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Woolf's Weighty Gifts: The Measure of Modernist Autonomy

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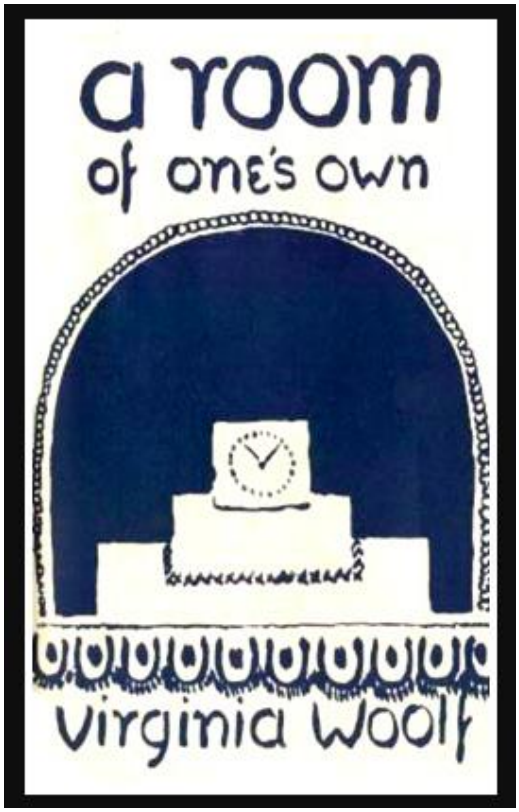
Abstract:
This paper argues that Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) provides a critical counterpoint to a cluster of recent discourses on the gift, autonomy, and the changing nature of labor in the contemporary creative economy. From Lewis Hyde's best-selling *The Gift* to neo-Marxist accounts of post-Fordism, these discourses routinely adopt modernist notions of autonomy in order to characterize creative labor today. Woolf's feminist vision of autonomy in *A Room of One's Own* at once dovetails with and complicates these discourses. In suggesting that feminine creative power, or "gifts," both are and are not measurable by a monetary standard, she reinforces a familiar tension between gifts and commodities. But in her attentiveness to the material conditions of creativity, she also refuses to let the ideal of autonomy become an alibi for precarity, as is so often the case with feminized labor in our own creative economy. Ultimately, I argue that *A Room of One's Own* reads as notes toward the possibility of a measure of the value of the gift as a gift—a measure that need not come at the expense of economic equality.

Keywords: Gifts, Gift economy, austerity, introduction

> I do not believe that gifts, whether of mind or character, can be weighed like sugar and butter.
>
> -Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

In her landmark 1929 work of feminist literary criticism, *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf posits a familiar opposition between gifts and commodities. Commodities "can be weighed like sugar and butter"; that is to say, they can be measured, in this case by both metric and monetary standards (105). By contrast, creative abilities, or "gifts," are immaterial, their value immeasurable. Of course, the fact that talents, or gifts, cannot be measured does not keep people from engaging in the "pastime of measuring" them—for example, by judging whether a book is "great" or "worthless" (106). Male academics in particular, Woolf argues, have expended a suspicious amount of energy comparing the respective "merits of the sexes," repeatedly insisting on the inferiority of women's gifts "a little too emphatically" (105, 34). Unlike her professorial counterparts, Woolf refuses to participate in the "pitting of sex against sex" (106). She does, however, pit members of the same sex against one another when she compares the merits of Charlotte Brontë and Jane Austen as writers. Brontë, Woolf claims, "had more genius" than Austen, but Austen had an advantage: "Her gift and her circumstances matched each other completely" (69, 68). Yet Brontë's gift exceeded her circumstances; *Jane Eyre* might have been a better book had Brontë "possessed say three hundred a year" (70). It would thus seem that gifts can in fact be weighed alongside the primary two "material things" at stake in Woolf's 1929 essay—not sugar and butter but rather money and space (106). While the gift's worth may be immeasurable, at least in theory, the cost of its cultivation is quite calculable and indeed *must* be calculated if women are ever to have the chance to express their genius in full. Woolf's own calculation is well-known: in 1920s England, the average cost for a woman to sustain a creative existence is five hundred pounds per year and a room of one's own.



