

8

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Woolf's feminism and feminism's Woolf

Feminism, both as a theoretical analysis of gender inequality and oppression and as a political movement, has used literary texts extensively in making and disseminating its meanings. Literary and literary-critical texts were central to 'second-wave' feminist politics and the movement for 'women's liberation' in the late 1960s and 1970s, laying many of the foundations for the developments in feminist and gender criticism and theory that have changed literary studies so radically. The significance of literature for feminism also gives a particular place to those writers whose work spans both feminist polemic and fiction or poetry, including Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir, Adrienne Rich and, preeminently, Virginia Woolf.

The relationship between Virginia Woolf and feminism, feminism and Virginia Woolf is, as the title of my chapter suggests, a symbiotic one. On the one hand, Woolf's feminism – which includes not just her explicit feminist politics but her concern and fascination with gender identities and with women's lives, histories and fictions – shaped her writing profoundly. On the other, feminist criticism and theory of the second half of the twentieth century have fundamentally altered the perception and reception of a writer who, in Anglo-American contexts at least, had largely fallen out of favour by the 1950s and 1960s.¹ The immediate post-war generation tended to perceive Woolf's as an essentially pre-war sensibility. In the decades that followed, women critics and academics creating new feminist approaches found Woolf speaking very directly to their concerns, in the first-person address (albeit one in which the 'I' is diffuse and multiple) of *A Room of One's Own* or in the voice or voices that seemed to speak out from Woolf's newly available essays, letters, diaries and memoirs.

The preoccupations of post-war feminist literary and cultural criticism could, indeed, be traced through accounts of and approaches to Virginia Woolf. Her work has been used as key evidence and example in the most significant and recurrent feminist debates; 'realist' versus 'modernist' writing as the most effective vehicle for a feminist politics; the existence of

a specifically female literary tradition and of a woman's language; the place of feminist 'anger' or radicalism; the feminist uses of 'androgyny' as a concept; the significance of gendered perspectives and 'the difference of view' as a counter to difference-blind assumptions of the universal; the relationships between socialism and feminism, feminism and pacifism, patriarchy and fascism.

Woolf's work is also central to recent models and histories of twentieth-century literature and culture; more particularly, definitions of modernism and, most recently, of postmodernism. In previous decades, British modernism was largely defined on the basis of literary themes and forms drawn from the work of T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, Ezra Pound and, though more ambivalently, D. H. Lawrence. When Virginia Woolf was included in this canon, it was most often as an exemplar of 'feminine' modes of writing and of an early twentieth-century (over)subjectivism. In recent years, modernism has come to look more like a 'mouvement des femmes', with Woolf as part of a cluster (or heading a roster) of women writers, including Dorothy Richardson, Katherine Mansfield, May Sinclair, H. D., Djuna Barnes, Mina Loy and Gertrude Stein. Various as these writers are, the question of the 'gender of modernism' has come to provide a powerful centripetal pull. Models of modernism and modernity have become substantially predicated on a set of preoccupations and identities shared by women writers of the first part of the twentieth century and beyond: private and public spheres; urban consciousness; language and the body; gender transformations; lesbian passions; self-presentations.

In biographical terms, feminist criticism has brought about a major shift from accounts of Woolf's relationships with 'Bloomsbury' men (Lytton Strachey, Roger Fry, Clive Bell) and their influences upon her to a concern with Woolf's relationships, personal, sexual and professional, with other women (Vanessa Bell, Violet Dickinson, Vita Sackville-West, Ethel Smyth). Work has grown on the lesbian dimensions of Woolf's fictions.² Critics have also examined Virginia Woolf in tandem with a female other: 'Vanessa and Virginia', 'Vita and Virginia'.³

In a number of feminist biographies, Woolf's history of mental illness and her death by suicide have become the occasion for discussion of those experiences (or their denial and repression) which, in a male-dominated society, make women ill or, more accurately, lead to such a diagnosis. The autobiographical dimensions of her novels, *To the Lighthouse* in particular, contribute to the blurring of boundaries between biography, autobiography and fiction in discussions of her life and work. The narratives created by her biographers seem, almost inevitably, to shape themselves into the life, the scenes, that Woolf, in many different forms, had already composed.

Woolf's feminism

If the feminisms of the second half of the twentieth century have found in Woolf one of their most significant forerunners, it is at least in part because her writing and thinking were so intertwined with the feminisms of the first half of the century. Her responses to the feminist ideas of her time were, however, complex and often contradictory. Alex Zwerdling has written that 'Until we see [Woolf's] work as a response to some of the received ideas of her time about women and "the cause", we will not fully understand it.'⁴ Her 'alternating loyalty to and deviation from' the familiar positions of the feminist movement produced contradictions in her thought which more recent feminisms have often found it difficult to accept, tending to opt for one pole rather than another, instead of recognising and negotiating inconsistencies.

A variety of weights have been attached to the involvement of Woolf (then Virginia Stephen) with the suffragist cause. At the beginning of 1910, she had written to her friend and Greek tutor Janet Case:

Would it be any use if I spent an afternoon or two weekly in addressing envelopes for the Adult Suffragists?

I don't know anything about the question. Perhaps you could send me a pamphlet, or give me the address of the office. I could neither do sums or argue, or speak, but I could do the humbler work if that is any good. You impressed me so much the other night with the wrongness of the present state of affairs that I feel that action is necessary. Your position seemed to me intolerable. The only way to better it is to do some thing I suppose. How melancholy it is that conversation isn't enough! (L1, p. 421)

For Zwerdling, the letter typifies Woolf's 'reluctant' political participation in a cause she nonetheless felt impelled to support. This reluctance was, he suggests, entirely consistent with her subsequent withdrawal from feminist activism, motivated not by an absence of sympathy with broader feminist beliefs and goals, but by her sense that suffrage – the struggle for women's right to vote – was too narrow a cause. It is significant, moreover, that Woolf's short-lived period of suffrage activism affiliated her to the suffragist rather than the more militant suffragette cause.

Naomi Black, who has written extensively about Virginia Woolf and the Women's Movement, uses much of the same 'evidence' to rather different ends. For Black, Woolf's suffrage work, most probably for a body called the People's Suffrage Organization, was significant in both historical and personal terms. The year of Woolf's involvement, 1910, 'was the peak of cooperation among the woman suffrage groups';⁵ by implication, the 'shadowy organization' to which Woolf belonged would thus have had extensive

contact with the larger and higher-profile women's suffrage groups, including the militant Women's Social and Political Union. Most significantly for Black, Woolf's work for the People's Suffrage Organization, however brief, signalled her entry into a feminist organisational politics which Black defines as 'social feminism'. 'Social feminism' is predicated on assumptions about the *differences* between men and women, and on the belief that women's values and skills, whether innate or culturally constructed, are excluded in male-dominated societies. It calls for a new understanding and valorisation of specifically female values, and is to be contrasted with an 'equal rights' feminism, which campaigns for women's equal access to the civic and social rights and structures enjoyed by men. The contrast is often framed as a distinction between a feminism of *equality* and one of *difference*.

Both Alex Zwerdling and Naomi Black have contributed significantly to an understanding of Woolf's feminism in its historical contexts. Zwerdling's is one of the most thoughtful and comprehensive accounts of the topic, though it may be that he renders Woolf too isolated in her (feminist) perceptions of the limits of suffrage and is thus too eager to withdraw her from a public and political arena. Black, by contrast, insists upon Woolf's continued organisational affiliations, though for the modern British reader the occasional talk Woolf gave to her local Women's Institute smacks more of duty than political commitment. It may be that the place to look for Woolf's feminist activism is in other kinds of institution, such as the Hogarth Press, for which she wrote *Three Guineas* as part of a series on women and feminism: other texts in the series included pamphlets by Willa Muir, Margaret Llewelyn Davies and Ray Strachey.

The equality versus difference arguments (or 'equal rights' versus 'social feminism') also seem too clear-cut and too polarised as a way of understanding Woolf's feminism. Her accounts of the difference of women's values, in literature and in life, are central to her writings but they are also open-ended, and more relativist than absolute. As Mary Jacobus argued in an important feminist essay on Woolf, the 'difference' of 'women's writing', like sexual difference itself, becomes 'a question rather than an answer'.⁶

In her very first writings, primarily reviews and essays for periodicals, Virginia Stephen had addressed the issues of 'masculine' and 'feminine' writing and the nature of their differences, the place of women in the literary tradition and the explanations for their relative absence until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In 1905 she reviewed W.L. Courtney's *The Feminine Note in Fiction*, asking: 'Is it not too soon after all to criticize the "feminine note" in anything? And will not the adequate critic of women be a woman?'⁷ The second question suggests the argument she would later

make in her essay 'Women and Fiction' and elaborate in *A Room of One's Own*: 'that both in life and in art the values of a woman are not the values of a man'.⁸ The 'too soon' of the first question makes a point to which she would frequently return – that the history of women's freedom of expression, education and experience is a very recent one.

Woolf developed this argument in response to the assertions made by Arnold Bennett in his 1920 collection of essays, *Our Women: Chapters on the Sex-Discord*, and to a favourable review of Bennett's book by her friend Desmond MacCarthy, writing under the pseudonym 'Affable Hawk'. Her diary entry for 26 September 1920 records her 'making up a paper upon Women, as a counterblast to Mr Bennett's adverse views reported in the papers', in particular his claim that 'intellectually and creatively man is the superior of woman' (*D2*, p. 69). In her letters to the *New Statesman*, Woolf anticipates the arguments of *A Room of One's Own*:

My difference with Affable Hawk is not that he denies the present intellectual equality of men and women. It is that he, with Mr Bennett, asserts that the mind of woman is not sensibly affected by education and liberty; that it is incapable of the highest achievements; and that it must remain for ever in the condition in which it now is. I must repeat that the fact that women have improved (which Affable Hawk now seems to admit), shows that they might still improve; for I cannot see why a limit should be set to their improvement in the nineteenth century rather than in the one hundred and nineteenth. But it is not education only that is needed. It is that women should have liberty of experience; that they should differ from men without fear and express their differences openly (for I do not agree with Affable Hawk that men and women are alike) . . .⁹

Woolf's emphases on education and experience as the necessary conditions for women's cultural and intellectual life are a key aspect of her contributions to a 'sociology' of culture, in which the environment and the social sphere become far more significant determinants of literary capacity and production than any concept of creativity as a purely personal property. Such 'materialism' – as in her emphases in *A Room of One's Own* on the importance of financial independence and autonomous space – became central to the socialist-feminist approaches to Woolf of the 1970s, including Michèle Barrett's collection of Woolf's essays, *Women & Writing*, which significantly contributed to the reception of the 'feminist' Woolf.

