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Braving the Mirror: Jean Rhys, Virginia Woolf and the Question of Autobiography

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1. Autobiography has played a central role in contemporary women's writing, raising a number of questions regarding the value and limitations of this trend towards literary self-disclosure. Is the act of confession a liberating step for women, which inspires an important sense of female identification and solidarity? Or does this kind of writing merely reiterate the ideology of subjectivity-as-truth which feminism should be calling into question? Put differently, does autobiographical writing constitute an indispensable part of feminism's emancipatory project—as liberal feminists^[1] claim—or does it play right into the hands of patriarchal ideology—as poststructuralist critics would have us believe? I will explore these questions with reference to two key autobiographical texts from the Interwar period, namely Jean Rhys's novel *Voyage in the Dark* and Virginia Woolf's memoir "A Sketch of the Past," and argue the need to negotiate a position in between the liberal-feminist and the poststructuralist stance on autobiography.
2. Autobiography is traditionally defined as a personal history that seeks to communicate or express the essential nature, the truth, of the self. It is seen to depend on the notion of a free, unique, unified, self-determining subject which pre-exists language and which uses language as a tool to reveal itself. This "common-sense" assumption has been called into question by poststructuralist theorists such as Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. They reject any notion of the self as given, arguing instead that the subject is constructed in language and in ideology—ideology being understood here as the cultural legitimation of the interests of dominant groups. Constituted in the discourses of the social, the subject is both determined and regulated by the forces of power inherent in the existing social formation.
3. As a starting point for discussing some of the political problems attendant on seeing the individual as a free, unique and autonomous subject, I will look at the judgement passed by the liberal-humanist critic Peter Wolfe on Anna Morgan, the heroine of Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark*. This novel, which is based on Rhys's own experiences, tells the story of a young girl who comes to England from the West Indies and gets a job as a chorus girl with a provincial touring company, falls in love with a wealthy man in London and becomes his mistress. She is eventually disposed of by him, falls into compromising circumstances, attracts a succession of lovers, becomes pregnant, and gets money from her first lover to have her abortion. Like many other critics, Wolfe is irritated by Anna's extreme passivity: "Single women who live alone do not always become prostitutes or drunkards. Anna might have supported herself honorably. Someone with more fiber would not have slid so easily into her groove of sameness" (117). In Wolfe's view, the course Anna pursues in life is determined by her character. The choices she makes and her potential for development depend on personality traits, understood as essential and predominantly given. While thus locating the problem of political change in the nature of the individual herself, Wolfe conveniently evades the question whether such change is possible at all, and, if so, how it could be brought about. Rather than going into the way in which Anna might acquire "more fiber," he simply states that "[s]omeone with more fiber" would have acted differently.

