GIFTS, MARKETS AND ECONOMIES OF DESIRE IN VIRGINIA WOOLF

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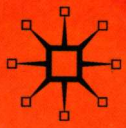

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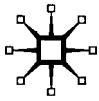

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To the birthday of my life, Sarah Burgess, whose love and generosity are without measure.

In memory of my Dad, Allan Gordon Simpson (1925–2003), and my friend and colleague, Dr Mike Davis (1962–2006) – two of the most generous of men.

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Abbreviations

AROO	*A Room of One's Own*
BTA	*Between the Acts*
CD	*The Crowded Dance of Modern Life (ed. and introd. Rachel Bowlby)*
CSF	*Complete Shorter Fiction*
D	*The Diary of Virginia Woolf (5 volumes)*
JR	*Jacob's Room*
L	*The Letters of Virginia Woolf (6 volumes, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann)*
MD	*Mrs Dalloway*
MOB	*Moments of Being*
O	*Orlando*
The Hours	*The Hours: The British Manuscript of Mrs Dalloway (ed. and introd. Helen Wussow)*
TG	*Three Guineas*
TTL	*To the Lighthouse*
TTL Holograph	*Holograph Version of To the Lighthouse*

Contents

Introduction

In recent years there has been an increasing critical interest in the relationship between modernist writers and their writing and the marketplace, exploding the myth mapped out in earlier influential studies, such as Andreas Huyssen's *After the Great Divide*, of modernist writers' and artists' absolute disinterest, detachment and contempt for popular and consumer culture. The polarised gendered distinction this myth also assumes between 'high' (masculine) and 'low' (feminine) art is undermined by more recent studies. These have begun to uncover, in Lawrence Rainey's words, 'the growing complexity of cultural exchange and circulation in modern society' (1998, 2) and to explore the contradictory and ambiguous interrelationships between modernist artists, the cultural institutions that produce art, the market, readers and modernist art as a 'commodity of a special sort' (Rainey, 1998, 3). Work in this area focused initially on James Joyce's engagement with advertising. It 'irrevocably opened the modernist canon to consumer theory' (Abbott 194),[1] and there is now a substantial body of work focused on Woolf's writing in relation to these concerns. These important studies elucidate her complex and contradictory engagement with the marketplace and relate this to the sexual and class politics of her work, to her own practice of publication, her personal attitude to the commercial world and to her sense of herself as a modernist writer.[2]

Alongside this exploration of Woolf's often ambivalent relationship to and representation of the marketplace, my study draws attention to the gift economy in operation in her writing and to the importance attributed to the giving of gifts. Focusing on the complex, contradictory and inconsistent interaction of gift and market economies in Woolf's work complicates still further the location of Woolf and her writing in relation to commercial literary production and to the niche-markets in which modernist texts circulated. This focus also expands the critical debate about the feminist and socialist politics of her writing, as well as furthering the interest in Woolf's representations of female sexuality and desire, and in the aesthetics of her writing with which such representations are entwined. The central thesis

I explore here is that gift-giving in Woolf's writing signifies an alternative feminine libidinal economy. This can destabilise the heteropatriarchal social order that capitalism seems to keep in place, and it can disrupt the ideological values and beliefs these social and economic systems perpetuate. Commodity culture can stimulate and mobilise a profusion of desires that it is unable to contain or control. However, I argue that it is the operation of the gift economy in Woolf's writing that works to realise a subversive economy of desire for and between women so that they can prioritise a different set of values. Contemplating ideas about the 'gift' of creativity and its circulation in the form of books in the literary marketplace also raises broader issues about reading and economies of meaning, which obviously relate to Woolf's preoccupation with the role of her ideal reader – to act like an accomplice reading with generosity.

