

VIRGINIA WOOLF AND THE MATERIALITY OF THEORY

SEX, ANIMAL, LIFE



DEREK RYAN

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EDINBURGH
University Press

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Edinburgh University Press Ltd
22 George Square, Edinburgh EH8 9LF

[www.eupublishing.com](http://www.euppublishing.com)

Typeset in 10.5/13 pt Sabon
by Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Stockport, Cheshire, and
printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7486 7643 9 (hardback)
ISBN 978 0 7486 7644 6 (webready PDF)
ISBN 978 0 7486 7645 3 (epub)
ISBN 978 0 7486 7646 0 (Amazon ebook)

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Acknowledgements

My first 'thank you' is to Jane Goldman for her generosity and guidance as I undertook the doctoral research which has led to this book. Without her boundless energy and passion for Woolf studies, and her friendship, *Virginia Woolf and the Materiality of Theory* would not have been possible. I also owe a huge debt of gratitude to John Coyle and Vassiliki Kolocotroni for all their support throughout my time at Glasgow, and to Alison Thorne and David Goldie for encouraging me to pursue my interest in Woolf's writing several years ago. For generously giving their time to read earlier drafts of this study and for providing invaluable comments and suggestions I would like to thank Jessica Berman, Bryony Randall, Laci Mattison, and my two anonymous readers for Edinburgh University Press. Thank you to Jackie Jones and her team for helping me to bring this book to publication.

I am extremely grateful to have been introduced to the Woolf community over the past few years and to have been welcomed so warmly: thank you for inspiring conferences, events, and conversations, and especially to Judith Allen, Suzanne Bellamy, Pamela Caughie, Kristin Czarnecki, Claire Davison-Pégon, Jeanne Dubino, Gill Lowe, and Kathryn Simpson. Thank you to Mark Hussey and Pam Morris for allowing me to read and quote from forthcoming essays. It was a privilege to co-organise the 21st Annual International Conference on Virginia Woolf in Glasgow (2011), and I thank everyone who attended for making that such a memorable occasion. This book has also benefited greatly from conversations I had with my fellow researchers and friends, whether in our 'Theory at Random' reading group, over an afternoon coffee, or in the pub. In particular, I thank Rebecca DeWald, Andrew Eadie, Erik Fuhrer, Ruth Hawthorn, Henry King, Lil Rose, and Mark West. A very special thank you to my dear friends Laura Gilmour, Vhairi Gilmour, and Kevin Wilkinson.

I am especially grateful to my Mum, Pauline Barrington, to William

Barrington, to my brother, Chris Ryan, and to my late, beloved Gran, Margaret McConnochie. The love and unwavering support I have received from them over the years has been a constant source of inspiration.

Finally, my deepest thanks to Stella Bolaki for her love, encouragement, and patience as I spent many long days and nights completing this book.

Earlier versions of portions from Chapter 1 appeared in “Nature, who has played so many queer tricks upon us”: Digging Granite and Chasing Rainbows with Virginia Woolf’, in Kristin Czarnecki and Carrie Rohman (eds), *Virginia Woolf and the Natural World: Selected Papers from the Twentieth International Conference on Virginia Woolf* (Clemson: Clemson University Digital Press, 2011), pp. 202–7, and in ‘Woolf’s Queering of Granite’, *Virginia Woolf Miscellany* 82 (2012): 20–2. An earlier version of a part of Chapter 4 appeared as ‘From Spaniel Club to Animalous Society: Virginia Woolf’s *Flush*’, in Derek Ryan and Stella Bolaki (eds), *Contradictory Woolf: Selected Papers from the Twenty-first Annual International Conference on Virginia Woolf* (Clemson: Clemson University Digital Press, 2012), pp. 158–65. An earlier version of a part of Chapter 5 appeared as ‘Woolf and Contemporary Philosophy’, in Bryony Randall and Jane Goldman (eds), *Virginia Woolf in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). I am grateful that this material could be reprinted with permission from these publications.

I would like to acknowledge the financial support of the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the University of Glasgow for funding the doctoral research on which this book is based.

Abbreviations

Works by Virginia Woolf

BA	<i>Between the Acts</i>
CR1	<i>The Common Reader Vol. I.</i>
CR2	<i>The Common Reader Vol. II.</i>
CSF	<i>The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf</i>
D1–5	<i>The Diary of Virginia Woolf</i>
F	<i>Flush: A Biography</i>
L1–6	<i>The Letters of Virginia Woolf</i>
JR	<i>Jacob's Room</i>
MB	<i>Moments of Being</i>
MD	<i>Mrs Dalloway</i>
ND	<i>Night and Day</i>
O	<i>Orlando: A Biography</i>
PA	<i>A Passionate Apprentice</i>
RO	<i>A Room of One's Own</i>
E1–6	<i>The Essays of Virginia Woolf</i>
TG	<i>Three Guineas</i>
TL	<i>To the Lighthouse</i>
VO	<i>The Voyage Out</i>
W	<i>The Waves</i>
WF	<i>Women and Fiction: The Manuscript Versions of A Room of One's Own</i>
Y	<i>The Years</i>

Editorial Note

For translations, the date given in parenthesis on first mention of the text is the first publication date in original language.

