, with its list of those volumes “Already Published” and “In Preparation,” establishes Woolf's growing and self-made canon. As a Hogarth edition of the novel, the Uniform *Voyage* thus provides Woolf the opportunity to re-make her Duckworth books. By censoring her more daring feminist statements, Woolf produced an arguably more commercial version of her first novel. But at the same time, she reclaimed her textual authority from Duckworth's social power. “She did not want to go on being censored or controlled” by Duckworth, Hermione Lee writes of the decision to make Hogarth Woolf's sole British publisher (369). By restoring *Voyage*'s original text for Hogarth's 1929 publication, Woolf casts aside the Duckworth imprint from her first novel and remakes it on her own terms, as the opening volume in Hogarth's “Collected Edition” of her works (D3 225). Textual cuts that may once have represented both an accession to commercial interests and an aversion to Duckworth's textual authority could now be restored under the sign of Woolf's own commercial and canonical success.

By re-producing *The Voyage Out* in the Uniform Edition, Woolf monumentalizes her textual authority in a book that marks itself as relatively stable and timeless (even if it would not seem sacrilegious to imagine Woolf chang-

gender the words). Simultaneously, she restores a text which had questioned the gender imbalances of literary and social history. "Just consider," Terence tells Rachel in one of the passages deleted for the American edition, "'it's the beginning of the twentieth century and until a few years ago no woman had ever come out by herself and said things at all. There it was going on in the background, for all those thousands of years, this curious silent unrepresented life'" (200). In order to narrate this "unrepresented life," Woolf faced the perpetual feminist choice of working within the established system or of creating new structures outside the tradition. Through her publishing practices, Woolf merged both options, fashioning herself as a commercial and canonical authority.

This merger of canonicity and commercialization is, I conclude, the most significant feature of the Uniform Edition's textual aura. Critical accounts of modernism have tended to privilege self-consciously high-cultural books and their publishing histories, presenting modernism as distanced from mainstream audiences rather than in its complex interactions with popular culture and commercialism. This perspective ignores the role of publishers as a gateway into literary culture; the absence of almost any women from publishing power, especially among mainstream presses, created special problems for female modernists. For women writers, the market was often the only way into the canon, so commodification became the sole available means of establishing textual authority. In contrast to Fredric Jameson's insistence that "for modernism, the commodity form signals the vocation *not* to be a commodity, to devise an aesthetic language incapable of offering commodity satisfaction, and resistant to instrumentalization" (16), we can see in Woolf's publishing decisions the blending of commercial appeal with her aesthetic language. In April 1921, while at work on *Jacob's Room* and gloomy over the slow sales of *Monday or Tuesday*, Woolf mused, "What depresses me is the thought that I have ceased to interest people—at the very moment, when, by the help of the press, I thought I was becoming more myself. One does *not* want an established reputation, such as I think I was getting, as one of our leading female novelists" (D2 107). Woolf worries that, on the heels of the more conventional novel *Night and Day*, she may be lumped together with the "leading female novelists"—such as Duckworth's best-selling Elinor Glyn, for example—as a popular producer of domestic fiction. Hogarth's freedom, by contrast, produces "that queer, & very pleasant sense, of something which I want to write; my own point of view. I wonder, though, whether the feeling that I write for half a dozen instead of 1500 will pervert this?—make me eccentric.--no, I think not" (D2 107). As a publisher, Woolf went on to rewrite the connotations of being a "leading novelist" by constructing an authorial space from which the market need not negate the canon. As books like the Uniform Editions attest, Woolf found an audience far larger than half a dozen or even 1500, and with it, the ability to revise the patriarchal traditions associated with canonical and commercial success. While Woolf remained ambivalent about the conse-

quences of her marketability, she also began to embrace her economic power, for what it meant both as an author and an employer. Writing in April, 1929, she reflected: "And 7 people now depend on us; & I think with pride that 7 people depend, largely, upon my hand writing on a sheet of paper. That is of great solace & pride to me. Its not scribbling; its keeping 7 people fed and housed. . . they live on my words. They will be feeding well off Women & Fiction next year for which I predict some sale (D3 221). Woolf was correct, of course, about the sales of *Women & Fiction* under its revised title and about her existing commercial status at its publication; after earning just more than £2000 in 1929, Woolf was free to construct her own public image (*Downhill*, 64). After all, as she would conclude in *A Room of One's Own*, "Intellectual freedom depends upon material things" (108).

