

## **Violence into Speech—Lessons from the Home Front in Virginia Woolf’s *Three Guineas***

**by Jean Mills**

In any street fight in our working class neighborhood south of Boston during the mid- to late- 1960’s, I was designated “ammo girl.” Whether the fight involved chains, blades, boards, rocks, or snowballs (packed with nails and shards of glass), as the youngest and only daughter in a family of three older brothers, and as ammo girl, I was forbidden to shoot—to come up from behind the wall or from behind whatever ‘fort’ we had constructed to aim... and... fire! I recall trying to take a shot once (I had both a good aim and a good arm) but my head was shoved back down behind the wall for my own ‘protection’ by the palm of my good brother’s big right hand. (I say ‘good’ brother, because like Virginia’s Thoby and to a lesser extent Adrian, I had two ‘good’ brothers as well. These as opposed to my one ‘bad’ half-brother who was more in keeping with Woolf’s two ‘bad’ half-brothers, George and Gerald Duckworth).<sup>1</sup> In any case, I felt myself roundly denounced by the absolute shock on my good brother’s face. He was brother as “law-giver” (Ruddick 186), hero (though he couldn’t save me), and he was charming and good-looking to boot. “Whose side are you on, anyway?” he scolded. “You’re ammo girl.”

In the ‘ready, aim, fire’ paradigm of war, I would be strictly confined to the ‘ready’ position. However, if one of my brothers went down in ‘the field’—usually a littered, weedy patch of pavement in a vacant lot or a back alley behind the abandoned Howe and French shoe factory—I would run out from behind the wall to nurse him and escort him back to safety. Between the ages of 7 and 9, in addition to packing ammo, I even had a nurse’s kit, but absolutely no awareness that to a certain extent without ‘ready’ there could be no ‘aim, fire’ and consequently no wounded, no war. I certainly had no idea that by the age of seven I was already in violation of the second duty of Virginia Woolf’s “Outsider’s Society” as outlined in her visionary, anarchic polemic for a peaceful world, *Three Guineas*. As Woolf writes, the first duty “not to fight with arms” was “easy” for

me to observe, as well, because like the “daughters of educated men” to whom she addresses *Three Guineas* in England in the 1930s, in the working class patriarchal structure of my own family in America in the 1960s, I was not allowed to fight. The second duty, however, to “refuse in the event of war to make munitions or nurse the wounded” (*TG* 162) marked my complicity in the hierarchical structure of a patriarchal worldview that Woolf sought not only to condemn (for its kinship with fascism), but to overthrow. Her instructions also point to the unmanageability of my position as a girl and later a woman in a culture and society that would persistently “sink the private brother[...] and inflate in his stead a monstrous male” (Woolf *TG* 160).

In *Three Guineas* Virginia Woolf has articulated for me the feeling I had upon having my head shoved down behind the wall. On the one hand, I experienced my role as being dictated and defined by a social construct that both rewarded and validated my brother’s power, while devaluing my own. I would only ever be ammo girl. It was a weakness, among many others afforded me by the accidents of gender, as well as, social class, historical moment, cultural context, and familial dysfunction, that I internalized, but which also created in me a kind of violence of the mind set up by the dangling carrot of a mythologized militarism.

In “A Sketch of the Past” in Virginia Woolf’s memoir *Moments of Being*, she describes how a childhood wrestling match changes into a beating she took at the hands of her good brother Thoby. She writes:

As a child then, my days, just as they do now, contained a large proportion of this cotton wool, this non-being. Week after week passed [...] Then, for no reason that I know about, there was a sudden violent shock; something happened so violently that I have remembered it all my life [...] I was fighting with Thoby on the lawn. We were pommelling each other with our fists. Just as I raised my fist to hit him, I felt: why hurt another person? I dropped my hand instantly, and stood there, and let him beat me. I remember the feeling. It was a feeling of hopeless sadness. It was as if I became aware of something terrible; and of my own powerlessness. I slunk off alone, feeling horribly depressed. (*MB* 71)