Gifts and gift-giving have important social, economic and political significance in a wide range of cultures. As Mark Osteen remarks, an interest in them has been a part of the development of Western society itself (1). Most often defined in opposition to monetary economies, and more recently specifically in opposition to capitalist economies, the gift is often perceived as a counter to the ideologies, concepts and moral values such systems endorse. The gift then is seen to represent what is ethically good and resonates with ideals such as altruism, sacrifice and love – a utopian contrast to the calculation, manipulation and corrupting impersonality and self-interest of the market. However, as most theories of the gift demonstrate, this dichotomy is not so clear-cut, nor are the two economies so reliably separate. Rather, there are a wide variety of gifts given for a wide variety of reasons, and motivations for giving and responses on receiving are usually complicated and multi-faceted. In his essay 'Gifts' (1844), one of the earlier theorists of the gift, Ralph Waldo Emerson, defines a true gift as being that which conveys something of the giver, which exemplifies his/her talents: 'The only gift is a portion of thyself' and other gifts are merely 'barbarous . . . apologies for gifts' (1997, 25). However, such a true gift is also problematic in the response it provokes in the recipient, who may feel his/her independence to be compromised by the obligation and gratitude such a gift implies. The importance of gratitude is also key to Georg Simmel's ideas about social bonds and gifts, which similarly works to place upon the recipient an unwelcome state of obligation.

With the expansion of sociology, anthropology and ethnography in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries came an intensification of the interest in gifts and gift economies. Since Marcel Mauss' groundbreaking ethnographic study, *The Gift* (*Essai Sur Le Don*),[3] was first published in 1925, it is the notion of reciprocity that has been the main focus of theoretical discussions of the gift. It has also been central to the question about whether the gift can be said to exist, 'compromised' as it is by the expectation of a return exchange gift, and so perceived by some as indistinguishable from a

monetary exchange. Several theorists of the gift argue in different ways that Mauss' theory negates the possibility of the gift, with the system of reciprocity resembling an economic exchange. This view is asserted by Jacques Derrida, for whom the gift is the 'impossible' (1992, 7); for Pierre Bourdieu, gift-giving is a kind of fiction, an 'individual and collective misrecognition' of the economic calculation and self-interest of the exchange masked as a gift (1997, 198). For Hélène Cixous, the obligation to reciprocate is also particularly problematic: she refers to this as 'the paradox of the gift that takes' (1981a, 263). For her a gift given in the hope or expectation of a return gift signals the denial of the gift, and its value is annulled, associated as it is for her with a masculine economy of calculation, thrift and a capitalist ethos focused on making profits. However, for many other theorists, it is precisely the process of reciprocation that seals the social bond so central to the gift economy, and the complex and often ambiguous motivations for giving and receiving are also vital to the social, emotional and erotic bonds that gifts can create. In Mauss' theory, reciprocation is not a paradoxical denial of the gift, nor a smoke-screen masking market exchange, but is rather a fundamental part of gift exchange practices. Indeed, the importance of reciprocity as a means of consolidating social bonds is key to Mauss' analysis of the central significance of exchange practices in the ancient, contemporary, Western and non-Western cultures on which his study focuses. As Osteen claims, the gift 'constitutes perhaps the fullest expression of what it means to be human . . . forges social connections and enacts one's true freedom' (14).

Mauss's theories emerged at a significant historical moment in Europe and, as societies struggled to recover, socially, politically, emotionally and economically from the First World War, debate about ways of managing the economy and criticism of existing economic systems came to the fore (notably, in Britain, where issues of economic adjustment were 'perhaps more prominent than most', (Aldcroft, 1983, 2)). More specifically in the Bloomsbury circle, the ideas of John Maynard Keynes, advocate of deficit spending and credit for the consumer to boost the economy, were to bring about radical changes in the British economy. Mauss draws on the studies of several prominent ethnographers. The key tenets of his study are that gifts are never freely given, and that social bonds are formed and consolidated, and cultural continuity ensured, by the obligation to reciprocate. Gifts exchanged are also never simply material, but inherently spiritual, even magical, imbued as they are with the identity or the soul of the donor – an idea most clearly encapsulated in his understanding of the *hau* of Maori exchange systems. Although Mauss notes the closing down of gift economies in capitalist societies, he also looks hopefully for traces of a gift economy remaining in Western European society of the time, perceiving gift practices and 'the morality of former times' in individual, group and state activities and legislative changes (65).[4] Using his theory of gift economies, Mauss casts a new and critical light on the increasingly commodified, impersonal and anonymous

nature of Western culture, a culture impoverished by capitalist values and practices: 'the mere skimpy life that it is given through the daily wages doled out by employers' (69).[5]