Introduction: Virginia Woolf and the Materiality of Theory

I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we – I mean all human beings – are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. *Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. (MB 85)

When Virginia Woolf, in this famous passage from her unfinished and posthumously published memoir 'Sketch of the Past' (1976), outlines her 'philosophy' or 'constant idea', she presents us with a 'conception' of life that is embedded in materiality: a 'pattern', 'hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life' (MB 85). It is, as Mark Hussey has recently put it, a form of theorising that is 'grounded' and 'embodied',¹ and other critics have placed emphasis on Woolf's formulation of human communality through language and art: Lorraine Sim, for example, writes of 'a connective principle' in Woolf's 'pattern' which is revealed through art and society;² Emily Hinnov claims, more explicitly, that 'Woolf views aesthetics as a vehicle for social action that might bring about humanistic unity [. . .] coherence and interconnectivity, she speaks to the web-like linkage between all of humanity, accessible through our participation in art';³ Bryony Randall suggests that 'far from being a unified, self-sufficient, self-explanatory temporal unit', Woolf's 'moment of being' is an experience inextricably tied to reading and writing;⁴ and Jane Goldman, aligning this passage with a Habermasian 'inter-subjectivity' and a Bakhtinian 'social origin' of language, argues that 'Woolf positions herself as part of a community of subjects, accessible through language but with no transcendent position outside it; [. . .] she understands language to be socially constructed and present only in its material utterances.'⁵

Woolf's focus here does indeed appear to be primarily on the question

of art and particularly writing ('I make it real by putting it into words') as well as of the human communality behind this writing ('we – I mean all human beings – are connected with this') (*MB* 85), but there is an additional ontological inflection to this excerpt from 'Sketch of the Past', one which extends the non-transcendent interconnectivity beyond a concern solely with the human and language or art, and which therefore speaks to key issues in this book concerning theory and materiality (and the materiality of theory).⁶ That is, the 'philosophy' reached in the above passage hinges on a conceptualisation of the collective pronoun 'we' that expands as it intensifies through each clause. In the first instance 'we' is clearly intended as representative of 'all human beings', yet the *connection* Woolf emphasises is one between this human 'we' and the 'pattern' or 'vast mass we call the world': 'We' are not only 'the words', but also the 'music' and, crucially, the 'thing itself'. We find, then, a communality that is extended beyond a purely human concern and where language is not the only immanent feature (to single out language in this way would be precisely to see it as, in some way, transcendent); in other words, we might say here that Woolf is concerned with world-making, not simply subject-making or word-making. This is further elucidated by the instance of 'shock' created by the embedded flower at St Ives:

I was looking at the flower bed by the front door; 'That is the whole', I said. I was looking at a plant with a spread of leaves; and it seemed suddenly plain that the flower itself was a part of the earth; that a ring enclosed what was the flower; and that was the real flower; part earth; part flower. (*MB* 84)

It may be that it is only through the human act of writing down (and indeed verbalising, as Woolf notes here) an instance such as this that Woolf feels she can 'make it whole' and find 'satisfaction' and 'reason', but the conceptual model of a non-hierarchical, intricately interconnected whole is suffused with the vitality and materiality of the 'dominant' sensation (over her 'passive' self) of the 'real flower' that was 'part earth; part flower' (*MB* 84–5). To be sure, both the event of writing and the event of the flower itself are immanent, creative processes.

What is emphasised by Woolf, then, is 'intuition'⁷ that is 'given to me, not made by me' (*MB* 85) and which 'refers to her idea that there is a pattern behind things, and in telling us the origin of this idea, she suggests that it comes from the pattern itself'.⁸ As Woolf writes in a letter to Vita Sackville-West on 16th March 1926, contemplating 'rhythm' this time rather than pattern, 'a sight, an emotion, creates this wave in the mind, long before it makes words to fit it', and therefore through writing 'one has to recapture this, and set this working (which has nothing appar-

ently to do with words)' (L3 247). And in the two paragraphs following the 'we are' refrain in 'Sketch of the Past', Woolf undercuts the notion of language as primary event. She at first appears to outline the 'far more necessary' importance of writing over other activities by 'spending the morning writing' rather than, as one example she gives, 'walking'. Following this, however, Woolf states that it was precisely whilst on her 'walk yesterday' that she was 'struck' by the realisation – 'these moments of being of mine were scaffolding in the background; were the invisible and silent part of my life as a child'. She goes on to describe the 'people' who were at the 'foreground' in her childhood, but these people, and therefore this foreground, are merely 'caricatures' (MB 86). What is left in the foreground of the reader's mind is the 'scaffolding', the fact that 'one is living all the time in relation to certain background rods or conceptions' (MB 85). What I am suggesting here is the sense that Woolf's writing is not so much concerned with a 'materiality [. . .] which blots out the light' of being,⁹ as it is with illuminating materiality as precisely the possibility of being: the becoming of the material world.