In *Virginia Woolf*, Louise DeSalvo I believe rightly sees Woolf’s experience as an internalization of her powerlessness—“that she should, simply, take it”—and as a marker

of the consequences of a failed, abusive social construction that outlines “the emotional contours” (106) of her life. I see the experience also as a marker of Virginia Woolf’s sanity and her brilliant use of a survival mechanism. Die another day. Lie down. Take it. So you can live to tell the tale. In a sense I see much of Virginia Woolf’s writing as her response to Thoby’s pommelling, her “fight [back] with the mind” (CE 173, 174), but *Three Guineas*, in particular, an essay for which she begins to collect material at the age of 46, and which she begins to write during her mid- to late- fifties, as her response not only to Thoby, but to all her brothers, good and bad. The dramatic trajectory of Woolf’s life from this early experience forward reveals a portrait of a woman who ultimately becomes a “pacifist other,” but a woman also for whom physical “non-being” is an imperative, as she finds a measure of peace in the sheltered concealment of the mind. Jane Marcus writes that “Woolf came from a culture and a family obsessed with female chastity, and she was obsessed with their obsession [...] it is a poignant and ironic measure of how one’s politics can be more radical than one’s life to note that she seems to have lived most of her life in physical chastity, and the powerful and moving images for her own creative processes are of the chaste imagination retreating to a nunnery” (79). In an endnote to her discussion of Woolf’s chastity, she points out that Woolf “celebrates celibacy and the single life in contrast to other left-wing feminists of the time, Rebecca West and Emma Goldman, who advocated free love” (199). I believe Woolf’s chastity, however, was enforced by her early childhood experiences with violence and sexual abuse. In a sense, Woolf’s sexuality was murdered when she was young, and, to my mind, *Three Guineas* is her furious emergence from the nunnery meant to radically transform all forms of violence into speech.

It is the aim of this essay to show that once Virginia Woolf realizes that in response to war “all she could do was write,” in *Three Guineas*, she does so with a vengeance, as she both challenges and expands our conventional notions of what it means to be a “pacifist.” Contrary to the criticism that *Three Guineas* “did not deal with [...] women’s capacity for martial belligerence,” (Lee 670), I believe Woolf demonstrates by virtue of the force of her rhetoric and the nature of her argument calling for social recreation, a deeply held understanding of violence as she condemns it as “hollow” and instructs us to be

“disinterested,” (Pawlowsky 3) neither to “incite [our] brothers to fight, or to dissuade them, but to maintain an attitude of complete indifference” (*TG* 163). Furthermore, to deny the scope and breadth of Woolf’s undertaking in terms of genre or the fury in the violent imagery of her rhetoric not only robs *Three Guineas* of its delicious anarchism, but also silences Woolf’s personal history and the complexity of her pacifist stance. In *Three Guineas*, she is at one and the same time pacifist and an aggressive, biting anti-fascist. She seeks to expose patriarchy’s links to fascism, give primacy to peace, but also rejects both an “enforced pacifism” or an “enforced feminism” (*TG* 269), questioning the efficacy of pacifist committee meetings as preaching to the choir. Paying tribute to Woolf too narrowly as a pacifist, without exploring the nuances of that moniker as it applies to Woolf’s life and her particular brand of rhetoric in the *Three Guineas* project, I believe, also makes her increasingly easy to dismiss and ironically plays into the hands of the fascist agenda she sought to destroy.

To the extent to which any book is an invitation to stand up and be shot at, then I would characterize the *Three Guineas* project as an atom bomb in a homemade slingshot. The pocket that holds the ‘stone’ is intricately webbed and uniquely crafted by Woolf as quintessential ammo-girl, or uber-ammo-girl, and took over a decade to build. The ‘bomb’ itself is the finished text complete with endnotes and photographs, but has yet to hit its target or to be successfully launched as it has been dismantled by the removal of the photographs, and by playing up an iconic image of Woolf as a crazy suicide, rather than giving press to the brilliance, glee, logic and sanity of her revolutionary ideas. Woolf’s argument in *Three Guineas*, that human rights begins at home, a notion that streamlines the tenets of patriarchy with fascism, continues to make us uncomfortable today, as her image is increasingly associated with madness and illness and the text of *Three Guineas* continues to be published maimed.<sup>2</sup>

Like most bombs made in tubs, I think because they must be made in secret and in private, the idea for *Three Guineas* begins in the bath. On January 20, 1931, Woolf writes in her diary that while bathing she has “conceived an entire new book—a sequel to *A Room of One’s Own*—about the sexual life of women” (*AWD* 161-162). She calls it

*Professions for Women*, which I see as a kind of cloaking device, masking for now her larger project, which by February 16, 1932 she has tied in to a fantastically aggressive desire to blow things up. Woolf has begun gathering her “facts” and continues on with the *Common Reader* “by way of proving my credentials” (*AWD* 174) and by February 1932 has “collected enough powder to blow up St. Pauls” (*AWD* 174).

