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Title of extract: **Virginia Woolf: Rethinking Realism, Remaking Fiction**

Name of Author: **Pykett, L.**

Title/Author of book/edition (if applicable): **Engendering Fictions: the English novel in the early twentieth century. Pykett, L.**

Name of Visual Creator or other acknowledgement (if applicable):

Journal details –title/Vol/Year (if applicable):

Publisher: **Edward Arnold**

Pages scanned: **90 - 111**

Course of Study (Module name and number): **Modernism CSEN6016**

Name of Designated Person
authorising scanning:

Date authorised: 14.08.13

Moodle/Powerpoint

E.L. Harris

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Virginia Woolf: Rethinking Realism, Remaking Fiction

*The habit of continually measuring women's wants by men's achievements seems out of date, ignominious, and intolerably boring. 'Here we have a world', we say, 'which has been shaped by men to fit their own needs. It is on the whole a poor sort of world . . . Now that we have secured possession of the tools of citizenship, we intend to use them not to copy men's models but to produce our own.'*¹

Virginia Woolf's writing life was a prolonged dialogue with herself and others about the nature and possibilities of fiction. Like Henry James, Woolf saw the future of fiction as inextricably connected with the future of women. More particularly she saw it as linked to changing attitudes to sex gender roles, to the changing of women's attitudes to men, to themselves, and to other women. As Woolf told the female audience of the lecture that became *A Room of One's Own*, 'Women are hard on women. Women dislike women.' Most importantly Woolf linked the future of fiction to the changing of men's attitudes to women.

The future of fiction depends very much upon what extent men can be educated to stand free speech in women . . . But whether men can be civilised . . . whether given a better environment the results might be such that women too can be artists lies on the lap of the Gods, no not upon the laps of the Gods, but upon your laps, upon the laps of professional women.²

Woolf's writing life was also a continual process of development and innovation in fictional practice. This was a process which involved both

a series of experiments with new fictional forms and a reworking of the traditional forms of fiction – in the latter case most notably in her reworking of the 'feminine' form of the family chronicle in *The Years*. As in the case of Richardson, the cultural norms and literary forms with which Woolf engaged, and which she sought to interrogate, were perceived as masculine. Woolf, like Richardson, argued that the old masculine forms of fiction were inadequate and outmoded. She even, on occasion, suggested that the English language itself had become an inadequate vehicle for rendering the complex subtleties and nuances of modern experience because it had degenerated from its former richness.

In the old days . . . when English was a new language, writers could invent new words and use them. Nowadays it is easy enough to invent new words – they spring to the lips whenever we see a new sight or feel a new sensation – but we cannot use them because the language is old . . . In order to use new words properly you would have to invent a new language. ('Craftsmanship', CDML 141)

Throughout her writings on fiction Woolf emphasized the importance, even urgency, of the project of remaking or renovating the language and the forms of fiction. She particularly emphasized the importance of opening up new areas to representation, and of representing more truthfully what had hitherto been misrepresented. As she famously asserted in 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' (1924), the 'tools and established conventions' which did the 'business' of fiction for the Edwardians were 'ruin' and 'death' to writers, like herself, who wished to extend the franchise of fiction and increase its range of representation.

In her deliberations of her own writing practice in her diaries, and more especially in her analyses of the current state of fiction and her prognostications on its future in her reviews and essays, Woolf constantly focused on the connections between gender and writing. She discussed writing in gendered terms, and, on occasions (although by no means consistently), asserted a belief in the necessity to engender a new kind of fiction by gendering writing differently. Dorothy Richardson's fictional experiments clearly formed an important part of the context in which Woolf formulated her own renovatory project for fiction. Woolf reviewed both *The Tunnel* and *Revolving Lights* (parts 4 and 7 of *Pilgrimage*) in terms which indicate that she regarded Richardson as a significant, if flawed, contributor to the engendering of modern fiction. Four of the chapter-volumes of *Pilgrimage*, Woolf's own review of *The Tunnel*, and May Sinclair's essay on 'The Novels of Dorothy Richardson'³ had already appeared by April 1919, when Woolf published her essay on 'Modern Novels' in *The Times Literary Supplement*. Slightly revised in 1925, and retitled as 'Modern Fiction', this essay became one of the key documents in the theorizing of modern and modernist fiction.

'Modern Fiction', like 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', is in part an analysis of the ills of the 'current masculine realism' beyond which Richardson sought to move in *Pilgrimage*. When Woolf surveyed the scene of contemporary fiction in these two essays she found a traditional and an experimental or innovatory fictional practice which were both disappointing in different ways. In these essays Woolf connects the failings of both traditionalists and innovators with their definition and practice of realism, and with their attitude to and use of the detail. In the end, as far as Woolf was concerned, both traditionalists and modernists were in danger of sinking in a sea of detail, clinging to a heap of fragments.

