

Tina Oziewicz
University of Wrocław

Farewell to the City, Farewell to Us: Essays by Milena Jesenská and Virginia Woolf

1. Introduction

Different as their lives were, Virginia Woolf and Milena Jesenská are among the iconic figures of the first generation of emancipated female authors who appeared on the European literary scene in the interwar period. The examination of a number of essays by Milena Jesenská (collected in Kathleen Hayes's 2003 *The Journalism of Milena Jesenská: A Critical Voice in Interwar Central Europe*) reveals their correspondence with two major essays by Virginia Woolf: *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938). The key overlap seems to be the quasi-*Bildungsroman* dimension of the two authors' reflection on the interrelatedness of the private and the political spheres. Jesenská's articles and essays, composed for the most part in Vienna and Prague, reflect her central European situatedness in the 1920s and 1930s as well as her specifically Czech experience of living within shrinking borders. Woolf's discursive writings about women, composed in the same period, reveal her specifically feminist perspective on the events in Europe. Although Woolf may not have felt the threat of war as directly as Jesenská, both authors recorded the thickening of the political situation. One aspect of the gathering storm that can be gleaned from their works is the gradual overshadowing of the private sphere by politics. As I demonstrate, there is a marked similarity of tone in Jesenská's and Woolf's writings from the 1920s and then 1930s. In the work of each author one is struck by a tangible difference between the lighter, more diversified writings of the 1920s and the increasingly strained tone in their writings from the 1930s. I suggest that Jesenská's journalism and Woolf's seminal essays can be examined in the same frame of reference inasmuch as the issue central for each author is the gradual shrinking of the sphere in which an individual is not reduced to social and political aspects of their existence.

2. Milena Jesenská and the demystification of the city

Born in Prague in 1896, Milena Jesenská was one of the first female Czech journalists. By the time she died in a Nazi concentration camp in Ravensbrück in 1944, her articles and essays had already been considered outstanding achievements in the history of Czech journalism. Jesenská attracted worldwide attention after the publication of Franz Kafka's *Letters to Milena* (1952), but it soon became clear that "she had a life, and a death, of her own, beyond being 'mistress to Kafka'" (Sayer 1998: 118).

Jesenská's periodical essays that capture the gradual overshadowing of the private sphere by the social and political one were written when she worked as a journalist in Vienna and Prague during the interwar period. The number of articles she published is estimated at well over one thousand. Throughout the 1920s she was a successful fashion columnist who nevertheless openly admitted that "fashion is nonsense" (Hayes 2003: 11) and claimed that clothes did not interest her at all. "What attracts me is the culture of the individual," she said instead (Hayes, 7). Her personal aesthetics was in line with the tenets of functionalism, especially with its rejection of ornamentation. Jesenská advocated simplicity, healthy lifestyle, elegant and practical clothes that did not hinder movement, and a modern approach to life in general. She associated men's clothes and boyish haircuts with progress and freedom. As she said, "as soon as a person puts on a pair of trousers, the world is twice as beautiful" (Hayes, 11). According to Hayes, Jesenská "was an arbiter of taste, but she did not simply want to advise her readers what colours or cuts to buy. Rather, she wanted to explain to them why they should cultivate this kind of taste, why this taste was the only acceptable and modern option" (Hayes, 7). Probably the best recommendation for her essays on fashion, interior design and lifestyle may be the fact that although her column was mostly addressed to women readers it was also read by Franz Kafka who "responded to her newspaper articles in his letters as if they have been addressed to him personally" (Hayes, 16). According to Hayes, "Jesenská had addressed Kafka in her articles after their relationship had come to an end, confident that he would read them" (Hayes, 23).¹ Indeed, in his last letter to Milena, dated December 25, 1923, Kafka expressed his longing for news of the outside world, asking Jesenská to send him some newspapers with her recent contributions (Kafka 1990: 237).

