

Report on Doctoral Thesis, 'The Forms of Memory: Auto/Biografiction of Virginia Woolf', by Paulina Pajak

Examiner: Revd Professor Jane de Gay, Leeds Trinity University, UK

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This doctoral thesis demonstrates convincingly that 'memory permeates Woolf's oeuvre' and that it is a 'creative, shaping force' behind Woolf's diaries, essays and her novels (the latter of which are rightly described as 'hybrid fiction works'). The thesis has two aims: to 'explore Woolf's diaries, fiction and essays as modernist experiments on representations of memory and to examine them as metanemonic works in which memory processes inspire metacognitive reflections, auto/biografictional practices as well as a critique of British memory culture(s).' Both of these aims are fulfilled. The thesis takes a transdisciplinary approach drawing on insights from contemporary socio-cognitive psychology, cultural memory studies and feminist literary studies to show how memory operates in a variety of different ways: it can, for example be both individual and collective, and the act of remembering can be both mnemonic and amnesiac. It then uses some insights from these disciplines to show how Woolf's work represents a wide variety of different forms of memory and that this representation varies between different pieces of work.

This thesis is an assured piece of work, well-written and well-paced, providing impressive coverage of the range of Woolf's work, including her diaries, her memoirs and her life writings; all nine of her novels; and well-chosen essays, namely the two volumes of *The Common Reader* and her two feminist essays *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*. Each piece of work is given equally careful attention with excellent contextualization and analyses of Woolf's style. There are many instances of good, perceptive close readings that throw new light on the texts (as will be explained later in this report).

The thesis admirably bears out the claims of the originality statement that this is the first full-length study of memory in Virginia Woolf. There are also several other original insights throughout the chapters, as will be shown later. The thesis shows good knowledge of the field, drawing on a wide range of reading, including the most recent Woolf scholarship and the latest editions of Woolf's novels. The transdisciplinary approach is consistent with recent trends towards trans/interdisciplinary approaches within the Humanities in general, and in Woolf studies in particular.

In my opinion, this thesis meets all the criteria for the award of a doctorate. This report will add further support for this statement in a section-by-section review of the thesis. However, I will also pose some questions for further exploration and make some suggestions for ways in which the project might be developed and improved, for example for future publication. I will identify three areas for improvement: (1) fuller engagement with Gabrielle McIntire's *Modernism, Memory, and Desire: T.S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), which is arguably the closest competitor for this work; (2) stronger connections to be drawn between parts of the thesis; and (3) a more adventurous conclusion.

Introduction

This section presents an admirably clear introduction to the project and to the nature of the problem to be addressed. The originality of the project is clearly identified: this is supported by a sound survey of relevant Woolf scholarship, showing that interest in the topic of memory is growing while also identifying the gaps in the scholarship that this project aims to fill.

Chapter 1. Virginia Woolf's Life-Writing: Between Autobiographical and Collective Memory

This chapter demonstrates originality by taking a transdisciplinary approach to Woolf's life-writing. As the originality statement sets out: 'there has been little prior attempt to analyse the representations of autobiographical and collective memory in Woolf's life-writing from the perspective of literary memory studies, involving socio-cognitive approaches' and this chapter is 'an attempt to fill the lacuna.'

1.1 'Autobiographical and Collective Memory'

This section presents a good, cogent account of developments from the early 20th-century to 21st-century perspectives on memory. Pająk presents a very careful contextualization to justify the assertion that Woolf's work seems to have anticipated more recent theories on memory: 'There are two possible explanations of this phenomenon: on the one hand, Woolf's acute powers of metacognitive and metaliterary observation, on the other hand, the interwar origins of some socio-cognitive and narrative theories of memory discussed in this work.'

The choice of theories is indeed 'original', but it would be useful to state why these approaches have been chosen over and above other ones that have occupied critical debate: for example, critics have studied Woolf's representation of some of her personal memories from a Freudian perspective, and some studies of Woolf's representation of the group consciousness have taken a Jungian approach. Indeed, Woolf and her contemporaries worked with Freudian and Jungian ideas themselves. It would therefore be useful to acknowledge the work of psychoanalytic critics (e.g. Elizabeth Abel, Rachel Bowlby, Laura Marcus) in order to distinguish this project from theirs and show its originality. Similarly, there is a body of scholarship on trauma in relation to modernism and World War I. This thesis takes its originality from adopting a different theoretical stance: that originality could have been flagged up further by giving reasons for not taking approaches used by earlier critics (a short paragraph would have sufficed).

