

Writing Where the Poles of the Worlds Meet, Inventing Identities Where There's No Room of One's Own¹ Virginia Woolf and Early Modern Women Writers

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WRITING AND PRIVACY

She scarcely writes to me. There is nothing new to tell me, she says, when she talks to me on the phone. Things home, at the other side of the sphere, move in a different rhythm; there is no news. Writing for her means announcement and enunciation. News precedes writing; writing just reports the new. I also know that writing is something ceremonial for her. It means after dinner cleaning the kitchen table, finding that special type of light letter paper, putting the date in the right top corner, and starting with the same stereotypical sentence: *Our dear daughter...* What does writing mean to my mother at five in the afternoon after a long day of labor in the fields, after cooking two meals a day, after a day of life-sustaining activities *for the others*? What does letter writing mean to my mother when she had to learn it at the age of forty-three when "bad fortune" took me so far away from her? Her letter is never longer than two pages, never shorter than two pages, it fits perfectly in the two sides of 6 by 10 inch piece of paper. In a peculiar way she arbitrarily adjusts the style and content of the letter to the size of the paper as if her writing did not have a life of its own, no sovereignty. What does writing mean to my mother if she does not have an awareness of herself as an author?

She never writes anything in the top left corner of the envelope, never fills the sender's position. What does letter writing mean to my mother if she never receives letters addressed to her? Before she married she did not have any government correspondence; after she got married all official (government) correspondence, tax forms, bills, family Christmas cards were sent to my father's name. *Write me a letter*, I keep asking her. I love her letters, the way she writes. It reminds me that words have shape, weight, like limestone, like grapes, it makes me aware again of the shape of my words. I did not "make" you a letter, she keeps apologizing. "Make" does not indicate a mis-translation here, a failure of the other language to translate the meaning of the Greek idiom "write a letter." It already sounds like a mis-translation in the original language. The written word is irreplaceable, it is "other" than what is outside, in the "real" world, but still so material. For her, a letter is something different from the thoughts and moods that precede it, but also different from the meaning I construct as I read it.

Once the letter was lost. Somewhere between the two worlds, between the two sides of the world, between the two ends of the oceanic water. Or otherwise, lost between two incommensurable worlds of writing, that world of writing as production and circulation within the public, and that other world of writing as a one-way journey. Her letter, without a sender's name, cannot circulate in the world of exchanges, can never return if something goes wrong, if wrong postage, wrong addressee. I spent so much time to write it, she keeps complaining. What did you write, I ask her, try to remember and write it again. (*Please write it again, I want that letter!*) "I cannot make it again," she says. It is not in her mind, it is not retrievable, the letter is made of a different material, it has a reality of its own. The letter is a microcosm, small enough to fit two pages, big enough to fill that empty space between us. It is too late for her to invent new identities in writing. It is also too late to join that world of pure

communication, of the symbolic, to feed writing with a sublimated desire. But still, her writing can fill emptiness with that matter of words, sounds, repetitions, events.

Our Dear Daughter... She always writes "our" even though it is "her" letter, private, writing from a position which others cannot share or substitute. She definitely does not write on behalf of the family, why then doesn't she dare the other pronoun? "My dear," a prohibited intimacy or a pronoun that cannot signify intimacy in the absence of identity or sense of interiority, in the impossibility of writing as privacy, in the impossibility of closing the letter with her signature?

But I would like to have a *room* of my own, a place that is not a *passage*. I mean a room, a closed space with one door that opens or locks only from within. I like to write in a room of my own, take that journey that invents new worlds, a journey where only those can follow me who lose themselves on the way, a journey where the mind recreates the world that Margaret Cavendish knew. I like to create rooms of my own (rooms are not given, originary, they are not already there) where the mind is not incandescent, where freedom of the mind is not that important as the mind, like the room, does not stand outside history or space but rather is re-fashioned in the very process of writing as it performs on its own self.

