

**Elizabeth Abel, *Odd Affinities: Virginia Woolf's Shadow Genealogies*.
Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2024, xix + 289 pp.**
(Reviewed by Luca Pinelli, Università degli Studi di Bergamo)

As early as 1920, Virginia Woolf complained in her essay “Freudian Fiction” that the emergence of psychoanalysis positively transformed the literary scene in Britain, as “the new key is a patent key that opens every door. It simplifies rather than complicates, detracts rather than enriches” (1988: 197): far from simply providing another critical perspective from which to look at literature, Freud’s theories threatened to reduce literary complexity to a list of symptoms any reader could venture to discern and analyse, Woolf suggested. Indeed, critics of Freud may feel inclined to argue that he often used literature to support his own theories without necessarily seeing any gaps between what he wanted to argue and the plethora of literary texts he scoured in search of a reflection of his own intuitions about human subjectivity, death, mourning, mothers and fathers. This is clearly *not* what happens in Elizabeth Abel’s latest monograph, which compellingly argues for the significance and even the necessity to investigate Woolf’s ‘shadow genealogies’ rather than simply content oneself with the wealth of direct or indirect citations her oeuvre has generated across the globe. If it is a shadow genealogy that *Odd Affinities* attempts to reconstruct, the less acknowledged shadow cast over its deft arguments is precisely Freudian psychoanalysis, which irrupts into the text, curiously enough, precisely when we enter European territory.

Organised in two separate but clearly interlinked parts, the monograph offers an astute reading of the potential resonances between Woolf on the one hand and Nella Larsen, James Baldwin, Roland Barthes, and W.G. Sebald on the other. Far from simply providing a thematic reading of Woolf’s and the other authors’ texts, Elizabeth Abel demonstrates what a truly comparative work should look like: as she weaves in and out of the texts, she finds unlikely connections and surprising echoes, often even at the level of syntax and vocabulary. So for instance we find ourselves positively astonished to find *Mrs Dalloway*’s oft-cited beginning reworked into a subordinate clause in Larsen’s *Passing* (“the morning’s aimless

wandering through the teeming Harlem streets, long after she had ordered the flowers which had been her excuse for setting out, was but another effort to tear herself loose”, quoted in Abel 2024: 25) or Woolf’s “damned egotistical self” as something she needs to downplay and counteract in her writing echoed in Baldwin’s “prison of my egocentricity” (quoted in Abel 2024: 70). But the monograph goes further, showing how the almost implausible resonances we can find between Woolf and other writers not traditionally associated with her – and who were often far from seeing her as part of their canon or even their literary conversation – reveal the underside of the ‘hypercanonic’ Woolf, to borrow David Damrosch’s useful concept (cf. Damrosch 2006).

The second part explores a more European context than the first, devoted as the latter was to an exploration of these unobserved vibrations occurring between African American authors and Woolf’s glaringly white modernism. Barthes’ work on photography and mourning clearly calls for a solid grounding in psychoanalytic theory, and Abel, whose first monograph famously pioneered psychoanalytic readings of Woolf, happily produces her sophisticated understanding of Freud, Melanie Klein, and Nicholas Abraham. I am using ‘sophisticated’ not merely because of the sheer pleasure Abel’s writing generates in somebody well versed in literary (and possibly psychoanalytic) criticism, but first and foremost because, as Woolf presaged in 1920, psychoanalysis can often reduce texts (and authors and characters) to symptoms we should dissect and resolve rather than see them as complexly stratified repositories of fact and fiction, presence and absence. Even in the most densely psychoanalytic chapter – Chapter 3 on Barthes, Woolf, and maternal mourning – Abel steers clear of this risk by drawing attention to the gaps in psychoanalytic theory that open up precisely once it is juxtaposed to literature, concluding for instance that ‘mania’ “offers a way to bridge the language of classical psychoanalysis with an emergent discourse of affects and sensations that deflects the critique of mania as a fantasy of omnipotence masking a failure to symbolize” (2024: 165-6): if tradition provides you with answers that hit the mark a bit too low, these theories ought to be corrected, redirected, placed in dialogue with the literary objects that could more pertinently provide a counterpoint. Perhaps slightly unacknowledged as a critical ‘school’ in the monograph, psychoanalysis is nonetheless never elevated to the status of a teller of literary truth but rather subjected to critical scrutiny.

That this is the only critical note we may venture to produce speaks volumes about the quality of the research this monograph rests upon. If Chapter 3 may find the reader somewhat underprepared for the dense psychoanalytic theorisation it

is premised upon, the other three chapters often struck me because of the skilful interweaving between the texts and authors they were to investigate. In good comparative fashion, *Odd Affinities* manages to bring into the same figurative room different authors and texts in order to fully explore their sonorities not only beyond received ideas but primarily beyond the kind of linear reception that literary criticism still cannot do without. And here comes Abel, pointing to the unobserved shadows that move at our feet as we move the light hither and thither in search of moths to taxonomise: making room for Woolf beyond her female genealogy or her feminist legacy helps us to better understand her significance not only as a well acknowledged presence in the literary canon, but first and foremost as a flickering light that produces shadows we need to follow and vibrations that we need to attend to.

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