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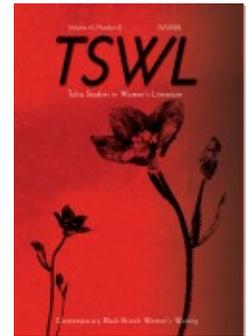
Virginia Woolf and Poetry by Emily Kopley (review)

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epilogue, Homestead writes of Lewis's vibrant *presence*, including her grief that received recognition from the friends and family that knew the couple but that, ironically, found no receptive capacity in the scholars who supposedly sought to understand.

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VIRGINIA WOOLF AND POETRY, by Emily Kopley. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. 393 pp. \$85.00 hardback.

In *To the Lighthouse* (1927), Virginia Woolf writes, "Nothing was simply one thing" (qtd. in Kopley, p. 220). Woolf's thoughts on poetry are no exception. At turns characterized by reverence and revulsion, Woolf's relationship to poetry is always, as Emily Kopley explores in *Virginia Woolf and Poetry*, defined by "fascination," as perhaps most stormy love affairs are (p. 27). While Woolf's "argument with contemporary novelists is well known, . . . less well known and studied is Woolf's debate with poetry as form and term" (p. 3). Kopley's study unfolds the ways in which poetry as a genre is "decisive for interpreting Woolf's work" and for understanding more vividly Woolf's feminism across her essays, novels, diary entries, and letters (p. 3). As Kopley explains, "Woolf's attitude toward poetry evolved over her lifetime, informing"—inspiring, provoking—"her work at every stage" (p. 27).

Woolf is widely regarded as modernism's most lyrical novelist. Contemporary poets tended to laud her novels as poetic, and scholars today commonly align Woolf's prose with poetry, some calling *The Waves* (1931) "a long prose-poem" and even an expression of "free verse" (p. 191). Poetry and Woolf thus may seem to make a perfect rather than tumultuous couple. Yet Kopley finds that Woolf's allegiance—for feminist reasons associated with gender, imaginative freedom, and class—remains with the novel and decidedly not with poetry. Kopley's study explores the ways "Woolf drew on the word 'poetry' . . . yet distanced herself from the word . . . so as to distinguish her genre, the novel, from one [poetry] she considered currently egotistical and didactic" (p. 271). Woolf's aversion to name her novels in terms of poetry as she strives to write lyrical prose demonstrates her complicated relationship with verse.

In examining Woolf's critique of poetry, Kopley illustrates Woolf's belief that much of what goes by poetry is more obedient to masculinism than to meaning, depth, and beauty (p. 266). Woolf finds verse too often trapped in a solipsistic "lyric 'I'" that avoids exploring interiorities beyond the poet's subjectivity (p. 187). Kopley explains that "the formal constraints

of verse, compared with the inviting freedom of prose . . . look to Woolf like fetters,” “mechanical and old-fashioned” (p. 77). The lovers of poetry in Woolf’s early life were men—her father Leslie Stephen, brother Thoby, and cousin J. K. Stephen—and the poets they “celebrated were all men” (pp. 39, 41). The poetry that Leslie recited both in Woolf’s upbringing and throughout *To the Lighthouse* as the character Mr. Ramsay reinforces masculinist orthodoxies such as the glorification of war and ideas about “powerless women” (p. 41). In Kopley’s estimation, Woolf thus “judges” verse “form as persistently inhospitable to” women and thus “outdated” for modern reality (p. 135).

Oppositely, Kopley argues that Woolf understands prose as a form of “daring inclusiveness” that welcomes a range of voices, especially women’s, and hence is better suited for a modern age (p. 29). Woolf finds the novel’s capacity to include voices beyond the “lyric ‘I’” and its exploration of content beyond “male ego and power” to be more “democratic,” less class- and gender-bound than verse and its “tower-dwellers, [male] poets” (pp. 39, 270, 259). Yet because of its more inclusive history, the prose tradition has not enjoyed the same cultural prestige as verse. Kopley explains that “Woolf wants to gain for prose, and by extension women writers, the prestige historically afforded to verse” by borrowing poetry’s tools and infusing them into prose (p. 28).

Despite Woolf’s distaste for verse, Kopley emphasizes that Woolf reveres many of its aspects, which she integrates into her prose to reinvent the novel. Though Woolf chides most poets’ work as self-centered, Woolf also finds inspiration in this “lyric ‘I’” for its dive into psychological experience. Woolf “explored in a novel a prose style” that draws upon the “lyric ‘I’” to “convey the inner life” not of a single speaker but of multiple characters (pp. 77, 3). In Kopley’s account, Woolf is also attracted by the form’s “abundant figurative language, and aural recurrence,” or the ways words, sounds, and images echo throughout a piece (p. 78). Woolf finds that prose can accommodate and extend poetic qualities that remain constrained in verse. She desires in prose to “blend the reality of modern life with the beauty of verse” to reimagine the modern novel (p. 260).