I like to have a room of my own where there is no hurry, threat, or agony. I like to be in that room where the verticality of the *I* collapses, a verticality that makes me a subject to technologies of control and panopticism, answerable to (thus identifiable with) the names society assigns to me. A blurring of the florescence of the mind, I will argue here, is not as poisonous for writing as Virginia Woolf wants to suggest in *A Room of One's Own*. It's a blurring that confuses the panopticism of power institutions over writing, disrupts the polarization of mind vs. expression, brings forth possibilities for an anarchic self-fashioning. In a "room" of writing the subjectivity of the author loses its verticality and the mind becomes again a space of hybridity where the poles of different worlds and identities meet, where dialectic does not function anymore as a metaphor between the real and the unreal. In a room of writing, a room within writing, subjectivity collapses again. The "Room" that at the turn of the century Virginia Woolf described as a place where women could stand outside ideology, create new processes of production and recreate culture, today appears as another ideology that could subdue writing to a hegemonic economy and trafficking of cultural production.

In this paper I argue that what in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, starts as an effort to stand outside history and change the forces of production, might not be the appropriate point from where to think and assess any women's writing (for example, early modern women writers) because it is a historically specific narrative of writing whose criteria are ideologically constructed. I am turning to that great melancholic lady, Margaret of Newcastle, whose passion for poetry Virginia Woolf finds to be disfigured and deformed, her mind poisoned by indignation against the position of women, her vision paralyzed by her melancholia, her untutored intelligence leading her to impure forms of writing pouring out "higgledy-piggledy" rather than as "pure poetry." I go back to her *Autobiography* which Virginia Woolf does not discuss as she restricts the study of literature to the study of poetry and fiction.² At the end of her *Autobiography* (do not confuse this for a confession), Cavendish writes:

Neither did I intend this piece for to delight, but to divulge; not to please the fancy; but to tell the truth, lest after ages should mistake, in not knowing I was daughter to one Master Lucas of St. Johns, near Colchester, in Essex, second wife to the Lord Marquis of Newcastle; for my Lord having had two wives, I might easily have been mistaken, especially if I should die and my Lord marry again.³

The fear for a confused identity (confused not as a postmodern notion of a multiple de-centered subject but as an identity *mistaken* by the others) and the anxiety about the erasure of her life traces in the history of patrilinearity indicate Cavendish's emerging sense of identity as a woman writer. The "I" which Virginia Woolf condemns in men's writing because it subdues the multiple and subtle voices of the senses, should not be taken for granted in the case of early modern women writers. Furthermore, the privacy, interiority, and stream of consciousness which a room of one's own would

help to secure and channel into writing, should not be taken for granted either. I argue here that a room of one's own as the material condition for security and freedom of the mind cannot be the origin of writing. Rather, there is a secondariness to identity and authorship *as well as* a secondariness to writing. Writing creates a space for the self-fashioning of identities and it is in the experiments of imaginative identities where one finds herself already writing. Writing is not the revelation or unfolding of a free, incandescent, mind in conditions of safety and serenity. As I discuss some early modern women writers I will make two points about writing and interiority: First, writing creates space for privacy and a sense of interiority; second, to the extent that the narrative of writing ("What is writing?" "What is good writing?") is, itself, historically specific, a literary critic should be perceptive to the ways women writers in their own writing re-appropriate and negotiate with narratives of writing from dominant discourses in ways that allow them to fashion narratives for writing that legitimate their own writing but at the same time do not negate other identities that give them authority in other ways.⁴

In the rest of this paper, I present Virginia Woolf's argument in *A Room of One's Own* focusing on her view of privacy and writing and on her critique of early modern women writers. I argue that to the extent that her view (narrative) of writing and her criteria for good writing are ideological and historically specific, they fail to address the specificity of early modern women writers' writing and they constitute an inappropriate viewpoint from where one could make a fruitful and intellectually challenging reading of their texts. Her view of writing fails to see how their writing was not an epiphenomenon reflecting and replicating patriarchal ideology; but rather, provided a space for a material invention of relatively new identities. Between culture and society, between public discourse and conventions of silence, between the material conditions of patriarchy and the immateriality of a woman's vision; writing was a third space, a third world where women performed identities in the absence of a stage for feminine performance, and participated in the production of culture in the absence of a women's literary tradition. It was a space where they could influence the production of culture through the self-fashioning of themselves as writing subjects, as authors of worlds of their own. Because writing is that peculiar space between culture and material production -- a space un-namable and thus non-existent in classic Marxist theory -- it allows the writer to maneuver in (though not to inhabit permanently) a space that allows her to create while at the same time to negotiate and re-fashion the discourses and conditions of creative production. Thus even though early women writers do not have a "Room of Their Own" they can still engage in the creation of literature. Writing allows a material self-fashioning of identities which allows women writers to leave traces in literary memory, traces that disrupt the soliloquy of patriarchy. It allows the emergence of imaginary worlds and an experimental resonance of voices. Writing itself is immaterial, but imagining, experimenting, inscribing are material processes in that they allow one's invention of self-consciousness and the tracing one's life as unique and irreplaceable. In the absence of monuments of culture that would reflect and thus ideologically construct and authorize women's public identities, writing works as an imaginary space for performing new identities which are not simply representations of a dominant ideology.