To her translator and editor Kathleen Hayes — as well as to Derek Sayer, to whom Jesenská epitomized "rebellious jeunesse dorée" (Sayer, 210) — Jesenská's life was "emblematic of a generation that came of age at the end of the First World War and saw its ideals destroyed by the Second World War" (Hayes, 1). Her periodical essays not only capture the atmosphere of the 1920s and 1930s but

¹ For the extensive account of Jesenská's essayistic correspondence with Kafka see Hayes's, "Introduction," (15–26), as well as *Letters to Milena*.

actually reflect, stage by stage, the way in which the political and ideological frenzy saturates all areas of life.

Obviously, the case is not that her early essays are optimistic and simplistic, whereas the late ones are predictable, monothematic and grim. In all of her writing Jesenská remains a congenial textual presence, turning writing periodical essays into what Woolf — in relation to personal letters — called “the humane art” (Woolf 1961: 54). Jesenská expresses her thoughts and feelings, likes and dislikes freely and boldly, always speaking in the first person. By confining her memories, dreams, intimate thoughts and snippets of private conversations, she forges a personal bond with the reader. Nevertheless, there is a change in tenor between her essays from the 1920s and those written in the late 1930s. The difference is only to be expected under the circumstances; as Jesenská puts it, “we journalists pick up topics that are practically lying around in the street” (Jesenská 1923: 107). Jesenská’s reflection is thus spurred by the first-hand experience; even if an episode she recounts may be trivial and trifle, it is imperceptibly transformed into a memorable scene. The first paragraph of “Hundreds of Thousands Looking for No-Man’s-Land” would be a good sample of Jesenská’s style:

On quiet and calm Vinohradská Street, a man stopped me. He was tattered and wretched, but he was not begging. Perhaps a Jew needs courage even to make a request if he has lived through the liberation of Austria. ‘Do you speak German?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘Are you a Jew?’ ‘I’m not.’ It was certainly that strange form of address that compelled me to turn around and watch his disappointed back because I realized that this man did not dare to ask for help from someone who was not Jewish — in the middle of Prague, in the middle of Europe, on a calm, sunny afternoon in 1938. (Jesenská 1938: 167)

Jesenská had a knack for putting things in perspective, reporting them as they had happened and at the same time revealing their disturbing aspects. She seems to refrain from commentary, choosing instead to provide the bare facts; but her seemingly innocent choice of basic and undisputable facts — such as the one that the scene just witnessed took place in the middle of Europe, and in the twentieth century — juxtaposed with another fact — homeless refugees in the streets not daring to ask for help — provides an effect in itself.

In her essays from the late 1930s political tensions and conflicts loom large over other issues. Particularly “Judge Lynch in Europe” (dated March 30, 1938) reflects Jesenská’s nostalgia for the previous decade which — although marred by the consequences of ill-devised provisions of the Versailles Treaty — seemed vibrant with the optimistic promise of being the first step toward a more humane, modern world. By 1938 life without political pressure and upheavals seems like utopia. “Europe has changed,” she writes, “so that it is full of blacks ... In Vienna today there are a good half-million blacks” (Jesenská 1938b: 150–151). Jesenská chooses the term “blacks” to refer to political emigrants, the refugees from Germany, most of them Jews and socialists. “An émigré is a black man,” she explains, “and what’s more, a black man among whites, living where he does not belong”

(Jesenská 1938b: 150). For the moment, she admits, “no one has done them any great harm. They have ‘only’ been forbidden to work ... In addition, ‘only’ their property has been confiscated and they have been given to understand that they should leave ... *Otherwise*, however, they can live” (Jesenská 1938b: 150). As she witnesses the contamination of the private sphere by the propaganda, political hysteria and violence of the public sphere, Jesenská begins to talk about the sphere of private life of ordinary people as literally disappearing:

In more peaceful — and peaceful — eras all different kinds of people probably lived next to one another and did not bother much about politics. It did not trouble them; it did not seem to touch them but was played out in some distant place. Today the politics has entered the dwellings of ordinary people, the two-room flats with kitchen, bathroom and lavatory; it has sat down at the tables with crocheted covers and it jingles from the radios, which used to play nothing but songs. (Jesenská 1938b: 150)

Jesenská attempts to capture “how the political life of the ordinary man looks in private” and concludes that “his political life” is “so blatantly private and so intertwined with his personal situation that it is closer to his skin than his own sense of honour” (Jesenská 1938b: 149). In the first paragraph of her 1938 essay “Judge Lynch in Europe” she thematizes this shrinking through the use of filmic focus techniques. Starting with the distant panorama of the city, she then zooms in to the limited area in which a daily life is played within the increasingly limited radius of daily movements. “Across the square,” she says, “and three streets down, the way to work, the way home, the pub on the corner, the tobacconist’s across the road and the eight square meters that are called home” (Jesenská 1938b: 150). It is in this limited radius — in “reality” — that people are seen, recognized and judged by others. What Jesenská notes is the growing importance of one’s national identity and political adherence. These two, she says, shape the way a person is treated, even down to the simplest gestures such as a “Good-morning” greeting.

Perhaps a foreigner, driving through an unfamiliar city and looking out over the sea of houses, might think he had a great metropolis in front of him. But a person who lives in a city so large that not once in his life does he see how it empties into the fields knows that really there are no big cities in the world. There are only streets running into one another and houses pressed close together with no gardens or fields; there are square stone cages in five storeys on top of one another. In a big city, the individual lives as he would in a village. Among neighbors, with the tobacconist’s shop across the road and the grocer on the corner. The concierge, the mailman, the tax collector, the telephone, work, a few friends and that is all. In the morning, the shop-assistant leaves milk and a bag of rolls in front of the door; the man who lives next door goes off to work; the girl who lives across the way and has a night shift at some bar comes home from work. The day begins with an indifferent greeting of good morning. All fates are noted in the tobacconist’s across the road. The walls have ears; women and children are talkative. So the whole building knows what debts and worries you have, what clothes you wear and what political convictions you hold. The man from the first floor greets you a little carelessly on account of those political convictions and the man from the second floor is particularly polite on account of them. If you belong to the same camp as the landlord, you

can get away with paying the rent a little late. If your membership card is different from that of the concierge, your son has to wipe his shoes with particular care so as not to dirty the stairs. If the woman from the third floor passes by, the building grimaces quietly, today a little maliciously: that woman is a Jew. And if the student in the white knee-socks from the fourth floor makes a ruckus on the stairs, he walks through an icy calm on the scowling streets of today. (Jesenská 1938b: 149)

The paragraph quoted above is particularly revealing in terms of the general air of disillusionment in her last essays. By the use of filmic focus technique Jesenská demystifies the illusion of space which every city promises. In reality, she says, “there are no big cities in the world” (Jesenská 1938b: 149).

This sober observation clashes with some lively sketches of the city to be found in her essays from the 1920s. Although never simplistically enthusiastic and definitely never glossing over social ills, her early essays were in tune with the specifically modernist fascination with city life. The obvious connections between the city, modernity and progress — and the resulting fascination with the metropolis — are high on the list of the generation’s fascinations. Mesmerized by the city, Jesenská was emblematic of her generation. Like Walter Benjamin, she was remarkably sensitive to the reciprocal influence of the urban environment and its inhabitants (Jesenská 1920: 64–66; Jesenská 1920c: 53–56; Jesenská 1920e: 49–52). The city was not only among the recurring topics of her essays; it was also one treated with delightful ingenuity. Sometimes seen as a mechanism — “How many absurdities there are in the mechanism we call the big city!” (Jesenská 1920e: 52) — it was more often as a living organism, personified and responding, capable to accept, befriend or reject a person (Jesenská 1920d: 70–72). The city is also able to help, to give a back-up when needed (Jesenská 1921: 91–94). Presented as an unpredictable and multifaceted entity, the city spins emotions and expectations, competing with other species of its kind — other cities — whose inhabitants watch each other warily:

Perhaps every city today is a Babylon; they say that in Berlin it is even worse than in Vienna and Paris, apparently, lags behind both of them. I do not know what it is like elsewhere. But here — God knows — there is pandemonium, one absurdity after another, degeneration, madness, luxury, poverty, hunger, champagne, everything all mixed up together like it is in a carnival. I do not know where to begin. There is no beginning; I do not know what should come first. (Jesenská 1920b: 76)

This is how it was in the 1920s. In 1938 it turned out that “the city” — with its spatial quality, multifaceted diversity and carnivalesque potential — is yet another illusion: there are no big cities any more. Instead, there are the neighbours and the walls which have ears. Where everything used to be “mixed up together” there are now sharp distinctions and clear divisions. There is a definite feel in the air that the carnival is over. As can be seen from these examples, even quite a brief examination of Jesenská’s essays reveals a strong sense of how, gradually, the political sphere delimits and devours the private one.

3. Virginia Woolf and the relinquishing of the self

A similar, and equally sharp awareness of this process can be inferred from Virginia Woolf's writing from the same period. "Immured in the ivory tower of Bloomsbury" for decades (Zwerdling 1986: 14), Woolf has been released at last largely due to Alex Zwerdling's influential *Virginia Woolf and the Real World*. Zwerdling's study emphasized Woolf's "strong interest in realism, history and the social matrix" (Zwerdling, 15). As Linden Peach points out, such a major shift in theoretical perspective requires a new kind of critical approach to Woolf's fiction. "[G]iven that many events traditionally recognized as the linchpins of history are either treated obliquely in her fiction or ignored altogether," she says, this is a demanding task (Peach 1999: 192). Hence, "[r]eading Woolf as a political novelist requires an approach posited on her oblique use of historical and contemporary events" (Peach, 193). The method she applies to Woolf's thirties fiction Peach chooses to call "cryptanalytical," that is, focusing upon "what is concealed or almost concealed in a text" (Peach, 193). Using this mode of reading, Peach re-reads *The Waves* and *The Years* as informed by the thirties' anxiety over Empire and *The Waves* as the elegy for the Empire (Peach, 196–203). A similar deciphering method, applied with equal subtlety to *The Years*, shows this mild, domestic novel as obliquely addressing the issue of British anti-Semitism (Bradshaw, 179–191). Peach's and Bradshaw's reinterpretations of *The Waves* and *The Years* tend to remove Woolf from the shade of the ivory tower stereotypically assigned to the ones detached from social reality. Her essays — which by their very specificity are much more straightforward in revealing the author's point of view — have recently been reread as well. Once the complex layers of often conflicting meaning in *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* have been analyzed, the list of discrepancies between these two seminal essays, usually taken to form a neat sequel, has proven rather long. "Although clearly related in content and setting," argues Elena Gualtieri in her *Virginia Woolf's Essays: Sketching the Past*,

Woolf's two book-length essays are very different kinds of writing from the point of view both of form and of tone. Where *A Room* is playful and ironic, *Three Guineas* is dead serious and sarcastic at best; while the latter insists upon the truth of facts and photographs, the former relies on fiction and charm; where *A Room* is rich in images and narrative skill, *Three Guineas* presents the same argument three times over, in a progressively tighter and tighter circle that risks to strangle its readers in the monotony of its tone. Perhaps more significantly or in addition to all these discrepancies, there is in *Three Guineas* no equivalent of the hopeful message of reconciliation and resolution of conflict which *A Room* provides with the androgynous ideal ... Overtly an argument against war and conflict, *Three Guineas* explicitly rejects any attempt at healing rifts and mending splits but rather insists on a strict separation of spheres between educated men and their daughters and sisters. (Gualtieri 2000: 82)

Even more interesting than the scope in which these two essays differ from one another is the price Woolf has chosen to pay to arrive at the position she adopted in *Three Guineas*. In one important aspect *Three Guineas* moves away not only

from *A Room*, but from most of her other works. The firm, combative stance Woolf adopts in *Three Guineas* has not come without a price: the seemingly definite relinquishing of her unique vision of a self.