This book explores how materiality is theorised by Woolf long before she started to write 'Sketch of the Past' in 1939, through the various connections she makes in her writings between human and nonhuman, embodiment and environment, culture and nature, life and matter. My title, *Virginia Woolf and the Materiality of Theory: Sex, Animal, Life*, points to three interrelated aspects of this study. Firstly, I engage with Woolf's writings in the context of theoretical debates which, broadly speaking, have marked a shift in the past fifteen years or so from the focus on language and discourse to questions concerning materiality and ontology; or, put another way, from the primacy of culture to its entanglement with nature. The debates I place Woolf within are all concerned with various aspects of materialism and immanence rather than abstraction and transcendence, forming part of a turn towards new materialisms in contemporary theory. This entails reading Woolf alongside the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze – a prominent figure throughout the book and someone who cites Woolf as exemplary of some of his most important concepts – as well as eminent contemporary theorists of materiality including Donna Haraway, Elizabeth Grosz, Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, and Rosi Braidotti, the latter of whom demonstrates at various points how Woolf's modernist aesthetics and feminist politics are influential on her thought. Secondly, moving away from the human- and subject-centred analyses more prominent in Woolf (and modernist) scholarship, each of my chapters engage, both seriously and I hope playfully, with a diverse range of nonhuman objects and materials that provide the impetus for Woolf's reconceptualisation of materiality – or, we might

say, the materials for her theories. These include granites and rainbows (Chapter 1), paint and grass (Chapter 2), wedding rings and a motor-car (Chapter 3), fur and flesh (Chapter 4), and matter itself, that productive yet elusive fabric of our material world (Chapter 5). It is the recognition of Woolf's particular form of embedded theorising that underpins my efforts in the first half of this book to shed new light on widely recognised discussions of Woolf in relation to feminism, sexual difference and sexuality, but that also leads in the second half of the book to open up her writings to emerging and less familiar critical paradigms which foreground the question of the animal and posthumanist conceptualisations of life. Thirdly, I seek to unsettle the perceived opposition between historical and theoretical approaches to Woolf's writings. Whilst the so-called 'turn' (or return) to the archive and historicism in modernist studies coincided with the diminishing influence of postmodernist or poststructuralist theory (based on the largely misguided premise that this theory was anti-historical and not concerned enough with the material contexts), there are crucial questions concerning materialism in relation to those terms in my subtitle – 'sex', 'animal', and 'life' – that are currently being posed in literary studies and contemporary theory, and which have still to be fully explored in Woolf's writing. Taking seriously the ways in which Woolf *theorises* materiality throughout her work, rather than focusing only on how she alludes to, or comments on, the material context in which she lived, demonstrates that the material world is not purely a concern for archivists or historicists, and that the way we historicise is affected by how we theorise materiality and how theory is materialised. In other words, to conceptualise is also to contextualise.

Working through these three stated concerns, my central argument will be that throughout her writing Woolf theorises the creative, immanent materiality of human and nonhuman life; that is, wary of the philosophical, ethical, and political pitfalls of individualism, binary oppositions, and transcendence, Woolf's writing offers new conceptualisations of the material world where the immanent and intimate entanglements of human and nonhuman agencies are brought to the fore. By focusing on wide-ranging but interrelated issues across five thematic chapters, and by reading Woolf alongside but also *inside* theoretical writings (and *vice versa*), I hope to offer a new perspective on Woolf's writings and to demonstrate the ways in which her texts help elucidate the subversive potential (and limitations) in these current theoretical contexts – therefore exploring in the process some of the aesthetic, political, ethical, ontological and conceptual links between modernist literature and theory. More specifically then, and building on the premise reached by

poststructuralist and postmodernist criticism that Woolf radically destabilises essential differences based on binary oppositions, I go on to ask: what precisely are the modes and models of materiality made possible by Woolf's texts and by the complex theoretical and critical contexts her writing has so clearly affected?

Woolf, modernism, and theory

The broader links between the modernist aesthetics, and cultures, that emerged in the first half of the twentieth century and those theoretical debates that proliferated in the second half have recently been emphasised in Stephen Ross' edited collection, *Modernism and Theory: A Critical Debate* (2009). In his introduction, Ross argues that while scholars (re)turning to the archives over the past two decades have widened the scope of what we now think of as the new modernist studies, it is unfortunate and somewhat puzzling that this has often coincided with the marginalisation of theory:

The ironies attending this elision verge on modernist absurdity: theory's challenge to predominant notions of the literary, canon formation, disciplinary formations, high and low culture, progress, civilisation, and imperialism helped make the new modernist studies possible. Also, theory's concern with globalization, imperialism, gender and sex roles, race and racism, reason and superstition, enlightenment and benightedness, sovereignty and slavery, margins and peripheries, and ethical complexities continues, albeit in a different register, modernism's already articulated concerns. Modernism's critique of modernity animated theory's invention of postmodernity, while theory's anti-foundational stance extended modernism's indeterminacy, linguistic complexity, and reflexivity.¹⁰