*Three Guineas* has its origins in oppression and its fellow-traveller, abuse, for her plan is to write “on being despised.” She “wanted—how violently—how persistently, pressingly, compulsorily I can’t say—to write” (*WD* 278). As late as October 12, 1937, working on what she hoped were the last pages of *Three Guineas*, she writes, “oh how violently I have been galloping through these mornings! It has pressed and spurted out of me. If that’s any proof of virtue, like a physical volcano. And my brain feels cool and quiet after the expulsion [...] I have deserved this gallop” (*WD* 276). What is significant here, and a relief for me to realize, is that Woolf as she emerges from the nunnery feels no shame and no guilt. In the process of writing *Three Guineas*, she has been satisfied, deserving, and renewed. *Three Guineas* may begin from the point of oppression, but its violence and its underlying aim of destruction, is life-affirming and long overdue. (As my therapist once said, “a murder a day keeps the therapist away”).

Woolf’s “gallop,” her *Three Guineas* project, consisted of a decade long construction of an apparatus, a secret weapon, with an intricate, unique, weblike design comprised of twelve volumes of reading notes, “including three fat scrapbooks” (Silver, *TG Before and After* 254) filled with news clippings, extracts, hand and typewritten notes, annotated quotations and master lists.<sup>3</sup> These are all online now at The Center for Woolf Studies thanks to the important work of Merry Pawlowski and Vara Neverow. In addition to the finished product, she also crafted and re-worked a 12,000 word first serial excerpt of *Three Guineas* for the *Atlantic Monthly* that overlapped with the publication of both the British and American editions of the book. The endnotes in the book proper—there were 124 in all—were not yet completed at the time of serialization in May and June 1938 (Black 74, 76). Woolf was also writing her novel *The Years*, which initially was attached to *Three Guineas*, as a novel-essay, but which she then split to make two separate but still

related texts by January 1933. When we think of *Three Guineas*, then, it is crucial to understand the finished product as a piece of a greater whole, to acknowledge the scope, breadth, and depth of Woolf's project/weapon, and understand the work as being radically outside or at the edges of genre.

Furthermore, the finished product itself is distinctive on a number of levels in terms of its design. The text is buttressed by endnotes that turn the notion of endnotes on its end? or rather ear? Generally speaking, endnotes in patriarchal texts function as a marker of authority, but have no "autonomous significance." The old cliché is that an endnote is "the mediocre attached to the beautiful." Woolf's endnotes are a function of women's authority, however, and very often can function on their own as fragmented essays. She advances the biographies of women in the endnotes in an attempt to construct a new order, and a new way of reading history. The endnotes maintain a sustained dialogue between the text and the kind of web archive Woolf has created in her reading notes and scrapbooks. Woolf has re-invented the text yet again and created *Three Guineas* as archive, or multi-leveled hypertext, where passages in the body link you to endnotes, which lead you to clippings, to diary entries, annotations, and back again to the text. As we digest Woolf's radical argument in terms of content, then, in terms of form we experience the text in a radically, some might say violently, different way.

When Woolf confronts one of the more controversial aspects of her argument, exposing women's complicity in patriarchy and thereby their 'consent' to fascism, she does so by sending us back and forth between endnotes, text, and her notebook archive. While Woolf sympathizes with the powerlessness of women's position in the home, she labels the dependency that marriage fosters as demonic when she links its relationship to the state. And she is gravely concerned with women's unconscious efforts, as well, on behalf of war. She writes:

How else can we explain that amazing outburst in August 1914, when the daughters of educated men who had been educated thus rushed into hospitals, some still attended by their maids, drove lorries, worked in fields and munition factories, and used all their immense stores of charm, of

sympathy, to persuade young men that to fight was heroic, and that the wounded in battle deserved all her care and all her praise? [...] Thus consciously she desired “our splendid Empire”; unconsciously she desired our splendid war. (58)

Here, again, my childhood experiences resonate, and I feel as one of those “ordinary women” (Snaith) of the working class who wrote to Woolf in praise of *Three Guineas* thanking her for expressing “so delicately and yet with such force” (Snaith L2) what they could not say for themselves. For as I matured, in addition to seeing my role as ammo girl as a consequence of an entrenched and deeply flawed socio-political system that exalted both the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ brother over the girl, but which was ‘bad’ for all, I also came to reflect upon my status as a regrettable legacy of my mother’s, for she worked at that time packing bombs in a munitions factory for \$1.35/hour during the Vietnam War, while my father was on strike.