Woolf's letters to the *New Statesman* also raise the difficult question of male and female 'likeness' and 'difference' and the significance of sexual identity in literature. At times, as in the passage quoted above, Woolf insists upon the difference between male and female perspectives, values and standards. Elsewhere in her writing, she expresses a desire for a freedom

from 'the tyranny of sex . . . any emphasis . . . laid consciously upon the sex of a writer is not only irritating but superfluous'.¹⁰ At yet other points – and this emerges in essays written around 1920 – she hints at the illusory nature of our conceptions of sexual identity: 'To cast out and incorporate in a person of the opposite sex all that we miss in ourselves and desire in the universe and detest in humanity is a deep and universal instinct on the part both of men and of women. But though it affords relief, it does not lead to understanding.'¹¹ The question here is whether the very conception of 'the other' as a fully but single-sexed identity (male/female) is a matter of fantasy and projection, of 'cast[ing] out' and 'incorporation' into an illusory whole. These questions, and the function served by Woolf's seeming absence of a consistent position on questions of sexual difference, are taken up in Woolf's most extended piece of writing on women and literature, *A Room of One's Own*.

Before moving on to this text, however, I want to pause on the slippery ground of women's 'improvement'. On the one hand, Woolf's emphasis on the provisional, incomplete aspects of women's selves could be said to point forward to more recent conceptions of 'women's identity' and 'feminism' as projects without a known goal and end. As Woolf wrote in 'Professions for Women' (first given as a lecture in 1931), the essay in which she introduced the 'Angel in the House', that symbol of Victorian femininity and rectitude whom the woman writer must destroy in order to write freely:

What is a woman? I assure you, I do not know. I do not believe that you know. I do not believe that anybody can know until she has expressed herself in all the arts and professions open to human skill.¹²

On the other hand, the concept of 'improvement' might suggest the evolutionary, developmental models of femininity and of 'woman' that dominated discussion at the turn of the last century. We should note, however, that by contrast with most representations of the 'New Woman' there is much of culture and little or nothing of biology in Woolf's arguments. I would argue, moreover, that Woolf, to a marked extent, subverted representations and discussions of 'The New Woman', and her later manifestation, 'The Modern Girl', both of which were central personifications for late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century feminisms. For Woolf, 'The Modern Girl' may well have seemed too slender and shallow a figure through which to explore psychical and temporal complexities, including women's collusions with their unfreedoms.

In *The Voyage Out* Rachel Vinrace's aunt Helen gives her George Meredith's novel *Diana of the Crossways* and Henrik Ibsen's play *The Doll's House*, both extremely influential late nineteenth-century works of

'New Woman' literature written by men. Rachel's identification with their heroines is total, creating in her 'some sort of change',¹³ yet Rachel later finds that the experiences of love they delineate have little connection with her own. Here the explicit reference to 'New Woman' writing calls attention to Woolf's own ambivalent relationship to this genre. The nightmare vision of entrapment and monstrosity – 'alone with a little deformed man who squatted on the floor gibbering' (VO, p. 74) – that both follows Richard Dalloway's sexual advances to Rachel and accompanies her fatal illness forges the link between sex and death in the novel. Its oneiric obscurity, however, blocks the narratives of female purity and male sexual pollution so central to the 'New Woman' fiction of the 1890s.¹⁴

Night and Day, like *The Years* and *Three Guineas*, explores changes in women's lives through the contrast between the private house and the life of the city. In *Night and Day* the contrast is made in part through the focus on two women: Katherine Hilbery, whose life is circumscribed by the rituals of upper-class domestic life and burdened by the demands of family, living and dead, and Mary Datchet, who has exchanged her country parsonage childhood for the life of the single woman in the city and for office work in the cause of women's suffrage. The city is central to *Night and Day*: Woolf, like her contemporary Dorothy Richardson, uses its spaces to explore the making of identity and consciousness, and London becomes central to the formation of social being.

Fascinated by the creation of private dreams in public places, Woolf explores the relationship between the 'inner' realms of daydream and reverie (which are often, and paradoxically, enabled by the life of the city streets) and the outer-directed but limited world of feminist and social activism. The novel gives the fullest account of the suffrage campaign to be found in Woolf's writing, but the satire directed against its members has troubled those critics arguing for the strength of Woolf's involvement with feminist *Realpolitik*, including her rather brief association with the suffragist cause. Although we may wish to nuance Alex Zwerdling's suggestion that 'Woolf's particular contribution to the women's movement was to restore a sense of the complexity of the issues after the radical simplification that had seemed necessary for political action,'¹⁵ it is certainly the case that Woolf chose to represent such a 'simplification' in *Night and Day* through the mild absurdities and egoisms of committees and campaigners. The novel also explores the ways in which the apparent singularity and single-mindedness of ambition and activism are always liable to transmutation into fantasies which multiply and dissolve the self and its desires.

At the novel's close, Mary Datchet, excluded from the romance plot, becomes for Katherine and her lover Ralph Denham an image of a bettered future, the 'illuminated blinds' of her London flat 'an expression to them

both of something impersonal and serene in the spirit of the woman within, working out her plans far into the night – her plans for the good of a world that none of them were ever to know'.¹⁶ The imagined shape of this world to come can only be determined by present knowledges, while the novel's final image is of Katherine standing on the threshold of her family home, poised, like so many fictional 'new women', between past and future.

Three Guineas turns its back on 'The Modern Girl'. Whereas a number of Woolf's feminist contemporaries, in their accounts of the rights and wrongs of women, produced chronological histories leading up to the woman, or girl, of the present day, Woolf makes her closing arguments through the oppressions of Victorian father–daughter relationships. There is undoubtedly an autobiographical element here, and an identification with these nineteenth-century 'daughters of educated men' that Woolf did not have with the *déclassée* 'contemporary young woman' represented, for example, in Ray Strachey's *Our Freedom and its Results* (published by the Hogarth Press in 1936), who takes her freedoms for granted and is, in the terms we would use today, definitely 'post-feminist'. In electing to represent the workings of patriarchy through Victorian father–daughter relationships in *Three Guineas* – the Barretts, the Brontës and the Jex-Blakes – Woolf was not only caught up imaginatively with her own Victorian upbringing. She also reveals the profound influence of the past on the present, and the ways in which each generation continues to live out and by the values, defences and world-views of the generation, or even generations, preceding its own. In this sense, we can never be fully present in and at our own times.

On the one hand, Woolf was concerned with a form of social and psychic asynchronicity; on the other, a telescoping of time as she explored, for example, the 'ancient and obscure emotions' that fuel, and socially ratify, the desire of fathers to control and possess their daughters. In both cases, there is a psychoanalytically informed understanding of oppression and repression which links Woolf's feminist analyses with her interest in group and collective psychology – for it was at times of social and political, rather than specifically personal crisis, that Woolf turned to psychology and psychoanalysis. Although Elizabeth Abel, in her *Virginia Woolf and the Fictions of Psychoanalysis*, represents Woolf's turn towards Freudian accounts of patriarchal culture as something of a defeat in her imaginings of women's past and future, other feminist critics have seen her analyses of the ways in which patriarchy and fascism interact as her most political, and most prescient, understandings.

A Room of One's Own and *Three Guineas* form the core of Woolf's feminist writings. Renewed critical attention to these texts – and to Woolf's numerous

essays on women writers and on women's position in society more generally – has created a Virginia Woolf whose feminism cannot be in doubt, and which is, indeed, at the very heart of her concerns. Nor can a strict line be drawn between her overtly feminist, 'polemical' works and her fiction. Her novels take up the images and imaginings of her pamphlets and essays; her 'non-fiction' uses strategies more often associated with fictional narrative.

A Room of One's Own and *Three Guineas* inevitably invite comparison as Woolf's two most substantial discursive works on women. E. M. Forster, who I discuss later, approved *A Room of One's Own* and deplored the more overtly political and uncompromising *Three Guineas*; more recently, a number of feminist critics have argued that, in contrast to *Three Guineas*, *A Room of One's Own* is overly bound by a need to charm, and by, in Woolf's own phrase, its 'tea-table manner'. I would argue that such a judgement overlooks the biting ironies of *A Room of One's Own* and that it might be more fruitful to think of the differences between the two texts as differences in rhetorical strategy and historical and political contexts rather than as those of feminist conviction or confidence.

A Room of One's Own intervenes in debates about women and creativity, fuelled in part by the obsession with 'genius' of the first decades of the century, and uses fictional strategies to talk about women and about fiction. It is also caught up with the sexual politics of the 1920s, and with the question of love and friendship between women, given new edge by the prosecution for obscenity of Radclyffe Hall's lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928. *Three Guineas*, written in the form of a letter, uses a seemingly more direct first-person address, but its play on and with terms that circulate throughout the text, and its stress on the need for new words and meanings, render it equally rhetorical. *Three Guineas* extends a number of the themes pursued in *A Room of One's Own*, but its contexts – the rise of European fascism and the growing threat of war – shape the concerns of the earlier text in different ways.

Both texts thematise and dramatises women's exclusion – from education, the professions, the public sphere. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf represents the structures of inclusion and exclusion as fundamental to patriarchal society and its treatment of women: 'I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in.'¹⁷ On her visit to 'Oxbridge', Woolf's narrator finds herself repeatedly 'locked out', excluded from chapel, library and the turf of the college quadrangle: 'Only the Fellows and Scholars are allowed here; the gravel is the place for me' (ROO, p. 5). Not only is her way physically barred, but these barriers interrupt the free flow of her thoughts, prohibiting her from 'trespassing'

on the grounds of intellect and imagination held to be the proper preserve of the male sex.

The effect of such controls, as *A Room of One's Own* represents it, is not to inhibit thought entirely, but to send it down different channels, and along byways other than the straight paths traversed by 'the trained mind' of the college-educated man. *A Room of One's Own* is, indeed, a text about thought and the possibilities of thought. In the scene in the British Museum, 'Woman' becomes a 'thought' in the vast dome of the Reading Room, imaged by Woolf as a 'huge bald forehead'. The amelioration of women's position in society depends, Woolf suggests, largely on their being thought of differently, and on their ceasing to be used as mirrors 'reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size'. The feminism of *A Room of One's Own* lies, it could be said, less in its concern with what is to be done than with how identities and states of affairs are to be conceptualised. Woolf's claim that 'we think back through our mothers if we are women' (*ROO*, p. 69) has been an immensely powerful support for a feminism seeking to construct a distinct women's history and literary tradition, but, in the contexts of *A Room of One's Own*, the emphasis should be placed as much on the 'thinking' (an activity traditionally associated with a 'rational' masculinity) as on the model of matrilinearity.

