

Strong Misreading

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In *On Deconstruction*, Jonathan Culler explains that "all readings are misreadings,"¹ and "The best a reader can achieve is a strong misreading -- a reading that will in turn produce others. Most readings are weak misreadings, which also attain neither understanding nor self-knowledge but blindly trope upon the text while claiming not to trope."² Theorists of rhetoric commonly consider the master tropes to be synecdoche, metonymy, irony, and metaphor. Culler's theoretical formulation of reading as misreading invokes all these tropes at once; thus to apply it to Zelia Gregoriou's reading of Virginia Woolf is to master-trope four ways upon her text. Troping, "strong readers struggle to master the text by misreading it."³ Zelia⁴ has given us not a weak misreading of Woolf, but a strong one. Joining in her deconstructive play, then, I entertain "the dependency of insight upon error"⁵ as a possibility. According to deconstructive theory, the best Zelia, Woolf herself, or I could achieve in reading women writers is a strong misreading that could produce others. Zelia has produced for us yet another "Woolf" text from *A Room of One's Own* conceived as "a space of hybridity."

"She scarcely writes to me." Who is "she?" Woolf or Zelia's own mother? This opening statement is ambiguous: a textual locus where the poles of two worlds meet, as is my own reiteration of it. I want some room of my own within her space of hybridity, much more than the Philosophy of Education Society allows⁶: room such as Woolf claimed to think about women's education. Re-appropriating, negotiating, I repeat in order to make a difference. I want Zelia to write more to us for she has courageously claimed philosophy of education as a kind of writing. But does she truly want philosophers of education to continue neglecting Woolf's concern for Cavendish's education⁷ or Woolf's dismay at not knowing Greek?

Zelia implicitly announces her troping romp over *A Room of One's Own* by first signifying its title as if it were Woolf's whole text (synecdoche). She does move on to summarize Woolf's argument as if to say that argument is itself Woolf's text (metonymy). With this philosophically conventional move, she pretends to be logocentric, for she makes clear, especially when reading her mother's and Cavendish's writing, that she is not so critically naive (irony). In view of her critique of Woolf's logocentrism, that satirical pretense implies that the "postmodern narrative practice" which recent Woolf critics have explored at length is a present absence in *A Room of One's Own*, which it is not (metaphor).⁸

Zelia's artful deployment of the four master tropes to critique Woolf has set up necessary premises for her assertion, otherwise undemonstrated, that Woolf conceives a woman writer's room of her own as standing outside history and ideology. Thus, Zelia not only puts Woolf's text under erasure, she cleverly satirizes conventional philosophical reading as a weak form of misreading, for it claims not to trope. By contrast with the philosophically conventional weak misreading of Woolf, her reading is a strong misreading. This deconstructive play with the interpretive conventions of our field, at Woolf's expense, is a clear case of re-appropriation and negotiation of diverse narratives of writing to legitimate a new identity against our own field's academic conventions: the creative struggle for politically potent authorial power within a space of hybridity.

"She scarcely writes to me." Does Zelia mean that such a logocentric misreading makes Woolf into a woman whose writing scarcely addresses her? Or does the very strength of her misreading itself signify her "true meaning" in declaring "She scarcely writes to me": that Woolf scarcely writes to her? Here is another locus of indeterminacy where the poles of two worlds meet, from which Zelia deftly constructs Cavendish's subjectivity and claims her own authorship as literary critic. Why should a philosopher of education claim authorship as a literary critic? At the beginning of *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf announces that she will be "making use of all the liberties and licenses of a novelist" in that largely educational treatise. She explains that "when a subject is highly controversial -- and any question about sex is that -- one cannot hope to tell the truth" (pp. 4-5), later cautioning that "Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" (p. 35). An earlier Woolf text in audience theory may show this looking-glass metaphor's relevance to Zelia's retheorizing of creative writing:

Young men and women beginning to write are generally given the plausible but utterly impracticable advice to write what they have to write as shortly as possible, as clearly as possible, and without other thought in their minds except to say exactly what is in them. Nobody ever adds on these occasions the one thing needful: "And be sure you choose your patron wisely," though that is the gist of the whole matter. For a book is always written for somebody to read, and since the patron is not merely the paymaster, but also in very subtle and insidious way the instigator and inspirer of what is written, it is of the utmost importance that he should be a desirable man.⁹

Woolf recognizes that there is no singular patron for anyone, except perhaps someone like Cavendish who did have a desirable man in the Duke of Newcastle. Otherwise this historically marginalized writer's patronage was lacking.¹⁰ What patronage have we? In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf does not depict Professor von X as a desirable man, and Zelia casts Woolf herself as akin to him in her critique of Cavendish, albeit by means of her own strong misreading. In writing about women, inspired by women, Zelia has written to women, any one of whom might also say, "She scarcely writes to me." "She" is then put in her place where the poles of two worlds meet. One of those worlds is a looking-glass reflecting the figure of our patrons at twice their natural size.

Read through the lens of Woolf's looking-glass metaphor, Zelia's paper provokes some profoundly generative if uncomfortable questions that could set us in motion toward the other world where we acknowledge the high price of being patronized. Such acknowledgment is crucial if our space of hybridity is not to become a house in which we play Woolf's proverbial angel. Who could Zelia's patrons be? They wouldn't mind papers on women or women's writing and literature, but would they want to hear theorizing about gender or about how literary women's educational thought might challenge philosophy of education? They wouldn't mind attention to women's comfortable writing about their own bodies in painful childbirth (such as Alice Thornton's),¹¹ but how eager would they be to consider educational questions posed by an uncomfortably written autobiographical narrative of a girl's body subjected to sexual violation by men in her own haute-bourgeois family? (Such was Woolf's *A Sketch of the Past*.) They wouldn't mind talk of individual women's resilient self-creation in solitary reverie supported by affable husbands, but could they stand more than passing mention of one woman's private struggle against illiteracy or material oppression? They wouldn't mind discussions, which I welcome myself, dignifying women whose cultural contributions scholars have dismissed for centuries, but would such patrons promote serious study of educational thought written by women whose other cultural contributions have been judged enduring and somehow significant, unless such study be dismissive?¹²

I agree with Zelia that a room of one's own can be taken too literally and also with Woolf's argument in *A Room of One's Own's* sequel, *Three Guineas*, that an Outsiders' Society is necessary. By that I mean we need to write to one another more often, not naively claiming to have stepped outside history or ideology, but ever alert to what we can and cannot say without losing ourselves or one another, without relinquishing the unwritten text or refashioning Woolf's angel in the house, and without ignoring the sad state of girls' and women's education even today.

1. Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1982), 175.
2. Ibid., 79-80.
3. Ibid., 80.
4. I depart from conventional surname citation in deference to Zelia's expressed wish.
5. Culler, *On Deconstruction*, 273.
6. Thanks to Deanne Bogdan and Catherine Hobbs for helpfully commenting on drafts of my spoken response, whose three parts followed Zelia's own. Thanks to John Green for helpful comments on this severely abridged version.
7. Virginia Woolf, "The Duchess of Newcastle," in *Women and Writing*, ed. Michele Barrett (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 79-81, 83, 87.
8. Pamela L. Caughie, *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1991); Karen Kaviola, *All Contraries Confounded* (Iowa City: University of Iowa, 1991); Makiko Minow Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1987).
9. Virginia Woolf, "The Patron and the Crocus," in *Collected Essays, Vol. II* (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1925), 149.
10. Andrew McNeillie, ed., *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 1 (London: Hogarth, 1986), 348.
11. Perhaps even philosophically irrelevant publication of a man's portrait of himself fully clothed painting his wife naked; see Bob Stake and Dale Kerr, *Educational Theory* 45, 1 (Winter 1995): 56.
12. Jane Roland Martin, "A Professorship and an Office of One's Own," in *Changing the Educational Landscape* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 120-29.

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