It is not clear whether Woolf knew of Mauss' work, but the general interest in the 'primitive' in modernist circles is clearly an influence in her writing. She would also have been aware of developments in anthropology and the newly emerging area of ethnography through her connection with Cambridge academics, notably her friendship with Jane Harrison, a classical scholar whose radically new interpretations and theories of ancient Greek art and culture were informed by anthropological and ethnographic studies. Harrison was herself influenced by the theories of Emile Durkheim (Mauss' uncle with whom he worked). Sandra J. Peacock notes her praise of work co-written by Durkheim and Mauss, and by Henri Hubert and Mauss in the 1890s (181). Other influences on Harrison and Woolf include George Frazer's work, especially *The Golden Bough*. As Meg Albrink notes, Woolf's 'connections within the Bloomsbury Group would have introduced her to the innovations of the Cambridge School of modern ethnographers, a group that included Malinowski, W. H. R. Rivers, and Alfred Cort Haddon' (197).[6]

In Woolf's writing, it is the broader interest of Mauss' study – to examine what participating in gift practices reveals about people's perception of things and people (Carrier 9) – that is of particular interest. In addition, it is the different perspective on social structures and the organisation of Western culture that understanding gift economies can bring, as they 'throw light upon our morality and help to direct our ideals' (Mauss 71, 78–80), which is also significant. These key aspects of Mauss' work resonate strongly with the effect of gift practices found in Woolf's writing as they illuminate her social critique in new ways through the dynamic interconnection of the social, the economic and representations of desire. Throughout much of her work, Woolf expresses concerns similar to those of Mauss about the – (all-pervasive) ethos of capitalism. Her writing also explores the ways in which a gift economy can operate in part as an alternative to capitalist exchange by privileging generosity, social bonds and intimacies, and rendering unimportant the purely monetary value of the objects exchanged. Significantly, the expectation or even obligation to reciprocate does not necessarily annul the spirit of the gift and convert it into a mercantile exchange; rather, it fulfils one function of the gift which is to reinforce social bonds.

Mauss' understanding of a present-day gift economy, in which commodity and gift economies co-exist, also sheds light on the gift economies in Woolf's work which operate in relation, rather than in a simple opposition, to the market. Although expressions of generosity and the literal giving of gifts do work to undermine capitalism's acquisitive ethos and the fixing of value and have a utopian quality, they take place within a capitalist society and so subvert this economic system from within. This does not mean that the gift

is subsumed in the dominant paradigm of capitalist exchange so that it becomes an impossibility or simply a 'fiction'. Rather, the profound ambiguity of the gift (in terms of motivation, its effect on the relationship between the participants and its value in every sense[7]) has a disruptive effect, suggestively sidestepping the calculation of market exchange. Further, in an increasingly impersonal and rigid economy (especially in the 1920s with the British Government stalwartly adhering to a policy of fiscal and monetary retrenchment in an attempt to return to the stability of the Gold Standard (Aldcroft 1986, 6)), the need to counter the impersonality of commodity culture through the exchange of personal gifts becomes more urgent (as Carrier argues, 11).