[Fig. 1: First Edition cover of *A Room of One's Own* by Vanessa Bell]

This essay brings together a cluster of related discourses about the gift, creativity, and the changing nature of labor in order to suggest that *A Room of One's Own* dovetails with, and opens up ways to think through, some of the paradoxes of our contemporary creative economy. In using the term "creative economy," I mean to register not only the work undertaken by professional artists but also the way in which, as Sarah Brouillette puts it in *Literature and the Creative Economy*, "more work has become comparable to artists' work" in recent years (34). Reflecting on the surprising affinities between neoliberal and neo-Marxist accounts of contemporary work, Brouillette argues that "both camps imagine creativity as located within individuals' uncontainable experimental energies and self-expressive capacities" (34). Both camps, in other words, imagine that creativity is autonomous. In the case of neo-Marxists such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Empire*, this creative freedom is understood in positive and negative terms. It is a freedom *to* create, a collective power to act. Yet, even more fundamentally, it is a freedom *from* transcendental standards. Being autonomous primarily means being "autonomous from any external regime of measure"—above all because such measures no longer exist (357).

[Fig. 2: Photograph of Woolf by George Charles Beresford]

For Hardt and Negri, contemporary labor-power occupies a “non-place” with respect to capital. This non-place is paradoxical, to say the least. While they will describe it as “outside measure” it is not outside capital per se (357). On the contrary, the language of “non-place” in part registers the absence of any outside of capital under the conditions of postmodernization (e.g., globalization, post-Fordism, just-in-time manufacturing, the information economy, and the growth of the service sector). As Negri elsewhere argues, in the global capitalist economy, even those values that once emerged outside the capitalist regime—e.g., the values generated by cooperation, social reproduction, political struggle, and affective labor—are now “immediately recuperated and mobilized” within it (82). Thus, Hardt and Negri make clear that labor-power is still subject to capitalist control; value is still “powerful and ubiquitous”—and perhaps all the more so in the absence of any universal measure (356). The key point for Hardt and Negri is that, while labor-power may still be controlled and treated as if it were measurable, it is, at base, “beyond measure”: the “vitality of the productive context” remains immeasurable and uncontrollable—a “productive excess” that continually “creates and re-creates the world in its entirety” from below (357).

Accounts of the new nature of labor have received important critiques. Brouillette, for example, further argues in the same study that, despite their Marxist roots, autonomists adopt an “ahistorical conception of creativity as the natural expression of an innate opposition to routine”

(6). Although this conception is “ahistorical,” the conception itself has a history in the fields of literature and aesthetics—one that we have already glimpsed in Woolf’s modernist conception of creativity as an immeasurable gift. In his account of the newfound centrality of immaterial labor, Maurizio Lazzarato gestures toward this history when he argues that immaterial labor today can best be understood according to an “aesthetic model” (142-43). Like aesthetic production, immaterial production entails a communicative, creative relationship between the producer-author and the consumer-audience. And, like works of art, immaterial commodities are not destroyed by use but rather generate an immersive environment or experience, transforming the consumer-audience. But the comparison holds little historical weight for Lazzarato. The aesthetic model ends up being an arbitrary precursor of a now generalized form of immaterial labor. Rather than identify the field of aesthetics as a source of the idea of labor-power’s “*radical autonomy*,” Lazzarato treats this field as evidence of the transcendental truth of labor-power’s autonomy (144, italics in original).