VIRGINIA WOOLF'S ARGUMENT

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf discusses the material barriers women face in attempting to produce literature, barriers of actual life and barriers of the mind. She suggests that only securing material conditions of freedom and serenity for women writers, will allow them to engage in the production of literature. In developing her argument, Virginia Woolf assumes that it is material conditions that structure both the psychological aspects of writing and the nature of the creative work itself. Thus the production of literature cannot be independent of its material conditions:

for fiction, imaginative work that is, is not dropped like a pebble upon the ground, as science may be; fiction is like a spider's web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners. Often the attachment is scarcely perceptible...these webs are...attached to grossly natural things like health and money and the houses we live in.⁵

Thus in her analysis of women's writing Virginia Woolf attempts to make these imperceptible webs visible by explaining how the lack of felicitous material conditions has been pernicious for both the mind and the writing of women. The absence of women's colleges and, later on, the scarcity of endowments for the few women's colleges impoverished women's education and literary tradition. Both the lack of money and the lack of a tradition of women writers create a sense of insecurity and self-effacement that has effects on the mind of the woman writer. The lack of a room of one's own means lack of comfort, lack of time for writing, lack of leisure and meditation, lack of confidence in one's self, lack of experience, lack of intimacy with little "events" (the skin of experience and the skin of the senses), lack of that "liberty to settle down upon whatever meditation was in harmony with the moment."⁶ For Virginia Woolf it is in that liberty to think what one wishes where lies the intimacy of the writer with the world, an intimacy that allows the writer to capture the detail, the shadow of the moment, the truth of the event that is essential in the writing of fiction.

What Virginia Woolf finds to be one of the worst barriers for women's creativity is the "harassment" of the mind by rage and its disturbance by "alien emotions" like fear and hatred against oppression and oppressors. Thus a harassed and distracted mind, that is far from the incandescent [free] mind, cannot create, cannot write. For to write, she insists, "there must be freedom and there must be peace....The writer must be back and let his mind celebrate its nuptials in darkness."⁷ Ironically, Virginia Woolf herself becomes distracted, her mind and writing become disturbed by "alien emotions" of anger when she reviews the writing of early modern women writers. She is anxious to leave those melancholic ladies behind, shut up in their parks among their folios, "those solitary great ladies who wrote without audience or criticism, for their own delight alone."⁸ These writers' trace seems to have a blurring effect on the mind and the literary history of Virginia Woolf herself; it is a trace that creates confusion. Virginia Woolf is *anxious* to restore a serene state of mind in this remembering of the literary mothers. As she finds herself to be caught in the very alien emotions she tries to exorcise, she hastily turns to Alpha Behn whose memory can have a soothing effect on Virginia Woolf's mind and writing, as well as a purifying effect on the literary tradition and memory Woolf tries to establish.