Despite the temporal gap, theory dating roughly from the mid-1960s to the mid-1990s – whether phenomenological, psychoanalytic, post-structuralist or ('third wave') feminist – is, according to Ross, 'integrally bound' to modernism precisely because of shared aesthetic and political concerns but also because its philosophical roots are 'either modernist (e.g. Heidegger, Husserl, Sartre, Wittgenstein) or shared by modernism (e.g. Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard)'.¹¹ Where our readings of Woolf are concerned, it is particularly important to add Henri Bergson to this list, especially considering that in one of the earliest monographs on her writings, Ruth Gruber suggests that Woolf was 'living in the Bergsonian atmosphere' and was 'too innately creative, too inherently Bergsonian to be called Bergson's imitator', and several critics have followed in forging links between Woolf and Bergson.¹²

Indeed, in the years since theory's prominence in modernist studies began to wane in the mid-1990s, a renewed interest in the philosophical roots of Woolf's modernism has been evident in important studies which have considered her writing alongside the likes of David Hume, Emmanuel Kant, Bertrand Russell, Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.¹³ These considerations of 'Woolf among the philosophers'¹⁴ thoroughly contradict Michael Lackey's view that to properly understand Woolf's work we must 'banish philosophy';¹⁵ rather, they reinforce Goldman's reflection that 'contextualising Woolf is not simply a historical turn. It entails a simultaneous return to theoretical and critical contexts, in which the processes of historicising and contextualising are always already placed.'¹⁶ In recent years then, the philosophical contexts in which Woolf was writing have combined with historical analyses, and have helped shape the way we engage with Woolf's modernism.

But where the aforementioned studies are primarily concerned with philosophical contexts contemporary to when Woolf herself was writing (and therefore sensitive to the risks of decontextualisation), a central tenet of Ross' argument is that it is also important to rearticulate the links between the modernist literature and the theoretical debates of the latter decades of the century, and as I aim to demonstrate in this book into the twenty-first century, so that we might begin to theorise modernism anew (and, we might even say, to modernise theory) in our own contemporary moment. This is itself a matter of contextualisation: the connections between modernism and theory are strengthened by reading literary and theoretical texts alongside one another in ways that involve not simply using theory to provide a particular methodology for readings of modernist texts or using modernism to provide examples of theoretical concepts; rather modernism and theory might, as Ross puts it, be thought of as 'mutually sustaining aspects of the same project' where 'modernist writing thinks theoretically and theory writes modernistically'.¹⁷ The extent to which this is true of all modernist writing, and indeed theory of the kind Ross focuses on, is of course contestable, but I want to take from his argument the emphasis on bringing together or intercepting modernism and theory, themselves a multiplicity of historical movements and moments, which need not be thought of as a flight from, rather a rethinking of, material realities. As Fredric Jameson states in his 'Afterword' to the same volume:

it is a reinvention of the historical situation alone that allows us to grasp the text as a vibrant historical act, and not as a document of the archives. And this is why even those texts which seemed to have become documents in a

now distant past, like the one-time masterpieces of the modern, suddenly come alive as living acts and forms of praxis – aesthetic, social, political, psychoanalytic, even ontological – which imperiously solicit our attention.¹⁸

As a theorist of the modern on her own terms, and someone who prompts us in ‘How it Strikes a Contemporary’ (1925) to ‘scan the horizon; see the past in relation to the future’ (CR1 241), Woolf provides with her writing the ideal context ‘to ask not just what modernism can tell us about theory and what theory can tell us about modernism, but also what the nexus modernism/theory can tell us about the twentieth century’s preoccupations, tendencies, triumphs, and failures’.¹⁹

In Woolf studies, the influence of poststructuralist and postmodernist readings of Woolf in the 1980s and 1990s testifies to the previous connections made between modernism and the kind of theory Ross claims is now marginalised, but also shows the limitations of approaches where ‘theory’ was largely synonymous with deconstructive readings which focused on the de-centring of (human) subjectivity, language, and discourse. Whilst my argument in this book will depart in important ways from such readings by turning to questions concerning the nonhuman as much as the human, objects as much as subjects, materiality as much as language, my approach to Woolf undoubtedly owes a debt to these studies, and in particular four well-known texts by Toril Moi, Makiko Minow-Pinkney, Rachel Bowlby, and Pamela Caughie. Firstly, the introduction to Moi’s 1985 book *Sexual/Textual Politics*, though not the first poststructuralist reading of Woolf,²⁰ is commonly referenced as a turning point in Woolf criticism where Moi introduces her wide-ranging analysis of Anglo-American and French feminisms by placing Woolf as a forerunner of feminist theory.²¹ Advocating a Derridean and Kristevan approach to Woolf, Moi argues that she challenges realist aesthetics and humanist formulations of identity, and she makes her often-cited and important assertion that Woolf’s modernist aesthetics and feminist politics are not to be seen as mutually exclusive, that her feminist politics are located ‘*precisely in her textual practice*’.²² Following this, in *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject* (1987), Minow-Pinkney provides the first book-length study to adopt this approach, offering a more detailed focus on Julia Kristeva and Jacques Derrida, and reading with and against Jacques Lacan, in her feminist poststructuralist psychoanalytic account of Woolf’s writing which seeks to find a new deconstructive understanding of subjectivity. Echoing Moi, Minow-Pinkney argues that Woolf’s modernist experimental aesthetics can ‘best be seen as a feminist subversion of the deepest formal principles – of the very definitions of narrative, writing, the subject – of a patriarchal social order’.²³ Published a year