The traditionalists, represented in both essays by Bennett, Galsworthy, and Wells, are found wanting because of their materialism. In 'Modern Fiction' Woolf glosses this as a laborious inventorizing of external details and a failure to select: 'they write of unimportant things . . . they spend immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring' (CDML 7). Enslaved by outmoded conventions, the materialists labour in vain to represent the totality of outer, external details; they fail to 'look within', and meanwhile 'life escapes' (CDML 8).

Whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide . . . So much of the enormous labour of proving the solidity, the likeness to life, of the story is not merely labour thrown away but labour misplaced to the extent of obscuring and blotting out the light of the conception. (CDML 8)

What is this 'life' that evades the documenting eye of the materialists? It is a semi-mystical concept. It is hardly susceptible of definition, but can perhaps be explained by analogy. 'Life' is that Wordsworthian sense of 'something far more deeply interfused' ('Tintern Abbey'). It is 'the relation between man and his circumambient universe, at the living moment' which D. H. Lawrence argued, in 'Morality and the Novel', it was the duty of the novel to capture (Px 527). 'Life', as one suffragette slogan put it, 'is feminine'.⁴ It would appear that 'life' was also gendered feminine for Dorothy Richardson. 'Life' is that deeper, inner ('true') reality which Richardson was seeking to capture by means of her associative 'feminine realism' in her vast book of life. For Woolf 'life' is that sudden epiphanic glimpse into the heart of things that some of her characters (usually a female or feminized character) attain, and which she attempts to articulate in her experiments with fictional form. In her essay on 'Life and the Novel', 'life' is a seductive, disruptive, and elusive woman, who would appear to be in need of masculine control.

Stridently, clamorously, life is forever pleading that she is the proper end of fiction and that the more he sees of her and catches of her the better his book will be. She does not add, however, that she is grossly impure; and that the side she flaunts uppermost is often, for the novelist, of no value whatever. Appearance and movement are the lures she trails to entice him after her, as if these were her essence, and by catching them he gained his goal. (CE ii. 135)

Like nineteenth-century critiques of realism, Woolf's writings on fiction constantly (sometimes playfully, sometimes anxiously) probe the relationship between depth and surface, and it would appear from this example that they do so in similarly gendered terms.

Despite her strictures on the laborious detailism of the materialists, Woolf's theorizing of fiction is not posited on a hostility to the accumulation of details in itself. She does not appear to think, for example, that a profusion of details inevitably annihilates 'life'. Indeed, she is constantly preoccupied with the problem of developing an aesthetic form that could capture the details of the 'myriad impressions' that the mind receives, and which constitute 'life'. With this end in view Woolf advocates a writing practice that would focus on a different kind of detail, and which would dispose or display the detail in a different manner and a different structure from that of the materialists. She requires less of the representational conventions of realism and more of the texture of modern reality as experienced by her readers, who, in the space of the average day, have had 'thousands of ideas' coursing through their brains, and in whom 'thousands of emotions have met, collided, and disappeared in astonishing disorder' ('Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', WE 86). More particularly Woolf requires a new or modern form of realism, a realism which would record not merely external details (as the Edwardian materialists did), but which would also record how the individual mind perceives and orders those details. In 'Modern Fiction' Woolf uses her quarrel with the materialists as a means of formulating a new psychological realism which would 'record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall', and 'trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness' (CDML 9).

The passage in 'Modern Fiction' in which Woolf formulated her aesthetic of the detail is one of the most frequently quoted in all of her writings, and has become almost a manifesto of modernism. Despite its (over)familiarity, it is worth quoting again, because it reveals some of the ambivalences and contradictions of Woolf's position. These ambivalences and contradictions are partly (perhaps largely) the product of the critical discourse within which Woolf is seeking to articulate her own position.

Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions . . . From all sides they come, an

incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there; so that, if a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style, and perhaps not a single button sewn on as the Bond Street tailors would have it. Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelists to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit . . . (CDML 8)

For Woolf the strength (but also, as we shall see, the weakness) of the break with the conventions of realistic representation, and the development of alternative, 'modern' tools by Joyce and Richardson, lie precisely in their ability to give the reader the impression of the flux of experience. It lies in their ability 'to convey this varying . . . unknown and uncircumscribed spirit'; 'to register one after another, and one on top of another, words cries, shouts, notes of a violin, fragments of lectures' (WE 16).