A Room of One's Own shares many of the concerns of other early twentieth-century feminist tracts, but transmutes 'issues' and histories into figurations and 'scene-making'. Winifred Holtby's *Women and a Changing Civilization*, for example, begins with a 'factual' account of women in prehistory and ends in the present day.¹⁸ Woolf, by contrast, does not conceal the constructedness of historical imaginings, but turns the histories of the 'Oxbridge' colleges (men's and women's) into 'founding' narratives aligned with fathers and mothers and the births of civilisations:

Kings and nobles brought treasure in huge sacks and poured it under the earth. This scene was for ever coming alive in my mind and placing itself by another of lean cows and a muddy market and withered greens and the stringy hearts of old men – these two pictures, disjointed and disconnected and nonsensical as they were, were for ever coming together and combating each other and had me entirely at their mercy. (ROO, p. 17)

Throughout *A Room of One's Own* Woolf plays with the question of origin and generation. Whereas the feminist commentators of her time directly addressed the question of birth control and its impact on women's lives, Woolf encodes it, weaving this issue into *A Room of One's Own* and exploring, indeed, what it means for women to think, and to be able to think, the absence of issue. The fact of childbirth and child-rearing acts as

one of the barriers intercepting the narrator's imaginings of a different lot for women.

I have been discussing *A Room of One's Own* as a kind of adventure in thinking differently or as a thought-experiment. Yet the 'conclusion' (or, as Woolf puts it, 'opinion upon one minor point') with which the text (putting the end at the beginning) opens is also a materialist one. Thinking and thought, for Woolf, are not independent of physical and material circumstances but shaped by them: 'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction' (*ROO*, p. 3). The text's admixture of indirectness and directness, of abstraction and situatedness, has helped to make it central to twentieth-century literary and cultural feminism. On the one hand its complexity and obliquity render it virtually inexhaustible by interpretation and limitlessly re-readable. On the other hand, it contains 'detachable' arguments, aphorisms and ideas (those 'nugget[s] of pure truth' which ostensibly elude the narrator's grasp) which have become foundation-stones for feminist theory and criticism: 'we think back through our mothers if we are women'; 'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction'; 'Chloe plus Olivia' (used as the title of a recent anthology of lesbian literature).¹⁹

'We think back through our mothers if we are women.' This most frequently quoted of Woolf's statements clearly relates to ideas and imaginings of a distinctively female literary tradition and of a language and literature shaped by and for women. The literary and cultural 'turn' in feminist politics has made Woolf's focus on women writers, in *A Room of One's Own* and in numerous essays and reviews, central to her feminism, though it was a less defining feature of a feminist politics in her time. Concepts of a female literary tradition became crucial for feminist literary studies, underlying the creation of presses, in the 1970s and beyond, dedicated to publishing women's writings and, in the academic sphere, of courses devoted to women's writing. These practices have become so naturalised that we now rarely question the assumption of women's 'difference' as writers, or the implications of constructing an independent tradition for women writers. Woolf's fable of Shakespeare's sister, who wanted to be a poet like her brother but committed suicide after finding herself pregnant with the child of the theatre manager who seduced her, also resonated with the feminist model of women's 'silences', the burial and repression of their gifts, and a literary history in which women's absence became constructed as a speaking silence.

In Woolf's time, the question of the woman writer's 'difference' was a particularly vexed one. Woolf reviewed a number of books by male critics – Courtney's *The Feminine Note in Fiction* among them – which sought for

some defining essence of the woman writer, and, by extension, the woman, by grouping literary women together as an object of study. One of the contexts for such works was the concern that literature itself was becoming, or had become, 'feminised'. Another was the turn-of-the-century biologism which had pervaded all forms of thought. The obsession with the nature of Woman is satirised by Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* as her narrator, pursuing the topic of 'Women and Fiction' in the British Library, quails before the volume of literature on the topic of Women: 'Have you any notion how many books are written about women in the course of one year? Have you any notion how many are written by men? Are you aware that you are, perhaps, the most discussed animal in the universe?' (ROO, p. 24). One of the issues implicitly posed by the text is how to think the question of women as embodied beings outside the reductive terms of much of the biology and anthropology of her day:

The book has somehow to be adapted to the body, and at a venture one would say that women's books should be shorter, more concentrated, than those of men, and framed so that they do not need long hours of steady and uninterrupted work. For interruptions there will always be. Again, the nerves that feed the brain would seem to differ in men and women, and if you are going to make them work their best and hardest, you must find out what treatment suits them . . . what alternations of work and rest they need, interpreting rest not as doing nothing but as doing something but something that is different; and what should that difference be? All this should be discussed and discovered; all this is part of the question of women and fiction. And yet, I continued, approaching the bookcase again, where shall I find that elaborate study of the psychology of women by a woman? (ROO, p. 71)

Male writers taking women as their objects of study, Woolf suggests, have vested interests in distorting the terms of the differences; hence the need for the 'study of the psychology of women by a woman'. The repetition of 'differ', 'different', 'difference' in the passage – three different modalities, used in different contexts – continues the posing of the question of (sexual) difference in the text as a whole. There is 'difference', Woolf seems to be suggesting, but we can as yet make no assumptions about its nature, for which we have no adequate instruments or standards of measurement. Difference, moreover, can only be a relative term – dependent on history, circumstance and perspective.

A Room of One's Own, like *Three Guineas* and many of Woolf's novels, continually explores the different and shifting views created by varying angles of perception. In *A Room of One's Own* Woolf follows her much debated allegory of 'two people [a young man and woman] getting into a cab' as a model of 'unity' within the mind with this passage:

What does one mean by 'the unity of the mind'? I pondered, for clearly the mind has so great a power of concentrating at any point at any moment that it seems to have no single state of being. It can separate itself off from the people in the street, for example, and think of itself as apart from them, at an upper window looking down on them. Or it can think with other people spontaneously, as, for instance, in a crowd waiting to hear some piece of news read out. It can think back through its fathers or through its mothers, as I have said that a woman writing thinks back through her mothers. Again if one is a woman one is often surprised by a sudden splitting off of consciousness, say in walking down Whitehall, when from being the natural inheritor of that civilisation, she becomes, on the contrary, outside of it, alien and critical. Clearly the mind is always altering its focus, and bringing the world into different perspectives. (ROO, pp. 87–8)

The passage names a number of 'stories'; of the founding narratives of generation and of literary heritage (mothers *or* fathers); of urban modernism (the perspectives of 'the man of the crowd' or of the detached observer at the upper window or on the balcony). The discussion is ostensibly about 'states of mind', a prelude to Woolf's discussion of creative 'androgyny'. Yet it marks a political as much as a psychological position, its uneasy pronouns ('it', 'one', 'she') suggesting the uncertain place of women in a culture, a nation, which they cannot fully call their own.

In the passage from *A Room of One's Own* this angle of vision takes the female subject by surprise. In *Three Guineas* it becomes the willed political stance of the woman who assumes her place as outsider. The 'splitting off of consciousness' is closely echoed in a diary entry (15 April 1937) in which Woolf describes dining with Kingsley Martin, Stephen Spender and Julian Bell (who would die in Spain three months later) and discussing politics and war: 'Can't be a pacifist; the irresponsible can. I sat there splitting off my own position from theirs, testing what they said, convincing myself of my own integrity & justice' (D5, p. 79). The 'splitting off' also marks the development of the feminist separatism central to the uncompromising radicalism of *Three Guineas*.

While it is possible to isolate themes and images running throughout Woolf's work, from her early essays to her last novel, it is also the case that her writings group themselves into clusters, formed around both personal and public preoccupations. Thus Woolf's fiction and non-fiction of the 1920s, for example, is substantially concerned with the relative fixities or mutabilities of sexual and gender identities. The opening section of *A Room of One's Own* echoes to 'a sort of humming noise' that could be heard before the First World War, which translates into the Victorian love poetry of Tennyson and Christina Rossetti. It is a reverberation from the harmonies

of 'two different notes, one high, one low', which was Mrs Ramsay's image of marriage in *To the Lighthouse*, the novel in which Woolf explored most fully the Victorian concept of 'separate spheres' and the chasm separating past and present. *Orlando*, whose writing was intertwined with that of *A Room of One's Own*, takes up, both seriously and satirically, the narratives of gender identity of the culture and period, and exposes the sexual nature of the ostensibly sex-transcendent 'androgyny' that has fuelled so much debate in Woolf criticism. *To the Lighthouse* and *Orlando*, on the surface such different fictions, share a sense of the complex relationships between model and copy, fictional and biographical representations, and a focus on time, memory, historical rupture and sexual identities.

The Pargiters/The Years (which Woolf also thought of as 'first cousin' to *Orlando* (D4, pp. 132–3)) and *Three Guineas* were profoundly shaped by the exigencies of the 1930s. Woolf, like so many of her literary contemporaries, was influenced by, and contributed to, the 'documentary' culture, the passion for 'fact', of this period. Woolf's original plan for *The Years* was that it should be an 'Essay-Novel', a 'novel of fact', in which essays would be interspersed with extracts from 'a [non-existent] novel that will run into many volumes': 'Its to be an Essay-Novel, called the Pargiters – & its to take in everything, sex, education, life & & come, with the most powerful & agile leaps, like a chamois across precipices from 1880 to here & now' (D4, p. 129). 'We must become the people that we were two or three generations ago. Let us be our great grandmothers,' she wrote in the first essay of *The Pargiters*, explaining that her use of the fictional extracts was to be an aid to this process for those unused to 'being somebody else'. The past provides 'that perspective which is so important for the understanding of the present' (*The Pargiters*, p. 9).

In early 1933 Woolf decided against the separate 'interchapters' (the essays), instead 'compact[ing] them in the text' (D4, p. 146), and later using some of the material in *Three Guineas*. The drafts of *The Pargiters* reveal what a radical and difficult project Woolf had first envisaged. *The Pargiters*, like *The Years*, explores the ways in which girls and women are restricted in the middle-class home, and excluded from the education and public life which their brothers and fathers take for granted. Yet the lives of men, too, are stunted by the inequalities between the sexes. Woolf's analyses are powerful ones, but she encountered immense difficulties in shaping them to the demands of plot, in moving her narrative forward into the 'here and now' and in negotiating the relationship between 'fact' and 'fiction'.