But if her mind cannot be separate from a historical memory of other women's writing, isn't Virginia Woolf already caught in that "harassment" of mind which she so much detests? Alpha Behn has "the plebeian virtues of humour, vitality and courage" and fits better Virginia Woolf's ideal of an androgynous mind. This is the mind that has the confidence of men's writing and lacks the resentment and defensive (apologetic) style of women's writing, it has the suggestive power of the feminine but not the resentment that leads to a "twisted and deformed" writing and "morbid imagination." The androgynous mind is "naturally creative, incandescent and undivided."⁹ Thus, Virginia Woolf concludes in *A Room of One's Own*, that the security of an annual income of 500 pounds and a lock on the door, will give a woman the power to think for oneself, recover in her mind its androgynous qualities and thus restore to her a naturally creative power. For Virginia Woolf the recovery of an androgynous mind and its natural potential for creative writing, because it is a movement outside history and ideology, constitutes the origin for radical political change. Closing her argument, she advises women: "Do not dream of influencing the people, I would say, if I knew how to make it sound exacted. Think of things in themselves."¹⁰ Ironically, an argument that starts with the intention to break from the patriarchal conditions of production, to "save" women's writing from the ideology of resentment, and to ground their writing on an original material force, at the end sounds like a logocentric claim for the immateriality and a-historicity of writing and the purity of literary meaning.

These "logocentric" overtones in Virginia Woolf's are not irrelevant to her anxious dismissal of some early modern women writers. The logic of her argument appears to rely on a split between mind and writing, origin and outcome, on the originality of thought and the secondariness of writing, as well as on a reading of writing as the inscription of pure meaning through pure forms of writing. I will try to show in the rest of this paper how early modern women writers' writing exposes the ideological limitations of Woolf's argument in two ways: First, their writing creates and recreates the mind and

the identity of the writer rather than reflecting the mind and the identity of the writer. Second, the process of writing is never a "naturally" creative process and cannot stand outside history. That is because narratives of writing and authorship are already re-appropriations of and negotiations with other narratives of other kinds of inscription and authority from the dominant culture, which however allow to the creative process a relative autonomy within history and within dominant culture (e.g. the religious narrative of the creation of the world as the inscription of God's mind). In the rest of this essay I will go back to those "fearful" Elizabethan ladies. I explore the negotiations with narratives of writing and the invention of identities and authority [authorship] in the writings of two women: Alice Thornton and Margaret Cavendish (Duchess of Newcastle).

RETHINKING THE MELANCHOLIC LADIES OF THE 17TH CENTURY

I start my reading with the claim that for Renaissance women writers identity, interiority, and privacy were not givens but rather were spaces to be invented and negotiated with other dominant ideas and social roles for women through their narratives of writing.

I start with the *Autobiography of Mrs. Alice Thornton* (1627-1707) to which Virginia Woolf does not make any reference. Married out of duty, she bore nine children, six of whom died. In her *Autobiography*, written in the later years of her life, she pictures her life as one of almost continual suffering and sickness from pregnancy and childbirth. Probably Virginia Woolf could have cited her writing as an example of the pernicious effects of the lack of a room of one's own as well as paradigmatic of a mind harassed by resentment. I will argue here, though, that there is no resentment in her writing, and that the harassment within her life (I would not say harassment of her mind) does not obstruct her writing. In her *Autobiography*, the privacy and interiority of the writer is not a given, an origin, but rather is an identity and a space to be invented through the very process of writing. Alice Thornton's subjectivity and sense of herself as author is realized not as a meta-awareness of an inward private [psychic] space but rather as a willfulness in serving and "pleasing God," for example, allowing herself to be disposed by God in marriage, "making [her] a more public instrument of good to those several relations."¹¹ But, at the same time she demonstrates a love for privacy and meditation which, however, cannot be experienced as a quest for autonomy, as a meta-awareness of selfhood and separateness. It is rather experienced indirectly as an enjoyment in pre-marital freedom and privacy:

As to myself, I was exceedingly satisfied in that happy and free condition, wherein I enjoyed *my time* with delight abundantly in the service of my God [...] in whose enjoyment I accounted my days spent with *great content and comfort*. (emphasis added)¹²

And later, in the prospect of her marriage, she confesses: "I was not hasty to change my free estate without much consideration."¹³ But as soon as I introduce this quote with the remark "confesses" I find myself reading her through Virginia Woolf's lenses, presupposing a resentment and weakness that is not actually there in her writing and her mind. It would also be a poor and a-historical textual reading to interpret her rhetoric of autobiography as a confessional mechanism that produces the modern subject (Foucault's approach in some of his readings.) For example, in her *Autobiography*, the experience of her body is extremely intimate but, nevertheless, not confessional. Even when she engages in a very detailed reading (writing) of her dissolving body, the details function to create a surface for writing rather than a depth of confessional subjectification in the webs of which her own subjectivity might be caught and normalized.

