

**EWA PŁONOWSKA ZIAREK (2012) *FEMINIST
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The decisive aspect of heteronomous autonomy, ignored by Adorno, is that the inaugural force of women's political revolt might enable the transformation of the historical impossibility of women's writing into its future possibility.
(Ziarek, 2012: 50)

The central concern of *Feminist Aesthetics and the Politics of Modernism* is one of (im)possibilities, or rather, of transforming impossibilities into possibilities. Confronting the brutal opposition faced by black and women modern writers – what Ewa Ziarek describes as the 'haunting history of destruction and the ongoing exclusion of women from politics and literary production' (5) – this groundbreaking work asks how that which has been so violently erased from history might be 'transformed into the inauguration of new possibilities of writing, sexuality, and becoming' (15). Identifying writers who explore the 'impossible possibility' (95) of translating a legacy of destruction into creativity and freedom, Ziarek's analysis focuses on the writing of Virginia Woolf and Nella Larsen in order to argue that the innovative literary forms of modernism open up ways of transforming a history of loss and separation into new possibilities of female art and being. Drawing on work by Adorno, Arendt, Agamben, Felski, Freud, Hegel, Kristeva and Marx, to name just a few, this rich, incisive and provocative text combines Ziarek's considerable expertise in modernism, critical theory, politics, gender and race in the service of reconfiguring our understanding of feminist aesthetics.

Even before her discussion of Woolf and Larsen begins, however, Ziarek confronts the 'impossibility' posed by critic Rita Felski in *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change*. Here, Felski argues that the very notion of feminist aesthetics is

problematic, asserting that it is ‘impossible to speak of “masculine” and “feminine” in any meaningful sense in the formal analysis of texts’ (1989: 2). She insists that the political value of texts within a feminist framework can only be measured by considering their social and historical context. Although Ziarek recognises Felski’s concerns about ‘ascribing gendered meanings to subversive aesthetic forms’, she stresses the importance of not falling into the ‘trap’ of ‘either apolitical formalism or the political overcoming of aesthetics’ (11). In other words, Ziarek’s theorisation takes into account the aesthetic specificity of texts produced by black and women modern writers *within* the context of material, political and historical conditions.

Central to the development of her argument is Theodor Adorno’s interest in the contradictory relationship between modern literature and its social material conditions – his theory of the ‘heteronomous autonomy’ of art. Highlighting art’s ‘double character as both autonomous and *fait social*’ in *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno insists that art that is ‘perceived strictly aesthetically is art aesthetically misperceived’ (1997: 7). He argues instead that art ‘originates in history and then is separated from it’; it is ‘social not only because of its mode of production’, but ‘becomes social by its opposition to society’ (6, 228, 296). For Ziarek, Adorno’s reading offers a possibility of feminist aesthetics because it allows her to examine art within the politics of capital ‘without negating its aesthetic specificity – that is, its autonomy’ (13). However, while Ziarek finds Adorno’s account of the contradictory relation between modern artistic practice and politics crucial to her rethinking of aesthetic theory, she challenges his focus on white male artists, arguing that his failure to account for gender and race reproduces patriarchal constructions of the feminine. Ziarek, then, moves beyond the limitations of Adorno’s aesthetic theory. Reformulating the heteronomous autonomy of art in the context of black and women writers, she insists that race and gender are ‘crucial, if heteronomous, categories of modern aesthetics’ (13). Notwithstanding the very different aesthetic, social, national and political contexts of the writers she examines, this renegotiation of Adorno’s theory enables her to raise her central concern: ‘how the haunting history of destruction and the ongoing exclusion of women from politics and literary production can be transformed into inaugural possibilities of writing and action’ (5).

Throughout *Feminist Aesthetics and the Politics of Modernism*, Ziarek returns to these notions of possibility and transformation: she is interested in thinking through the ways that what has been violently

erased or destroyed from women's writing and politics might be 'aesthetically transformed into new, multiple possibilities of what literature and femininity might mean and might become' (7). And in order for this transformation to take place, one must bear witness to the destruction and exclusion of black female subjects, as well as honour the work of those who seek to challenge history. Writing of the 'pressure of dumbness' (2) inflicted upon women, she considers unrecorded lives and destroyed bodies, examining the tension between muteness and literary innovation, and asking what aesthetic possibilities might emerge from the contradictory relation between melancholic impasse and transformative action. Here, she highlights a fragile convergence between melancholia, revolution and freedom, drawing together work by Sigmund Freud, Judith Butler, Julia Kristeva and Étienne Balibar. Of particular interest is the way that she builds on psychoanalytic theories of revolution, namely Kristeva's maternal genealogy of history, arguing that at each subsequent loss – including the loss of freedom – the originary crisis of separation from the maternal is reactivated. Another implication of Kristeva's work for Ziarek is her focus on the signifying capacity of language. Melancholia, she argues, denies the metaphoric transfer of affect into language and results in the disavowal of the signifier (68). As a result of this failure of metaphor to transform suffering into meaning, melancholic language is killed off, effectively confining wounded subjects to mute suffering and, ultimately, to social death. This also disintegrates the very possibility of political action. Crucially, however, Ziarek develops her argument by demonstrating that melancholia is a hybrid concept: on the one hand, it signifies a personal and political impasse; but on the other, it responds to a crisis of literary practice. Literary form, in other words, becomes the ground upon which repression, exclusion and violence are inscribed; by incorporating separation and loss into its very structure, the work of art bears witness to its devastating history. Ziarek's unique contribution here is to approach melancholia in women's writing by stressing the migrations of pain between subjects and objects, political oppression and literary practice, language and affect. Reading the inscription of women's historical struggle in the structure of the text itself, she explores the relationship between literary form and affect, without disavowing the difference. She argues that new possibilities of writing demand the development of new structures, and examines the ways in which damage that is inflicted upon bodies might be related to experimental literary forms.