In looking back to Woolf’s modernist aesthetics in *A Room of One’s Own*, I in part mean to further recuperate the aesthetic history of this idea of autonomy. Yet I also mean to join recent scholars of modernism such as Andrew Goldstone and Peter Killaney in rewriting this history, i.e. to complicate still dominant assumptions about the nature of autonomy in the eyes of modernist writers and artists. Modernism tends to be upheld as the last bastion of an ideal of aesthetic autonomy that the universalization of capital has made both ever more imperative and increasingly impossible to sustain. Thus, Brouillette, in an essay published on *nonsite.org*, argues that, far from being a “mere relic of [. . .] modernism,” an ideal of autonomy is “especially necessary today” precisely because autonomy seems to have been so thoroughly co-opted by capitalist production—because the values of creative freedom, resistance to routine, doing what one loves and so on have been made to serve neoliberal “political and economic uses” (“Academic Labor”). While I similarly want to claim that Woolf’s vision of autonomy has critical value for us, her readers in the twenty-first century, I also want to suggest that its value derives from the way in which Woolf’s work breaks with standard accounts of modernist autonomy. In another essay on *nonsite.org*, Nicholas Brown echoes earlier Marxist critics in defining modernist autonomy as “hostility to the market.” Such hostility can be felt in Woolf’s belief in the limits of capitalist metrics in *A Room of One’s Own*. But this belief also stands in tension with what I have elsewhere referred to as Woolf’s materialism—her thoughtfulness about the material conditions of intellectual and creative freedom, especially for women (“Lean Back” 155-56). For Woolf, gifts, as a kind of labor-power, are autonomous or, as Hardt and Negri might say, beyond measure. But the bottom line remains that exercising one’s gift, putting it to work, depends on having one’s own money and space—two things that are entirely measurable and which women have traditionally lacked. Thus, while autonomy, as a creative praxis, may entail all manner of feelings about the market, hostile or otherwise, autonomy remains, at base, inseparable from the market. Simply put, there is no hope of rising above material things without material things.

Given her preoccupation with such things, Woolf is, admittedly, not the most obvious candidate for an attempt to recuperate modernist aesthetics for progressive politics. After all, Woolf’s materialism could also take the form of a troubling bourgeois class bias. Although some feminist

scholars have been eager to emphasize Woolf's socialism, Woolf wrote quite openly of feeling "irretrievably cut off" from working-class women by dint of her relative economic comfort in "Memories of a Working Women's Guild," her reflections on the 1913 Women's Co-operative Guild Congress (178). As Mark Hussey has argued, Woolf maintained across texts that "one class is unknowable by another" (22). In *A Room of One's Own*, her sense of class division can be felt in her devaluation of some gifts' expression. At times, it is as if the only gifts that count as gifts are those that are backed by adequate capital—i.e. as if the only true gifts are those that belong to the middle class. Woolf's speaker, Mary, speculates that, during the Elizabethan period, women and members of the working classes must have possessed "genius of a sort"—the modifier, *of a sort*, exemplifying the highbrow tone that would help to win Woolf a longstanding reputation as a Bloomsbury snob (48). But without the proper means to express it, such genius, whatever its sort, could never be realized. What we find in the history books is not gifts of genius per se but the gift's dangerous double—the poison that the French sociologist Marcel Mauss claimed gifts "can always become" if not kept in circulation ("Gift, Gift" 30). Mary imagines that, when we read of some madwoman or witch, we catch a glimpse of "a lost novelist, a suppressed poet"—a woman who might have been creative but was instead "crazed with the torture that her gift had put her to" (49). Without the conditions necessary to be expressed as gifts, gifts such as those of Shakespeare's imaginary sister, Judith, become their opposite—a fatal curse.

The fact that Woolf was, as she was of most everything, exhaustingly self-aware of her snobbishness and elitism, does not diminish her potential offensiveness. Nevertheless, we might take a cue from her biographer Hermione Lee's claim that such offensiveness has an "essential, even a desirable role in her work" (145). If unsettling, Woolf's sense of an impenetrable class division and especially her criticism of under-funded feminine gifts also have the advantage of never allowing us to ignore the realities of economic inequality. In *A Room of One's Own*, the fact that women "have always been poor" is a problem that can be remedied by only material means (108). Even if we grant that money and space have symbolic meanings—"that five hundred a year stands for the power to contemplate, that a lock on the door means the power to think for oneself"—they are also to be understood quite literally (106). Material things are above all important *as* material things. This means moreover that economic inequality cannot be solved on symbolic grounds. In other words, the material need for redistribution cannot be answered by more liberal and generous symbolic recognition of poor women's gifts.