The vision of the self found in Woolf's fiction and essays is one of the most comprehensive undertakings to render an individual through the artistic-literary representations of their inner life. What I find especially relevant is that Woolf's conception of the self challenged and undermined compartmentalization of the social sphere in which an individual was reduced to a limited number of defining and easily definable features. The human self in Woolf's novels and essays is always innately subversive, because it positions itself against what is outside and it views everything that is social as a burden or obstacle — as something worthless, childish, superfluous, or comic. Juxtaposed with all socially constructed definitions of an individual, Woolf's idea of the self is variegated, fluid, and asocial.

For Woolf an individual self is never fully revealed — in a sense that our knowledge about it will always be incomplete. In his analysis of *Jacob's Room*, Zwerdling argues that the reason behind the experimental form of this early novel was Woolf's attempt to undermine the traditional narrative perspective in order to grasp and reveal the incompleteness of our knowledge about any individual, including oneself (Zwerdling, 62–83). Throughout her fiction, the image of the self is consequently antithetical to any one-dimensional idea of identity. To have at one's disposal literally thousands of different selves to call upon and switch into — “these selves of which we are built up, one on top of another, as plates are piled on a waiter's hand” (Woolf 2000: 212–213) — is not only the luxury of Orlando. Woolf's characters loosen the grip on their own identity over and over again, almost on the daily basis. The mental and emotional fluctuations which in other authors' works would amount to the disintegration of one's identity — a character's affliction, in short — in Woolf's characters are as natural as breathing. They are supposed to suggest the way the mind works. *The Waves* and *Between the Acts* — two novels best exemplifying the stream-of-consciousness technique — offer numerous examples to illustrate the fluctuations of identity. Even characters from *The Years*, Woolf's most down-to-earth novel, have to remind themselves from time to time who they actually are — “She had been thinking, Am I that, or am I this? Are we one, or are we separate — something of the kind” (Woolf 2004b: 120) — and admit that “we do not know ourselves, ordinary people; and if we do not know ourselves, how then can we make religions, laws, that ... that fit” (Woolf 2004b: 246). This intuition, voiced numerous times throughout her essays and novels, may be the reason behind Woolf's conscious reserve, if not detachment. However attuned Woolf have been to the social reality, she chose to address historical and contemporary events obliquely or to ignore them altogether (Peach, 192–193). However observant Woolf was of socio-political events, she

pledged herself early in her writing career to a kind of fiction that would measure the movements and responses of minds, rather than bodies, of subjective rather than objective truth.

In this fiction, history is filtered through the inner lives of characters, the First World War being famously reduced to a parenthesis in *To the Lighthouse*. *The Waves* represents the summit of this achievement. Even though *The Years* is the most historical and outward-facing of Woolf's later writings ... the calendar in use is still clearly that of the heart rather than the calendar of public history. (Connor 2004: xi)

It would be hard to deny that the unique perspective Woolf adapts in most, if not all, of her novels tends to downplay the dimension called the social reality, revealing, now and again, its fictitious luster. This stance, far from neutral, is a combative one in its own subversive way. By this I mean that Woolf's specific point of view is deliberately chosen to spin and disrupt the alleged stability of characters and their perceptions, imperceptibly infusing every element of their surroundings with a shimmering, unreal quality. The air of a constant, if silent, questioning of a stable façade of the inner and outer world seems to permeate her fiction. My point is, however, that what was taken to be the result of the lack of interest in the social matrix, might have resulted as well from the lack of deference or approval — a type of conscientious objection to the relentless social pressure exhorted on an individual from the cradle to the grave. Fluidity of the self is, in this context, the self's best protection.