In her analysis of the dialectical relationship between women and fascism, in particular, the fascism of Mussolini, Hitler and Franco, “Female Sexuality in Fascist Ideology,” Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi cautions against keeping silent about women’s roles in the political, social and economic realities of tyranny. By keeping silent, dismissing, exonerating or absolving, Macciocchi writes that we create “another way of sending women into a vacuum, or, on the contrary, of creating a theology of women (which in any case runs into the same historical void).” She continues that “this vacuum is all the more serious in that, on the reverse side, fascism lay solidly like a huge disturbing carcass, on the politico-intellectual landscape” (67). In *Three Guineas*, Woolf aligns the tenets of patriarchy with a Brechtian sense of fascism which compares the relationship to “that between a protector, or pimp, and his whores [...] whereby] the state acts as procurer and women become the prostitutes of capital” (Macciocchi 69). As she sends us back and forth between text, endnotes, and notebook archive, Woolf brilliantly connects the dots of the oppression of women’s sexuality in the home with her larger concern, women as whores for the state. Woolf writes of the pimp/whore dynamic in the private home in terms of marriage, the dependent relationship between husband and wife in the 1930s, but

the coinage also works seamlessly in the familial structure of an incestuous household as well.

Ultimately, it is Virginia Woolf's feminism, and her passionate accumulation of women facts that give her the courage and confidence to "fight back with the mind," to confront violence, process it, and revel in it, as she uses her fierce rhetorical voice to her advantage as a writer. She claims not to understand the militaristic impulse, "As it is a fact that she cannot understand what instinct compels him, what glory, what interest, what manly satisfaction fighting provides for him—'without war there would be no outlet for the manly qualities which fighting develops'—as fighting thus is a sex characteristic which she cannot share" (*TG* 163). But then she immediately includes a long endnote that speaks favorably and romantically of the female amazon warrior. She is in essence answering herself in the back matter of the book, when she writes "The following quotation shows, however, that if sanctioned the fighting instinct easily develops" (*TG* 269). Virginia Woolf is impatient with injustice, and the conflagrations that precede this contemplative qualification, this fence straddling between an essentialist and constructivist view of gender, further reveal her brilliant use of fire to start new growth.

When it comes to argumentation, Virginia Woolf likes violence. She likes to blow things up. She also likes to burn things to the ground. The first thing she wants to blow up, if we turn to the notes that predate the text, is religion, as we have seen, "St. Paul's." The next thing she wants to destroy is the university. She likes matches. She writes that "education, the finest education in the world, does not teach people to hate force, but to use it?" (*TG* 43). And because the university is tied to the war machine, she wonders if she shouldn't suggest students "buy rags and petrol and Bryant and May's matches and burn the college to the ground?" (48). The outrageousness of the content of this scene is brilliantly offset by Woolf as a casual suggestion, and yet we are now in a land of extremes where we suddenly prefer to "track a killer than a thought" (DiBattista).

Certainly, when Woolf's persona is suggesting violence, she is the most fun to follow around. She writes "what is the aim of education, what kind of society, what kind of



human being should [it] seek to produce.” She will only support the charity if he satisfies her that he “will use it to produce the kind of society, the kind of people that will help to prevent war” (49). Women’s colleges are complicit as well and tied to patriarchy. Therefore, “no guinea should go to rebuilding the college on the old plan; just as certainly none could be spent upon building a college on a new plan.” The money instead “should be earmarked ‘Rags. Petrol. Matches.’” Then, in one of the most assertive, punctuating, satisfying moments in creative nonfiction, she writes, “Take this guinea and with it burn the college to the ground. Set fire to old hypocrisies. Let the light of the burning building scare the nightingales and incarnadine the willows. And let the daughters of educated men dance round the fire and heap armful upon armful of dead leaves upon the flames. And let their mothers lean from the upper windows and cry, ‘Let it blaze! Let it blaze! For we have done with this “education”!’” (49). Following along the scorched path of our killer/hero, we begin to see Woolf’s attraction to pyrotechnics as a lens outlining the figure of Woolf as ‘pacifist other.’ And rhetorical fire becomes the means by which she can achieve her goal of social replacement, anarchy, and starting anew.