4. In the above quote, Wolfe also seems to take it for granted that, as a prostitute, Anna is being exploited and oppressed. However, if we are to take the liberal-humanist line that Anna is a self-determining agent, free to make her own decisions, the situation is not so clear-cut. What to make, for example, of passages like the following one, where Anna, in bed with Walter, identifies with the mulatto girl her own age whose name she had once seen on a slave list: "*Maillote Boyd, aged 18. Maillotte Boyd, aged 18. . . . But I like it like this. I don't want it any other way but this*" (48). Anna accepts identification with the slave girl, entering, in her relationship with Walter, a slave-like dependency and submission. The complicity of oppressed people with their own oppression, of which this is a clear example, cannot be accounted for by liberal feminism, with its belief in the sovereignty of the individual (Weedon 80). Within this framework, a woman who makes a conscious choice to earn her living by selling the use of her body for prostitution is not oppressed. Liberal-humanist discourse effectively obscures the structural and institutional oppression of women, reducing oppression to a subjective psychological state—feeling oppressed.
5. Thus, the liberal-humanist assumption that the individual subject is the source of meaning, knowledge and action can serve as a guarantee and justification of existing social relations. Traditional autobiography, with its valorization of the power and autonomy of individual psyche, is considered by poststructuralist critics as the accomplice of ideology, serving conservative interests. Linda Kauffman, for one, declares herself "against personal testimony" (1155), which she perceives as posing a dangerous threat to the realization of feminism's political aims. Through the allure of confessional writing, she contends, society "tames the feminist" (1158). As well as arguing against traditional modes of writing, Kauffman calls for new ways of reading. If conventional criticism uncritically protests the truth of liberal-humanist assumptions, recuperating experimental texts for ideological purposes, a new, truly radical feminist reading practice should foreground otherness and beware of turning the other into the same. Rather than "contribut[e] to the successful working of the machinery of society," such criticism would be "a counterfriction to the machine" (1168).
6. In the next few paragraphs I will heed Kauffman's call and attempt a succinct poststructuralist—or, more precisely, Lacanian[2]—reading of *Voyage in the Dark* to show that liberal-humanist/feminist critics have been missing an important point about the novel. I will approach Woolf's "A Sketch of the Past" from the same angle, and go on to discuss the gains and losses of poststructuralist theories of subject construction that my analyses of these two texts bring to light. I will end with an attempt to strike a happy medium between poststructuralist and liberal-feminist conceptions of subjectivity, for which I will draw primarily on the work of Rita Felski.
7. Within the analysis which Lacan offers, the subject is formed through a series of stages. Initially, the infant is an "hommelette"—a little man and also like a broken egg spreading without hindrance in all directions. The child has no sense of fixed identity, no way of conceiving of itself as a unity, distinct from what is "other," exterior to it. During the mirror stage of its development, however, it "recognizes" itself in the mirror as a unit distinct from the outside world. This "recognition" is an identification with a false image of a unified self, imposed on the infant by society. With the entry into language (the final stage) comes the insertion of the child into a position within the symbolic order. Identity, then, depends upon both difference (between the self and the other realized at the mirror stage) and accession to the position of an "I" within discourse.[3]
8. Both *Voyage in the Dark* and "A Sketch of the Past" give evidence of this process of development. Rhys's novel relates how the child Anna is ushered into the symbolic order of English society by her step-mother Hester. The language Hester speaks situates people as subjects, forcing them to identify with certain subject positions and not others: "She had [. . .] an English lady's voice with a sharp, cutting edge to it. Now that I've spoken you can hear that I'm a lady. I have spoken and I suppose you now realize that I'm an English gentlewoman. I have my doubts about you. Speak up and I will place you at once. Speak up, for I fear the worst. That sort of voice" (50). The language of the symbolic order in which Hester participates situates her as an English gentlewoman, and "places" other individuals in a similar manner. The symbolic order legislates the boundaries of what it is possible for people to think and say, as is evidenced in Hester's censorship of Anna's attempts to express what she thinks or feels. When Anna responds to one of Hester's stories with "My goodness," Hester answers, "Don't say my goodness. [. . .] My badness, that's what you ought to say" (60). When Anna says that she hates dogs, Hester replies, "I don't know what'll become of you if you go on like that. [. . .] People won't like you. People in England will dislike

you very much if you say things like that" (61).

9. The language of the symbolic, exemplified by Hester's speech, contrasts with the patois spoken by Francine, the black servant girl who acts as a mother substitute for Anna. In fact, Francine's speech is reminiscent of the maternal ur-language celebrated by certain strands of French feminism, i.e. the original, pre-symbolic speech that is lost when the "proper" speech of the symbolic order is gained. Hester describes it in the following terms: "I tried to teach you to talk like a lady and behave like a lady and not like a nigger and of course I couldn't do it. Impossible to get you away from the servants. That awful sing-song voice you had! Exactly like a nigger you talked—and still do. Exactly like that dreadful girl Francine. When you were jabbering away together in the pantry I never could tell which of you was speaking" (56). The rhythmic, intonational, "sing-song" quality of Francine's language recalls the pulsations of the mother's body. Perceived by Hester as "jabbering," i.e. nonsensical talk, this maternal proto-language can be seen to threaten the fixity of meaning in "proper" symbolic language. After all, it refers back to a realm where difference was as yet non-existent and identity fluid: "I never could tell which of you was speaking."
10. Throughout the novel it is suggested, by various images, that the fluidity and multiplicity of identity, characteristic of the earliest stages of psychic development and associated in the text with the Caribbean island of Dominica, is systematically repressed by the rigid structures of the English social order. The novel sets up a contrast, for example, between untamed natural phenomena in Dominica and their domesticated counterparts in England. Consider the following passage:

Walter said, 'Have you got flowers like these in your island? These little bright things are rather sweet, don't you think?'

I said, 'Not quite like these.' But when I began to talk about the flowers out there I got that feeling of a dream, of two things that I couldn't fit together, and it was as if I were making up the names. Stephanotis, hibiscus, yellow-bell, jasmine, frangipanni, corolita. . . .

'I like it here,' I said. 'I didn't know England could be so beautiful.'