The way of describing the self as heterogeneous, plural, and fluctuating is consistent throughout Woolf's novels and essays. In many passages in which this concept appears, the self is transient and spatial. If there is a border line anywhere at all, it is either invisible or blurred. The very choice of Woolf's imagery for capturing the inner reality is revealing in this respect. The self is "a wedge of darkness" (Woolf 2002: 45), "a deep lake" (Woolf 1961: 205), "scattered snow" (Woolf 2004: 112), "the field, the barn, the trees" (Woolf 2004: 63), "the seasons... January, May, November; the mud, the mist, the dawn" (Woolf 2004: 63), "a virgin forest; a snow field where even the print of birds' feet is unknown" (Woolf 1967: 196), "a mixture" (Woolf 1961: 30), or simply "we" (Woolf 1961: 15).

Woolf not only blunted the divisions. By introducing the concept of an androgynous mind she erased them altogether. This is the case specifically in *A Room of One's Own*, which she wrote about the same time as *Orlando* — "a challenge to monological narratives of gender and national identity" (Peach, 196). In those writings Woolf affirmed that the mind may be gendered but the mind's gender need not overlap with the body's gender. Thus, claims Woolf,

Shakespeare was androgynous; and so were Keats and Sterne and Cooper and Lamb and Coleridge. Shelley perhaps was sexless. Milton and Ben Johnson had a dash too much of the male in them. So had Wordsworth and Tolstoy. In our time Proust was wholly androgynous, if not perhaps a little too much of a woman. (Woolf 2005: 627)

It can be argued that Woolf questioned clear gendering in all of her experimental novels; the stream-of-consciousness technique, at least, seems to be developed to blur all clear-cut divisions (Zwerdling, 277–281). The sheer impossibility to determine the gendering of "darkness" beneath the surface of "our apparitions, the things

you know us by” (Woolf 2002: 45) suggests that when one tries to render the self, the deep core of a human being, such divisions do not apply.

This fact has been noted. In his analysis of *To the Lighthouse*, *The Waves*, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Between the Acts* Alex Zwerdling says:

In these experimental works Woolf deliberately smudges the outline of the individual and creates a world in which the borders that separate us become permeable and sometimes disappear altogether. The isolated, particular person comes to seem a social fiction; the individual identity is extended and diffused until it melts into the identity of others and the world around it. (Zwerdling, 279–280)

The ironically pragmatic explanation for this extension and diffusion can be found in Woolf’s essay “Street Hunting: A London Adventure” (1930). Although published as late as 1942 — in the collection *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* — this essay exemplifies Woolf’s late-1920s original vision about diversity of the self. Woolf argues that the individual is not instrumental in splitting their self and living in parallel realities all at once. This stratification is inherent in human nature:

Yet it is nature’s folly, not ours. When she set about her chief masterpiece, the making of man, she should have thought of one thing only. Instead, turning her head, looking over her shoulder, into each one of us she let creep instincts and desires which are utterly at variance with his main being, so that we are streaked, variegated, all of a mixture; the colours have run. Is the true self this which stands on the pavement in January, or that which bends over the balcony in June? Am I here, or am I there? Or is the true self neither this nor that, neither here nor there, but something so varied and wandering that it is only when we give the rein to its wishes and let it take its way unimpeded that we are indeed ourselves? Circumstances compel unity; for convenience sake a man must be a whole. The good citizen when he opens his door in the evening must be banker, golfer, husband, father; not a nomad wandering the desert, a mystic staring at the sky, a debauchee in the slums of San Francisco, a soldier heading a revolution, a pariah howling with skepticism and solitude. When he opens his door, he must run his fingers through his hair and put his umbrella in the stand like the rest. (Woolf 1961: 30)