In thus reflecting on the intersection of class and gender, Woolf, it seems to me, speaks to the gendered nature of precarity in our own contemporary creativity economy. As feminist scholars such as Angela McRobbie have stressed, the shift to post-Fordism coincided with the "flow of women into work" and the feminization of labor more broadly amid the erosion of conventionally gendered boundaries between life and work, production and reproduction, and immaterial and material labor (67). Feminization and flexibilization have gone hand in hand. To some degree, Woolf's contribution to critiques of this economy is quite simple. In short, she refuses to treat poverty—and specifically feminine poverty—as a virtue in its own right. In so doing, she offers a crucial counterpoint to current discourses of autonomy, particularly Lewis Hyde's incredibly popular account of the so-called commerce of the creative spirit in *The Gift*. Hyde's well-known

argument is that works of art exist in two economies, "a market economy and a gift economy" (xvi). Modernism—and particularly modernist writing by men—is exemplary of modern art's duality for Hyde. He devotes a significant portion of his study to discussion of Ezra Pound and opens with an epigraph from Joseph Conrad's preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* in which Conrad claims that art speaks to that part of us "which is a gift and not an acquisition" (quoted in Hyde xv). Lee Konstantinou has recently argued that Hyde's idealization of the gifted artist exemplifies the discourse of creativity mapped out by Brouillette. Konstantinou suggests that, in assuring artists that their work continues to have the status of a gift even if it is also treated like a commodity, Hyde "offers a palliative for the contemporary author or creative worker, an imaginative renegotiation of her relationship to the actual conditions of her labor" (128). In other words, Hyde enables the creative worker to imagine that she is not a "mere worker" but rather an autonomous creator fulfilling her ambition to Do What She Loves (Konstantinou 132).

What concerns me here is the other side of this equation—not the palliative Hyde offers to the potential sell-out but rather the cold comfort he gives to the starving artist in an era when so many workers are like artists. While Hyde is careful in *The Gift* not to, in his words, "romanticize the poverty of the artist," his study is routinely invoked in debates over what is or ought to be the appropriate payment for writing in the age of the Internet (365). In "The Free and the Antifree," an editorial for a recent issue of *n+1* on the topic of survival, the Editors note that Hyde's *The Gift* "is often cited as an argument against payment for writing." Importantly, the Editors further suggest that this argument is most often made by writers with income from some other source, such as a full-time tenure-track or tenured faculty position: "'Art is a gift,' these people say, as they pick up their paychecks from Princeton or Iowa or Columbia." In an op-ed for *The New York Times*, the cartoonist Tim Kreider also cites Hyde, but in order to protest non-payment. Kreider writes, "I have read Lewis Hyde's *The Gift*, and participated in a gift economy for 20 years [. . .] Not getting paid for things in your 20s is glumly expected, even sort of cool; not getting paid in your 40s, when your back is starting to hurt and you are still sleeping on a futon, considerably less so" ("Slaves of the Internet"). Ultimately, the prestige of coolness pales alongside the contingency and under-compensation of the gig economy.

To be sure, our own digital age is a far cry from the literary landscape of *A Room of One's Own*. In the latter, Woolf's speaker imagines the world indifferently telling men of genius, "Write if you choose," while contemptuously asking women, "What's the good of your writing?" (52). By contrast, the digital world of social-media oversharing, preference-tracking, and crowdsourced content production seems to issue a universal imperative: Write! Not only that but create, share—*give!* And better yet: give it away for free! While Woolf does not provide anything like a solution to this phenomenon, the fact that she never lets the ideal of aesthetic autonomy become an alibi for the treatment of creativity as if it were a free gift remains instructive, particularly at a moment when the autonomy we so often idealize lends itself to a justification for austerity and precarity. As is the case with other discourses of autonomy, Woolf's essay leaves us with a paradox: creativity may be both a measurable commodity and an immeasurable gift. But in contrast to Hyde's study and especially to the reception of Hyde's study, in Woolf's writing, the opposition between gift economies and money economies cannot be reduced to an

opposition between unpaid labor and paid labor. Whereas for Hyde, in *The Gift*, "a work of art can survive without the market," the opposite is the case for Woolf (xvi). She insists that there is no gift without money to support its expression.