It is very easy to read the *locus classicus* of 'Modern Fiction' simply as an example of the modernist discourse of rupture, as an unequivocal exhortation to the modern writer to break with the past and to abandon traditional aesthetic modes and forms. Indeed in the passage in question Woolf rejects a whole tradition of detailistic, realistic representation, which, she suggests, is as anachronistic as the lamps of horse-drawn carriages which they symmetrically arrange. In its place Woolf offers a blend of scientific modernity (the atoms of particle physics), a modern Bergsonian sense that it was no longer possible to think in terms of a fixed identity or a common reality,⁵ and a Georgian version of Edwardian vitalism. In her reflections on her own writing practice Woolf sought a fictional form which would replace the profusion of details found in the materialists (a saturation of details) with a saturation of the detail. A form that would 'saturate every atom . . . eliminate all waste, deadness, superfluity . . . give the moment whole . . . This appalling narrative business of the realist: getting on from lunch to dinner . . . is false, unreal, merely conventional' (WD 139). However, to read 'Modern Fiction' simply in terms of the modernist discourse of rupture is to misread it, since it is as much a story of negotiating tradition as it is a narrative of rupture. Woolf's utopian aspirations for fictional form are mixed with a strong streak of realism. She fiercely resists the disabling force of the status quo, but she never underestimates its power: 'if a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention . . .'. In 'Modern Fiction' Woolf articulates her sense of the

need to break with and think outside existing conventions, but she also sees the difficulties of doing so. She addresses the problem of articulating the fragmentary multiplicity of experience, but she also problematizes 'experience', suggesting that it is always mediated by the conventions of representation. Her sense of the coercive power of representational conventions and their ability to enforce a common-sense view of the world is indicated in the example she gives in 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' – interestingly an example which focuses on the perception of sexual difference – of how 'the public' will 'actually learn to see women with tails and men with humps' if told 'with sufficient conviction' and for long enough that this is the way things are (WE 83).

Woolf's writing practice is designed to change the way in which we see how things are. No one who has read *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* (to take only the most obviously polemical examples) could be in any doubt that Virginia Woolf also had a commitment to changing the way things actually are. In her essays on fiction in general and in those on individual novelists Woolf constantly emphasized the need for the writers and readers of modern fiction to learn to look differently and to learn to look at different things. In her own fiction she attempted to provide structures in which they might do so. For example, the structure that masks structure in *Jacob's Room* (1922), 'no scaffolding; scarcely a brick to be seen; all crepuscular' (WD 23). In the 'tunnelling process' (WD 61) which she uses in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), by means of which she 'dig[s] out beautiful caves behind my characters' (WD 60). In the 'great splashes of exaggeration' (WD 120) in *Orlando* (1928), the 'play-poem idea' (WD 108) of *The Waves* (1931), and in her attempt to 'lyricize the argument' (WD 238) and subjectivize history in *The Years* (1937).

Both the old and the new ways of looking which are discussed or enacted in Woolf's writings are crucially linked to issues of gender and sexual difference. The materialism of the Edwardians whose shortcomings Woolf dissects in 'Modern Fiction' and more minutely in 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' is inextricably connected in her analysis with their masculinism. The obviously female 'narrator' of 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' wishes to rescue her central female character from the 'ugly', 'clumsy', 'incongruous' representational tools of the male novelists who (as Woolf tells it) would do violence to her story. 'It is not only that they celebrate male virtues, enforce male values and describe the world of men,' Woolf writes of Galsworthy's novels in *A Room of One's Own*, but also 'that the emotion with which these books are permeated is to a woman incomprehensible' (RO 100). A book by a man is, after all, just a man's book.

In short, Woolf's objections to the Edwardian materialists are based as much on what they leave out as on how they represent what they include. For Woolf their most important omission is the 'difference of view' provided by woman as both observer and observed. The 'difference of view' is the key to the 'plot' of 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', which, like many

of Woolf's essays, discusses fiction by employing the devices of fiction. In 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' a woman writer expresses her dissatisfaction with the gaze of male writers by telling a story about how that gaze works, and at the same time telling a story about how she, a woman writer, would write it differently. 'Mrs Brown must be rescued' from the external gaze of the male materialists who cannot see *her*. Woolf, the modern novelist, must begin again. However, one of the most important problems with which Woolf's essay narratives engage is that, in beginning again, one can never simply and smoothly begin at the beginning. The new writer, like the narrator of *A Room of One's Own* – who begins her lecture with the words 'But, you may say' – is always interrupting, butting in to a conversation or narrative whose lines are already established. Thus, as Woolf deconstructs her own narrative ('if you will allow me to pull my own anecdote to pieces') in 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', she acknowledges the extent to which she remains locked into the dominant paradigms:

you ... see how keenly I felt the lack of a convention ... The incident had made a great impression on me. But how was I to transmit it to you? All I could do was to report as accurately as I could what was said, to describe in detail what was worn, to say, despairingly, that all sorts of scenes rushed into my mind, to proceed to tumble them out pell-mell ... to tell you the truth, I was also strongly tempted to manufacture a three-volume novel ...