The absence of a room of one's own seems to be an insignificant factor for her writing, as her writerly comfort is not realized negatively as an escape from the external world -- we cannot presuppose here an external world/internal world split -- but rather, in a more positive way, through a writerly comfort in the description of her body. Comfort here is not external to writing, an origin, but rather is intrinsic to writing as an unrefined straightforwardness in the detailed writing of the events of her body, which almost embarrasses the contemporary reader. Searching for a subject behind the narration, for a subjectivity constructed through suffering morbidly confirmed in writing

through the description of the pain, lamenting for a freedom of mind harassed by the subjugation of marriage, is the least appropriate way to read the text because it assumes a modern subject behind the text. Instead of searching for a deep meaning, we should let this embarrassing lack of embarrassment in her narration of the body, this writerly comfort and complacency in writing the surfaces of the bodily events, to elicit a different kind of subjectivity and a different sense of authorship. Writing with such extreme comfort on the events of conception, pregnancy, delivery, recovery, sickness, and death, Alice Thornton writes against the public versus private economy of the body, re-appropriates the privacy of the body as a space of writerly comfort, re-appropriates the secrecy of the body in an open and detailed writing of her own body that confirms her writerly authority. Here is an excerpt from her meditation on the birth of her first son:

I was, by the infinite providence of God, in great mercy delivered. But I having had such sore travail in danger of my life so long, and the child coming into the world with his feet first, caused the child to be almost strangled in the birth, only living about half an hour, so died before we could get a minister to baptize him, although he was sent for.

I was delivered of my first son and fifth child on the 10th of December, 1657. He was buried in Catericke church the same day by Mr. Siddall. This sweet goodly son was turned wrong by the fall I got in September before, nor had the midwife skill to turn him right, which was the cause of the loss of his life, and the hazard of my own. The weakness of my body was exceedingly great, of long continuance, that it put me into the beginning of a consumption, none expecting for many days together that I should recover; and when I did recruit a little, then a new trouble seized on me by the loss of blood, in the bleeding of the hemorrhoids every day for a half a year together. Nor did I recover the lameness of my left knee for one whole quarter of a year, in which I could not touch the ground with it. This I got in my labor, for want of the knee to be assisted. But, alas! all these miseries was nothing to what I have deserved from the just hand of God.¹⁴

No resentment but no incandescence of the mind either. Harassment of the body but not harassment of the mind. No comfort in material conditions but still a comfort in the narration of the body, so comfortable that it almost makes the contemporary reader uncomfortable. Here, the author recovers her privacy and interiority as a space for meditation through the transformation of her bodily memory into a scene of writing where the identity and subjectivity of the author are invented in the surfaces of the experience of writing rather than in the depths of meaning and in the secrecy of psychic privacy.

I now turn to the Duchess of Newcastle. "Open the Duchess and one finds the same outburst of rage," writes Virginia Woolf. And she goes on:

Margaret too might have been a poet; in our day all that activity would have turned a wheel of some sort. As it was, what could bind, tame or civilize for human use that wild, generous, untutored intelligence? It poured itself out, higgledy-piggledy, in torrents of rhyme and prose, poetry and philosophy which stand congealed in quartos and folios that nobody ever reads.¹⁵

Why does Virginia Woolf, while she aims to question the exclusionary character of a patriarchal literary tradition, still criticize the writings and dismiss the contribution of early modern women writers? I suggest that the reason is that Woolf does not give any serious consideration to the circulation of manuscripts in the Renaissance as an alternative economy of writing that establishes different kinds of authority and legitimation for the writer, as well as different relations between writer and reader. But there is something else that I find particularly troublesome in Virginia Woolf's reading of the Duchess of Newcastle. Interpreting the Duchess's solitude and melancholy as signs of a confused or even harassed mind, Virginia Woolf misses the possibility that melancholy and solitude are not natural states, personal symptoms, or individual emotions which the Duchess demonstrates but rather these are conventional narratives from the culture of Renaissance which the Duchess re-appropriates in order to fashion a writer's identity. In the Renaissance literary culture melancholy is the signifier for poetic genius and creativity, it is the unavoidable "good disease" of the writers. Thus it is very likely that in her *Autobiography* the Duchess appropriates a rhetoric of melancholia from men's discourse in order to fashion an author's persona and status while at the same time she uses melancholia to justify and legitimate her withdrawal from what would be more