Yet Woolf also begins to imagine the possibility of a gift that would be measurable by a means other than money. There is a glimpse of this possibility even in my epigraph. In claiming that gifts cannot be weighed *like* sugar and butter, Woolf suggests that they might be weighed *like* something else. It is in courting this ambiguous something—in imagining that gifts might be measured differently—that Woolf offers a second contribution to current discourses on autonomy. In Brouillette's work in particular, we find a striking return to the rhetoric of measure abandoned by Hardt and Negri. Stressing the need to counter neoliberalism's own celebration—and exploitation—of autonomy, she argues that the "idea of autonomy should be retained not under the sign of personal freedom to invent, but rather as a *measure* of a persistent consciousness of the limits of capitalist markets and of the contradictory ways in which opposition to capital can be useful to it" ("Academic Labor," emphasis added). Realization of this idea, or "autonomization," is then defined as "the struggle to develop and secure the means for articulations of creativity that are separable from capital *in some authentic measure*" (emphasis added). Autonomy, in each case, is itself a form of measure, albeit a highly paradoxical one: autonomy is the measure of the real possibility of—and the struggle for—a break with capitalist regimes of measure. Implicit though Brouillette's departure from autonomist rhetoric of immeasurability may be, her formulation of autonomy as a measure that has not yet been realized resonates with Woolf's own repeated insistence that we have not yet seen, and so cannot yet account for, the full breadth of women's creative gifts.

Feminine gifts, Woolf suggests in *A Room of One's Own*, are not buried in the historical archive so much as they have yet to come into existence. What has kept feminine gifts from finding full expression is a hierarchical sexual division of labor—a division that Woolf suggests is slowly beginning to break down. Observing the various men (a coal-heaver, a house-painter) and women (a nursemaid, a shopkeeper) at work in her neighborhood, Woolf's narrator, Mary, notes the increased difficulty of judging the "comparative values" of masculine and feminine occupations:

> I thought how much harder it is now than it must have been even a century ago to say which of these employments is the higher, the more necessary. Is it better to be a coal-heaver or a nursemaid; is the charwoman who has brought up eight children of less value to the world than the barrister who had made a hundred thousand pounds? (39-40)

Mary concludes that such questions are "useless to ask" for two very different reasons (40). On the one hand, she claims, standards of measure change, which means the "values of charwomen and lawyers rise and fall from decade to decade" (40). On the other, an occupation is an expression of one's gift. And, since it is impossible to "state the value of any one gift at the moment," it stands to reason that "we have no rods with which to measure [the values of different occupations] even as they are at the moment" (40). The implication is again that gifts

are immeasurable, at least by a monetary standard. Yet in repeatedly suggesting that we have no standard of measure "at the moment," Mary also suggests that gifts might be measured by a different standard. In other words, the point is not that gifts cannot be measured at all but that we simply have no rod adequate to the task of measuring the unique value of gifts *as* gifts right now.

A Room of One's Own further suggests that our basic understanding of gifts is constrained by the persistent sexual division of labor. The problem is not just that different occupations are gendered either feminine or masculine and so women's gifts and men's gifts have been confined to this or that form of work. The problem is also that being a woman or being a man is itself a form of work. Women's work is above all the work entailed in being a woman, i.e. a member of the "protected sex" (40). In the wake of this problem, Mary looks forward to a time not only when women can pursue any occupation but also when womanhood itself will have "ceased to be a protected occupation"—a time when women no longer have to waste their gifts on merely being women (40). In other words, she looks forward to a phantasmatic future when the creative power of men and the creative power of women no longer appear to be so different and gifts could finally be measured by a standard other than gender.

At the end of her essay, Woolf sketches one form of work toward which women's gifts might be directed until that day comes. Having taken over the narration from the fictive "Mary," Woolf concludes by again reflecting on the imaginary figure of Shakespeare's sister, Judith, who never had a chance to realize her own literary gifts. According to Woolf, Judith "still lives," but is in need of a gift from the audience in order to be "born again" (113, 114). The gift that we have the "power to give her" is a gift of work: "I maintain that she would come if we worked for her, and that so to work, even in poverty and obscurity, is worth while" (113, 114). *Even* in poverty and obscurity—but not necessarily. The distinction is important, for it marks Woolf's resistance to fetishizing poverty as proof of one's autonomy even as she maintains that feminine work is "worth while" and has a value beyond its market value.