However, Woolf's representation of the gift economy is more spontaneous, pleasurable and risky than the seemingly orderly threefold practice of giving, receiving and reciprocating in an ongoing circulation of exchange identified by Mauss (the apparent certainty of which others have criticised). It is also crucially complicated by her central concerns with issues of gender and sexuality. Woolf's questioning of capitalist paradigms, unlike Mauss' challenges, is bound up with her resistance to and subversion of the heterosexual and patriarchal norms and values capitalism seems to reinforce. A focus on the gift and gift economies expands the feminist perspective on the experience of women in a heteropatriarchal capitalist society offered in Woolf's work as it further complicates the negotiation of both capitalist and gift economies. This is partly because, in giving gifts, women run the risk of colluding with hegemonic social and sexual power structures that identify woman *as* a gift to be exchanged between men, even as they pose a more subversive threat by usurping the active role assigned to men in such monetary and heterosexual economies. As active agents, or what cultural anthropologist Gayle Rubin calls 'exchange partners', women defy the role assigned to them in heterocentric cultures as 'sexual semi-objects – gifts' (542, 543). In doing so they subvert the social mechanisms by which 'obligatory heterosexuality' and women's oppression are reinforced and perpetuated in male-dominated societies, through male 'rights of bestowal' (543, 545). These ideas, presented in her influential essay 'The Traffic in Women: Notes on the "Political Economy" of Sex', are in part a response to the work of structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss whose study of gift exchange in primitive societies, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, adds to Mauss' work by focusing on sex, gender and sexuality. Writing from a feminist perspective, Rubin challenges the unquestioning endorsement of the exchange of women as gifts that Lévi-Strauss posits as intrinsic to the consolidation of kinship bonds. She argues that because women are perceived only as 'sexual subjects', they cannot 'realize the [social] benefits of their own circulation' and that '(t)he asymmetry of gender – the difference between exchanger and exchanged – entails the constraint of female sexuality' (543, 548). Importantly, she makes clear that this 'traffic' in women is not 'confined to

the "primitive" world' but is 'more pronounced and commercialized in more "civilized' societies" ' (543). These ideas resonate clearly with Woolf's writing. A focus on gift economies brings to the fore the criticisms of the 'sex/gender system' (a term coined by Rubin, 534) of compulsory heterosexuality on which it is based, and of the stifling of women's desires and agency. Gifts in Woolf's work suggest a subversive sexual politics and the articulation of women's homoerotic desires; indeed, gift-giving and gift economies can be seen to realise and articulate subversive desires which threaten to undermine social and sexual norms and systems.

Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray also propose theories of the gift that are intrinsically connected to gender and sexuality, and which have potential to disrupt heterosexual and market economies radically. Their discussion of masculine and feminine economies works simultaneously at the level of the material manifestations of such economies (seeing the masculine economy exemplified in capitalist exchange and the feminine economy in the process of gift exchange) and at the level of the psychological, libidinal and emotional experience. Irigaray contemplates the effect of women taking charge of their own desires and their social and political agency by 'going to market' on their own, 'free from the control of the seller-buyer-consumer subjects' (1985, 196). More radically, women's refusal to go to market at all, and the rejection of a market mode of exchange, creates possibilities for 'a certain economy of abundance' denied by capitalist commerce (1985, 197).

Although for Cixous the sense of obligation and the need to respond with a reciprocal gift or gratitude are issues that problematise the gift, her theory of the gift's subversive potential, so that it threatens to undermine the dominant capitalist paradigm and the heteropatriarchal social organisation with which it co-exists, resonates strongly with the representations of gift economies in Woolf's writing. For Cixous, the feminine gift economy privileges fluidity, indeterminacy, a destabilisation of hierarchies and rational systems, bringing about a disturbance of property rights. It does not try to recover its expenses or to recuperate its losses; in fact, giving, excess and overflow are recognised as sources of pleasure and *jouissance*. This concept of the gift economy as feminine, disruptive and resistant to the commodifying impulse of capitalism has a suggestive significance for exploring the experimental modernist forms and aesthetics of Woolf's writing, which similarly privileges ambiguity, indeterminacy and inconclusiveness. It can be said to have a textual generosity in its richness, depth and associative connections, a syntactic fullness, created through the 'highly elliptical [sentence] structures . . . whose phrases and clauses, sutured by semicolons . . . allow an unbroken accretion or amplification of detail within the individual sentence' (Boone, 1998, 179). Joseph Allen Boone's comment on 'the ubiquitous use of present-tense participial phrases [which] generates forward motion' (179) is also in tune with the gift economy in which, as Lewis Hyde remarks, 'The only essential is this: *the gift must always move*', its purpose is not to 'stand

still . . . mark a boundary or resist momentum' but to 'keep(s) going' to ensure the circulation of gifts and the connections and bonds they create (4, Hyde's emphasis). In this sense, reciprocation of the gift or the passing of the gift to another recipient in a circulation of gift-giving is seen as positive.