appropriate (domestic) roles for her sex. Thus she earns that precious "privacy" of writing without losing her public aristocratic status, and at the same time she gains access to literary social circles and becomes one of the Queen's favorites. She writes in her *Autobiography*: "I being addicted from my childhood to contemplation rather than conversation, to solitariness rather than society, to melancholy rather than mirth, to write with the pen than to work with the needle."¹⁶

But this self-fashioning of an author's identity cannot be seamless for Cavendish as she has to negotiate her identity as an author with other identities and social conventions. If her self-fashioning of an author's identity becomes too straightforward, she runs the risk of gaining authorial status at the cost of losing her social status as a Duchess, a lady of noble marriage. Thus if "natural" bashfulness is a "natural" disposition conventionally associated with her bourgeois social status in the same way that melancholy is associated with the creative talent of an author, then one way to negotiate the two identities together is to *bashfully* claim her disposition for writing. She fashions a writer's identity which she retrospectively puts under erasure: "I pass my time with scribbling than writing, with words than wit."¹⁷ In a similar way, the quest for separateness and privacy and the self-fashioning of solitude must be put aside in a rhetorical way that allows her to negotiate her need for privacy with social conventions that deny privacy to her. She writes in her *Autobiography*: "I took great delight...as I did invent myself, not taking that pleasure in such fashion as it was invented by others ...I always took delight in a singularity." Yet immediately some lines after this daring demonstration of difference and quest for [or celebration of] privacy, the identity of a writer is rhetorically put aside (certainly not denied or canceled) by retrieving again the narrative of melancholy: "As for my disposition [for singularity and solitude], it is more inclining to be melancholy than merry."¹⁸

I will end my deconstructive reading of this melancholic lady's harassed mind and blurred writing with a reference to her utopian text: "The Blazing New World." I remind my reader that this re-reading aims to historicize privacy and freedom of mind and to situate these in the very process of writing, to de-naturalize the identity of the writer, her privacy and expressive means, and to re-situate them as contested and negotiable spaces in a discourse that blurs the borders between the private and public, psychic depth and writing experience. Margaret Cavendish, as we have seen, fashions a melancholic identity both in her statements and in her portraits on most of the frontispieces of her books. But here I want to focus on a different feature of her narrative on writing. In her text *The Blazing New World*, Cavendish combines three different narratives -- a narrative on an imaginary world (work of fancy), an imaginary narrative of herself as a writer in that world, and a meta-narrative on the nature of writing in a parasitic text (the forward and the postscript of the utopia) -- into a postmodern text.

Even more, her utopia, "The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing New World," is not a separate work but rather was published together (as one work) with *Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy* in both 1666 and 1668. In the forward ("To the Reader") of this work (and "world") Cavendish wants to make clear to the reader that in her hybrid work fancy and reason are both forms of creative production by the mind, yet from these two types of writing only fiction has the capacity to also recreate the mind:

The end of reason, is truth; the end of fancy is fiction: but mistake me not, when I distinguish *fancy* from *reason*; I mean not as if fancy were not made by the rational parts of matter; but by *reason* I understand a rational search and inquiry into the causes of natural effects, and by *fancy* a voluntary creation or production of the mind, both being effects, or rather actions of the rational parts of matter; of which as that [reason]... requires sometimes the help of fancy, to recreate the mind, and withdraw it from its more serious contemplations.¹⁹

We see here a view of creative writing quite opposite to Virginia Woolf's notion of an original mind that unfolds freely in the process of writing. Here, mind is portrayed as an-archic (no origin), performing on its own self, re-creating itself through writing and imagination. What is more interesting is that Cavendish presents writing as a space of hybridity where different worlds,

different genres and different languages meet each other in a way that allows them to maintain their aniso-morphic difference:

And this is the reason [recreation of the mind] why I added this piece of fancy to my philosophical observation, and joined them as two worlds at the ends of the their poles.²⁰

But the difference between this hybrid work (romantic, philosophical, and fantastical) and a postmodern pastiche aesthetic is that the former remains political. In her hybrid work Margaret Cavendish refuses to reify the boundaries between genres or to restrict women's writing space to poetry and exclude them from philosophy and the sciences. By appropriating the narrative of a hybrid space where the poles of different worlds meet from geographical imagination, and by re-articulating and circulating this narrative in the economy of literary production as a narrative of writing, Cavendish manages to fashion writing as a world of noise and difference *where literary criteria of purity cannot be applied any more*. This fashioning of writing has very radical implications for women's writing because it is exactly criteria of purity that have been used historically to devalue women's writing and bury their works into obscurity. (Perhaps it is by such criteria that Virginia Woolf comes to characterize Margaret Cavendish as "the crazy Duchess"!)

Yet one might argue that this impact is limited as *The Blazing World* belongs to the Imaginary World. How can Cavendish have any impact on her readers? My response to this is that *The Blazing World* is already a double signifier (for a utopian world and for the world of writing) and a double text (writing about an imaginary world and an imaginary fashioning of the process of writing and the identity of the author). Furthermore, it is a double statement, both denotative and performative. Thus the reader's delight in taking a journey in Cavendish's utopian world constitutes already a felicitous re-enactment of Cavendish's desire to have a world of her own, "a world of [her] creating." Interestingly, in her description of the landscapes of the utopian world, Cavendish evokes a geographic imagination that is similar to the narrative of writing she constructs through metaphors on writing in the more "parasitic" parts of the utopian text (forward and epilogue). In the same way, the adventures of the characters are fashioned as similar to the "adventures" of a writer. In the same way the world of fancy recreates the mind, the imaginary world of writing evoked within the fiction of a utopian world paradoxically appears more real and more convincing than it would appear in the context of a pure theoretical treatise on writing.²¹ For example, the heroine is abducted by pirates, the wind carries their ship to the Northern Pole, where the poles of different worlds meet: the World, and the New World, the world where the woman is the object of others and the new world where the heroine performatively-and-imaginatively fashions her new identity as Empress *and* writer. There, at the poles, the ship is forced among huge pieces of ice, the pirates freeze to death, and the heroine makes the passage into the other world:

[I]t is impossible to round this world's globe from pole to pole, so as we do from East to West; because the Poles of the Other world, joining to the Poles of this, do not allow any further passage to surround the world that way; but if any one arrives to either of these Poles, he is either forced to return, or to enter into another world.²²

While Woolf takes serenity of mind and comfort to be conditions of writing (no special effort, no hurry), here this passage into writing is neither serene nor natural. There is hurry because behind there's death; there's oppression, and an irreducible spatial difference never reduced to the temporality of the mind; there is anxiety to fashion a woman writer's identity which is not given, that, for early women writers, is a more vital space than a room of one's own. Thus positioning her own self as a character in a text of fiction, Cavendish is able to fashion her own identity as a woman writer:

At last, when the Duchess saw that no patterns would do her any good in the framing of her world; she resolved to make a world of her own invention, and this world was composed of sensitive and rational self-moving matter.²³

This self-moving matter, elsewhere referred to as "an immaterial spirit" is not other than writing. Earlier I suggested an analogy between geographic imagination and the imagination of writing, between plot and the narrative of writing. Doesn't this analogy, one might argue, reify the boundaries between fiction and real world, fantasy and material production? In response to this I would argue that the boundaries are not fixed but rather mobile and continuously redefined in two supplementary moves: the plot of *The Blazing World* collapses into a narrative for writing, and, the urgency to fashion the author's identity and to legitimate her authority creates new options in the design of the plot. It is this potential of writing that I believe Virginia Woolf misses: its capacity to be a self-moving matter, to move the boundaries between the real and the imaginary, to disrupt the real and to insinuate within it the imaginary, to create within the real a space and legitimation for identities that have been fashioned in the imaginary. Thus, why reject early women writers for "scrabbling" in the absence of a room of their own if in this scrabbling they can fashion identities and invent narratives for writing? The immaterial spirit in the utopian *Blazing World* asks the Duchess:

[W]hy should you desire to be Empress of a material world, and be troubled with the cares that attend your government? whereas by creating a world within yourself, you may enjoy all both in whole and in parts, without control or opposition, and may take that world you please, and alter it when you please, and enjoy as much pleasure as a world can afford you [...] The Duchess of Newcastle was most earnest and industrious to make her world, because she had none at present.²⁴

Here I want to bring this re-reading of these two early modern women writers to a close. Such re-readings help us understand how our views of and criteria for creative writing have been ideologically constructed. Further, it invites us to re-think the teaching of writing not simply as the cultivation of personal talent, not as creating the conditions for discovering and expressing one's different voice and different experience, but rather as a space of hybridity where different identities and different narratives of authorship and power re-appropriate or negotiate with each other, and some times even allow the fashioning of new worlds and new identities against social conventions.

I believe we need to reconsider the importance of that "self-moving matter" in fashioning imaginary identities while at the same time keep redefining and mobilizing the boundaries between the real and the un-real. Writing is a space we owe to our students and even to ourselves as teachers; it's a space which once we start to inhabit we may realize that we need to rethink the way we have theorized questions of subjectivity, agency, creativity, and freedom. Playing the "crazy" Duchess' "game," we may ask ourselves: Why desire only a room of one's own if we live where the poles of the worlds meet?

1. This paper started in the context of a class on "Early Modern Women Writers Writing the Body," taught by Prof. Carol Neely in the Fall of 1994 at the University of Illinois. Her teaching, inspiring reading of Early Modern Women Writers, poetic presence, and support helped create "a room of my own" without which the writing of this paper would never be possible.

2. Thus Virginia Woolf makes the same error she criticizes others of doing. For example, in a caustic and cynical tone she says that the overemphasis on the writings of Cavendish ("cucumber spreading over roses") dropped into obscurity other women authors because the ideology of criticism valorizes "serious writing" but not other forms of writing ("letters do not count"). Interestingly, her ideology critique is already enveloped in the same ideology because to be able to make that critique of Cavendish she emphasizes on her "novels" and leaves aside her Autobiography ("Autobiographies do not count," seems to be Virginia Woolf's literary criticism rule in *A Room of One's Own*).

3. Margaret, Duchess of Newcastle, *A True Relation of my Birth, Breeding and Life. Written by the Thrice Noble, Illustrious and Excellent Princess, The Lady Marchioness of Newcastle. 1650*, in *The Cavalier and His Lady*, ed. Edward Jenkins (London: Macmillan and Co., 1872).

4. I borrow the term negotiation from Ann Rosalind Jones' essay "Imitation, Negotiation, Appropriation," in Ann Rosalind Jones, *The Currency of Eros: Women's Love Lyric in Europe 1540-1620* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1990), 1-10.

5. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1989).
6. Ibid., 6.
7. Ibid., 104.
8. Ibid., 63.
9. Ibid., 98.
10. Ibid., 111.
11. Alice Thornton, *The Autobiography of Mrs. Alice Thornton*, in *The Publications of the Surtees Society*, vol. *LXII* (London: Andrews and Co., 1875), 38.
12. Ibid., 37-38.
13. Ibid., 38.
14. Ibid., 46.
15. Woolf, 61.
16. Margaret, Duchess of Newcastle, *A True Relation of my Birth, Breeding and Life*, 172.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., 175.
19. Margaret Cavendish, "The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing New World," in *New Blazing World and Other Writings*, ed. Kate Lilley (New York: University of New York Press, 1992), 124.
20. Ibid.
21. For example, doesn't the most mundane everyday experience suddenly appear more real when represented in the imaginary world of a film? Or even, don't we sometimes filter and assess the reality of our actual experiences through the "reality" of filmic representations?
22. Margaret Cavendish, "The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing New World," 126.
23. Ibid., 188.
24. Ibid., 186.

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