For future development of the project, it would be useful if Pająk could engage more actively with the theories by interrogating them further in order to assess their usefulness and establish a clearer sense of her own perspective. It would also be useful to make a distinction between the theories that are presented merely to set the scene and those which are going to be significant to the project. For the latter, there could be a brief indication of where they will be used later in the thesis. As the thesis unfolds, Pająk applies theories from the latter category in a selective, relevant and nuanced way, so it would have been good to indicate how the theories will be used from the outset. In particular, it would have been good to highlight how the theories enable us to see memory as taking many different forms: the thesis is commendable for its wide-ranging understanding of memory and so it would have been good to signal this variety more prominently from the outset.

1.2 Woolf's Life-Writing from the Perspective of Memory Studies

In this section, Pająk moves to the analysis of Woolf's texts from the perspective of memory studies, drawing particularly on Max Saunders and Erll and Rigney. The section starts with the diaries and moves on to Woolf's life-writings and memoirs. The diaries are a very useful place to start examining how Woolf turned the stuff of everyday life into writing, and the section presents a very useful analysis of Woolf's reflections on the purpose of her diary and the workings of memory, in light of the overall intention of the thesis. It was good to note the *different forms that Woolf's diary took, including journals and pocket diaries*: for future

exploration, it might be interesting to pay attention to the diary as physical object, considering how Woolf organized her writing across different notebooks and what function is fulfilled by the pocket diaries.

It would have been good to see some further exploration of the diary as a literary form: for example, Pająk notes that Woolf enjoyed reading other diarists (e.g. Tolstoy), and it would have been good to explore how these may have influenced Woolf and how her use of this literary form affected her quest to tell the 'truth' of life. Similarly, mention is made of Woolf's use of 'literary quotes' (section 1.2.2), but it would be good to explore the effect of these on her style and on her shaping of life events. In other words, what does it mean when Woolf uses another writer's words to express how she is feeling?

There is good analysis of how Woolf uses her diaries to relate her personal memory with collective memory. A particularly strong example is Pająk's analysis of the diary entry on a Jewish girl arriving at the Woolfs' door (section 1.2.1). This quotation is an excellent illustration of Pająk's point that Woolf inscribes the 'individual tragedy' into 'the accusation of a social system'. However, it could be noted that the diary entry is also reflexive: firstly, Woolf identifies with the girls' ethnicity by pointing out that Leonard is Jewish, and then implicates herself and Leonard as part of the problem, for she 'felt its our fault.'

The final section of this chapter, ('Ghosts, Selves and Woolf's Unfinished Autobiography', 1.2.4) examines 'A Sketch of the Past'. It was good to note that Woolf was writing in a family tradition of memoirs: though again, it might have been interesting to think about how her writing drew on or interrogated theirs. For example, Pająk notes that Woolf wrote her memoirs for her nephew Julian, but she could also have noted that James Stephen and Leslie Stephen both wrote their memoirs for their children, so there is more of a parallel than appears at first.

Pająk usefully acknowledges that Woolf was aware of the fragmentation of self, but I would like to see this problematizing of the sense of self pushed further. Although the final section in this chapter speaks of 'ghosts' and 'selves', there is sometimes an implication that Woolf is a coherent subject able to summon or mediate between those selves. It would also be helpful to consider how all these autobiographical writings as texts are *constructed* as creative works: narrative works that relate to other texts. Finally, it would also be useful consider the implications of the fact that 'A Sketch of the Past' was written *after* Woolf had already described some of her experiences in fiction – such as Rhoda's experience of the puddle and

Neville's of hearing of a suicide in *The Waves*. What are we to make of the fact that Woolf's attempts at autobiographical writing late in life had been preceded by fictionalized accounts of the same events?