The division of *The Pargiters* into the texts that became *The Years* and *Three Guineas* was at least in part a way of dealing with these difficulties. In the process of turning *The Pargiters* into *The Years*, Woolf also drew back

from the 'didactic demonstrative' strain of the novel, her fear of the 'didactic' (*D4*, p. 145) growing as she saw and heard the workings of fascist ideology. Increasingly, Woolf seemed to link political propaganda – both left and right – with the forms of masculine war-mongering or war-enthusiasm to which the feminism of *Three Guineas* is so profoundly opposed. Writing in 'The Leaning Tower' (1940) of and to the group of young male writers we now know as 'The Auden Generation', Woolf argued that the distorting effects of two world wars had resulted in 'the pedagogic, the didactic, the loud speaker strain that dominates their poetry. They must teach; they must preach.'²⁰

A Room of One's Own began life as an after-dinner speech, retains a discursive, performative dimension and explores the gendered shape and rhythm of *sentences*. In *Three Guineas* Woolf, by contrast, emphasises the written nature of her text and the politically loaded nature of *words* – 'feminism', 'patriotism', 'influence', 'freedom'. *Three Guineas* is epistolary in form, punctuated by extracts from the writings of 'fact' – biographies, autobiographies, newspaper texts and images ('history in the raw') – and closes with a lengthy and elaborate structure of footnotes and references. The letter form was a device Woolf also used in her response to *Life as We Have Known It* ('Memories of a Working Women's Guild') and which operated there as a form of refusal – to 'introduce', 'preface' or frame the memoirs: 'Books should stand on their own feet.'²¹ Interestingly, both *Three Guineas* and 'Memories of a Working Women's Guild' are the Woolf texts which have raised the most questions about the class identifications and limitations of Woolf's feminism. 'Memories of a Working Women's Guild' refuses to imagine cross-class knowledge and empathy: 'One could not be Mrs Giles because one's body had never stood at the wash-tub; one's hands had never wrung and scrubbed and chopped up whatever the meat may be that makes a miner's dinner.'²² *Three Guineas* makes its specific address to the 'daughters of educated men': Woolf seemed deliberately to have rejected the 'pro-proletarian spectacles' of many of her contemporaries. Class position and perspective is indeed a complex and troubled dimension of Woolf's feminism, and one of which she was acutely aware – perhaps more aware than many of her recent critics.

The scrapbooks of newspaper and journal cuttings kept by Woolf during the 1930s, on which she drew substantially during the writing of *Three Guineas*, give important insight into Woolf's feminism at this time. In a letter of 1916, Woolf had written (*L2*, p. 76): 'I become steadily more feminist owing to the Times, which I read at breakfast and wonder how this preposterous masculine fiction [the First World War] keeps going a day longer – without some vigorous young woman pulling us together and

marching through it.' As fascism spread throughout Europe in the 1930s, Woolf's notebooks place in ironic juxtaposition 'patriarchal' attitudes towards women in England and fascist ideology abroad. Quoting correspondence from the *Daily Telegraph* in which the letter-writers deplore the entry of women into the professions, Woolf comments:

There, in those quotations, is the egg of the very same worm that we know under other names in other countries.

There we have in embryo the creature, Dictator as we call him when he is Italian or German, who believes that he has the right whether given by God, Nature, sex or race is immaterial, to dictate to other human beings how they shall live; what they shall do.

Woolf reinforces the point with a quotation from Hitler, whose sentiments on women and the home chime directly with those of the newspaper correspondents: 'One is written in English, the other in German. But where is the difference? Are they not both saying the same thing, whether they speak English or German . . .?'²³ The Dictator is also one who dictates to women.

Much of the criticism directed against *Three Guineas* expressed the widely held view that feminism should be subordinated to the 'larger' cause of anti-fascism. Woolf pasted into her *Three Guineas* scrapbooks a telling letter from Elizabeth Bibesco, which she also quoted in her diary. In January 1935, Bibesco had asked Woolf to support a proposed anti-fascist exhibition organised by the Cambridge Anti-War Council; Woolf had responded by enquiring about the omission of 'the woman question' from the project. Bibesco replied: 'I am afraid that it had not occurred to me that in matters of ultimate importance even feminists could wish to segregate & label the sexes' (*D4*, p. 273). Such attitudes may well have fuelled the insistence in *Three Guineas* that, while the fight against fascism is a common cause, men and women must, for the time being at least, follow their related but separate paths.

In a number of the essays and in the novel written after *Three Guineas*, *Between the Acts*, Woolf explored the question of masculinity as searchingly as that of women and femininity. In *Between the Acts*, Woolf explores masculine sexuality, aggression and fear and their relationship to the coming of war, primarily through the figures of Giles, whose 'anger' dominates much of the novel, and the homosexual William Dodge. Although *Three Guineas* would seem to advocate a feminist separatism, Woolf was throughout her work absorbed by the social and psychological motivations underlying men's need to belittle and exclude women, from the angry professor of *A Room of One's Own* to the regressive and repressive fathers of

Three Guineas. In 'Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid', published in 1940, Woolf wrote of the external and internal voices driving 'the young airmen up in the sky' and of 'instincts fostered and cherished by education and tradition'. 'We must help the young Englishmen', she writes, 'to root out from themselves the love of medals and decorations.'²⁴

'Patriarchy' and 'patriotism' share an etymological root. In 'Professions for Women', the lecture, and then essay, which provided the foundation for *The Pargiters*, Woolf wrote of the need to perform a symbolic matricide: 'If I had not killed her,' she writes of the mother-figure, 'The Angel in the House', 'she would have killed me.' In *Three Guineas*, by contrast, it is fathers who threaten to pluck the heart out of their daughters' aspirations and ambitions. Freedom from the law of fathers, *Three Guineas* suggests, is also freedom from the boundaries of nationhood. The basis for 'the anonymous and secret society of Outsiders', imagined as women's alternative to a nation conceived as a male club writ large, is that 'as a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world.' Woolf's refusal to collude with patriotism – *Three Guineas* is shot through with ironies directed against patriotic and institutional pomp and circumstance – has been variously celebrated and critiqued. Could Woolf's claim to a global identity be too confidently (even imperialistically) inclusive? Does placing women in the position of Outsiders allow Woolf to exempt them from the urgent decisions of the period, and would her position in 1938 have put her very close to a 'politics of appeasement'? 'Thinking is my fighting,' Woolf wrote, thus suggesting not a disengagement from the exigencies of her time, but an acute sense of the specific responses she could, and would, make to them.

Feminism's Woolf

The question of Woolf's 'feminism' played a central role in the earliest critical discussions of her work. One of the first book-length studies of Woolf was written by the novelist and feminist critic and commentator Winifred Holtby. Holtby's book, engaging with the gendered perspectives and politics of Woolf's time, took up the question of 'androgyny', so central to recent feminist Woolf criticism, and, by reading *A Room of One's Own* and *Orlando* in tandem, hinted that Woolf's use of the concept of 'androgyny', far from evading sexual identity, was closely allied to theories of bisexuality and (female) homosexuality. She also explored the provisionality of gender identities in ways which anticipate recent feminist and postmodernist readings of Woolf. Thus Holtby, in her reading of *A Room*

of *One's Own*, understood Woolf to be saying that we cannot 'yet' give an answer to the question 'What is a woman?':

Looking round upon the world of human beings as we know it, we are hard put to it to say what is the natural shape of men or women, so old, so all-enveloping are the moulds fitted by history and custom over their personalities. We do not know how much of sensitiveness, intuition, docility and tenderness may not be naturally 'male', how much of curiosity, aggression, audacity and combativeness may not be 'female'.²⁵

Holtby supported Woolf's model of cultural and historical distortion, whereby the 'natural shape' of men and women is twisted by patriarchy's insistence on the inferiority of women, 'for if they were not inferior, they would cease to enlarge' (*ROO*, p. 32).

In the decades between Holtby's study and Woolf's 'rediscovery' by 'second-wave' feminist criticism, a number of commentators on Woolf had also put 'feminism' at the centre of their analyses – though often in less than sympathetic ways. For Woolf's friend and fellow-novelist E. M. Forster, delivering a lecture on her life and work two months after her death, Woolf's feminism was 'a very peculiar side of her', producing 'one of the most brilliant of her books – the charming and persuasive *A Room of One's Own*', but also 'responsible for the worst of her books – the cantankerous *Three Guineas* – and for the less successful streaks in *Orlando*'.²⁶ 'There are spots of [feminism] all over her work, and it was constantly in her mind,' Forster asserted, representing 'feminism' as a matter of 'streaks' and 'spots', blemishes on the work of art. 'In my judgement', he continued:

There is something old-fashioned about this extreme Feminism; it dates back to her suffragette youth of the 1910s, when men kissed girls to distract them from wanting the vote, and very properly provoked her wrath. By the 1930s she had much less to complain of, and seems to keep on grumbling from habit . . . She was sensible about the past; about the present she was sometimes unreasonable. However, I speak as a man here, and as an elderly one. The best judges of her Feminism are neither elderly men nor even elderly women, but young women.²⁷

Forster's comments typify the inability of many of her contemporaries – women as well as men – to accept Woolf's feminist pacifism of the 1930s or her perception, explored at greatest length in *Three Guineas*, that 'patriarchy', militarism and fascism support and sustain each other.

Forster's identification of feminism with suffrage is also significant. If feminism is defined as the political campaign for women's votes, then its success would indeed render feminism obsolete. Yet many of Woolf's contemporaries continued to work with a broader definition of the feminist

project, and to show, as Woolf herself did in *Three Guineas*, that women's rights had in no sense been conclusively 'won' with suffrage. The vote, Woolf's narrator declares in *A Room of One's Own*, had meant far less to her than her aunt's legacy, which had given her the five hundred pounds a year and the room of her own deemed necessary for the woman writer.

For a later critic, J. B. Bachelor, whose 'Feminism in Virginia Woolf', first published in 1968, takes up, and partially refutes, Forster's charges against Woolf's feminism, 'the implications of feminism are antipathetic to [Woolf's] personality'.²⁸ In an essay singularly unattuned to Woolf's ironies and rhetorical strategies, Bachelor reads the Woolf of *A Room* as arguing that 'women must not emulate men', but give them 'a "renewal of creative power" by the contact of contrasting ways of life, and for this reason women's education should "bring out and fortify the differences rather than the similarities"'. Bachelor writes:

To return to Forster's original assessment . . . I have suggested firstly that the protests in *Three Guineas* are legitimate in the contest of the 'thirties; secondly, that feminism proper is aesthetically unacceptable to Virginia Woolf and hardly appears in her writings; and thirdly that what is 'constantly in her mind' is not 'feminism' but a passionate concern with the nature of womanhood.²⁹

Woolf's 'concern with the nature of womanhood', Bachelor suggests, takes 'two slightly contradictory forms; one with women in their relationships with men and with society, and the special roles that they can play . . . and the other with the full development of women as individuals and as artists'. The focus on women characters in Woolf's fiction was also central to much early feminist criticism, as well as non- or anti-feminist criticism. It would be a revealing exercise to chart the change in critical attitudes towards Mrs Ramsay, Lily Briscoe or Clarissa Dalloway. Whereas, for example, earlier critics tended to celebrate Mrs Ramsay's 'creativity' in human relations and her ability to harmonise the domestic sphere (the 'spinsterish' Lily's passion for her art being seen as a lesser form of creativity), recent critics have seen the portrait of Mrs Ramsay as less positive. Feminist critics have pointed to the ways in which she upholds systems of marriage and a 'separate spheres' ideology of masculinity and femininity which severely disadvantages women; psychoanalytic critics have focused on the ambivalence towards the mother-figure which fuels Lily's (and Woolf's) drive to represent her.

