The Value of Solitude

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Abstract

Confinement can present itself in terms of loss and deprivation, but it can also enable us to rediscover the moral value of solitude as a necessary condition for the birth of revolutionary ideas that can change the world. World literature plays an important part in this process, with its self-reflective power that allows for a “detached engagement” with the world at large, as David Damrosch has posited in What Is World Literature? This conception of solitude as a paradoxical condition for the birth of revolutionary ideas that can change the world goes back as far as the 12th Dynasty Egyptian text The Debate Between a Man and His Soul, long before there ever was a “Western tradition” that goes from Stoicism to Montaigne, Virginia Woolf and beyond. This essay will tell the secret story of one of the circulation routes of the value of solitude as key to participation and revolutionary intervention in a world in crisis.

Keywords

stoicism – Virginia Woolf – Orlando – Montaigne – Enola Holmes

Since the pandemic started in early 2020, Stoicism seems to have gained new currency. Numerous articles put forth a return to Stoicism’s ideas of acceptance of death as part of life and of the need to transcend pain and suffering: Manuel Llorente in El mundo speaks of “What we can learn from classical philosophers in times of pandemic and confinement,” while Francesc Arroyo announces in El País that “Marcus Aurelius has the vaccine.” As the publisher of Random House told the Guardian, in English-speaking countries, the sale of Marcus Aurelius's writings has increased by 28%. The historian and lawyer Kit Hildyard has remarked that “Although the coronavirus pandemic has led some to
feel more bored, anxious, and inert, it also heralds a chance for humanity to rediscover the value of Stoicism.” In this essay, I want to focus on a central Stoic theme, the value of solitude, and to argue that the Stoics are a key node in a complex history, in which solitude and confinement have been understood as reinforcing our connection to the world. For us in turn, both during pandemic times and beyond, retracing this history, from Virginia Woolf to Shakespeare and Montaigne and then back into antiquity, can turn our very own private room into a space in which we can transform our conversation with our self into forms that survive us.

1 A Room of One’s Own

In 1928, in the solitude of a small room in Bloomsbury, a mind dreamed of a revolutionary pair of ideas: that the creative mind is androgynous and that it’s not limited to the historical time it’s been allotted by our habits of perception. Virginia Woolf put forth these ideas in two mirrored texts written simultaneously: the feminist manifesto *A Room of One’s Own* and the fictional autobiography *Orlando* that tells the story of a man born in Elizabethan England who traverses 350 years and in the middle is transformed overnight into a woman. But “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write”, declares Woolf in *A Room* (3).

Imagining herself in a little room of her own holding conversation with the great minds represented by the books on her shelves, Woolf concludes, “it is in our idleness, in our dreams, that the submerged truth sometimes comes to the top” (*A Room* 24). This is also the secret that made possible Orlando’s uncanny journey of self-discovery: “indeed, some say that all our most violent passions, and art and religion are the reflections which we see in the dark hollow at the back of the head when the visible world is obscured for the time” (*Orlando* 237). Simultaneously, in *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf spells out the revolutionary potential of the dark hollow at the back of the head where all creation is born: the world of dreams of the hippocampus.

Think with what humanity and brilliancy men, from the earliest ages, have pointed out to women that dark place at the back of the head! And if Mary [Carmichael] were very brave and very honest, she would go behind the other sex and tell us what she found there. A true picture of man as a whole can never be painted until a woman has described that spot the size of a shilling.
A Room of One’s Own is the theoretical backbone of Orlando. Woolf writes it from her very own room, holding discourse with the past, starting with the Elizabethan period where she imagines that Shakespeare had a sister, Judith, herself a poet born before society was ready for her, so she ends up committing suicide. But, Woolf writes, she hasn’t died. She survived through all the women writers, including herself. Woolf’s conversation with the history of women’s writing covers the same period as Orlando and is punctuated with metacommments like: “And I looked at the bookcase again” (63) to turn to conversation with another writer while all the time staying in her very own room.

In the final pages of Orlando, contemporary Orlando walks through her ancestors’ gallery and muses on her family’s history by going all the way back to the Elizabethan period and then again to the present moment, “looking at picture after picture as if he sought the likeness of somebody whom he could not find” (53). And all the time she’s only been sitting in the very chair in which Elizabeth, and maybe Shakespeare himself, once sat. We realize then that Orlando’s century-long journey that we’ve just read lasted for only a few brief minutes or the couple of hours that it took Woolf to deliver the lectures that became A Room of One’s Own. Such a journey is possible only in the solitude of our room and takes place entirely in the mind: “Was not writing poetry a secret transaction, a voice answering a voice?” (Orlando 238).