Chapter 2. Individual and Collective Gendered Memory in Virginia Woolf's Fiction

This chapter makes an excellent, wide-ranging survey of the different ways in which Woolf presents memory in her novels and how the representation of different modes of remembering gives each novel a distinctive shape. The chapter is well-paced, giving each novel careful attention and the structuring of the sections is excellent, outlining the chronological development of Woolf's representation of memory over seven of her novels, whilst showing how *Jacob's Room* (1922) paved the way for the much later novel, *Between the Acts* (1941) and the essay *Three Guineas* (1938).

In the first section ('Housed Memories: Spatial and Temporal Portrayals in *Voyage Out* (1915) and *Night and Day* (1919)' 2.1), Pająk presents an excellent reading of space in the novels, whereby the 'private rooms' of the two female protagonists 'serve as loci of their memory and identity.' This reading engages with a theme that is important within Woolf studies and humanities more generally, though it would have been good to acknowledge *Jacob's Room* when discussing the significance of the room as a symbol in Woolf. Also, in terms of the broader theme of auto/biografiction, it would have been good to have a stronger articulation of the possible autobiographical elements in these earlier novels – something that comes out more strongly in the discussion of *To the Lighthouse* and *Orlando*.

The section on *Mrs Dalloway* ('Sensual Memory in Mrs. Dalloway (1925)', 2.2) presents an excellent analysis of how the character is built up from her memories, further supporting the overall argument of the thesis that Woolf's work on memory is central to her modernist experiment. The section also makes a particularly good job of analysing the different modes of memory (as set out in the introduction), in considering the very different experiences of Clarissa and Septimus Warren Smith.

The theme of auto/biografiction comes to the fore in the section on *To the Lighthouse* and *Orlando* ('Looking back: Gendered Memory in *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *Orlando* (1928)', 2.3). There is a strong reading of how *To the Lighthouse* presents Woolf's own maturation and the predicament of the female artist/writer, summed up in the following image

which is particularly striking and perceptive: 'In *To The Lighthouse*, Woolf portrays remembering as evoking series of scenes, or "windows" open into the past, interweaving the intricacies of autobiographical visual memory into the story of a woman artist.' This idea could have been developed further with more detail on the process by which Lily Briscoe completes her painting, for example how she 'dipped into the past' as she dips her brush into the paint. It would also have been useful to discuss Woolf's own well-known observation (in her diary entry for 28th November 1928) that writing *To the Lighthouse* helped to lay the ghosts of both her parents.

In discussing *Orlando*, Pająk presents a striking argument that 'Woolf's fictionalised herstoryography reflects the central function of autobiographical gendered memory in the shaping of alternative approaches to the past.' This argument could have been developed further through deeper engagement with Gabrielle McIntire's work on memory and history. For example, McIntire notes that 'the boundary between memory and history is slight in Woolf's writings', for she 'persistently conflates her own personal past with the cultural and public domain of capital "H" History' (McIntire, 2008, 133). McIntire also has a chapter on *Orlando* that could have been discussed in detail.

Pająk draws excellent connections between *Orlando* and Woolf's diaries (something that again could have been foreshadowed in the Chapter 1): 'If as Saunders observes *Orlando* constitutes a composite portrait, employing the "idea of temporal multiplicity" and "multiple selves," then I suggest that such literary practice may originate from the writer's diary.'

The section on *The Waves* and *The Years* makes a good job of shifting critical attention from collective consciousness to collective memory ('From Collective Consciousness to Collective Memory: *The Waves* (1931) and *The Years* (1937), 2.4). The subsection on *The Waves* applies theories about the range of different types of memory to the characters in the novel in a very nuanced way. This could very easily have been a forced reading, but Pająk usefully points out that all the characters exhibit different traits. However, this was another point at which connections could have been made between texts: as with my comments on the section on 'A Sketch of the Past', the chapter on *The Waves* needed to present a stronger sense of how Woolf's writing of her self in this novel helped to construct the story she tells in 'Sketch.'

Pajak reads *The Years* as being concerned with the collective memory of single women: this is an original insight and a useful addition to the scholarship. However, it would have been useful to have something more here about how history is memory, an idea that is developed more fully in the following section in connection with *Jacob's Room* and *Between the Acts*. Again, it would have been useful to draw on Gabrielle McIntire's analysis of the relationship between history and memory. There is good discussion of Woolf's use of the *Antigone* in *The Years*: again, in terms of drawing stronger connections between different parts of the thesis, it would have been useful to note that the *Antigone* would also be important within *Three Guineas*.