later, Rachel Bowlby's *Virginia Woolf: Feminist Destinations* offers a broadly poststructuralist reading of Woolf's feminism – albeit that it departs from the more technical analysis provided by Minow-Pinkney – to suggest that 'issues of literary representation, historical narrative and sexual difference are inseparable throughout Woolf's work'. Bowlby argues that this is precisely what makes Woolf a feminist writer, one that questions 'the very notion of straightforward directions and known destinations'.²⁴ Finally, in the wake of these feminist poststructuralist and psychoanalytic readings of Woolf, Caughie's 1991 study, *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism*, focuses on how various strands of postmodernist/poststructuralist theory and literature challenge the motivations and reading strategies with which we approach Woolf's texts. Caughie does not seek to claim Woolf as a postmodernist *avant la lettre*, but to challenge orthodox modernist and feminist readings of her writings which fail, she argues, to move past various binary oppositions between 'conventional and modern, masculine and feminine, appearance and reality, the external and the essence'.²⁵

Reflecting on these poststructuralist and postmodernist approaches to Woolf and to feminism, and acknowledging that self-identifying as either is now considered to be unfashionable (indeed, according to Moi's own recent comments, 'the poststructuralist paradigm is now exhausted' and postmodern feminism is 'an intellectual tradition that has been fully explored'²⁶), Caughie today maintains that there is still important work to be done concerning the relationship between modernism, poststructuralism and feminism:

If I continue to ride that dead horse, it is because I believe that 'things may stay true longer than they stay interesting.' There remains the need for a feminist intervention informed by the insights of poststructuralist theory that would have us question notions of collective identity or action, end-oriented narratives, or the past as redeemable. Where a notion of progress returns in our history of theory is not in the notion of ends, as if there is a goal to be realized, but in the realization that feminism is what cannot pass, or become passé.²⁷

Theory may well have been, to some extent, marginalised over the past fifteen years or so in the expansion of modernist studies, but there is little doubt that by opening up readings of Woolf to various critical and theoretical contexts (including fields recognised today as cultural studies, gender studies and queer theory) these postmodernist and poststructuralist readings continue to be important in challenging our assumptions – whether from a theoretical, historical, or cultural perspective – about the stability of intentionality, language, meaning, and identity.

Yet if poststructuralist or postmodernist readings of Woolf remain important in drawing attention to some of the continuities between modernism and theory, helping us to reassess, as Ross puts it, the ‘preoccupations, tendencies, triumphs, and failures’ of the twentieth century, they also lead us to new theoretical concerns and conceptual paradigms which impact on how we think about the relationship between modernism and theory at the beginning of the twenty-first. As such, this book departs from the above approaches to Woolf’s modernism and feminism where they placed emphasis on language and discourse and on psychoanalytic structures of (human) subjectivity and desire. This is precisely to take account of the changing nature of ‘theory’ since the predominance of poststructuralism and postmodernism in the 1980s and early 1990s, where materiality has become the grounds for important debates that seek to re-evaluate how we think of the relationship between culture and nature, human and nonhuman. That this is still linked to poststructuralism rather than a complete break from it is emphasised by the fact that the work of Deleuze (solo and with Félix Guattari) is crucial to these new theories of materiality. As a key figure of what is often seen to be ‘high’ (poststructuralist) theory and someone who was profoundly influenced by modernist literature, Deleuze, as I will explain in more detail below, has only recently come to prominence in modernist studies and Woolf studies, much later than other poststructuralist thinkers such as Derrida, Lacan, Kristeva, and Foucault. But as well as aiming to fill a gap in Woolf studies where her work has yet to be systematically considered alongside Deleuzian philosophy, my reading of Woolf is placed in the context of contemporary dialogues on materialist theories of ‘sex’, the ‘animal’, and ‘life’ that have been inspired by, expanded upon, and produced challenges to, Deleuze’s thought (for example the reactions of feminist theorists to the concept of ‘becoming-woman’, discussed in Chapter 2, or the conflicting ways that theorists have responded to Deleuze and Guattari’s writings on animals, discussed in Chapter 4). When I focus on important materialist theorists of the following generation(s), including Braidotti, Grosz, Haraway, Barad, and Bennett, I do so not to suggest that what is revolutionary in contemporary theory can be characterised simply by the shift from one set of thinkers to another, but to situate my readings of Woolf in the context of ongoing and contentious theoretical debates concerning nonanthropocentric conceptualisations of our material world.

