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## Review of Virginia Woolf and the Materiality of Theory by Derek Ryan

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**A REVIEW OF:**

**DEREK RYAN (2013), VIRGINIA WOOLF AND THE MATERIALITY OF THEORY: SEX, ANIMAL, LIFE. EDINBURGH: EDINBURGH UNIVERSITY PRESS. PP. 234, ISBN 978-0-748-67643-9**

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Derek Ryan's *Virginia Woolf and the Materiality of Theory* is an exploration of "Woolf's writing alongside Deleuze's philosophy and new materialist theories of 'sex', 'animal' and 'life'." What might at first glance sound like yet another exegetical effort to elucidate new meanings in Woolf's writing—this time using new materialist approaches—is in fact a claim towards an understanding of Woolf's literary practice as itself a form of theorizing. In Ryan's intriguing study, Woolf emerges as a precursor of, and inspiration for, contemporary philosophical and critical approaches that privilege matter and material relations as productive venues for "nonanthropocentric conceptualizations" of the world (9).

The book is made up of 5 interconnected chapters, each exploring a different new materialist thematic concern via Woolf's works, plus an introduction that clarifies the goals of the book and gives an overview of the contemporary scholars whose works will be used in the journey. In light of what is explained in the introduction, it is crucial to keep in mind that Ryan is looking at theoretical formulations embedded in Woolf's works—his book is a creative excavation of her theory-making through literature. If the reader expects to encounter ground-breaking new readings of her works, there might be some disappointment in the horizon at the relative paucity of such results. This is not the goal of the book; Ryan focuses on Woolf's engagement with the material world in her playful use of language to understand the resonances that her works have with recent critical and philosophical developments.

In chapter one, "Materials for Theory," Ryan sets the tone of the book (and incidentally, gets the closest he will get to an exegetical approach). He explores Woolf's use of the apparently opposing terms 'granite' and 'rainbow'—the first seemingly evoking concreteness, the second ephemerality—to show how she sometimes undermines and sometimes further develops such oppositions, by "performing a kind of lexical and extra-lexical polygamy" (49). For Ryan, such practice is a demonstration that Woolf was wary of any type of totalisation, and sought with her writing to undermine any fixed meaning for terms. Ryan traces Woolf's influence on Deleuze's thought and links her tendency to complicate her lexicon to Deleuze's rhizomatic approach.

Chapter two tackles the concept of difference—particularly sexual difference, crucial in most new materialist debates—in conversation with Elizabeth Grosz, Deleuze and Guattari, Judith Butler, Rosi Braidotti, and others. The focus is on the famous feminist essay "A Room

of One's Own" and the novel *To the Lighthouse*. These are taken as chief examples of Woolf's effort to complicate terms such as 'woman' and 'androgyny' through her commitment to material concerns, for example in her attention to the materiality of paint and canvas (92). For Ryan, Woolf's theory of androgyny "multiplies difference to create a subject that is more complicated and that is not defined by an oppositional relation" (68).

In chapter three, "Queering and Non/Human Desire", Ryan engages *Orlando* and contemporary theorizing of desire, with special attention to Rosi Braidotti's approach. The fictional biography emerges as an empirical study that queers the relations depicted in the book, beyond a reflection on Woolf's own involvement with Vita Sackville-West and into a serious consideration of nonhuman relations. Through his reading of *Orlando*, Ryan supports Braidotti's claim that "any viable model of sexual difference (...) has to take into account not only the nature of difference between men and women, but differences that exist within the category of 'women' as well as in each individual woman" (103). For him, *Orlando* is a study on the material workings of desire that reflect Braidotti's own conception of the term; Woolf is seen as a precursor of the idea that desire emerges in the encounter, as an inseparable entanglement between the desiring subjects. The chapter's main argument is swiftly summarized in the "idea that sexuality means relations, which are actualized in encounters" (106). As Ryan sees it, "*Orlando* transports subjectivity from plurality to multiplicity" (127).

"The Question of the Animal" is the fourth chapter and argues that *Flush*, the mock-biography of a cocker spaniel, playfully questions the human-animal divide. For Ryan, *Flush* "provides crucial instances of the materiality of Woolf's nonanthropocentric theorizing" (164). By reading the dog's biography in conversation with Haraway's *Companion Species*, and Deleuze and Guattari's notion of becoming-animal, Ryan argues that the novel is a creative exercise in imagining animals beyond Oedipal relations, or anthropomorphizing tropes. *Flush* is for him an actualization, in literature, of 'becoming-other with'—a way to consider together the insights of Haraway and Deleuze and Guattari, all of whom cite Woolf among their intellectual influences.

The fifth chapter, "Quantum Reality and Posthuman Life", is perhaps the most intriguing of all the discussions Ryan engaged in so far in the book. It uses *The Waves* to navigate "Woolf's exploration of epistemology and ontology, internal and external, subject and object, life and matter" (171). It does so by reading it alongside Karen Barad's notion of agential realism developed in *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, as well as Deleuze and Guattari's uses of the notions of haecceity and pure immanence. Woolf's concept of life is thus construed to be as phenomena, as intra-actions between entangled agencies that cannot be separately defined before their encounter. In this chapter many concepts that Ryan has worked out throughout the book culminate, and as such it is the most ambitious. The chapter works as a conclusion to the book, pointing towards Woolf's commitment to life as creative immanence resulting from material, non/human intra-actions (197).

Overall, Ryan's work offers a fascinating and valuable viewpoint. In using the text to investigate theory, rather than using theory to exegetically investigate the text, he offers a daring perspective both on Woolf and on the thinkers—and thoughts—she influenced and inspired.