The importance of the reciprocation of gifts as a means of creating and cementing social bonds is also evident in Woolf's own gift-giving practice. The social role the gift plays corresponds to the socialist dimension of Woolf's thinking, writing and political involvements. Woolf lived through a period of dramatic change in British history, in which Britain's international position as a political, economic and imperial power declined, especially after the First World War, and was displaced by the newly emerging powers of Germany and America. These international changes coincided with changes in the social, political and economic structures of British society, and with legislative, parliamentary and economic changes and improvements, as well as with the rise of the Labour Party. These caused rigid class and gender hierarchies to begin to shift (as Woolf records in her 1924 essay, 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown').[8] Although Woolf was highly conscious of her securely middle-class status, she was at times both uneasily self-conscious and superior about her class privilege – 'an uneasy woman of property' and 'a chameleon writer', as Alex Zwerdling observes (33). Although she criticised the class system in her writing, she was in no doubt that her class privilege and her inherited wealth were the key to her becoming a writer.[9] Honest enough to acknowledge that her lack of knowledge and understanding of working-class life and experience made her unfit to represent it, her unsympathetic and prejudiced views also surface in problematic and sometimes shocking ways. Yet, she was also a woman who throughout her life was engaged with organisations and causes the aims of which were to bring about social and political reforms. She participated in activities that Mauss would characterise as part of a gift economy – her work for the Workers Educational Association and for the Women's Co-operative Guild, for instance, as well as her giving of charity gifts, her letter writing and other support for various political groups at different times of her life.

Although the gift economy is evident in Woolf's earlier fiction, *The Voyage Out* and *Night and Day*, it is in her writing of the 1920s and 1930s that it becomes more prominent and more complexly connected to ideas about the monetary economy, as well as to her own contradictory relationship to the literary marketplace. As others have noted, Woolf's sense of the market economy was in some ways in tune with Keynes' ideas of the economy as a more fluid and shifting entity. There is a sense in her work of the aesthetic and erotic pleasures that commodity culture can engender and release, with the ever-changing flux of commodity spectacle stimulating both the imagination and desires and opening up new opportunities for women. The sense of endless economic flows and the abandonment of fixed reference points (such as the Gold Standard, which Keynes argued limited the economy) also

clearly correspond with Woolf's modernist aesthetics, modes of creativity and the politics of her writing. However, she was also aware of the ruthlessness that underlies this apparent democratisation of consumer pleasure and of the inequality of access to material comforts and luxury; as Leslie Hankins argues, Woolf's criticism is aimed at 'the [capitalist] power brokers behind the market' (Hankins, 2000, 23). Hankins locates Woolf on 'an ideological faultline' between the private sphere of artistic creation and the 'threatening energy of the streets' (2000, 18). This faultline has many manifestations, and usefully encapsulates Woolf's identity as a modernist writer, a businesswoman and a 'reader-consumer' of commodity culture.