Following poststructuralism, there may well be a ‘contemporary theoretical astuteness’, as Claire Colebrook puts it, ‘consisting of acknowledging the provisional status of one’s position’ and an awareness of ‘some textual mediating condition – there is no sex in itself, race

in itself, history in itself', but the way in which this awareness passes through diverse fields and disciplines sometimes 'avoids the problem of theory'.²⁸ In this book I am not concerned with imposing a theoretical framework onto Woolf's texts so much as I am in addressing the act of doing theory itself, focusing on the ways in which Woolf's texts are themselves theorised and theorising. Such an approach entails, of course, choosing to read Woolf in certain ways and in particular contexts, foregrounding certain critical frameworks and debates rather than others. But in making such choices I am keen to avoid the limitations in the kind of postmodernist approach Caughie advocates in her earlier book, where her polemical critique of dualisms too easily falls back on a 'refusal to choose', a phrase that recurs throughout *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism*,²⁹ as itself a subversive act rather than exploring the ways in which specific choices – whether made by or for us – can lead us to find heterogeneity and multiplicity affirmed in Woolf's texts. Whilst not wishing to reduce Woolf's writings to any one theoretical framework, then, in this book I have chosen to focus on specific thematic concerns and commit Woolf's texts to particular theoretical alliances. As I demonstrate in Chapter 1, rejecting totalising and binary models of language and thought does not take us into a space of noncommitment, of a postmodernist 'refusal to choose' where we nonetheless remain within a system of language, vacillating there but never reaching beyond or outside the text, and each of the following chapters are concerned with committing language to something more than itself. Any theoretical approach to Woolf will, to some extent, be partial, but what interests me is the ways in which recognising, accounting for, and experimenting with Woolf's own mode of theorising does not entail suspending or deferring commitment to careful and sustained analysis of her texts; rather it is to conceive of committed, close readings that are nonetheless changeable and open, remaining aware, as Woolf writes in 'Craftsmanship' (1937), that 'the truth they try to catch is many-sided', and so will require change, revision, and future perspectives (E6 97).

Despite premature obituaries then, theory has far from disappeared (just as, conversely, historicism is hardly a nascent activity). As Jane Elliott and Derek Attridge's recent intervention in *Theory After 'Theory'* (2011) suggests, the role of theory itself is at an exciting stage, 'returning' in new and unexpected forms:

Since the mid-1990s, the story goes, theory has continued to diversify, drawing on the work of a range of new figures and examining a host of new archives and arenas, but its newer incarnations offer at most a kind of after-life of the once vital object that was 'Theory', a diluted form lacking in both intellectual substance and institutional prominence. [. . . But] where theory

continues to thrive, it increasingly adopts positions that challenge some of the fundamental intellectual stances that once defined 'Theory' [. . .] new work is being produced that mounts such challenges from within theory's now much wider institutional and discursive boundaries.³⁰

If we are to consider the relationship between Woolf and theory today, it has not simply to be a return to the poststructuralist or postmodernist readings of Woolf that were influential in the 1980s and 1990s but a turn towards new theoretical paradigms that seek to address the limitations of those approaches whilst building on their subversive potential. My own efforts in this book are to forge creative links between Woolf's modernist/feminist aesthetics and politics and contemporary theories of materiality, locating theory within Woolf's writing, as well as Woolf within theory, so as to bring her modernism and her own theorising firmly into the foreground of current debates in fields such as feminist philosophy, queer theory, animal studies, and posthumanities. It is at the intersection of these two concerns – on the revitalising of the relationship between modernism and theory and of theory after 'Theory' – that my reading of Woolf and the materiality of theory can be situated.

Woolf, new materialisms, and Deleuze

Considering the relationship between Woolf's writing and materialism is itself nothing new to Woolf studies. Michèle Barrett, in her 1979 introduction to *Virginia Woolf: Women and Writing*, makes clear that Woolf was both a literary theorist³¹ and concerned with the material conditions of women and men: 'She argued that the writer was the product of her or his historical circumstances, and that material conditions were of crucial importance', and 'she claimed that these material circumstances had a profound effect on the psychological aspects of writing, and that they could be seen to influence the nature of the creative work itself'.³² Barrett cites a famous passage from *A Room of One's Own* (1929) to support her argument, where Woolf writes that 'fiction is like a spider's web' and that 'these webs are not spun in mid-air by incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in' (RO 53). Importantly, and contrary to other feminist Woolf critics such as Jane Marcus,³³ Barrett is uncomfortable with claiming Woolf's 'materialist' argument as a Marxist one.³⁴ Writing many years later in *Imagination in Theory* (1999) – and having noted the 'intimate blow' dealt to many of the 'working assumptions' of a humanist and historicist