The word that characterizes Orlando from the first words he utters is “alone”: “Orlando naturally loved solitary places, vast views, and to feel himself for ever and ever and ever alone. So, after a long silence, ‘I am alone,’ he breathed at last, opening his lips for the first time in this record” (14). “Solitude was his choice” (51). In the final pages of Orlando, when she enters her family’s gallery of portraits, the biographer echoes Orlando’s first words: “Now she was alone” (239). Framing Orlando through solitude in mirrored sentences in the opening and ending of her book Woolf was repeating her chiastic construction of Shakespeare’s apparition in the pages of Orlando as a poet lost in his thoughts: “He held a pen in his hand, but he was not writing. He seemed in the act of rolling some thought up and down, to and fro in his mind till it gathered shape or momentum to his liking. His eyes, globed and clouded like some green stone of curious texture, were fixed. He did not see Orlando” (17).

Shakespeare returns as a ghostly presence in the final pages of Orlando, three and a half centuries after Orlando had first seen him:

“He sat at Twitchett’s table,” she mused, “with a dirty ruff on .... Was it old Mr. Baker come to measure the timber? Or was it Sh—p—re?” (for when we speak names we deeply reverence to ourselves we never speak them whole). She gazed for ten minutes ahead of her, letting the car come
almost to a standstill. “Haunted!” she cried, suddenly pressing the accelerator. “Haunted! ever since I was a child.”

Orlando 229

It shouldn’t surprise us that Orlando’s solitude comes from one of Shakespeare’s most moving moments of solitude: Hamlet’s soliloquy that opens with “Now I am alone” (2.2.501, 152), beginning one of the most powerful and meaningful conversations with one’s self in the history of literature. Hamlet is torn between the need to avenge his father’s death and the doubt about the Ghost’s origin, and fearing it may be just a figment of his own tormented mind’s eye. It’s in this moment of perfect solitude that Hamlet has the revelation about his course of action that will change the world as he, and we, knew it: “The play’s the thing / Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King” (2.2.557–8, 155). Orlando, too, has the revelation about the mind’s power to travel centuries, cultures and languages in the blink of an eye, as well as about the myriad selves that inhabit her, in the final pages that are her own soliloquy echoing Hamlet’s words: “Now she was alone” (230). For solitude in our own little room “could revolutionize biography in a night” (Woolf, Letters 3: 429).

In *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf writes that “books continue each other, in spite of our habit of judging them separately” (59), and it is through books that Woolf, like Orlando, connects to her multiple past lives. As she wrote in *A Sketch of the Past* (1939), “Virginia Stephen was not born on the 25th January 1882, but was born many thousands of years ago; and had from the very first to encounter instincts already acquired by thousands of ancestresses in the past.” Eight years earlier, she had given this perception to her character Louis in her poem-novel *The Waves*: “I force myself to state, if only in one line of unwritten poetry, this moment; to mark this inch in the long, long history that began in Egypt, in the time of the Pharaohs, when women carried red pitchers to the Nile. I seem already to have lived many thousand years” (371). At the end of the novel, “Percival has died (he died in Egypt; he died in Greece; all deaths are one death)” (434).

A moment that encompasses all time, a single self that is multiple, a solitude that is the highest form of sociability because of its revolutionary potential to change the world through the discovery of new ideas that only solitude can reveal: the roots of these intertwined themes in Woolf’s work can in fact be traced back through the Renaissance to classical antiquity, and ultimately to the time of the Egyptian pharaohs, just as Woolf and Louis jointly suggest. In retracing this path from the recent to the more distant past, we can begin with Montaigne, and more particularly with Woolf’s reading of Montaigne’s reading of the Stoics.
Montaigne, the Stoics and Marcus Aurelius

It’s in solitude that we can simultaneously enjoy the freedom of the mind and continue to belong to the world. This idea structures Woolf’s notion of literature as well as Orlando’s journey. The roots of this idea Woolf could find in Seneca and the other Stoics whose works fed into Montaigne’s Essays, and it’s probably no coincidence that Orlando is born in 1588, the year when Montaigne’s completed Essays was published. Woolf knew the Essays intimately and read them constantly ever since she received a first copy in 1903 from her brother Thoby.