As noted earlier, it was very useful to consider *Jacob's Room* and *Between the Acts* as companion texts ('The Memory of the Great War: *Jacob's Room* (1922) and *Between the Acts* (1941)', 2.5). The subsection on *Jacob's Room*, 'Remembering Scarborough' presents a strikingly original argument about collective memory of the bombing and its relationship to Woolf's pacifist message. This section is also commendable for its particularly wide-ranging consideration of particular kinds of memory: Pajak's argument about collective memory and forgetting in *Between the Acts* is another particularly original insight. To take the discussion further, it might be useful to say more about Woolf's cyclical view of history and her scepticism about progress (drawing on the work of Leena Kore-Schröder for example).

Chapter 3. Virginia Woolf's Essays as "Acts of Remembrance:" Cultural Memory

This final chapter, on the essays, presents a useful analysis of Woolf's experiments in genre, helpfully characterizing these as auto/biografiction rather than their more conventional designation as non-fiction. The essays are explored 'from the cultural memory perspective applied to literary studies, as it allows critical tools for analysing the mnemonic aspects of Woolf's texts.' Pajak demonstrates very good knowledge of the range of Woolf's essayistic output, including familiarity with the six-volume collection of her *Essays*, whilst helpfully focusing on four texts: the two volumes of the *Common Reader*, *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*.

The section on 'Literary Tombstones and Afterlives: *The Common Reader* (1925) and *The Common Reader: Second Series* (1935)' (3.1) presents an excellent analysis of Woolf's misremembering and fictionalizing processes in her essays on literary criticism, making

excellent use of Astrid Erll's theories. There is excellent close reading of how Woolf engages with and constructs literary afterlives for particular writers in her essays. There is also some very strong close reading of ways in which Woolf personalizes these essays, both by envisaging personalities for the writers she discusses, and by bringing in a guarded and disguised personal dimension of her own.

This theme is continued in the next section, on *A Room of One's Own* ('Woolf Rewriting History: A Room of One's Own (1929)' 3.2). This section makes an excellent job of examining how Woolf fictionalizes her own biography: something that could have been signalled more clearly in Chapter 1, as has been noted. The reading of Shakespeare's *Sister* as autobiographical is also original. Again, I'd advise Pająk to engage with McIntire's reading of *A Room of One's Own* as she develops this section.

The section on *A Room of One's Own* also makes a very good job of analysing how Woolf uses auto/biographical devices in order to rewrite history from a gendered point of view. In a clear and well-structured argument, Pająk then moves to *Three Guineas* and Woolf's critique of patriarchal collective memory to envision female alternatives ('The Critique of British Collective Memory: *Three Guineas* (1938)' 3.3), examining 'the tension between individual and collective remembering' and 'Woolf's critique of the British collective memory, symbolized as "the procession" and depicted through alternating use of amnesiac and mnemonic stances.' There is some excellent analysis of the gendered nature of processions and ceremonies in the light of these theories.

In terms of building stronger links between parts of the thesis, more could have been said about the relationship between *Three Guineas* and *The Years* as sister-texts, not least as a way of further exploring Woolf's experiments with genre. It would also have been useful to highlight the connections between *Three Guineas* and *Between the Acts* in terms of their treatment of 'amnesiac' and 'mnemonic' states. Nonetheless, this is a very strong chapter that also draws together some important strands of the thesis.

Conclusions

This section presents a very clear and cogent summary of the arguments that have been presented in the foregoing chapters, reinforcing one's impression that this is a clear, well-paced, well-argued thesis. In a way, because of the clarity of the thesis as a whole, this summary was not really necessary as it repeats what has gone before. It might have been more interesting to have something here about the implications of what Pająk has found and

how this might change our perceptions of Woolf, maybe expanding upon the comments on the closing page about the continuing relevance of Woolf and relating these specifically to how Woolf can contribute to our understanding of the workings of memory today. This is something I would like to explore in the viva.

Examiner's summing up

To conclude, in my view this thesis makes a welcome and original contribution to Woolf scholarship and I would hope to see this published as a book in time. In my view, this thesis satisfies all the criteria for the award of a doctorate.

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