But if I had done that I should have escaped the appalling effort of saying what I meant. (WE 81–2)

As I have been trying to emphasize, for Woolf the 'appalling effort of saying what I meant' is not simply the existential situation of the writer, nor is it merely a function of belatedness – a problem caused by having to work with the outmoded tools inherited from the older generation, or with a language that has degenerated from its former glories. It is also, and importantly, a problem of difference. The woman writer is doubly disadvantaged by the force of the existing conventions, because 'men are the arbiters' of those conventions. Woolf makes the point forcefully in the much-quoted passage from 'Women and Fiction':

It is probable ... that in both life and art the values of a woman are not the values of a man. Thus, when a woman comes to write a novel, she will find that she is perpetually wishing to alter the established values – to make serious what appears insignificant to a man, and trivial what to him is important. And for that she will be criticized; for the critic of the opposite sex will be genuinely puzzled and surprised by an attempt to alter the current scale of values, and will see in it not merely a difference of view, but a view that is weak, or trivial, or sentimental, because it differs from his own. (CE ii. 146)

In other words, there is all the difference in the world in this 'difference of view'. The importance of Woolf's statement is precisely that she emphasizes that the difference of view provided by the woman is not simply another way of looking at the world, but rather that it changes the world: 'And so the smashing and the crashing' of masculine conventions must begin (WE 84). The story Woolf tells in her essay narratives from 'Modern Fiction' to *A Room of One's Own* is a story of rupture, and the abandonment of tradition – 'in or about December 1910 human character changed' (WE 70); but it is also, as I have suggested, a story about continuity and the force of tradition. It is a story, too, about intervening in and disrupting the dominant tradition; a story about negotiating and reworking the established conventions. In short, it is a story of renovation. Thus, although Woolf wishes to do more or less everything differently from Bennett, Galsworthy, and Wells, she shares their belief that the novel begins with character. She endorses the break with plot and story, and with the conventions of realistic representation made by Joyce and Richardson, but in her own fiction she never quite dispenses with 'plot', 'tragedy', or 'comedy', or with the dynastic narrative or family chronicle of the Victorians. Rather she returns to and interestingly reworks and complicates these apparently outmoded tools. Moreover, when she looks closely at the work of writers who do attempt a radical break with realistic representation, Woolf calls attention to the dangers of narrowness and constriction of the 'cramp and confinement of personality' (CE ii. 159), and the 'egotistical self' which 'ruins Joyce and Richardson' (WD 23).

Woolf's response to the experimentation of Joyce and Richardson is partly the quibbling of a literary rival. One recalls that Woolf responded to the news of Katherine Mansfield's death with the remark that at least this made for one less competitor. More importantly, the ambivalence of Woolf's attitude to Joyce and Richardson is evidence of the persistence in her own critical discourse of the terms of the late nineteenth-century debates on fiction, particularly the gendered discourse on realism. 'We want to be rid of realism, to penetrate without its help into the regions beneath it,' Woolf writes in her review of *The Tunnel*. However, she also requires 'that Miss Richardson shall fashion this new material into something which has the shapeliness of the old accepted forms' (WE 17). She approves Joyce's commitment 'at all costs to reveal the flickerings of that innermost flame which flashes its messages through the brain':

The scene in the cemetery [in *Ulysses*], for instance, with its brilliancy, its sordidity, its incoherence, its sudden lightening flashes of significance, does undoubtedly come so close to the quick of the mind that, on a first reading at any rate, it is difficult not to acclaim a masterpiece. (CDML 9)

Ultimately, however, she finds the Joycean method limiting, enclosing, 'centred in a self which, in spite of its tremor of susceptibility, never

embraces or creates what is outside itself' (CDML 10). In addition she finds Joyce 'difficult' and 'unpleasant' and she is suspicious of his didactic 'emphasis . . . upon indecency' (CDML 10). Thus Woolf, the modern novelist of subjectivity, like the late nineteenth-century conservative critic confronting the experiments of the New Woman writers, is troubled by the problematic relationship between the inner and the outer in modern fiction, by its apparent obsession with the 'unpleasant' details of physical life, and by the dangers of egotism. Woolf, on the contrary, preferred a fictional form that would 'enclose everything, everything . . . enclose the human heart' and have everything 'dancing in unity' (WD 23); a form which would enable both writer and reader to inhabit lives, experiences, states of consciousness other than their own and give them 'the illusion that one is not tethered to a single mind' ('Street Haunting', CDML 81).