A number of mid-century critics, in particular those influenced by 'myth' and 'archetype' criticism, focused less on the *ideologies* of gender identity than on masculinity and femininity as *principles*. Mrs Ramsay becomes perceived as a representation of the mind and sensibility of the female

novelist, holding the whole together. J. B. Bachelor was by no means alone in making the critical move from the question of Woolf's *feminism* to that of Woolf's *femininity*, including her 'passionate concern with the nature of womanhood'. Herbert Marder's *Feminism and Art* (1968), by contrast, insists on the centrality of feminism as politics to Woolf's work, although its impulse is also towards the resolution of opposites through the model of 'androgyny'.³⁰

Woolf's 'style' was also used as a way of defining by contrast, and shoring up, the 'masculine' writing of her male contemporaries. The famous passage in 'Modern Fiction' in which Woolf offers an account of consciousness and the modern novel – 'Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions' (an aesthetic from which she in fact takes a critical distance, ascribing it to Joyce and his contemporaries) – was used against Woolf by her detractors, who frequently defined her limitations as those of a purely passive, receptive consciousness. This consciousness is invariably feminised, as in Herbert Muller's 1937 critique of Woolf and other women writers of the early twentieth century, 'the Society of the Daughters of Henry James': 'they render with a nice precision the subtle gradations of perception and sensation – but in this delicious banquet the mere man still yearns for a little red beef and port wine'.³¹

Such a response is anticipated in Woolf's accounts of the difference of value. 'It is probable', she writes in 'Women and Fiction', 'that both in life and in art the values of a woman are not the values of a man'.³² She elaborated this claim at length in *A Room of One's Own*, playing, as in *Three Guineas*, with the relationships between money and value:

It is obvious that the values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the other sex; naturally, this is so. Yet it is the masculine values that prevail. Speaking crudely, football and sport are 'important'; the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes 'trivial'. And these values are inevitably transferred from life to fiction. This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing-room. A scene in a battle-field is more important than a scene in a shop – everywhere and much more subtly the difference of value persists. (ROO, p. 67)

In her imagined fiction of the future in *A Room of One's Own*, the scene is indeed set in a shop, an 'ever-changing and turning world of gloves and shoes and stuffs swaying up and down among the faint scents that come through chemists' bottles down arcades of dress material over a floor of pseudo-marble' (ROO, p. 89). Through this 'ever-changing and turning

world' Woolf not only points up but feminises the fleeting, mutable nature of modernity and modern life.

Feminist criticism has, above all, demanded a transvaluation of values (to borrow Nietzsche's phrase), and insisted that the supposedly 'universal' values underlying literary judgements and canon-formation were in fact highly partial, ideological and, for the most part, unsympathetic to the 'difference' of women writers and readers. It has, in this sense, called for a revaluation of the 'perception and sensation' so readily dismissed by Muller. On the other hand, there has also been a significant drive to reveal how unladylike a writer Woolf in fact was, and to show that her writing was fuelled by a proper feminist anger.

'Anger' and 'androgyny' were the two terms most central to 'second-wave' feminist debates on Woolf. Their centrality serves to further increase the importance of *A Room of One's Own* as the key text of Woolf's feminism and feminism's Woolf, for it is here that 'anger' and 'androgyny' are most fully discussed. Yet *A Room of One's Own* was seen by many critics to subdue and repress women's anger in favour of a more serene gender-transcendent or androgynous creativity, whereas righteous anger was felt to be the motivating force underlying *Three Guineas*, a text in which 'androgyny' is replaced by an emphasis on women as 'outsiders', both different from and separate from men. More readily assimilated to radical feminisms, *Three Guineas* has taken on further significance with the new or renewed interest in women's writing on war and fascism, and with a renewed engagement in literary and feminist studies with cultural and historical contexts and concerns: it is the central text in, to take one significant recent example, Naomi Black's *Virginia Woolf as Feminist* (2004). Whereas a feminist criticism centred on feminine writing, identity and sexuality turned primarily to the poetics of *A Room of One's Own*, *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*, those critics concerned with a more overtly feminist Woolf – one whose feminism is an aspect of political and social engagement with the events of her time – have tended to focus on *The Years*, *Three Guineas* and, though to a lesser extent, *Night and Day* and *Between the Acts*.

To an extent, such a divide maps on to the 'modernism' versus 'realism' debates central to literary and cultural studies of the 1970s. This way of dividing up the territory informed Toril Moi's response to Elaine Showalter's chapter on Virginia Woolf in *A Literature of Their Own*. Showalter, taking her cues from recently published biographical works on Woolf and arguing against Carolyn Heilbrun's celebration of 'Bloomsbury androgyny', read the message of *A Room of One's Own* as a defensive 'flight into androgyny': 'Androgyny was the myth that helped her evade

confrontation with her own painful femaleness and enabled her to choke and repress her anger and ambition.³³ In Showalter's account, anger found its articulation in 'madness', while madness, or at least breakdown, is associated with 'crises in female identity': the onset of menstruation at the time of her mother's premature death; Leonard's decision that they would not have children; menopause. 'If one can see *A Room of One's Own* as a document in the literary history of female aestheticism,' Showalter writes, 'and remain detached from its narrative strategies, the concepts of androgyny and the private room are neither as liberating nor as obvious as they first appear. They have a darker side that is the sphere of the exile and the eunuch.'³⁴ The myth of androgyny and women's 'madness' become linked as different ways of articulating 'resentment and rage'.

Showalter's focus on constructions of and treatment for female insanity makes her chapter on Woolf a dry run for *The Female Malady*, the book in which she explores the history of the concept of women's madness, while the double binds in which she ties Woolf owe something to Ronald Laing's existential psychoanalysis and its accounts of psychic and familial 'knots'. In her response to Showalter's discussion of Woolf, however, Toril Moi takes up the reading of *A Room of One's Own* rather than the psychological and biographical dimensions of the chapter. Starting with Showalter's view of *A Room of One's Own* as an 'extremely impersonal and defensive text', from whose distracting rhetorical devices the feminist critic should take a critical distance, Moi argues that 'remaining detached from the narrative strategies of *Room* is equivalent to not reading it at all'.³⁵ Picking up on a passing reference to Georg Lukács at the close of Showalter's chapter ('In Georg Lukács' formulation, the ethic of a novelist becomes an aesthetic problem in his writing'), Moi turned her response to Showalter into a replay of the debates between Brecht and Lukács in the 1930s, which had been newly translated and re-presented for the 1970s, with Moi on the side of Woolf's modernism and avant-gardism and Showalter standing for a realist aesthetic opposed to textual innovation and inseparable from that shibboleth of the new cultural theory, bourgeois or liberal humanism. The multiple 'I's' of *A Room of One's Own*, which in Showalter's account are a marker of Woolf's refusal or inability to speak in her own voice, are for Moi a central aspect of Woolf's challenge to 'the male-humanist concept of an essential human identity', a challenge in turn linked to psychoanalysis's subversions of the old stable ego. Woolf, Moi argues, 'radically undermine[s] the notion of the unitary self, the central concept of Western male humanism and one crucial to Showalter's feminism'.³⁶ This feminism is then shown up as a crude 'images of women' aesthetic, which seeks positive role models in its women writers and their characters rather than 'locating the politics of

Woolf's writing precisely in her textual practice'. Turning to Julia Kristeva's theories, and in particular her essay 'Women's Time', Moi pitted an aesthetics and politics both avant-gardist and feminist against the 'traditional aesthetic categories' of 'current Anglo-American feminist criticism'. Woolf's 'androgyny', Moi argues, is the deconstruction of sexual identity and of the duality masculinity–femininity, not its attempted resolution or sublation into a unified, sex-transcendent holism.

As significant as the impassable divide Moi refused to straddle (French versus Anglo-American feminism) is the role played by Virginia Woolf in the construction of feminist theories. Elaine Showalter, in *A Literature of Their Own*, presents herself as setting out to save feminist literary criticism, and women's writing more generally, from Woolf's fatal legacy of repression, passivity, sickness and suicide. Using Woolf's own 'murderous imagery' against herself, Showalter argued that Woolf represents the 'Angel in the House' for the twentieth-century woman writer and that she must be demystified, if not killed. Moi, by contrast, sets out to 'rescue' Woolf from her unreconstructed, undeconstructive readers or, rather, non-readers: 'A feminist criticism that would do both justice and homage to its great mother and sister: this, surely, should be our goal.'³⁷ Woolf is the starting-point and occasion for Moi's history and critique of feminist literary theories: the 'mother' of the feminist critics of the late twentieth century, her right reading will be the result of the right forms of sexual/textual politics. Woolf thus becomes the alpha and omega of feminist criticism, its origin and its 'goal'.