But something had happened to it. It was as if the wildness had gone out of it. (67)

Like the flowers, transplanted women are stripped of their wildness, taught to conform to the geographical and cultural climate: "You're sweet," Anna is told time and time again by her English lovers (19, *passim*). Trees also undergo significant changes on the voyage to England: while in Dominica there is a mango tree "so big that all the garden was in its shadow" (37), the tree outside Anna's rooming house in England is "lopped so that it looked like a man with stumps instead of arms and legs" (9). This is a particularly graphic image of how Lacan's unbounded "hommelette" is constricted and moulded into shape by society. As Anna's frequent complaints about England's tedious monotony—identical towns, streets, houses, rooms etc.—make clear, English society has a passionate desire to absorb everyone into a perpetual sameness, where all that is different is levelled, forced to conform to the pre-established patterns of culture.

11. In part four of the novel, the revelry of the blacks is set against the reprovng bourgeois values of Hester. In a memory, Anna is metaphorically imprisoned inside white respectability, "*watching. . . from between the slats of the jealousies*" (157). Caught in the straitjacket of the particular subject position she has been forced to adopt by the social formation, Anna is excluded from the carnival festivities, whose sense of boundless joy and movement seems to recall pre-Oedipality. In fact, it is mainly through such images of confinement that England and life in England are evoked in the novel. England is "divided into squares like pocket-handkerchiefs; a small tidy look it had everywhere fenced off from everywhere else" (15). The main image of England, repeated several times, is of a high, dark wall. English people's voices are like "high, smooth, unclimbable walls all round you, closing in on you" (126), and the look in Vincent's eyes is like a "high, smooth, unclimbable wall. No communication possible" (147). At one point, Anna likens her life to a "garden with a high wall round it" (115). Particularly noteworthy is also the constricting hold of the various rooms Anna lives in, all of which seem to suggest oppression and entrapment: "it was like being in a small dark box" (22).
12. While the carnival dancers move "*forwards and backwards backwards and forwards whirling round and round*" (157), one of the white onlookers calls for the festivities to be stopped. Another one, however, expresses disagreement with this verdict, observing that "*some people want to stop everything*" (156). In fact, everything *is* stopped in England, as is indicated by the recurring image of the stopped clock (30, 104). What this image points to is the desire eternally to fix time felt by "some people" with an interest in perpetuating the existing social

formation. The effect "they" hope to achieve is to make people accept existing social relations as natural and inevitable; to induce the feeling described by Anna in the following quote: "To the Memory of Doctor Charles Le Mesurier, the Poor of this Island were Grateful for his Benevolence, the Rich Rewarded his Industry and Skill.' That gave you a peaceful and melancholy feeling. The poor do this and the rich do that, the world is so-and-so and nothing can change it. For ever and for ever turning and nothing, nothing can change it" (37). The most effective way to make people willingly participate in their own subjection is by offering them modes of subjectivity that deny their own social construction, proclaiming themselves to be natural. The following quotes show how Anna has internalized two rules for middle-class feminine behaviour: "A lady always puts on her gloves before going into the street" (30); "The thought of having a wet patch underneath your arms—a disgusting and a disgraceful thing to happen to a lady—makes you very miserable" (36). However, the clearest example of complicity with oppression in the novel is the passage referred to above in which Anna accepts identification with her slave-like position.