Ziarek is not, however, interested in formal experimentation for experimentation's sake. She emphasises the text's transformative political as well as aesthetic force. In her bid to present the reader with a theory of feminist aesthetics within its social and historical context, Ziarek turns to the militant suffrage movement in Britain (1903-1914). For the most part, she argues, the suffrage movement has been marginalised in both political and aesthetic theories of modernity, marking a 'failure of thinking and remembrance' (20). Raising new questions, however, she addresses the suffragettes' redefinition of the right to vote as the right to revolt. Central to this is her reading of Emmeline Pankhurst's reinterpretation of the word 'militancy', which, she points out, means not only 'a state of being militant, warfare', but also 'to stand opposed, or to act in opposition' (33-34). Ziarek concludes that 'in these twists and turns of various definitions, the word *militancy* itself becomes militant, indeterminate, giving rise to new conflicting interpretations' (34). Notwithstanding the limitations of suffrage militancy, she argues that as well as signifying violent opposition, the transformative force of militancy is also a 'new event, the inaugural act of revolutionary struggle' (34). Distinguishing between negative freedom – the destruction of oppressive gender structures – and positive freedom – the creation of new gender relations – Ziarek rethinks Adorno 'beyond the negative' (48) and highlights the possibility of the inaugural force of the revolutionary act and the way that it introduces new signifiers of femininity. This reading of inaugural possibility plays on Hannah Arendt's conceptualisation of the 'entirely new' in *On Revolution* (1990: 37). Stressing the convergence of revolution with freedom, novelty and participation in a transformative, creative praxis, Ziarek concludes that the experimental character of women's modernism might signify in entirely new ways.

In the remainder of *Feminist Aesthetics and the Politics of Modernism*, Ziarek examines the process by which two writers experiencing quite different national, political, racial and cultural contexts – Virginia Woolf and Nella Larsen – confront the question of transforming gender domination into its revolutionary possibility. Focusing on *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *A Room of One's Own* (1929) by Woolf and *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929) by Larsen, her main objective is to consider how literary innovation can emerge from the suffering and exclusion faced by women and the ways in which this aesthetic novelty is intertwined with the inaugural force of political freedom. In the case of Woolf, she asks how melancholia can be reworked in the composition of *To the Lighthouse*. Analysing Lily

Briscoe's desire for a new language of painting, Ziarek suggests that Woolf's text incorporates a 'line of division' or connection of opposites into its very structure. She points out that, considering the difficulty she experiences in finishing her painting so as to incorporate the violence inflicted upon women's art, Lily looked at her canvas and "'drew a line there, in the center. It was done; it was finished'" (Woolf, 1981b: 208-209, cited in Ziarek, 2012: 76). Arguing that Lily's line both unifies and divides, Ziarek suggests that the 'razor blade' incision 'transforms the violence of that cut into a concluding brushstroke' (76). Remarking on the ambiguity of this ending, which also 'announces the end of women's art', she explains that the 'doubling and internal division marked by the semicolon in the phrase – "it was done; it was finished" – implies both the completion of female art and the persisting threat of its destruction' (76-77). Ziarek thus demonstrates that dissonance, like the cut, is inscribed in the novel at the level of form. She argues that *To the Lighthouse* negates structures of domination, incorporates revolution into its composition, and offers alternative modes of freedom and possibility, effectively comparing the militant suffrage movement with modernism's revolutionary rhetoric (112). As Woolf testifies of her own writing in *A Room of One's Own*, this sort of experimentation 'shifts the emphasis from the representation of ideological "facts" to the exploration of what is excluded from history and the creation of new possibilities in "fiction"' (103).

The attention to revolutionary form in fiction is also embedded in her examination of Nella Larsen's work. Moving from the white, middle class modernism of Woolf to the Harlem Renaissance, Ziarek argues that Larsen's 'experimental black modernism transforms the performative violence of discourse in order to reclaim the foreclosed possibilities of inauguration – the conditions of a black female renaissance as such' (194). In Larsen's first novel, *Quicksand*, this is evident when the heroine Helga Crane experiences a suffocating sensation that reenacts the violence of lynching. For Ziarek, Larsen's writing asks:

How is it possible to write from within such suffocation? How is it possible to transfer, or transpose, that sensation that destroys not only subjective expression but also language itself and its musicality into writing? How can the novel inscribe the trace of that violence and death buried in the female mouth into its own language?
(77)