Woolf knew that this room of one’s own is both a physical and a mental space, which, to her, was the absolute origin of truth in the absence of prejudice. In this, she had a kindred spirit in Montaigne, who writes in his great essay “On Solitude” of his soul (in French, the feminine âme): “we must bring her back, haul her back, into our self. That is true solitude. It can be enjoyed in towns and in kings’ courts, but more conveniently apart” (The Complete Essays 270). In an excellent dissertation on Montaigne and Woolf, Lucía del Carmen Raphael writes that Woolf’s concept of a writer needing a room of one’s own is based on Montaigne writing his essays in the tower of his chateau, but she only cites Woolf’s 1924 essay on Montaigne, not Montaigne’s essay “On Solitude,” which is the actual source:

> We should set aside a room, just for ourselves [une arriereboutique, toute nostre], at the back of the shop, keeping it entirely free and establishing there our true liberty, our principal solitude and asylum. Within it our normal conversation should be of ourselves, with ourselves, so privy that no commerce or communication with the outside world should find a place there; there we should talk and laugh as though we had no wife, no children, no possessions, no followers, no menservants, so that when the occasion arises that we must lose them it should not be a new experience to do without them. We have a soul able to turn in on herself; she can keep herself company; she has the wherewithal to attack, to defend, to receive and to give. Let us not fear that in such a solitude as that we shall be crouching in painful idleness: 
>
> *in solis sis tibi turba locis.*
> [in lonely places, be a crowd unto yourself.] [Tibullus, iv, xiii, 12]
>
> The Complete Essays 270

Woolf’s own room is a boundless place where the mind knows no determinations that confine it: no sex, no sexuality, no nation: “there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind” (A Room 56).
Woolf wasn't interested in Montaigne first and foremost to provide material for her own essays, as most Woolf scholars assume (Juliet Dusinberre, Nicola Luckhurst, Carl H. Klaus). Even Judith Allen focuses her analysis mostly on Woolf's essays, though she remarks that “Woolf’s early attraction to Montaigne's 'essayistic' mode stems from her desire to tamper with genre, to undermine what had been, at the end of the nineteenth century, the 'conventional' novel” (2). A welcome exception is Lucia del Carmen Raphael, who shows how Woolf turned Montaigne's philosophy into “a style of narration” that reaches a climax with The Waves (Raphael 3).

Woolf’s conversation with Montaigne knew no genre boundary, and in his essay “On Habit” she found a source for her revolutionary idea of the androgynous mind put forth in the solitude of her very own room: “Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine, I thought” (A Room 71). If Proust, Woolf’s other major model, speaks of habit that deadens our desire, Montaigne speaks of habit, “the Queen and Empress of the World” as Pindar called her, that “stuns our senses” (“On Habit” The Complete Essays 123). To think of sex or sexuality as determinations of the mind is one such habit or mere opinion. Against such an opinion Woolf can create Orlando as a man who becomes a woman overnight, and this is no wondrous thing, for she has read in Montaigne's essay “On Habit” that “Miraculous wonders depend on our ignorance of Nature not on the essence of Nature.” “Human reason is a dye spread more or less equally through all the opinions and all the manners of us humans, which are infinite in matter and infinite in diversity” (The Complete Essays 126). Montaigne includes sexual practices and gender roles as culturally constructed concepts: “There are countries where there are public brothels of men and where men can marry each other” (126). When Woolf writes that to think “of one sex as distinct from the other is an effort. It interferes with the unity of the mind” (A Room 70), she’s rewriting Montaigne, who believed that the mind or the soul knows no sex determinations, for man and woman are cast in the soul’s “single mould” – “a quite revolutionary idea as Montaigne holds it,” as M.A. Screech has remarked (“Introduction” to The Complete Essays xviii).

In his essay “On Imagination,” Montaigne writes that the power of imagination can lead to a change of sex, an idea the author of Orlando must have found appealing and which no Woolf scholars have discussed. Montaigne’s numerous examples tell about women turned into men, something that the author of Orlando would reverse:

Pliny says that, on the very day of the wedding, he saw Lucius Cossitius change from woman to man; Pontanus and others tell of similar meta-
morphoses which have happened in Italy in recent centuries. And, since both Iphis’ own desires and her mother’s were so vehement,

Vota puer solvit, quae foemina vorerat Iphis.

[Iphis fulfilled as a boy vows made as a girl.]