13. A process of development very similar to Anna's can be traced in Woolf's memoir "A Sketch of the Past," which consists of a series of "moments of being" threaded in among descriptions of Woolf's relationships with other members of her family and evocations of the social milieu in which she grew up. Like Anna's childhood memories of Dominica, Woolf's moments of being hearken back to a state in which self and world were as yet conjoined, unformed. For example, she recalls a moment of pure ecstasy in which she had "the feeling. . . of lying in a grape and seeing through a film of semi-transparent yellow. . . . The sound seems to fall through an elastic, gummy air; which holds it up; which prevents it from being sharp and distinct. The quality of the air above Talland House seemed to suspend sound, to let it sink down slowly, as if it were caught in a blue gummy veil" (65-66). The whole complex of images suggests that Woolf has not yet been born, and sees and hears dim rumours of the outside world while still in the womb, surrounded by amniotic fluid. The memoir relates how the fluidity, mutability and indeterminacy of identity characteristic of the pre-Oedipal phase evoked here (and elsewhere) is gradually suppressed by the forces of society, which seek to impose a distinct, well-delineated self upon the young Virginia.
14. For most of her childhood, however, Woolf seems to have been part of a collective "we," not a self-contained "I." It is as if she had not yet developed a distinct sense of selfhood, and could not, therefore, be the grammatical subject of the sentences in the text dealing with that period. Indeed, the voice in much of the memoir is not an "I" but a "we" that includes the four offspring of Julia Jackson's second marriage. This "we" lives, eats, sleeps, perceives, feels in a kind of primordial unity, distinct from the rest of the household. The "we" is the audience for the domestic drama, experiencing in collective sorrow Julia's death, in collective excitement Stella's engagement, in collective joy the sea at St. Ives. The four Stephens slowly differentiate from a common amorphous element. The emergence of a distinct ego is marked—as in *Voyage in the Dark*—by the assignment of separate rooms: "By the time I had that room, when I was fifteen that is, 'we four'—'us four' as we called ourselves—had become separate. That was symbolized by our separate rooms" (125).
15. Woolf leaves us in no doubt that the source of the identity she acquires is the outside world: "Consider what immense forces society brings to play upon each of us, how that society changes from decade to decade; and also from class to class; well, if we cannot analyse these invisible presences, we know very little of the subject of the memoir; and again how futile life-writing becomes. I see myself as a fish in a stream; deflected; held in place; but cannot describe the stream" (80). "A Sketch of the Past" shows how Woolf has a self literally thrust upon her by forces outside her control. Throughout the text, Woolf emphasizes her passivity in the whole process. For example, she refers to herself as "the little creature driven on [. . .] by the growth of her legs and arms, driven without her being able to stop it, or to change it" (79). At one point, she imagines herself as an inert substance caught in the toils of a powerful machine. She presents her father and her half-brother George Duckworth as robots trying to grind her into a mechanical woman: "And so, while father preserved the framework of 1860, George filled in the framework with all kinds of minutely-teethed saws; and the machine into which our rebellious bodies were inserted in 1900 not only held us tight in its framework, but bit into us with innumerable sharp teeth" (151-52). This machine obviously refers to the pressures exerted by the conventions and beliefs dominant in the late-Victorian, upper-middle-class family life of the Stephens and the Duckworths at Hyde Park Gate. Society, represented by George Duckworth, had a template of a self for Virginia—someone oblivious to art and in search of a noble husband—and brought immense pressure to bear upon her to get her to accept identification with that self-image.

16. To sum up, what a poststructuralist reading of *Voyage in the Dark* and "A Sketch of the Past" reveals is that women's oppression is determined by social and institutional factors, and not a mere matter of individual psychology.^[4] Poststructuralism makes visible the work of ideology where previously it went unnoticed and unchallenged. It achieves this at a price, though: poststructuralist theory can be seen to preclude the possibility of social transformation. After all, it does not allow for an exterior point from which the prevailing and all-pervading operation of power can be made subject to critique so that it may be consciously and explicitly resisted. While offering an explanation of women's oppression, poststructuralism has been unable to provide a theoretical framework which can account for the possibility of women reflecting on and changing aspects of the structures which shape them.^[5]
17. That critical reflection on and resistance to oppression do occur, is evidenced both in *Voyage in the Dark* and in "A Sketch of the Past." Rhys's novel records a number of thoughts and actions that an orthodox poststructuralist reading, such as the one that I performed above, simply cannot accommodate. If we are to see Anna as a mere passive reflection of a monolithic system of domination, then what do we make of the following passage: "Everybody says, 'Get on.' Of course, some people do get on. Yes, but how many? What about what's-her-name? She got on, didn't she? 'Chorus-Girl Marries Peer's Son.' Well, what about her? Get on or get out, they say. Get on or get out" (64). What this internal dialogue suggests is that Anna is no mere receptacle of ideology, but retains a distinct capacity for critical reflection, using language to contest existing worldviews. The passage exposes the lack of social logic behind the maxim that all girls should marry rich men. It provides an ironic commentary on the power of popular opinion, fed by the official, quoted words of newspapers, and masking the social reality of young women in Anna's position. Rhys's heroine thus effectively challenges the prevailing ideology—even if the concluding voice expresses futility or defeat in the face of the rule's power. In addition to this, the novel tells us of at least two occasions on which Anna takes violent action against her oppression. She smashes the picture of the begging dog which epitomizes England for her (137), and, angry at being defined (implicitly) as a prostitute by Walter and his friends, puts down the end of her cigarette on her lover's hand (74). "A Sketch of the Past" also contains an account of resistance to oppression, revealing how Virginia and Vanessa rebel against their environment: "Together we shaped our own angle, and from it looked out at a world that seemed to both of us much the same. Very soon after Stella's death we realised that we must make some standing place for ourselves in this baffling, frustrating whirlpool. Every day we did battle for that which was always being snatched from us, or distorted" (143-44). Poststructuralist theory, unable to theorize political agency, cannot account for such moments of resistance.
18. The charge of political ineffectiveness, then, can be levelled not only against liberal feminism but also against its poststructuralist challenger. A way out of this deadlock is suggested by Rita Felski in her perceptive study *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change*. Felski rejects both the notion of a self-determining ego and the theory of structural determination that defines subjectivity as an illusion that merely serves to reproduce the status quo. Instead, she opts for a dynamic model of social reproduction and human communication that allows for a more dialectical understanding of the relationship between subjectivity and social structures. Human beings do not simply reproduce existing structures in the process of action and communication, but in turn modify those structures even as they are shaped by them. Theorizing a dialectical interrelation between subject and structure thus "avoids the twin pitfalls of determinism and voluntarism, allowing for the recognition that the female subject is necessarily constructed through a variety of structural determinants—psychological, ideological, social—without thereby simply reducing her to a passive reflection of male-defined schemata" (Felski 58).
19. For Felski, the demise of subjectivity envisaged by poststructuralism is not an event to be hoped for and uncritically acclaimed. She approvingly quotes Andreas Huyssen, who asks, rhetorically:

Doesn't poststructuralism, where it simply denies the subject altogether, jettison the chance of challenging the *ideology of the subject* (as male, white, and middle class) by developing alternative and different notions of subjectivity? . . . To raise the question of subjectivity at all no longer carries the stigma of being caught in the trap of bourgeois or petit-bourgeois ideology; the discourse of subjectivity has been cut loose from its moorings in bourgeois individualism. (qtd. in Felski 67)

While feminist theory challenges the masculine bias of dominant concepts of the

subject, an appeal to the female self constitutes an important defining element of the politics of the women's movement. The decentring of the subject in contemporary theory does not mean that subjectivity should be abandoned as a category of oppositional political thought. Some form of appeal to collective identity and solidarity is a necessary precondition for the emergence and effectiveness of an oppositional movement.

20. The conclusion to be drawn from these reflections—and now I come back to the questions with which I opened this article—is that autobiographical writing, by encoding concerns with subjectivity and self-emancipation, does indeed constitute an indispensable part of feminism's emancipatory project:

The assertion that the self needs to be decentered is of little value to women who have never had a self; a recurring theme of feminist literature is the difficulty many women still experience in defining an independent identity beyond that shaped by the needs and desires of those around them. It is precisely for this reason that the autobiographical novel continues to remain a major literary form for oppressed groups, as a medium for confronting problems of self and of cultural identity which fulfills important social needs. (Felski 78)

Chris Weedon, in *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*, agrees with Felski that women "need texts that affirm marginalized subject positions" (167). However, she goes on, "it is important to be constantly wary of the dangers of fixing subject positions and meanings beyond the moment when they are politically productive. We also need ways of reading which see texts for what they are—partisan discursive constructs offering particular meanings and modes of understanding" (167). Ways of writing and reading which emphasize women's ability to take their lives into their own hands have a central role to play in the struggle for women's liberation, but so do ways of writing and reading which draw attention to the structural determination of subjectivity. As exemplified, to some extent, by "A Sketch of the Past" and *Voyage in the Dark*, there is a place for traditional, realist modes of reading and self-writing as well as for deconstructive ways of reading and more experimental forms of self-writing. If feminism is effectively to produce a counterfriction to the machinery of society, it had better pool all these resources rather than tap only a subset of them.

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Endnotes

- [1] Liberal feminism, which has its roots in the writings of John Stuart Mill and Mary Wollstonecraft, "aims to achieve full equality of opportunity in all spheres of life without radically transforming the present social and political system" (Weedon 4). Liberal

feminists argue for women's equality with men on the basis of their essential sameness as rational subjects. As far as literature is concerned, they tend to value texts which aim to foster a viable sense of female subjectivity by realistically reproducing women's experience. Representatives of this (predominantly Anglo-American) strand of feminism include Elaine Showalter, Ellen Moers, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. [[Back](#)]

[2] Lacanian theory has provided poststructuralism with a new conception of subjectivity compatible with its own theoretical foundations. As the poststructuralist readings of Rhys and Woolf which I will present in the following pages are primarily concerned with processes of subject constitution or identity formation, I have chosen to frame them in specifically Lacanian terms. [[Back](#)]

[3] This rather sketchy account of Lacan's thought is based on Belsey 60-61 and on Easthope and McGowan 68. [[Back](#)]

[4] While it may seem strange that a psychoanalytic reading should lead one to make light of the importance of individual psychology, there is no real paradox here. After all, by introducing an eminently socio-political conception of subjectivity, Lacan implicates the individual in the social level and effectively deconstructs the essentialist division between the two. [[Back](#)]

[5] The viability of Foucault's (undertheorized) notion of "resistance" has been called into question by many feminist critics; see, for example, Grimshaw. Scepticism about the political usefulness for women of Lacan's model of psycho-sexual development is equally widespread; see, for example, Weedon. [[Back](#)]