Gayatri Spivak has also turned to the final lines of *A Room of One's Own* to think through the future of one field of immaterial labor in particular—the discipline of comparative literature. In *Death of a Discipline*, Spivak argues that Woolf's call to her female audience to work even in poverty marks a departure from her foregoing argument about the importance of having money and a room of one's own. Drawing a comparison between the work for which Woolf calls and her own activist "work outside salaried work" in the Global South, Spivak suggests that the latter might serve as a model for a "new Comparative Literature" (35). Given that Woolf wrote for money and that both she and *Room*'s narrator were beneficiaries of inheritances from their aunts, I am not convinced that it is quite so easy to draw a clear distinction between the two parts of the essay—between Mary's call for money and a room of one's own, on the one hand, and Woolf's call for what may be unpaid work, on the other. Still, I want to conclude by echoing Spivak's suggestion that Woolf's essay points toward a kind of work in the humanities that might supplement—in the Derridean sense of "fill a hole in as well as add to"—the "authority of the social sciences" (42).

More specifically, given my focus on gifts, I want to suggest that Woolf provides a literary and gendered counterpoint to the sociology of Mauss, whose 1925 essay on the gift, *Essai sur le don*, is the starting point for most all gift theory since. Intriguingly, Mauss makes an appearance in Negri's discussion of the transformation of labor. Negri suggests that recent philosophical interest in "Mauss's *Sociology of the Gift* [*sic*] over Max Weber's *Economy and Society*" is an index of the fact that, with the growth of affective labor, "*value* is now an *investment of desire*" (87, emphasis in original). The implication is that Mauss's theory of gift economies is at base a theory of libidinal economies. But gift economies were never just about desire for Mauss. Ultimately, they were about what we would now call a social safety net. At the end of his essay, Mauss identifies the rise of the nascent welfare state across Western Europe with a "return" to an ethos of the gift (65-71). Whereas later gift theorists such as Jacques Godbout and Alain Caillé in *The World of the Gift* have insisted that "the state system is not a system of the gift," Mauss was invested in wedding institutions of the state, the gift, and even the nominal enemy of modernism, the market (59).

Writing as an outsider to academia, with a limited literary tradition behind her, the Woolf of *A Room of One's Own* is also invested in institution building. At the end of the essay, she looks toward the possibility of a collectivity of women working in the name of a "common life" beyond the feminized domestic space of the "common sitting-room" (113-14). Earlier we are told, "There is no mark on the wall to measure the precise height of women"—yet this is in part because "the very walls are permeated by their creative force" (85, 87). This force has since been unleashed into the economy—including, of course, the creative space of the college humanities classroom, dominated as it now is by contingent, adjunct labor. Nevertheless, it remains the case that we lack, as Brouillette puts it, an "authentic measure" of the autonomy of such labor. In the wake of this problem and the feminization of labor more broadly, Woolf invites us, her future readers, to measure autonomy in terms of our collective resistance to letting the notion of a distinctly feminine gift become an excuse for economic inequality. Autonomy, in this instance, would be characterized by a common desire to work toward that most paradoxical of creations—a new tradition, one that may not always be hostile to the market, but which might nevertheless break the exploitative cycle of creative destruction that valorizes innovation at an inhumane cost. Far from having been exhausted by the postmodern creative economy, such a desire still seeks, to quote Woolf once more, "[to] harness itself to pens and brushes and business and politics"—and to do so in full measure (87).

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Figures

Figure 1: Bell, Vanessa. First Edition cover of *A Room of One's Own* by Vanessa Bell. Wikipedia.org. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Room_of_One%27s_Own

Figure 2: Beresford, George Charles. Portrait of Virginia Woolf. Wikimedia Commons. www.commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:George_Charles_Beresford_-_Virginia_Woolf_in_1902_-_Restoration.jpg

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