In my own childhood battles on the home front, it wasn’t until I took a nailball in the calf as ammo girl, and witnessed during the same confrontation a neighborhood boy lose the tip of his finger, when the weapon of choice somehow came to involve a pitchfork, that the visible evidence of ‘war,’ the real physical effects of war on the body, trumped the militaristic impulse inside. I quit being ammo girl, but because the missing fingertip made the boy both more and less of a man, I remember feeling sorry for some time that the nailball hadn’t left a scar. In addition to the hazards of street fighting, I also saw as we all did the visible evidence of the insidious Vietnam War on the body. In one instance, in my experiences, in the form of a boy we re-named Flying Doug, who had left for Vietnam a math whiz and boy scout, but returned having to undergo electric shock treatments for war trauma and ended up sniffing glue for the next ten years down by the edge of the pond. For my mother’s part, she too had quit. She left the munitions plant, but not until an explosive detonated by accident killing a Mexican immigrant she used to see in passing on her break. Despite being ‘cured’ of our masculine fantasies and ultimately repulsed by any patriotic glorification of war, we had both failed Virginia. But

quoting Amelia Earhart, Woolf's flygirl used to negate Mussolini's flyboy, Ciano, in her clippings, she writes that it is exactly our failure that "should be seen as a challenge." As I continue to slouch towards sisterhood, *Three Guineas* has made me aware of how my fate was inextricably and intimately tied to theirs, to my parents and to my brothers good and bad. And it is this notion of the interconnectedness of human relations that makes Woolf's argument, that human rights really must begin at home, so logical, validating, and clear.

**Jean Mills** read versions of "Violence into Speech" at the International Virginia Woolf conference, University of London (June 2004) and Modernist Studies Association conference, Vancouver, B.C. (October 2004). Her most recent article "Women Creating Change: Dignity, Financial Literacy and Food, Glorious Food!" appeared in *Affilia*, 19.3 Fall 2004. She has written on Gertrude Stein for *Americana* (June 2003) and Harvard's *Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide* (March-April 2003). She is currently at work on a doctoral dissertation on Jane Harrison under the supervision of Jane Marcus, and teaches Modernist expatriate writers in Paris at Hunter College, New York City.

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<sup>1</sup> It is Sara Ruddick in 1981 who makes the distinction between Woolf's 'good' and 'bad' brothers in her essay "Private Brother, Public World" when she writes that "It is partly by contrast with these 'bad' brothers that Thoby so clearly embodies the brotherly virtues of guidance and protection" (186). It is not until Louise De Salvo's 1989 study *Virginia Woolf: The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on Her Life and Work* that we begin to understand just how 'bad' the 'bad' brothers were. What Ruddick sees as an inversion of the "archetypal brother-sister relation," De Salvo documents as perversion: "Virginia Woolf was a sexually abused child; she was an incest survivor" (1). I apply the same distinctions to my own childhood experiences.

<sup>2</sup> Elena Gualtieri writes in "Three Guineas and the Photograph: The Art of Propaganda" that "In the post-war years the reproduction of the five plates became somewhat erratic. They were dropped from the Hogarth Press edition after the fourth imprint, which appeared in 1952, as well as from the American paperback edition brought out in 1963. More recently, the plates have once again been reintegrated within the essay both in the Penguin 1993 edition, where they appear in their original location, and in the World's Classics one of 1992, where they have been reprinted at the center of the text" (166). The majority of currently published paperback editions in the United States do not include the photographs, which were meticulously laid out with each plate lined up opposite specific lines of commentary. I would like to note the placement of "a general" which falls in the text of the first edition between the line break "ridi- and culous" and suggest its placement as a satirical gesture on Woolf's part. At the time of Gualtieri's article the identity of the figures of the photographs was unknown. Recent scholarship reveals a letter in the Hogarth Press archives at Reading University from the engravers Garrett & Atkinson that lists the figures as Lord Baden-Powell ("A General"), Earl (Stanley) Baldwin ("A University Procession"), Lord Hewart ("A Judge") and William Cosmo Gordon Lang, Archbishop of Canterbury ("An Archbishop"). (Staveley)

<sup>3</sup> Jane Marcus refers to *Three Guineas* as "a documentary of women in the 1930's." She is also the one who spoke of the entire project as a kind of "quilt" to which I would only add, that if it is indeed a quilt, it is one limned with small pox with the intention of wiping out a tribe.