The Complete Essays 110–1

Montaigne’s *arriereboutique*, a solitary place where revolutionary ideas are born that would change “biography in a night” three and a half centuries later with *Orlando*, branched deeper into an even more distant past, in the books of the Stoics. It is uncertain whether Marcus Aurelius’s *Meditations* was among them, although a first printed translation into Latin of the Greek manuscript became available in 1558 as *De seipso, seu vita sua*. Montaigne’s father loved Bishop Antonio de Guevara’s *Libro aureo del emperador Marco Aurelio*, a flamboyant book loosely based on the personality of Marcus Aurelius: “he intermingled his speech with elegant references to books in the vernacular, especially Spanish, and among the Spanish he frequently cited the so-called Marco Aurelio” (Montaigne, “On Drunkenness” *The Complete Essays* 386). Although Guevara’s immensely popular book wasn’t based on Marcus Aurelius’ writings, excerpts from the Greek original were already circulating among the learned in the 14th and 15th centuries (A.S.L. Farquharson, “Introduction” to *The Meditations*).

What’s certain is that the Stoics’ ideas about the creative power of solitude and the self fueled both the *Meditations* and the *Essays*:

nowhere can one retreat into greater peace or freedom from care than within one’s own soul ... retreat into this little plot of earth [ἀγρίδιον] that is truly your own [ἐαυτοῦ] ... things of themselves have no hold on the mind, but stand motionless outside it, and all disturbances arise solely from the opinions within us ....

“The universe is change, and life mere opinion.” [Democritus]

*Meditations* iv.3

And finally, the ultimate room of our own, this little territory where we retire to hold conversation with the great minds that speak to us centuries later through their work and help us discover new ideas to change the world especially in moments of crisis, is the final telos of our lives. For poets never die, they just bear different names.

The second revolutionary idea that Woolf develops in *A Room* and in *Orlando* is that our notion of limited or quantifiable time is but another opinion. The corollary of this idea is that we should reconsider our notion of death as...
an absolute ending and something negative, banned from our daily consciousness. This is why poets never die, books continue each other, and Orlando can travel back to the Elizabethan period without moving from her chair in the gallery of her ancestors’ portraits in 1928, the same chair in which Shakespeare himself once sat. Woolf shared her own notion of time, life and death with the Stoics. Time “alone is ours” writes Seneca, “this fleeting, slippery thing” (Letter 1, 25). “[W]e are wrong to think that death lies ahead: much of it has passed us by already, for all our past life is in the grip of death” (Letters 25). Orlando’s narrator wonders: “Are we so made that we have to take death in small doses daily or we could not go on with the business of living? … what nature is death and of what nature life?” (51).

An old and weary Seneca writes:

I strive to make a day count for a whole lifetime. It’s not that I cling to it as if it were my last – not by any means, and yet I do look at it as if it could actually be my last. I write you this letter in the same spirit, as if death were about to summon me in the very middle of writing. I’m ready to leave; the reason I enjoy life is that I am not too concerned about how long all this is going to last.

Letters 178

Therefore, Marcus Aurelius concludes, “Let your every action, word, and thought be those of one who could depart from life at any moment” (Meditations ii:11). This is Montaigne’s advice in the essay “To philosophize is to learn how to die”: “We do not know where death awaits us: so let us wait for it everywhere. To practise death is to practise freedom. A man who has learned how to die has unlearned how to be a slave” (The Complete Essays 96). “As far as we possibly can we must always have our boots on, ready to go” (98).

To live a whole life in a single day – no wonder Woolf would dream, under the Stoics’ influence more than that of James Joyce, of Clarissa Dalloway living a whole life in a single day. Or to live several lives in the blink of an eye, as Orlando walks one morning through her ancestors’ gallery, or as Woolf browses the shelves in her own room as she writes A Room of One’s Own. “I choose the very best company; and it is to them that I entrust my mind, in whatever place, in whatever age they have lived,” writes Seneca (Letters 179).
There and Back Again: The Debate between a Man and His Soul

But before Woolf’s room of her own, Montaigne’s arrière-boutique, and Marcus Aurelius’s small territory ἄγριδιον, the harbor toward which our entire life rows was first dreamed by the anonymous poet of the Egyptian Debate Between a Man and His Soul:

Yonder is a place of alighting,  
storage-chest of the heart.  
The West is a harbor,  
which the perceptive should be rowed to.  

ALLEN The Debate 167

Found with The Tale of Sinuhe and the Eloquent Peasant in a late Twelfth Dynasty papyrus The Debate is perhaps the Ancient Egyptian text most often cited outside the field of Egyptology, as Jan Assmann notes (A Dialogue 387). Structured as a dialogue between a man contemplating death in the ultimate solitude of his very own inner room with his ba or soul (in James P. Allen’s 2011 translation), The Debate is ironically one of the most controversial texts. It has generated diametrically opposed readings, from a purely didactic one that sees the text as a collection of funerary regulations to highly literary ones that see it as an instance of personal soliloquy debating an existential problem and finding a revolutionary solution.