Toril Moi's suggestions for a Kristevan reading of Woolf, in some part anticipated in Mary Jacobus's essay 'The Difference of View' (1979), were pursued by a number of critics. The ramifications of such work were far-reaching, linking up with new agendas in psychoanalytic literary criticism and theory, and with explorations of the place of women writers, and gender more generally, within modernist and avant-garde culture. In *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974), Kristeva, drawing upon Freud's distinction between pre-Oedipal and Oedipal sexual drives and Lacan's concepts of the 'imaginary' and 'symbolic', defined the place of the pre-symbolic or 'semiotic' (where the symbolic is understood as the condition of ordered, 'rational' signification) as the space of the maternal chora (enclosed space, womb, receptacle), which in turn corresponds to the 'poetic' function of language. Represented as the transgressive, 'feminine' materiality of signification, the 'semiotic' becomes evident in 'madness, holiness and poetry', and surfaces in literary texts, particularly those of the avant-garde, as musicality and linguistic play. Kristevan theory, as well as the accounts of 'feminine écriture' in the work of Hélène Cixous and others, opened up for

occupancy the 'depths' of Woolf's writing: the female 'room' (perceived by Showalter as a prison-house) or the 'deep lake' of the imagination and of 'unconscious being' in Woolf's essay 'Professions for Women', and its poetics, its 'writ[ing] to a rhythm not a plot'. Some of the most subtle and nuanced feminist work on Woolf, including studies by Margaret Homans, Makiko Minow-Pinkney, Patricia Waugh, Sue Roe, Patricia Lawrence and Clare Hanson, has focused on questions of gender, modernism and language, taking as its starting-points Woolf's troubled but imaginatively crucial concepts of a language 'fitted' to women, as in her review of Dorothy Richardson's novel *Revolving Lights*, her models of writing and sexuality, and the intertwining of feminist and modernist subversions of traditional narrative forms and structures in her work.³⁸

The 'visual turn' taken by literary and cultural studies in recent years has been strongly reflected in new studies of Woolf's work. Maggie Humm has explored the importance of photography and photographic aesthetics in the life and work of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell.³⁹ Jane Goldman's *The Feminist Aesthetics of Virginia Woolf: Modernism, Post-Impressionism and the Politics of the Visual* explores a 'feminist prismatic' in Woolf's work and the centrality of 'colourism' to her writing, philosophy and politics, linking 'the historical and political context of the suffrage movement' to Woolf's revisions of 'photogological tropes of subjectivity' and 'heliotropic discourses', and insisting upon a 'materialist' dimension to Woolf's conceptions and representations of gender difference and to the representations of 'light' and 'darkness' in her work.⁴⁰ Emily Dalgarno's more psychoanalytically inflected study *Virginia Woolf and the Visible World* shares Goldman's understanding of the significance of the 1929 solar eclipse to Woolf's writing and thought, and explores the ways in which, for Woolf, 'narrative begins as a response to her sense of being orientated towards an unrepresentable visible', at a moment 'when historically specific optical codes were undergoing significant change'.⁴¹ Subjectivity, in these studies, is explored through the question of visibility. The focus on vision and visuality has come together with a new, or renewed, fascination with Woolf's engagement with the scientific discourses of her time, in particular those, such as astronomy, to which perception and optics are central, and these topics and *topoi* have been brought into a feminist frame.⁴²

In 'The Difference of View', Mary Jacobus was both committed to a deconstructionist and psychoanalytic reading of Woolf and concerned with the terms of 'androgyny' and 'anger'. 'Androgyny' is redefined as a way of representing or negotiating 'difference': the model of 'sexual difference' is one in which the difference between the sexes is turned from a question of

sexed/gendered entities, identities and essences to a focus on the process of differentiation itself. ‘Androgyny,’ Jacobus suggests, is ‘a simultaneous enactment of desire and repression by which the split is closed with an essentially Utopian vision of undivided consciousness. The repressive male/female opposition which “interferes with the unity of the mind” gives way to a mind paradoxically conceived of not as one, but as heterogeneous, open to the play of difference.’⁴³ On the other hand, women’s ‘anger’ becomes the quantity that is transmitted between generations of women writers. In Jacobus’s account, women under patriarchy ‘experience desire without Law, wielding language without power’, a language of feeling which ‘can only ally itself with insanity – an insanity which, displaced into writing, produces a moment of imaginative and linguistic excess over-brimming the container of fiction, and swamping the distinction between author and character’.⁴⁴ The metonymic chain Jacobus constructs here is then used to link moments of desire, transgression and excess in Mary Wollstonecraft, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot and Virginia Woolf: ‘The overflow in *Jane Eyre* washes into *A Room of One’s Own*.’ Jacobus takes up the critical moment in *A Room of One’s Own* in which Woolf ostensibly condemns Charlotte Brontë’s intrusive ‘rage’ against the nineteenth-century woman’s lot. ‘Editing into her writing the outburst edited out of Charlotte Brontë’s,’ Jacobus writes, ‘Virginia Woolf creates a point of instability which unsettles her own urbane and polished decorum.’ ‘Thinking back through our mothers’ creates rupture as well as continuity; the legacy of one woman writer to another becomes a ‘rift . . . revealing other possible fictions, other kinds of writing’.

For Jane Marcus, Brenda Silver and a number of North American Woolf critics, ‘anger’ runs throughout Woolf’s texts, even where it is most displaced or denied. The focus on women’s anger extended the highly influential work of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, which explored the creation of negative, transgressive doubles in nineteenth-century women’s writing as ways of both owning and disowning rebellion and rage. Thus Judith Kegan Gardiner, in an essay on psychoanalytic feminist criticism, noted that, although Woolf chastised Charlotte Brontë’s intrusive anger in *A Room of One’s Own*, she ‘imagined an angry tale of her own, that of Shakespeare’s talented sister who was seduced, abandoned and driven to suicide: “who shall measure the heat and violence of the poet’s heart when caught and tangled in a woman’s body?”’⁴⁵ For Jane Marcus, ‘anger’ in Woolf’s work is the quality transmitted from writer to writer (‘We know from *A Writer’s Diary* how often anger was the primary impulse of Woolf’s art, but here is proof that she was among that sisterhood of great women writers whose pens were driven by anger – Mary Wollstonecraft,

George Sand, Olive Schreiner'),⁴⁶ and from author to critic. As Marcus writes in her introduction to *Art and Anger*: 'My concern with Woolf's anger clearly grew out of my own anger and the anger of my generation of feminist critics, who were trying to change the subject without yet having developed a sophisticated methodology.'⁴⁷

'Changing the subject', in the case of Woolf studies, entailed, Marcus wrote, the attempt to move 'from the study of madness and suicide to a concentration on her pacifism, feminism, and socialism'. Throughout the essays on Woolf in *Art and Anger*, Marcus insisted on 'the triple ply' of Woolf as 'artist, feminist, socialist', against what she saw as the depoliticised, aestheticised and enfeebled Virginia Woolf constructed by her recent biographers and the keepers of her literary estate. 'It is an open secret,' Marcus wrote,

that Virginia Woolf's literary estate is hostile to feminist critics. There are two taboo subjects: on the one hand her lesbian identity, woman-centered life, and feminist work, and on the other her socialist politics. If you wish to discover the truth regarding these issues, you will have a long, hard struggle. In that struggle you will find the sisterhood of feminist Woolf scholarship.⁴⁸

The language of 'sisterhood', like that of mothers and daughters, took on very specific resonances in a context in which Woolf's editors, biographers and literary trustees were male family members and associates: Leonard Woolf, Quentin Bell (Virginia Woolf's nephew and author of the first official Woolf biography) and Nigel Nicolson, Vita Sackville-West's son and the editor of Woolf's letters. (Anne Olivier Bell, the editor of Woolf's diaries and Quentin Bell's wife, takes on masculine privilege by association.) The increasing friction between a number of feminist critics – the 'lupines', as Quentin Bell termed them, an appellation then taken on as a badge of honour – and the Bells and the estate has been vividly documented by Regina Marler in *Bloomsbury Pie*.⁴⁹ It is perhaps enough to note here that controversies arose in part because the release and publication of Woolf's 'personal' writings – diaries, memoirs, letters – coincided with the burgeoning of feminist criticism and, more specifically, of forms of feminist criticism substantially committed to the values of experience, authenticity, voice and presence. Marcus's objections to Olivier Bell's meticulous editorial annotations of the first volume of the diaries, for example, arose from a fantasy of the woman writer speaking out across the decades to her literary daughters. The corollary of this ideal of unmediated communication is the critic's 'anger' at an editorial writing which can only appear to her as a defacement, or as an interruption or silencing of Woolf's voice and message.

Biography became the controversial genre at this moment in Woolf and Bloomsbury studies, as it was for Woolf and her contemporaries in the 1920s and 1930s.⁵⁰ Quentin Bell elected to separate the ‘life’ from the ‘work’, and chose not to discuss Woolf’s writings. Jane Marcus commented:

The Bell view of Virginia Woolf . . . shows her only from the neck down and in the bosom of her family. This is often the trouble with biographies of great women; one never knows what kind of heads graced their feminine shoulders, and sometimes one can hardly see them at all in the family album. Much of Woolf’s best writing attacked private property and the family, and she considered herself an outsider to it all.⁵¹

Interestingly, however, Marcus’s writing on Woolf has been substantially concerned precisely with the ‘family album’; she reiterates, for example, that Woolf’s pacifism is the legacy of her ancestors in the Clapham Sect, and of her Quaker aunt, Caroline Stephen, whose mystical writings Marcus sees as a crucial influence on Woolf, a mysticism rendered feminist in part through its transmission from aunt to niece, bypassing the father and, to some extent, the mother.

Marcus’s broader critical–biographical endeavour has been to shift the focus away from Woolf’s ‘Bloomsbury’ relationships, including those with Leonard Woolf, Lytton Strachey and the Bells. Vanessa Bell, for example, receives very little attention from Marcus, whereas for critics like Jane Dunn and Diane Gillespie Vanessa’s and Virginia’s is the crucial relationship. For Marcus, music, opera and drama – the ‘collective’ arts – replace painting as the sister medium for Woolf’s writing. Marcus also explored Woolf’s political, ‘feminist’, friendships with Margaret Llewelyn-Davies, for whom Woolf wrote her introduction to *Life as We Have Known It*; Ethel Smyth, suffrage activist, writer and composer, to whom Woolf became close later in her life; and Jane Ellen Harrison, the classical scholar whom Marcus describes as the heroine of *A Room of One’s Own*.⁵² The relationship with the non-biological mother/mentor (the ‘mother’ for Lily Briscoe rather than for Cam, as it were) is the significant connection for Marcus, for whom Julia Stephen, in her proper Victorian femininity, cannot be an altogether good mother-image and role model for feminist daughters.