In her second novel, *Passing*, 'death buried in the female mouth' is replayed, according to Ziarek, through the shredding of the letter by Clare Kendry, the black writer who is passing as white (77). She refers to the scene when the female protagonist, Irene, tears to pieces a letter from her lover, Clare, pointing out that this foretells Clare's own death. Ziarek focuses on the destruction of this letter rather than on Clare's accident, citing: "With an [un]usual (*sic*) methodicalness she tore the offending letter into tiny ragged squares.... The destruction completed ... she dropped them over the railing and watched them scatter" (Larsen 1986: 178; cited in Ziarek, 2012: 78). Ziarek goes on to argue:

This tearing apart and scattering of the insurgent black text and the desiring female body are inscribed in the composition of Larsen's novel through the proliferation of dashes, ellipses, silences, unexpected abrupt endings, and, finally, through the exclusion and scattering of Clare's letters, which prefigures the violent death of the letter writer herself. (78)

Ziarek states: 'Such a formal struggle by literary means – scattering, fragmentation, ellipsis, illegibility – “externalizes” the subjective incorporations of political conflicts and transforms them into formal construction' (79). Here, by paying attention to its grammar and syntax, Ziarek deftly shows the ways that *Passing* 'manifest[s] on the level of its form the discord between meaning and non-meaning, death and re-naissance' (79). It is worth noting, however, that Ziarek's argument might be construed as somewhat misleading here, for the ellipses in the description of the letter's destruction cited above are not in fact Larsen's: they are Ziarek's own. Despite this, in Part III of *Feminist Aesthetics and the Politics of Modernism*, Ziarek continues with an astute and convincing analysis of the letter in Larsen's work, arguing that it is 'deployed in a double sense: first, as the enigmatic trope of nonsignifiable violence, freedom, and desire and, second, as an intimation of a literary praxis exceeding the existing conditions of reception and interpretation' (201). Larsen's use of the letter is particularly interesting, Ziarek points out, considering her own critical contribution to the discussion of black aesthetics, which appeared in the form of a letter written in defense of experimental black writing. Larsen's own letter responded to a poor review by Frank Horne of *Flight* (1926), a novel by her friend Walter White. Ziarek explains that Larsen's letter was solicited by

the editor of *Opportunity*, Charles S. Johnson, and strongly objected to the reviewer's 'aesthetic "blindness"' (Larsen, 2007: 159; cited in Ziarek, 2012: 201). In his review, Horne "'grumbles about 'lack of clarity'" and "faulty sentence structure"' (Larsen, 2007: 160; cited in Ziarek, 2012: 202), complaining of its failure to achieve narrative completion. Larsen, however, insists that the reviewer is ignorant of the novel's linguistic and syntactic complexity, pointing out that texts by writers such as Galsworthy, Conrad and Proust place similar demands on their readers, and in so doing, offer vast revolutionary potential.

Returning to the ambiguity of the letter within Larsen's fiction, Ziarek moves on to the trope of enigma (199). She refers repeatedly to the 'enigmatic scrawl' and to the 'impossible enigma of writing' (204), suggesting that in Larsen's story, 'The Wrong Man', the letters 'neither reveal the secrets of the dead nor guard their silence, but take us to "the edge of nowhere," to an encounter with the *impossible* – a word that recurs repeatedly in the story' (Larsen, 1992: 5-6; cited in Ziarek, 2012: 204). Here, we return once again to the trope of (im)possibility, demonstrating that the impossible enigma of writing is in fact crucial to the inauguration of new possibilities for femininity. Drawing on Hegel's (1975) concept of enigma and Claudia Tate's (1980) account of 'enigmatic surplus', Ziarek discusses the lack of clarity, abrupt endings, refusal of closure, and transgressive laughter in Larsen's work (219). But whereas foreignness and alterity are considered by Hegel as a 'defect', Ziarek considers them 'a unique accomplishment of the work of art' (183), 'reclaim[ing] enigma as a crucial feature of modernist art and literature' and arguing that it is in fact 'a paradoxical achievement of women's modernism, which preserves the foreignness of materiality within literary form' (184). For Ziarek, Larsen's primary accomplishment is this enigmatic surplus, resulting in the 'transformation of impossible destruction into an aesthetic possibility, which demonstrates that "anything can happen," anything can come to pass' (227).

In conclusion, then, through her integration of aesthetic and political theory, Ziarek shows us that a violent history of loss and exclusion might be 'aesthetically transformed into new, multiple possibilities of what literature and femininity might mean and might become' (7). However, she makes clear that 'as the tension between melancholic modernism, bearing witness to the destruction of women's artistic capacities, and the invention of new possibilities suggests, this is by no means an easy task' (119), and the violent

opposition faced by black and female modern writers threatens the very possibility of art. It is through formal experimentation, however – and tropes of enigma, laughter and the ghostly shudder – that we might overcome the melancholic impasse and open up a ‘new feminine aesthetics of potentiality’ as well as ‘the possibility of political transformation’ (119, 189). Bringing together multiple theoretical perspectives in this rich, persuasive and elegant text, Ziarek therefore confronts impossible destruction in order to inaugurate new possibilities of writing and becoming.

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