Hans Goedicke writes that the ba is imaginary and “the dispute remains within one person” (The Report 10). Unlike our modern notion of self, during the Middle Kingdom there are two forms of ba: “one with transcendental, the other with immanent, origin” (35), or what we would call the soul and the self. “While the ba as self has the world as its only realm, the ba as soul has only a temporary habitation in the mundane world,” depicted with the hieroglyph of a stork, while the transcendental ba is written with the sign representing a lamp. Goedicke observes that the ba in the dialogue “is the immanent ba” (37), so the conversation takes place in the solitude of one’s own mind, like Hamlet’s soliloquies that reveal secret things that change the face of the world as we knew it.

The poem draws on the harpists’ songs recorded on the walls of tombs that try to reconcile man with the horrors and blessings of death, but also on “pessimistic literary laments and on funerary compositions known as ‘Transfigurations’” (Richard B. Parkinson, The Tale of Sinuhe 151). “[T]he dialogue ends with the two speakers facing death together, with a final allusion to the imagery of voyaging. As the text stands, it is the first time the speakers refer to themselves
as ‘we’” (154), marking the final resolution to live in harmony with one’s self until natural death takes the soul into the immortal world.

In the man’s third speech, he voices two laments; the last two speak about solitude and choosing death. The second lament’s refrain is “To whom can I speak today?” The logical conclusion is the refrain of the third lament: “Death is in my sight today.”

Death is in my sight today,
  like a sick man gets well,
  like going outside after mourning.

Death is in my sight today,
  like myrrh’s smell,
  like sitting under sails on a windy day.

... 

Death is in my sight today,
  like a man longs to see home,
  when he has spent many years taken in captivity.

Death and merriment were linked for the ancient Egyptians, and death songs were sung at parties. This habit impressed Montaigne, who alluded to it repeatedly in his Essays, citing Plutarch and Herodotus: “To begin depriving death of its greatest advantage over us, let us adopt a way clean contrary to that common one; let us deprive death of its strangeness; let us frequent it, let us get used to it .... That is what the Egyptians did: in the midst of all their banquets and good cheer they would bring in a mummified corpse to serve as a warning to the guests.” (The Complete Essays 96). “[A]fter their festivities the Egyptians used to display before their guests a huge portrait of death, held up by a man crying, ‘Drink and be merry: once dead you will look like this’” (The Complete Essays 100).

Solitude, however, is abhorred in Ancient Egypt. It is only evoked in extreme moments of distress – or, in a word, in a time of crisis – when the soul can hold communion with itself and come to understand deeper, hidden things. As Assmann has observed,

In cases of solitude and isolation when the exterior constellations of a person have vanished, a self is threatened by death if it cannot find a partner within its interior community .... This is the type of a literary form that we may term “interior dialogue.” It is characteristic of situations of distress and solitude. Only in situations of extreme despair and isolation,
does a “self” turn to speaking to his “heart” of his “Ba.” ... The feelings that the Self expresses in its second and third songs rise from a fatal crisis, a catastrophic situation, an experience of estrangement from a world turned upside down, or “out of joint” as Hamlet says .... Yet this seems to be the rather exceptional, even revolutionary, message of our text.

Assmann, *A Dialogue* 386

Writing to preserve the memory of the dead remains the only option in a world turned upside down, where time is out of joint. Assmann’s citing Hamlet is not accidental. Hamlet himself is not very different from a scribe when, following the Ghost’s terrible revelation in what may be just another of Hamlet’s soliloquies for only he can hear the Ghost speak, he takes out his table of memory, deletes from it everything that made him Hamlet the son – his learning, his love for Ophelia, his friends, in a word: his memory – and inscribes on it the Ghost’s final commandment: “Remember me!”

Yea, from the table of my memory
I’ll wipe away all trivial fond records,
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,
That youth and observation copied there,
And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain
1.5.98–103, 122

Pretending to write, he concludes:

So uncle, there you are. Now to my word:
It is “Adieu, adieu, remember me.”
I have sworn’t.
1.5.110–2, 122

“To whom shall I speak today? / The past is not remembered.” To be remembered is to oppose death, and in the solitude of Hamlet’s torment, the past asks for the death of Hamlet the son who turns into Hamlet the father through the process of writing. A world out of joint is a world in crisis when revolutionary ideas that restore the world are born. Such was the world of the 12th Dynasty poet who wrote *The Debate*. Such will be the world of Hamlet, and other solitaries who arrive in his wake: Orlando and Enola Holmes.