Alongside the publication of Woolf’s ‘personal’ writings and the growing number of biographies of Woolf, including Phyllis Rose’s important biography *Woman of Letters* (1978), came the manuscript editions of her novels and polemical writings. Jane Marcus defined her own practice as a ‘socialist feminist’ critic in part through her ‘materialist’ work with draft and manuscript versions of Woolf’s text, arguing that ‘the drafts and unpublished versions seemed “truer” texts – spectacularly truer in the case

of *The Years* . . . The censorship of editors, publishers, husbands, as well as the enormous pressure of self-censorship on a woman writer, makes the reader mistrust the published text and makes the critic mistrust any methodology that accepts without question the privilege of the printed text.'⁵³ The late 1970s and early 1980s saw the publication of the 'two enormous chunks' Woolf had omitted from *The Pargiters/The Years* and an edition of *The Pargiters* itself, including the original version of 'Professions for Women'. In *Downhill All the Way*, a volume of his autobiography, Leonard Woolf describes Woolf's extensive revisions of *The Years*: 'I have compared the galley proofs with the published version and the work which she did on the galleys is astonishing. She cut out bodily two enormous chunks, and there is hardly a single page on which there are not considerable rewritings or verbal alterations.'⁵⁴ Louise DeSalvo published an edition of *Melymbrosia*, the early version of *The Voyage Out*, and *Virginia Woolf's First Voyage: A Novel in the Making*, a study of the ways in which 'Woolf's changing conception of her first novel was related to her changing life experiences'.⁵⁵

If for Marcus the early, discarded drafts of texts were often seen as the 'truer', more overtly feminist versions which were then suppressed, DeSalvo's work on buried and repressed narratives may well have influenced her contentious biography of Woolf, *Virginia Woolf: The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on Her Life and Work* (1989). For DeSalvo, Woolf's 'life's work – her memoirs and her autobiography, her novels, her essays and biographies – is an invaluable missing link in the history of incest, abuse, and the effects of family violence'. In her work, DeSalvo writes, Woolf 'carved out a way to tell her story . . . and that of other childhood victims of abuse and neglect'.⁵⁶

DeSalvo's book is extreme in its claims, and in its implication that Woolf's writing should be seen as a form of testimonial literature, whose disturbing messages it is the critic and reader's ethical duty to heed. She is by no means alone among recent critics, however, in focusing on representations of violence and trauma in Woolf's work, and on the recurrence in Woolf's work of two 'moments' in particular. The first is the death of the mother; the second an event of violation or rape, which a number of critics have linked to the intrusive sexual explorations the young Virginia Stephen underwent at the hands of her half-brother, Gerald Duckworth, and which she described in 'A Sketch of the Past', published for the first time in 1985. In this memoir, too, she describes vividly Julia Stephen's death and its effects on the family.

'Scene-making' was, Woolf wrote, central to her art, her 'natural way of marking the past' (*MB*, 1985, p. 142). Feminist and psychoanalytic critics

have sought to understand the ways in which recurrent ‘scenes’ in Woolf’s novels offer a crucial link between ‘the life’ and ‘the work’ and open up the complex dynamics of memory and representation in her writing. In their psychoanalytically informed analyses, Françoise Defromont, Elizabeth Abel, Mary Jacobus and others explored the workings in Woolf’s fiction of ‘remembering, repeating, and working through’, to borrow the title of one of Freud’s essays. Defromont made the question of maternal presence and absence central to an understanding of Woolf’s work, and to its recurrent imagery of mirrors and mirroring. Exploring the significance of broken mirrors in *To the Lighthouse* and *Between the Acts*, Defromont writes: ‘The mirror is shattered at the moment when there is a double breakage. Biographical echoes resonate through the writing; the two traumatic scenes inscribed in *Moments of Being*, rape and death, are rips which echo everywhere.’⁵⁷ While Defromont’s focus on traumatic events in Woolf’s childhood is not wholly dissimilar from DeSalvo’s, it differs radically in its complex understandings of the relationship between event and representation and in its focus on the ways in which ‘the two most dramatic moments of Virginia Woolf’s life, namely her mother’s death and the sexual aggressions she suffered, are symbolised, reduced, displaced and played out in the space of literature’.⁵⁸ For Defromont, ‘trauma’ is displayed and displaced in the text itself; hence the echoic, reiterative nature of Woolf’s writing, and its fragmentary syntax and insistent, even excessive, punctuation, so different from, for example, James Joyce’s representations of continuous ‘feminine’ speech in *Ulysses*.

Elizabeth Abel’s work on Woolf, in particular her *Virginia Woolf and the Fictions of Psychoanalysis*, has also been concerned with the role of repetition and interruption in Woolf’s writings. Her interest, however, was less in the fragmenting effects of a violence played out against the self, and both repeated and guarded against in the fiction, than in the narratives of gendered and psychic development represented in Woolf’s writing and in psychoanalytic stories of identity and its making. Using the work of Melanie Klein as well as Freud, Abel looks at the ‘narrative project’ which conjoins Woolf’s writing and psychoanalysis in the 1920s and 1930s, while exploring Woolf’s fictions as a critique of Freudian versions of the ‘family romance’. As Abel writes: ‘By questioning the paternal genealogies prescribed by nineteenth-century fictional conventions and reinscribed by Freud, Woolf’s novels of the 1920s parallel the narratives Melanie Klein was formulating simultaneously and anticipate the more radical revisions that emerged in psychoanalysis over the next half century.’⁵⁹

For Abel, the narratives of female development outlined in *Mrs Dalloway* closely match those simultaneously plotted by Freud in his essays on

femininity, while at the same time 'expressly challeng[ing] his normative categories of women's sexuality'. As the narrative is pulled backwards into a remembered past, so Woolf opens up the space of women's affective and erotic relations with other women, such as Clarissa's with Sally Seton, exploring a realm of identifications which have become central to lesbian critical studies of Woolf. Abel links this realm to that of the buried or lost 'pre-Oedipal' space-time gestured towards by Freud, which have helped shape the mother-daughter plots of contemporary feminism and the focus on maternal identifications.⁶⁰ *To the Lighthouse*, Abel argues, plays out a Freudian Oedipal narrative which dominates the Ramsay children's past and present while producing a Kleinian challenge to Freudian fictions in Lily Briscoe's 'sustained and recuperative matricentric story'. Following *To the Lighthouse*, *A Room of One's Own* is 'Woolf's most complete and complex interpretation of matrilineage; it is also her last'.⁶¹ *Three Guineas* turns away from mothers to explore the role of fathers, and Woolf becomes more, not less, allied to Freud in the late 1930s. Situating *Between the Acts* in the political and historical contexts of growing European fascism, and reading it alongside Freud's histories of patriarchal culture and its origins, *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism*, Abel finds Woolf's last novel haunted by a void, 'a new inability to think or write the mother, who is already absent or subsumed (like Sohrab) to patriarchy'.⁶² In the literary and historical narrative Abel herself constructs, the mother is gradually evacuated from Woolf's fictions; the turning-point is *A Room of One's Own* which, while ostensibly committed to a model of matrilineage and to the mother-daughter plot, in fact conceals an ambivalence towards the mother at its heart.

Psychoanalytic feminist criticism, of which Abel's and Defromont's is some of the most subtle and powerful, has extended the implications of Freud's account of the pre-Oedipal realm of the mother-daughter dyad and of maternal plenitude, finding in Woolf's work, and in *To the Lighthouse* in particular, some of its most compelling explorations and representations. There is a difference, however, between critics for whom there is something like a lost female homeland and those, like Mary Jacobus, for whom the pre-Oedipal relationship with the mother is a myth rather than a place to which women could or should seek to return. As Jacobus writes in *First Things*:

Mothers and myths of origins have the same function, which may in the end be to remind us that something is always lost in stories of the constitution of the subject, whether we call it the body or an undivided self. Feminism has tried to supply this lack by making the mother the unremembered heroine of the psychoanalytic text – she who would make it whole if we could only tell the entire unexpurgated story.⁶³

Throughout her work, Jacobus has critically opened up such versions of feminist utopianism and nostalgia to the fragmentations, gaps and divisions they screen and deny.

Rachel Bowlby, while sharing Elizabeth Abel's interest in the relationship between Freud's and Woolf's fictions of femininity and female development, has, perhaps more emphatically than any feminist critic of Woolf, resisted the pull of the past and the elegiac dimensions of Woolf's writing. Bowlby, in her highly original criticism, has represented Woolf as a writer of 'modernity' as well as 'modernism', opening up the place in her work of the city (a topic also explored by Susan Squier⁶⁴), new forms of travel and transport and their relationship to modern subjectivities, and consumerism and the fashioning of sexual identities, and exploring 'Woolf's ceaseless fascination with the surprising connections and clashes amid the discontinuous movements of modern life'.⁶⁵ This is the Woolf of 'Modern Fiction', who wrote:

We do not come to write better; all that we can be said to do is to keep moving, now a little in this direction, now in that, but with a circular tendency should the whole course of the track be viewed from a sufficiently lofty pinnacle. It need scarcely be said that we make no claim to stand, even momentarily, upon that vantage ground.⁶⁶

In such passages we find the complexities of Woolf's concept of history as movement rather than linear progress, and her destabilising models of knowledge, in which a perspective is located, only to be undermined in the very next phrase.

Bowlby's work has emphasised the absence of fixities in Woolf's writing. She has also pointed up the ways in which such multivalency has made Woolf the exemplar for any number of different forms of feminism, although the fixing of Woolf to one position rather than another is wholly counter to her strategies and perspectives. Bowlby opens *Feminist Destinations* with a reading of 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' which focuses less on the debate between Edwardian and modernist writing, which has structured so many readings of this essay, than on the train journey itself, and its gendering of passenger and journey:

It is precisely in her insistence on the sexual inflection of all questions of historical understanding and literary representation that Woolf is a feminist writer. She constantly associates certainty and conventionality with a complacent masculinity which she sees as setting the norms for models of individual and historical development. It makes sense, then, that it will be from the woman in the corner of the railway compartment – or the woman not synchronised with the time of the train – that the most fruitful and troubling questions will be posed, and that new lines may emerge.⁶⁷

Bowlby's readings of Woolf could be situated in the broader contexts of recent work on the 'gender of modernity' and on the feminisation of culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, dimensions further explored in recent studies of Woolf's articles for British *Vogue* and other popular magazines. As Nicola Luckhurst writes, the relationship, and the tensions, between Bloomsbury and *Vogue* are also those of the distinction and connection 'between high and low culture, between modernism and the mass media, between art and marketing'.⁶⁸

It is not surprising that Bowlby makes the route taken by the daughter in *Mrs Dalloway* as significant as that of the mother, nor that *Feminist Destinations* focuses on *Jacob's Room* and *Orlando*, the first of which has tended to receive less attention from feminist critics than Woolf's other novels, and the second of which has only recently become a central, and even exemplary, text for feminism and postmodernism. *Jacob's Room* is in one way Woolf's most experimental novel, in its radical deconstruction of 'character'. *Orlando* is similarly 'postmodern' in its production of 'performative' identities, and its radical undermining of fixed gender identities. For Bowlby, these are crucial dimensions of Woolf's work, although she is also concerned with Woolf's 'recurrent and persistent explorations of conceptions of history-writing',⁶⁹ including the play with biographical forms of *Jacob's Room* and the historical fictions and fantasies of *Orlando*.