Marxism by poststructuralism's anti-humanism, its critique of teleological thought, and its insistence on the constructed nature of linguistic meaning³⁵ – Barrett reinforces the 'ambiguity' she finds in Woolf's materialism.³⁶ Intriguingly, she at the same time notes the ambiguity in Woolf's relationship to humanism, claiming that she displays an 'agnostic kind of not-humanism' in contrast to the more pointed 'anti-humanism' of Louis Althusser or of the poststructuralists.³⁷ But whilst Barrett is hesitant to go beyond agnosticism and ambiguity, partly as a result of her worries over the political impotence that she fears for such a position, my own reading of Woolf places her in the politically and ethically charged context of debates on materiality which have emerged in more recent years and mark an attempt to unsettle anthropocentrism and to foreground the mutual interdependence of culture and nature, human and nonhuman, meaning and matter.³⁸

Virginia Woolf and the Materiality of Theory seeks to more closely and comprehensively explore the relationship between Woolf's writing and nonhumanist or, to use a term I discuss more fully in Chapter 5, 'posthumanist' conceptualisations of the material world. This is not to be concerned with what comes after or without humans, but to better account for the material entanglements of humans with nonhuman objects, animals and environments, in order to reassess the human and the nonhuman both in themselves and in their relationality. By focusing on the ways in which materiality matters to Woolf in relation to the natural world, sexual difference, sexuality, animality, and life itself, this book therefore follows those theoretical approaches that have radicalised our understanding of subjectivity and of language but crucially takes seriously the growing claims of the need, as Diana Coole and Samantha Frost argue in *New Materialisms* (2010), 'to subject objectivity and material reality to a similarly radical reappraisal'.³⁹ In *Vibrant Matter* (2010), Jane Bennett shows that a radical and nonanthropocentric reappraisal of materialism, coupled with an immanent vitalism, involves an engagement with the material world which is not limited by a humanist and historicist Marxist model.⁴⁰

How did Marx's notion of materiality – as economic structures and exchanges that provoke many other events – come to stand for the materialist perspective per se? Why is there not a more robust debate between contending philosophies of materiality or between contending accounts of how materiality matters to politics?

For some time political theory has acknowledged that materiality matters. But this materiality most often refers to human social structures or to the human meanings 'embodied' in them and other objects. Because politics is itself often construed as an exclusively human domain, what registers on it is a set of material constraints on or a context for human action. Dogged resist-

ance to anthropocentrism is perhaps the main difference between the vital materialism I pursue and this kind of historical materialism.⁴¹

These growing attempts to reconceptualise materiality are concerned with the move towards an affirmative (rather than dialectical) materialism which ‘sees its task as creating new concepts and images of nature that affirm matter’s immanent vitality’, therefore complicating how we conceive of causation and emphasising multiple entanglements of human and nonhuman agencies.⁴² Coole and Frost outline three central themes of these ‘new materialisms’: the view of matter as itself having agency, a view that is tied to posthumanism; the status of ‘life’ and related bioethical and biopolitical issues; and a ‘nondogmatic’ critical reengagement with ‘the material details of everyday life’: ‘An important characteristic shared by all three components is their emphasis on materialization as a complex, pluralistic, relatively open process and their insistence that humans, including theorists themselves, be recognized as thoroughly immersed within materiality’s productive contingencies.’⁴³ Clearly, this is a far cry from the Edwardian materialism of Arnold Bennett, H. G. Wells, and John Galsworthy that Woolf finds so insufficient to capture ‘life itself’ in ‘Character in Fiction’ (E3 436), and considering Woolf in light of these new materialisms also points beyond the more classically ‘materialist’ arguments she puts forward in texts such as *A Room of One’s Own* and *Three Guineas* (1938), vitally important though that these are.

‘New materialisms’ are necessarily pluralised, and throughout this book I consider Woolf’s wide-ranging reconceptualisation of the material world alongside various nuanced contemporary materialist theories. I begin in Chapter 1 with Woolf’s own theory of ‘granite and rainbow’ which, I argue, is entangled in a vibrant, multiple and creative engagement with, and conceptualisation of, the material world. The subsequent chapters go on to consider Braidotti’s materialist nomadic feminism in relation to *A Room of One’s Own* and *To the Lighthouse* (1927), Braidotti’s ‘polymorphous vitalism’ and Colebrook’s ‘queer vitalism’ alongside *Orlando* (1928), Haraway’s ‘mud philosophy’ and *Flush* (1933), and Barad’s quantum-inspired, material-discursive ‘intra-action’ alongside Bennett’s theory of ‘vital materialism’ in relation to *The Waves* (1931). All these theories are in one way or another influenced by Deleuze who is engaged with closely in each chapter, and who presents in his philosophy an expressive materiality,⁴⁴ ‘a kind of supersaturated materialism’ as Elizabeth Grosz describes in *Becoming Undone* (2011), ‘a materialism that incorporates that which is commonly opposed to it – the ideal, the conceptual, the mind, or consciousness’.⁴⁵ It is Deleuze’s