But how could the revolutionary Egyptian text travel such a long way into our modern world? The answer seems to lie in several mysterious lines from the man’s second speech:
my soul is leading me astray.
I cannot listen to him
because of dragging me to death before I have come to it,
because of throwing me on the fire to incinerate me.

Allen The Debate 165

Hans Goedicke comments that “‘to be thrown upon the fire’ is a metaphor for the corporeal existence .... This observation opens a completely new vista on the author’s ideas, which are quite similar to those formulated in the Gnostic systems around the turn of the era,” including “earthly life as a fiery purgatory” (The Report 95). According to Goedicke, “The world as a prison which man wishes to flee is not found again in such pronounced form before the appearance of mystic tendencies around the turn of the era, culminating in the various Gnostic doctrines. The idea seems indigenous to ancient Egypt since the earliest times, when the differentiation between immanent and transcendent worlds was conceived” (51). He adds: “That a connection with the later philosophical ideas exists is highly probable, although impossible to corroborate at present” (58).

The world The Debate puts forth is a world reversed from the typical one of Ancient Egypt, writes Assmann: “The Egyptians did not normally view existence on earth as a foreign exile from which death was a release – with the sole possible exception of one text that is extraordinary in every respect, the Dialogue of a Man with His Ba” (Death and Salvation 184).

The most mysterious lines of the Middle Egyptian text, “my soul ... throwing me on the fire to incinerate me,” would gain new momentum with Gnosticism, as Goedicke notes. One such text written in the climate of the early Christian Gnostic beliefs is 2 Peter, one of the strangest eschatological texts in the New Testament. While critical of the early Gnostic Christian sects that denied the Parousia or Jesus’s second coming, the epistle’s author spoke of doomsday as death by fire, a belief put forth also by Stoicism:

But the Day of the Lord will come like a thief. On that day the heavens will disappear with a roaring sound, the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done on it will be exposed. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, think of the kind of holy and godly people you ought to be as you look forward to and hasten the coming of the day of God.

3:10–12
Apart from echoing Isaiah and Matthew, as Raymond Brown says, “the writer may be making himself intelligible also to those whose primary background included the Stoic doctrine of an immense conflagration that would consume the finite and be followed by regeneration in a never-ending cycle” (*An Introduction*). This passage based on Stoic ideas, including hastening the coming of a better world also through the practice of solitude that improved us and the world, will be picked up by Goethe in defining the age of “world literature” that’s yet to come in 1827: “National literature is now a rather unmeaning term; the epoch of World-literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach” (*Conversations* 19–20). What better way to do so than retire in our very own room to converse through reading with writers beyond our time and space and write, in our turn, books that can change the world? Awareness of an approaching end that’s the very heart of life gives it purpose and pushes us to rethink our role in it. Revolutionary ideas we come up with are one such response.

To the Egyptian poet’s lament “To whom can I speak today” the next poem replies, “Death is in my sight” as man’s ultimate desire. Stoic writers like Marcus Aurelius and Seneca later spoke of a moral necessity to hasten to death: “But as things are, you see how utterly wearisome is the discord of the life that you share with them, and you are moved to say, ‘Come quickly, death, or one of these days I too may forget myself’” (Marcus Aurelius *Meditations* ix:3). “Do we know already how to live – how to die? We should hasten with all our mind to that point where it is the deceits of circumstance we have to look out for, not just deceitful words” (Seneca *Letters* 131). Like the Stoics, 2 Peter recirculates Hellenistic concepts including virtue, knowledge, and hastening the end as a liberation. In the epistle, the Christian must “hasten” because the day of the Lord may come “like a thief in the night”, “waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn!” [προσδοκῶντας καὶ σπεύδοντας τὴν παρουσίαν τῆς τοῦ Θεοῦ ἡμέρας, δι’ ἥν οὐρανοὶ πυρούμενοι λιθήσονται καὶ στοιχεῖα καυσούμενα τήκεται] (2 Peter 3:12). To hasten to one’s death or the death of the earth as we know it is to hasten toward a better life that will free us. This juxtaposition shows the close ties between Stoic and Christian thought that allowed the Victorians, notably including Leslie Stephen himself, to revisit Marcus Aurelius as a model to “reconcile Christian ‘heartliness’ with hard Stoic morality” (Behlman *The Victorian* 3–4) in a mode of “ascetic nostalgia” (16).