Pamela Caughie's *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism: Literature in Quest and Question of Itself* (1991) sets out, as its title indicates, 'to read Woolf again from the place of postmodernism'.⁷⁰ Caughie, in opening with an account of feminist Woolf criticism to date, suggests that it had been largely inadequate to the play and performance of Woolf's fictions, and that Woolf has been inaccurately represented both by 'modernist' and 'feminist' critics. She returns, as so many critics have done, to Toril Moi's responses to Elaine Showalter as a defining moment not only in Woolf but in feminist studies generally: Mary Eagleton uses their 'debate' as the first section of her reader in *Feminist Literary Criticism*. Caughie argues that the opposition Moi constructed between Anglo-American and French feminisms was in fact part of the 'broader transformation in literature and theory that we have come to call *postmodernism*':

What has been described as a debate between opposing schools of feminism can now be seen as a change in the very way we conceive the relations between things. Thus, what is needed in Woolf criticism is a perspective that can free Woolf's writings from the cage of modernism and the camps of feminism without denying these relations in her texts . . . By considering Woolf's works in the context of postmodern narrative and cultural theories, I want to change the way we conceive prose discourse so that we do not feel compelled to claim

Woolf as a spokesperson for any one group of writers. Virginia Woolf can enter into a variety of literary relations, for she has no essential nature.⁷¹

For Caughie, Woolf's feminism is '*an effect of her formal experiments*', rather than their cause. As she rethought traditional assumptions and practices in literature, so 'Woolf raised many of the feminist and poststructuralist critical issues that have subsequently emerged as such. Her formal experiments resulted in what many have come to call a postmodern narrative practice, as well as in a feminist textual politics.' Caughie's declared intention is 'to change the way we read Woolf' in order to explode the view that there is a 'right reading' of her work. Changing the way we read Woolf, and literary texts in general, involves a move from an interpretative paradigm of literary analysis (the uncovering of meaning from within the text) to a concern with the rhetoricity and 'pragmatics' of literature: in Caughie's terms, 'how it functions and how it finds an audience'. Woolf's critical essays, in particular, reveal that 'Woolf is more interested in how a reader responds to and shapes a text than in elucidating an author's thematic statements or characterizing forms'.⁷²

Caughie notes that she may contravene her own principle of non-dualistic thinking in seeming to oppose two types of writing, modernism and postmodernism, and replacing 'a modernist or feminist referential with a postmodernist one'. The way out of this impasse is, she argues, not to *define* a practice (as much feminist criticism has done) but to *enact* a way of proceeding. Yet, I would suggest, her argument creates further dualisms, with the first term the negative one: properties/production, defining/enacting and, as in the account given in my preceding paragraph, interpretative/pragmatic. We can either call this faulty reasoning or resign ourselves to the inevitability of binary logics and to our messy critical practices, in which attending to 'meanings' *and* to 'strategies' might not be mutually exclusive activities.

The binary divide and connection with which a number of feminist Woolf critics have been working most substantially in recent years is that of the private and the public. Hermione Lee, in her major biography of Virginia Woolf which, along with Julia Briggs's *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*, has given new depth and vitality to the 'biographical' Woolf, writes that 'the conflict between private and public . . . will be one of the main subjects of her writing life'.⁷³ Woolf's 'use of a public/private dichotomy [which] draws attention to her own complicating of the terms' is the subject of Anna Snaith's *Virginia Woolf: Public and Private Negotiations*. Snaith's study explores the centrality of the terms 'private' and 'public' to many of Woolf's foremost concerns – questions of publishing and the reading public,

'her literal movement' between public and private spaces, questions of inclusion and exclusion from 'literal and metaphorical public spaces'.⁷⁴ It also illuminates the relationship between Woolf's politics and her narrative strategies, in particular her uses of 'indirect interior monologue' as a way of negotiating a narrative and conceptual space between 'private' and 'public' discourse. The terms of 'public discourse' further reverberate throughout Melba Cuddy-Keane's *Virginia Woolf, the Intellectual and the Public Sphere*, a study, like Snaith's, rich in historical and cultural context which explores Woolf's role as 'public intellectual' against the background of early twentieth-century preoccupations with, and suppositions about, class, culture, gender and education.⁷⁵

Questions of reading and the reader – Woolf's 'common reader' – lie at the heart not only of Cuddy-Keane's study but of Elena Gualtieri's *Virginia Woolf's Essays: Sketching the Past*, Juliet Dusinberre's *Virginia Woolf's Renaissance: Woman Reader or Common Reader?*, Jane de Gay's *Virginia Woolf's Novels and the Literary Past* and Anne Fernald's *Virginia Woolf: Feminism and the Reader*.⁷⁶ For Gualtieri, the essay as a form opens up 'the intersections between private and public, personal and political': she also explores the relationship between Woolf's 'modernist' essayism and her 'practice as one of the first feminist historians of literature'.⁷⁷ Fernald sets out 'to bridge the divide between the literary and the feminist Woolf' and, while exploring Woolf's dialogue, as reader and writer, with writers such as Hakluyt, Addison and Byron, to show that a sense of literary tradition in Woolf should be understood 'as an invention rather than as an inheritance'.⁷⁸ Implicitly or, in Fernald's case, explicitly, as she calls for 'a version of literary history that would not rely on family metaphors', these studies suggest the limited nature of 'thinking back through our mothers' as an exclusive way of proceeding.

The Woolf of contemporary feminist criticism is a Woolf in the world. Critics look on the one hand to the workings of space and place in Woolf's writing and thought, including her complex relationship to questions of nationalism and imperialism and the imbrications of these with her critiques of patriarchy and fascism.⁷⁹ They are turning on the other hand to literary history and tradition, to Woolf's remaking of the past in the present, and to the implications and dimensions of her reading, including the profound relationship between Woolf as reader and as writer (research enabled by Brenda Silver's earlier scholarship⁸⁰). While the fascination with every aspect of Woolf's life, writing and thought does not diminish, it is often the implications and dimensions of 'feminism' itself that are being defined and redefined – its allegiances and alliances, the shifting nature of its preoccupations. Thus feminisms continue to find themselves in Woolf.

Notes

- 1 I have focused in this chapter on Woolf's British and US reception. Analyses of her reception, feminist and otherwise, in other national and cultural contexts reveal rather different histories of reception and response. For detailed and wide-ranging accounts of these, see *The Reception of Virginia Woolf in Europe*, ed. Mary Ann Caws and Nicola Luckhurst (London: Continuum, 2002) and the chapter on 'European Reception Studies' by Nicola Luckhurst and Alice Staveley in *Palgrave Advances in Virginia Woolf Studies*, ed. Anna Snaith (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
- 2 See, for example, essays in Eileen Barrett and Patricia Cramer (eds.), *Virginia Woolf: Lesbian Readings* (New York: New York University Press, 1997) and Gay Wachman, *Lesbian Empire: Radical Crosswriting in the Twenties* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001).
- 3 See Jane Dunn, *A Very Close Conspiracy: Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf* (London: Cape, 1991); Diane Gillespie, *The Sisters' Arts: The Writing and Painting of Virginia Woolf* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1988); Suzanne Raitt, *Vita and Virginia: The Work and Friendship of Vita Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993).
- 4 Alex Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 211.
- 5 Naomi Black, 'Virginia Woolf and the Women's Movement', in *Virginia Woolf: A Feminist Slant*, ed. Jane Marcus (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), p. 185. See also Black's recent book, *Virginia Woolf as Feminist* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), for detailed discussion of Woolf's feminist politics and a very full account of *Three Guineas*.
- 6 Mary Jacobus, 'The Difference of View', in *Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 40.
- 7 Virginia Woolf, *WE*, ed. Rachel Bowlby (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), p. 3.
- 8 Michèle Barrett (ed.), *Virginia Woolf: Women and Writing* (London: Women's Press, 1979), p. 49.
- 9 *WE*, p. 38.
- 10 'Women Novelists', in *ibid.*, p. 12.
- 11 'Men and Women', in *ibid.*, p. 19.
- 12 Rachel Bowlby (ed.), *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), pp. 103-5.
- 13 Virginia Woolf, *VO* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p. 122. All further references will be to this edition.
- 14 See, for example, Sarah Grand, *The Heavenly Twins*, 3 vols. (London: William Heinemann, 1893).
- 15 Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World*, p. 217.
- 16 Virginia Woolf, *ND* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 469. All further references will be to this edition.
- 17 Virginia Woolf, *ROO* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), p. 21. All further references will be to this edition.
- 18 Winifred Holtby, *Women and a Changing Civilization* (1935) (Chicago: Academy Press, 1978).

- 19 *Chloe plus Olivia: An Anthology of Lesbian Literature from the Seventeenth Century to the Present Day*, ed. Lilian Faderman (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995).
- 20 *WE*, p. 172.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 133.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 136.
- 23 Virginia Woolf, *TG* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), p. 175. All further references will be to this edition.
- 24 Bowlby (ed.), *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life*, p. 171.
- 25 Winifred Holtby, *Virginia Woolf: A Critical Memoir* (London: Wishart, 1932; repr. Chicago: Academy Press, 1978), p. 183.
- 26 E. M. Forster, *Virginia Woolf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1942), p. 23.
- 27 *Ibid.*, pp. 22–3.
- 28 J. B. Bachelor, 'Feminism in Virginia Woolf', in *Virginia Woolf: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Clare Sprague (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971), p. 171.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 170. This passage, which reveals a strong and symptomatic critical unease with the question of feminism in Woolf's writing, recalls one of Freud's favourite jokes – that of the man who borrows his neighbour's kettle and, when rebuked for returning it with a hole in it, defends himself on the following grounds: 'First, I never borrowed a kettle from B. at all; secondly, the kettle had a hole in it already when I got it from him; and thirdly, I gave him back the kettle undamaged.' *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1953), vol. VIII, p. 62.
- 30 Herbert Marder, *Feminism and Art: A Study of Virginia Woolf* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).
- 31 Herbert J. Muller, 'Virginia Woolf, and Feminine Fiction', in *Critical Essays on Virginia Woolf*, ed. Morris Beja (Boston, MA: G. K. Hall & Co., 1985), p. 35.
- 32 Barrett (ed.), *Women and Writing*, p. 49.
- 33 Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (London: Virago, 1978), p. 264.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 285.
- 35 Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 3.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- 37 *Ibid.*, p. 18.
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THE CAMBRIDGE
COMPANION TO
VIRGINIA WOOLF

EDITED BY
SUSAN SELLERS

Second Edition



CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521721677

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First published 2000
Second edition 2010

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The Cambridge companion to Virginia Woolf / edited by Susan Sellers. – 2nd ed.
p. cm. – (Cambridge companions to literature)

ISBN 978-0-521-89694-8 (Hardback) – ISBN 978-0-521-72167-7 (pbk.)

I. Woolf, Virginia, 1882-1941—Criticism and interpretation. I. Sellers, Susan.

II. Title. III. Series.

PR6045.O72Z5655 2010

823'.912-dc22

2009047127

ISBN 978-0-521-89694-8 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-72167-7 Paperback

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