Such an idea of the self is difficult to square with any particular specification, including the most basic division between sexes. Yet this duality is central to Woolf’s two feminist essays. Although *A Room of One’s Own* begins similarly to the later *Three Guineas* — that is, with a clear-cut division between distinctly gendered groups — at some point the argument stops sharp. In the very last chapter Woolf backtracks, trying to disentangle from clear-cut social divisions which are incompatible with her intuition and artistic vision of an inner life. Unlike the conclusion of *Three Guineas*, which declares the impossibility to cooperate and to share the same space and postulates “the Outsiders’ Society” (Woolf 2005b, 860), in *A Room of One’s Own* Woolf takes the path of androgynous mind which best captures her intuition that sharp external divisions are misleading (Woolf 2005: 623–627). In *Three Guineas*, however, under the pressure of increasingly politicized late 1930s, Woolf suspends her own artistic conception of an individual and subscribes, to an extent, to a collective-point-of-view categorizations of identity.

The stance adopted in the earlier essay — more conciliatory and noncommittal — is closer to Woolf's vision of the self as captured in her fiction and other essays. The radical stance adopted in *Three Guineas* is, in fact, incompatible with her understanding of what an individual and the life of the self are. The irony is that in *A Room of One's Own* Woolf warned other female writers against following the path she eventually took in *Three Guineas*. In the conclusion of *A Room of One's Own* she wrote:

Even so, the very first sentence that I would write here ... is that it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly ... And fatal is no figure of speech, for anything written with that conscious bias is doomed to death. It ceases to be fertilized. (Woolf 2005: 627)

The radicalization of her feminist stance at the end of the 1930s can therefore be seen as her adopting of the perspective which a decade earlier, at the end of the 1920s, Woolf had tried to avoid.

4. Conclusion

Throughout her fiction and essays, Virginia Woolf experimented with the ways of capturing and rendering the inner life. The basic intuition behind her attempts was that in its innermost essence the self resists being assigned any labels. It is only in *Three Guineas*, “the most combative and the most partisan of Woolf's works” (Gualtieri, 82) that she decisively shelved her belief that men and women “think the same thoughts” (Woolf 2004b: 246) and made the opposite claim the gist of her argument. According to Zwerdling, the reason behind the radicalization of ideas expressed in *Three Guineas* was the growing political tension, the rise of fascism, the threat of war and her loss of belief in the feasibility of pacifist ideas (Zwerdling, 297–301). These external pressures put into sharper focus the endemically female-hostile flavour of the times² to which Woolf was so sensitive (Woolf 2005b: 820–821). What I think this suggests is that Woolf's late-1930s feminist commitment in the direction outlined in *Three Guineas* — although genuine and doubtlessly in tune with her general attitude — can be seen as a suspension, if not surrender, of her basic intuition: her original conception of the self, incomparably more complex than the socially constructed forms of identity which she had earlier seen as “simply childish” (Woolf 2002: 45). This retreat — retreat from depth to the surface, from the fluid to easily definable and “ready-made” forms of identity — was, I believe, the stance adopted under the pressure of the growing politicization and compartmentalization on the social plane.

² For the “endemic,” so to speak, misogyny of modernism see Nicholls' commentary on Baudelaire (Nicholls 2009: 4) and on Marinetti and Italian Futurism (Nicholls, 86).

The same phenomena were registered in the periodical essays of the same decade written by Milena Jesenská. Jesenská viewed the emergence of the social net of clear-cut divisions and the stifling compartmentalization not only from much shorter distance — as emigrants from Nazi Germany and ‘liberated’ Austria were flooding into the Czech Republic, and the antagonisms between Czech and German inhabitants of the Sudeten region reached its peak — but also from a different angle. With so many divisions and front lines emerging, Jesenská never felt compelled to draw yet another line: between men-dominated society and women as the subdued group. She did not view herself in this manner and was not in the position to theorize from a distance: she reacted to the events as they were happening. Nevertheless, in her essays one can find the documentary confirmation of what Woolf acknowledged only gradually and reiterated so strongly in *Three Guineas*. Saturated as an individual is by the social reality, one can find no ultimate shelter in the variegated, transgressive and all-encompassing mind.

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