For Leslie Stephen’s daughter, Virginia Woolf, however, Marcus Aurelius was not the hard Stoic tamed by Christianity that he was for her father, but rather a kindred spirit: “Hasten, then, towards your goal [σπεύδε οὖν εἰς τέλος], and dismissing idle hopes, come to your own rescue, if you have any care for yourself,
while it is still possible” (*Meditations* III:14). Or as Seneca said: “You will find some people, even some committed philosophers, who say that one should never take violent measures against one’s own life, feeling that it is wrong to become one’s own murderer. They say one should wait for the end that nature has decreed. Those who say this do not realize that they are blocking the road to freedom.” (*Seneca Letters* 211). On March 28, 1941, Virginia too chose the road to freedom that led there by the River Ouse.

4 Enola Holmes

But poets never die, Woolf tells us in concluding her essay *A Room of One’s Own*, this little room at the back of the shop where she found the revolutionary idea behind *Orlando*, which she shares with the Stoics and their predecessors in ancient Egypt: that death is no ending nor a negative experience, and hastening towards it is the purpose of life. In *Orlando*, “The Oak Tree” is at once Orlando’s poem that traverses centuries and Woolf’s own genealogical tree with roots that go deep into the past:

> directly he was alone on the mound under the oak tree, the seconds began to round and fill until it seemed as if they would never fall. They filled themselves, moreover, with the strangest variety of objects .... he came to think about them, his whole past, which seemed to him of extreme length and variety, rushed into the falling second, swelled it a dozen times its natural size, coloured it all the tints of the rainbow and filled it with all the odds and ends in the universe.

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As we’ve seen, these roots go down to Montaigne and then to Marcus Aurelius and ultimately to ancient Egypt. Reading Woolf’s narrator’s concluding remarks about the oak tree we read of Woolf’s own genealogical tree: “The tree had grown bigger, sturdier, and more knotted since she had known it, somewhere about the year 1588 ... Flinging herself on the ground, she felt the bones of the tree running out like ribs from a spine this way and that beneath her. She liked to think that she was riding the back of the world” (237).

A great genealogical tree has branches extending into the future as well as roots into the past. From *Orlando*’s last pages that speak of the solitude that gives birth to revolutionary ideas, contemporary writer Nancy Springer picks Orlando up and makes her into Sherlock Holmes’ lost sister: Enola Holmes, the heroine of *The Enola Holmes Mysteries*. She is the daughter of Lady Eudoria, a
suffragette who teaches Enola to be a feminist and to enjoy her solitude before she leaves her to join the revolutionary underground feminist movement in London in 1888. As Woolf’s Orlando steps out of the book, saying “Now she was alone” (230), she steps into a mirrored fictional world as Enola: “I would very much like to know why my mother named me ‘Enola,’ which, backwards, spells alone. Mum was, or perhaps still is, fond of ciphers ... “You will do very well on your own, Enola,” she would tell me nearly every day as I was growing up.”

Catherine Butler and Hallie O’Donovan have noted Nancy Springer’s building on *A Room of One’s Own* in creating Enola (*Reading History in Children’s Books* 128), but they haven’t seen the equally important role of *Orlando*. While Eudoria and Enola are clearly Springer’s versions of Judith Shakespeare, the twin sister that Woolf imagines for Shakespeare in *A Room*, they are also modeled on Orlando. After his overnight metamorphosis into a woman, Orlando runs off with a band of gypsies: “There, in the shadow of a giant fig tree waited an old Gipsy on a donkey. He led another by the bridle. Orlando swung her leg over it; and thus, attended by a lean dog, riding a donkey, in company of a gipsy, the Ambassador of Great Britain at the Court of the Sultan left Constantinople” (104). Like Orlando, Eudoria runs off with the gypsies, leaving Enola on her fourteenth birthday. Both for Orlando, but also for Eudoria and Enola, a gipsy’s life means absolute freedom: “It did not matter where I found myself at the end of that day, or the next. I would dine upon bread and cheese, I would sleep in the open like a Gypsy,” Enola tells herself when she leaves the home she shares with her brothers Sherlock and Mycroft, who are preventing her from going off to seek her mother. “That afternoon, aptly enough considering my thoughts of Gypsies, I met with a caravan of the nomad folk in their brightly painted round-topped house-wagons. Most gentry despised Gypsies, but Mother had allowed them to camp sometimes upon the Ferndell estate, and as a child I had been fascinated by them.”