interest in a ‘material vitalism’,⁴⁶ in the intertwined relation between materiality and life, and therefore his interest in what is outside of language, or rather ‘the outside of language’⁴⁷ – what goes beyond a concern purely with discourse, representation, and signification – that partly accounts for the fact that within literary studies interest in his theories developed later than other important poststructuralists.⁴⁸ This is seen in the way that Deleuze is almost entirely absent from consideration in those poststructuralist readings of Woolf outlined above. When he is briefly referred to by Minow-Pinkney, it is to dismiss his non-dialectical viewpoint and refusal to place language as the primary concern of subject-formation; Deleuze and Guattari are disregarded as ‘one-sided theorists’ who ‘fetishise the moment of de-structuration and a-signification’.⁴⁹ Yet in recent years Deleuze and Guattari have been hugely influential in new theories of materiality precisely because, unlike some other poststructuralist perspectives, they do not fetishise language. Linguistic signs do not, for Deleuze, take a higher status than other types of signs, as he has made clear when outlining ‘several kinds of signs’ that form a ‘heterogeneity of relation’ in texts including *Proust and Signs* (1964), *Difference and Repetition* (1968) and, with Guattari, in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980).⁵⁰ Central to Deleuze’s view of literature, therefore, is that it involves more than linguistic signs; this is what distinguishes his work from more familiar poststructuralist and deconstructive approaches which tend to focus on, to borrow John Hughes’ phrase, ‘the scrupulous delineation of textual aporias’.⁵¹

To be sure, this is not to say that Deleuze shares no affinities with other poststructuralists.⁵² ‘Affinity’ is precisely the word used by Derrida, for example, in his eulogy for Deleuze (following the latter’s death in 1995), where he writes about feeling ‘a proximity or a near total affinity’ with Deleuze ‘concerning an irreducible difference that is in opposition to dialectical opposition, a difference “more profound” than a contradiction (*Difference and Repetition*), a difference in the joyously repeated affirmation (“yes, yes”’).⁵³ In Chapter 4 I turn to Derrida’s later writings on the animal, and read them alongside Deleuze, but an important difference in Deleuze’s work that is central to my study throughout is that where Derrida has been characterised as displaying ‘a sort of anxiety of influence [. . .] leading to the redoubtable caution and reflexive awareness of his writing’, Deleuze’s affirmative philosophy is focused on the creation of the new.⁵⁴ This affirmative mode of creation is captured by Deleuze in *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (1962):

To affirm is still to evaluate, but to evaluate from the perspective of a will which enjoys its own difference in life instead of suffering the pains of the

opposition to this life that it has itself inspired. *To affirm is not to take responsibility for, to take on the burden of what is, but to release, to set free what lives.* To affirm is to unburden: not to load life with the weight of higher values, but *to create* new values which are those of life, which make life light and active.⁵⁵

It is a matter of freeing life from an oppositional framework because ‘differentiation’, Deleuze writes in *Bergsonism* (1966), ‘is never a negation but a creation, and that difference is never negative but essentially positive and creative’.⁵⁶ It is precisely this nonoppositional, affirmative and creative difference that interests me in Woolf’s writing.

The divergences between both Derrida’s and Deleuze’s understanding of ‘difference’ are also marked by their key influences. Derrida’s *différance*, promoting the free play of signifiers where, as he puts it in *Writing and Difference* (1967), terms are bound up in ‘infinite implication, the indefinite referral of signifier to signifier’,⁵⁷ comes out of his more clearly ‘post-phenomenological’ philosophy, where the likes of Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger are engaged with and critiqued in much more detail than they are in Deleuze’s ‘material and forceful’ philosophy of difference.⁵⁸ In his interest in how difference ‘makes itself’, as he puts it in *Difference and Repetition*,⁵⁹ Deleuze turns more to Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Bergson, all of whom are linked by ‘their critique of negativity, their cultivation of joy, the hatred of interiority, the externality of forces and relations, the denunciation of power’.⁶⁰ Difference for Deleuze is a vital, generative, ontologically primary force. Derrida’s philosophy of difference may not be wholly consigned to language, but it is, as Grosz demonstrates, concerned with ‘a difference constrained to the functioning of representation, a difference that resides in and infiltrates from the sign or text’, whereas Deleuze is more interested in the ‘shimmering self-variations’ of difference which creates the material entanglements of human and nonhuman becomings, ‘the force that enacts materiality’ rather than simply being about its representation.⁶¹ Where literature’s relationship with life, becoming and difference is therefore concerned, Deleuze himself distances his own approach to texts from Derrida’s deconstruction:

As for the method of deconstruction of texts, I see clearly what it is, I admire it a lot, but it has nothing to do with my own method [. . .] For me, a text is merely a cog in an extra-textual practice. It is not a question of commenting on a text by a method of deconstruction, or by a method of textual practice, or by other methods; it is a question of seeing what *use* it has in the extra-textual practice that prolongs the text.⁶²

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