Notes

- ¹This paper is part of a larger study, in which I argue that modernist women writers, who found the greatest freedom from publishers' reinscription of patriarchal traditions by publishing themselves, fashioned their own brand of cultural capital by directly engaging relatively popular markets. I focus primarily on Woolf and Hogarth and Gertrude Stein and the Plain Edition, published by Alice B. Toklas.
- ²Borstein notes that, "Although Benjamin himself saw the aura as 'withering' in the age of mechanical reproduction, we may revise Benjamin by emphasizing that, for literary works, original mechanical reproductions can create their own aura and that it is the earlier auras that wither under successive reproductions of the work, particularly if the 'work' is thought of as identical merely to its words" (224). I concur that books produced in special or limited editions—or in editions that become rare regardless of publishers' intentions—aim for a diluted sense of Benjamin's aura, as they mark themselves implicitly as rarer and thus more "authentic" than versions of the same work produced in popular editions.
- ³"Given the small organization of the Hogarth Press," S. P. Rosenbaum surmises of the jacket copy for Woolf's books, "It is reasonable to conclude that these blurbs were written by the author. And who wrote the copy for the Hogarth Press's catalogue announcements of the Woolfs' books? Again these descriptions can be considered authorial—or quasi-authorial, perhaps, if Leonard wrote them with Virginia's approval" (22-3). The interaction between Woolf's "outside" and "inside" writing is a fruitful area for study. The original jacket copy for *A Room of One's Own*, for example, states simply: "The conditions that are favourable to imaginative work are discussed, including the right relation of the sexes" (*Women & Fiction*, xii), in what seems a watering down of *Room*'s internal argument for the popular audience of bookshop browsers.
- ⁴Quoted from the collection of the Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections office at the Washington State University Library.
- ⁵No doubt part of the financial success of these years derived from the cheaper printing costs of the Uniform Editions. As Willis explains, the "inexpensive trade edition meant to the press greater ease of production, lower reprinting costs, and certain marketing advantages in the attractive, uniform volumes" (155-6). Edward L. Bishop notes that the Uniform jackets' hand-drawn designs "preserve the link with the avant-garde, [while] the jade-green cloth boards with the gold lettering on the spine assert Woolf's entry into the literary establishment" (58).

- 6 As Leonard Woolf notes, *Orlando* was "the turning-point in Virginia's career as a successful novelist" (143). In all, she earned slightly more than £3700 on her books between 1928 and 1929.
- 7 On the author as a brand name, see Andrew Wernick, "Authorship and the supplement of promotion," in *What Is An Author?*, eds. Maurice Bricotti and Nicola Miller (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993).
- 8 In discussion following the conference panel, Julia Briggs said Woolf made other revisions in Uniform texts as well. I hope soon to collate the Uniform and later editions, but at present I am certainly willing to take Briggs at her word. Assuming such revisions to be present, the Uniform Edition would represent another instance of Woolf's post-publication revising habits, similar to the changes made between English and American editions, but now more in line with Henry James's famous revisions for the New York Edition of his works. See *Henry James's New York Edition: The Construction of Authorship*, ed. David McWhittier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).
- 9 Hogarth's standard practice was to list each Uniform Edition as a "New Edition." While not technically true from a bibliographer's point of view, the new cover does create a new version. As Hans Zeller argues, "Since a text, as text, does not in fact consist of elements but of the relationships between them, variation at one point has an effect on invariant sections of the text. ... A new version implies a new intention" (241).
- 10 In their introduction to the Shakespeare Head Press edition, C. Ruth and Lawrence Miller conclude that the switch was purely a financial decision by Leonard Woolf, made after Richard Kenesly had ordered the wrong size paper for the Uniform Edition (xxx). As the Millers note, references in Woolf's diaries and letters to the Uniform Edition are scarce, but it still seems likely that she was more than "indifferent" (xxx) about which version of her novel would launch the series.
- 11 On this topic, see especially Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900-1940* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), and *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Bonnie Kime Scott (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).
- 12 Rosenbaum describes Glyn's books as "forgettable but immensely popular romantic novels of passion on tiger-skin rugs" (13). After the initial strong sales for *The Waves* began to fade, Woolf worried again that she was "in danger, indeed, of becoming our leading novelist, and not with the highbrows only" (DA 49). Woolf's concern that she will become a "leading novelist," like her anxiety about that phrase following the reception of *Night and Day*, addresses the anxiety of her joint commercial and intellectual public presences.

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