When Orlando left the gypsies she headed for England, for the first time dressed as a woman. For her part, Enola, who had always dressed as a tomboy, escapes from her brothers’ house by disguising herself as a woman, in the tradition of Shakespeare’s crossdressing heroines, including Rosalind, Shakespeare’s Orlando’s sweetheart in *As You Like It*. Enola’s boyish figure has no feminine curves, much to the astonishment of the seamstress her brother Mycroft brings in to turn his sister into a “proper woman”: “The seamstress had arrived from London, settled herself in a long-vacant room once occupied by a lady’s maid, sighed over the old treadle sewing machine, and then taken my measurements. Waist: 20 inches. Tsk. Too large. Chest: 21 inches. Tsk. Far too small. Hips: 22 inches. Tsk. Dreadfully inadequate.” The dress, however, proves perfect for Enola’s escape:
They would expect me to disguise myself as a boy. Very likely they had heard about my knickerbockers, and anyway, in Shakespeare and other works of fiction, runaway girls always disguised themselves as boys.

Therefore, I would not.

I would disguise myself as the last thing my brothers would think I could, having met me as a plain beanpole of a child in a frock that barely covered my knees.

I would disguise myself as a grown woman. And then I would set about finding my mother.

It's during the Victorian period, when Enola lives, that Orlando realizes that a dress prevents her from being free:

So she stood mournfully ... dragged down by the weight of the crinoline which she had submissively adopted. It was heavier and more drab than any dress she had yet worn. None had ever so impeded her movements. No longer could she stride through the garden with her dogs, or run lightly to the high mound and fling herself beneath the oak tree.

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A true feminist, Enola’s mother is “very much a free thinker, a woman of character, a proponent of female suffrage and dress reform, including the soft, loose, Aesthetic gowns advocated by Ruskin – but also, whether she liked it or not, she was a squire’s widow, with certain obligations.” Lady Eudoria’s dress reminds us of Lady Orlando’s dress that is masculine and feminine at the same time: “How odd that my mother should go out with a mannish umbrella, a mannish hat, yet swishing that most flirtatious feminine tail, a bustle.”

Like the daughter of a true feminist of the time, Enola is homeschooled: “Mum had sent me to school with the village children, and after I had learned all I could there, she had told me I would do quite well on my own, and I considered that I had. I’d read every book in Ferndell Hall’s library, from A Child’s Garden of Verses to the entire Encyclopaedia Britannica.” But a literary education, even at home, isn’t proper for a young lady:

Mycroft restated the question: “You have had the proper education of a young lady?” “I have read Shakespeare,” I replied, “and Aristotle, and Locke, and the novels of Thackeray, and the essays of Mary Wollstonecraft.” Their faces froze. I could scarcely have horrified them more if I had told them I had learned to perform on a circus trapeze.
In Harry Bradbeer’s 2020 film *Enola Holmes*, Enola’s readings also include the story of Joan of Arc, *The Rights of Man*, Shakespeare’s complete plays (with a focus on *Romeo and Juliet*), and a book of Greek mythology showing Thalestris, Queen of the Amazons, in full Roman armor looking like a man. Orlando enters Woolf’s novel playing at being a warrior; in the opening of the film, Lady Eudoria trains Enola in jujitsu. Even though she soon disappears, Eudoria continues to write secret, ciphered messages to her daughter and print them in the *Pall Mall Gazette*: “This message was sent, she believes, by a contented woman who is wandering, free, in a place where there are no hairpins, no corsets, no dress improvers: with the Gypsies on the moors.” Like Orlando before her, she ran away with a Gypsy caravan: “The runaway woman had no great distance to travel, needing only to walk out upon the countryside until she met, very likely by prearrangement, with a caravan of England’s nomads. In *The Meanings of Flowers*, the rambling rose refers to ‘a free, wandering, Gypsy type of life.’”

“I don’t need friends, I have my own company,” Enola declares in the film to the stiff educator brought by Mycroft to educate her, who promises her a good life in society despite her disappointment in Enola’s boyish hips. Trained to decipher very complicated messages from her mother, Enola finds the most important message expressed as directly as possible. Next to the money Eudoria leaves her, there’s a note: “Our future is up to us.”

From the solitude of our rooms we can dream of worlds yet to come, exercising a form of detached engagement with our present world. Detached, to see what still needs to be done. Engaged, to intervene in it after we’ve descended into our intimate self that gives us the revolutionary ideas to remake this world, and ourselves. Like the ancient Egyptian poet and the Stoics, Woolf believes that one’s work, created in the solitude of our own room, *can* improve and even revolutionize mankind as well as one’s self: “the conviction – or is it the instinct? – that good books are desirable and that good writers, even if they show every variety of human depravity, are still good human beings. Thus when I ask you to write more books I am urging you to do what will be for your good and for the good of the world at large” (*A Room* 79). Our task today is no different.

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