Woolf was involved in the business of writing in several ways: as a reviewer and essay writer, as a novelist, and as the co-owner of the Hogarth Press. This participation in the literary market played a vital role in sustaining her materially, imaginatively, intellectually, psychologically and emotionally. As Lee argues, Woolf was 'intensely conscious of her value in the market-place' (1996, 558); her preoccupation with her earnings in her diaries may in part be related to her life-long anxieties about money (not having enough but not wanting too much). These anxieties stemmed, partly at least, from her father's attitude to and manipulative use of money,[10] but also from the close connection she perceived between sales figures and her reputation and success. Sales figures feature prominently in her diaries and seem to be a marker of her artistic, as well as her financial, achievement, so that her earnings act as an affirmation of her identity and success as a writer. Making money and attaining financial independence are also key aspects of her feminist politics. As Jane Garrity argues, '(f)or Woolf, making money is both an act of subversion – precisely because she's a woman – and a form of contamination, because it exposes the economic basis of her literary production' (2000, 197). She also knowingly exploits the literary market in several ways – by commanding increasingly high fees for her journalism as her reputation grew in the late 1920s, by submitting the same piece for publication more than once and so 'making a double income' (Lee, 1996, 559), and by and taking advantage of the opportunity offered to her by Dorothy Todd, the editor of *Vogue* in the early 1920s, not only to make money (her key aim in publishing in such venues), but also to enhance her reputation in a different sphere (Garrity, 2000, 195).[11]

Greater financial independence gave her purchasing power and access to the pleasures of commodity culture. She did learn to use her 'spending muscle', but she was also conscious of her preoccupation with money, and the pleasures of spending it were coloured by concern about her difficulty in spending 'without fuss or anxiety' (*D*3 212). Her diary repeatedly returns to these issues and to the distaste she feels for the commercial world even as she benefits from it.[12] Interestingly, Woolf's fiction represents very limited instances of spending, perhaps revealing this unease. As a highbrow writer, Woolf sustained an idealistic belief in the value of writing as a form of art

for its own sake, and she saw the dangers and detrimental effects of the commodification of writing. This ideologically conflicted position of participation in, yet distance from, the market was a tricky balance to sustain for Woolf, as she weighed up her money-making with a resistance to the capitalist ethos in order to maintain a sense of her writing as separate from other commodities. Woolf's co-ownership (with Leonard Woolf) of the Hogarth Press is one of the ways she achieved this balance. Another is her creation of what Hyde calls 'a protected gift-sphere in which the work is created' (275).

In some ways the Hogarth Press seemed to provide an alternative to capitalist enterprise[13] and provided a buffer protecting Woolf to some extent from the pressures and economic exigencies of the commodity market. The Press was a success and expanded. It became 'a serious business', as Woolf records in her diary (*D*2 307), and developed a significant commercial role that overlapped with the mainstream literary market. As Willison et al. argue, the Press's 'commercial component . . . led inevitably to a rapprochement with the general trade' (xv). However, this expansion was not driven by the capitalist urge to maximise profits[14] and the Press took financial risks to publish work that commercial publishers would not consider. This included material by new and working-class writers, writing that was experimental and politically unorthodox, as well as translations, notably of Freud's writings – a move that entailed a significant risk of prosecution given the shock and offence that Freud's ideas had the potential to create. It also sought to restore, for some of the time at least, a sense of a more holistic process of literary production, as Woolf was involved not only in the writing of her texts, but also in their printing, binding, marketing, packaging and posting – the elements that capitalist mass production isolates in the production of alienable commodities exchanged in an impersonal market.

The Press was also part of the changing literary market in which modernist art was perceived not merely as an object of simple and immediate mass consumption, but rather as 'a rarity' with value as an investment (Rainey, 1999, 43). The Woolfs' decision to reprint 'Kew Gardens' in 1927 in a limited edition format was, according to Staveley (2003), motivated by the temptation of capitalising on Woolf's growing status and maintaining some control over her work, as well as by making a profit in this niche market in which her work, carefully produced to look expensive, was marketed as a collectible. Willison et al. also argue that the Press actually facilitated the entry of modernism into the more general literary marketplace and contributed to 'the eventual reception of modernism in Britain and America in the late 1920s and 1930s which had been initiated by Pound and Ford' (xv). The success of the Hogarth 'Uniform Editions' of Woolf's novels (begun in 1929) not only made her writing more affordable to the common reader, ('reaching that wide public audience of common readers, which she found so necessary', Snaith, 2000, 45), but this publication of inexpensive editions 'staked a claim for Virginia Woolf's commercial value and . . . for the lasting value of