Its capacity to dramatize conversation rather than monologue is, for Woolf, one of the novel’s modern achievements over verse. Yet even this achievement is complex. One of the most moving aspects of Kopley’s study is her exploration of Woolf’s writing against, about, and with poetry as a dialogue with deceased male beloveds whose masculinist elitism troubles her. In this way, Woolf’s prose affords a resurrection of these men and her relationship with them. For instance, by infusing *To the Lighthouse* with the poetry Mr. Ramsay recites, Woolf critiques its masculinist tradition and “asserts her own voice and interpretations of this poetry” while also hon-

oring the memory of her father and paying tribute to his love of literature (p. 97). In *Jacob's Room* (1922) too, Woolf recreates fiery conversations she had about poetry with her brother Thoby who passed away in 1906. By inserting discussions about Shakespeare's work in *Jacob's Room*, Woolf is "recreating in the novel a conversation she once had with her dead brother" and is consequently "able to continue discussing literature with him" (p. 93). Woolf could have closed the door to conversations about masculinist verse in her prose; instead, she recovers and respects, even creatively needs, the verse tradition even as it vexes her feminist sensibilities.

Kopley honors Woolf's perception of poetry while also recognizing Woolf's limited views on the genre. A young Virginia Stephen, for example, lambasts A. C. Swinburne's poetry as "exemplifying two faults with poetry, its incomprehensibility and emotionalism" (p. 33). Yet Kopley points out that much of Swinburne's poetry is "eminently cogent and impersonal" (p. 33). As an adult, Woolf slams poetry for its masculinism but seems not to have cared to search out, let alone read, much of "the diverse attitude toward verse . . . and poetry among women writers of her time" or before (p. 25). If she had, Kopley notes, Woolf would have noticed the ways in which poets as diverse as Emily Dickinson and Gertrude Stein challenge the form's masculinist parameters. Woolf's "self-imposed" and "selective reading in contemporary poetry" shows she may have created, not merely noted, divisive "gendered views of verse and prose" (pp. 23, 24). Maintaining a generic gendered divide may have functioned to inspire Woolf to "[reject] verse as a contemporary medium and [appropriate] poetic techniques for prose" and thus push for innovations in both genres (p. 22).

Like *The Waves*, the arc of Kopley's study evokes *The Epic of Gilgamesh*: the book's ending recalls its beginning, but Woolf, characters, and readers are no longer the same. Woolf commences and concludes her journey as a writer surrounded by a male poetry tradition, but she experiences the form and its tradition differently as she writes her final novel, *Between the Acts* (1941), an elegy for a disappearing English literary tradition. With World War II threatening a collapse of "English social life," Woolf longs for an earlier time in which "the bygone power of poetry"—even a masculinist verse tradition—"held an aching allure" to unite a now "fractured" nation (p. 293). In *Between the Acts*, Woolf orchestrates this tradition more than fights it, inserting a feminist influence on it by curating the male poetic tradition both as novelist and by narrating its director as female: Miss La Trobe. In this way, Woolf no longer lambasts the poetic tradition as much as she creates space inside it for women's agency.

Woolf holds her complicated but generative relationship with poetry close her entire writing life. I recommend that lovers of both Woolf's work and poetry hold Kopley's *Virginia Woolf and Poetry* close. It is inspired

research written in gorgeous prose and will delight anyone interested in the influence that poetry and prose historically exert on each other. Kopley's study opens new vistas for understanding the exquisite tension that lies at the bottom of Woolf's often challenging but always beautiful writing.

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VIRGINIA WOOLF AND THE ETHICS OF INTIMACY, by Elsa Högberg. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. 234 pp. \$108.00 hardback; \$35.95 paperback; \$28.76 ebook.

Elsa Högberg's *Virginia Woolf and the Ethics of Intimacy* is an intelligent and important book, but it is not an easy read. Its prose style is fluid, and its close readings illuminating, yet it rightly demands of the reader a theoretical sophistication and a studied attention appropriate to its subject matter. Steeped in the poststructuralist psychoanalytic theories of Judith Butler, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva—especially their writings from the twenty-first century that together develop what the author calls “an ethics of intimacy”—this book revises our notions of both Virginia Woolf's narrative ethics and modernist concepts of intimacy (p. 8). Högberg writes that intimacy is “a central term in the academic discourse of our century,” entailing relations other than familial, sexual, erotic, or compassionate to encompass face-to-face encounters with strangers with whom one may have no emotional connection (p. 6). Such encounters in Woolf's writings render boundaries separating subject and subject, as well as subject and object, porous, creating a “vertiginous state, into which the reader is drawn” (p. 13). To remain outside that state, to retain a distinctive self and to see the other as distinct from oneself, is to engage in a sort of “ethical violence” (p. 16). In Högberg's compelling account, Woolf's modernist aesthetics, her famed exploration of “the atoms as they fall,” has profound ethical implications, and it positions Woolf's writings in the “historical genealogy of thought” that extends from the modernists to the poststructuralist theorists discussed here (p. 22). Intimacy, not empathy, becomes in Woolf's art a means of resisting violence and rendering national as well as individual boundaries permeable, unstable, and thus open to reconfiguration. As Högberg forcefully declares, “It is high time that we politicize Woolf's modernist writing of interiority” (p. 28). This book shows us how this is possible, if we have the patience to work through its intricate and elegant argument.

Högberg's deep familiarity and engagement with contemporary Woolf criticism provides a useful overview of the current state of Woolf scholarship, even as it insists on the continuing value of the poststructuralist