It would be wrong to see Woolf as wishing simply to recuperate the Arnoldian project of seeing things steadily and seeing them whole, but there are a number of occasions on which she seemed to express a preference for a fictional method that would (as it were) see the fragments of experience in all their fragmentary and evanescent detail and yet still see them whole. She retained, too, something of the Victorians' contradictory attitude to the detail and its gendering. She rejected the materialists' forensic external inventorizing of the detail which she codes masculine (in any case, all of Woolf's regularly cited materialist demons are male), but she also retains misgivings about the 'feminine' detail of Richardson.

That Miss Richardson gets so far as to achieve a sense of reality far greater than that produced by the ordinary means is undoubted. But, then, *which reality* is it, the *superficial* or the *profound*? . . . we still find ourselves *distressingly near the surface*. Things look much the same as ever. (WE 16; emphasis added)

For Woolf, as for some Victorian critics of domestic realism, 'feminine realism' is associated with surfaces, the superficial, an absence of significant pattern, and perspective.

'BUT WHAT ABOUT MY CULTURE?' READING AND WRITING DIFFERENTLY

*In women's writing, language seems to be seen from a foreign land . . . Virginia Woolf describes suspended states . . . but she does not dissect language as Joyce does. Estranged from language, women are visionaries, dancers who suffer as they speak.*⁶

In all of her writing Woolf was concerned with the question of 'which reality?' The outer or the inner, the superficial or the profound? She was

also centrally concerned with the question of whose reality, men's or women's? In fact, 'which reality?' and 'whose reality?' often turn out to be the same question. The centrality of these questions to her work complicates Woolf's relationship to modernism and to early twentieth-century writing more generally. Woolf inherited both questions from the nineteenth-century feminist debates, which she replays in her own terms in her novels and essays. Both questions are central to the project of cultural renovation which informs much of her writing. I will look at two areas of Woolf's work in which these questions are particularly important: her cultural critique, and her ideas on the gender(ing) of writing.

Like Richardson's, Woolf's project of renovating or making fiction anew was grounded in a fundamental critique of the dominant culture. Woolf's cultural critique, like Richardson's, took the form of an exposure of its masculinism, an analysis of the masculine perspectives and values upon which 'culture' was based, and an interrogation of male authority. Woolf describes the social structure of contemporary England as a patriarchy (RO 35), and dissects culture as a system which validates patriarchal rule and keeps it in place. She articulates her cultural critique by constructing a narrative of cultural history which tells the story of how men have made the world in their own image and to serve their own interests.

Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size. Without that power probably the earth would still be swamp and jungle. The glories of all our wars would be unknown . . . whatever may be their use in civilized societies, mirrors are essential to all violent and heroic action. That is why Napoleon and Mussolini both insist so emphatically upon the inferiority of women, for if they were not inferior they would cease to enlarge. And it serves to explain how restless they are under her criticism . . . For if she begins to tell the truth, the figure in the looking glass shrinks; his fitness for life is diminished. How is he to go on giving judgement, civilizing natives, making laws, writing books, dressing up and speechifying at banquets, unless he can see himself at breakfast and at dinner at least twice the size he really is? (RO 37-8)

The difference of view offered in this passage is articulated most explicitly in the later polemical works, *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*, but it is present right from the beginning, and is found in all of her work 'creative' and 'critical', 'imaginative' and 'polemical' (I will return shortly to the question of the difficulty of assigning any one of Woolf's works to one or other of these categories). In virtually all of her writings Woolf, like Richardson, revisited the history of turn-of-the-century feminism and appropriated, reworked, and, increasingly, updated its arguments in the light of the new social feminism of the post-war

period.⁷ She also retold (and revised) that history, most notably in *The Years*, in which she constructed a history of women and the upper-middle-class patriarchal family from the 1880s to 'the present day'. In all her work, as Alex Zwerdling has noted, Woolf was interested in 'the underlying psychological and economic causes', and one might add consequences, of 'masculine dominance and feminine repressed anger or acquiescence'.⁸ In this respect she continued the work begun by the New Woman writers of the 1890s, and indeed often did so in rather similar terms, by giving the reader privileged access to the subjectivity of her female characters, and focusing on women's subjective experience of social and familial structures.

In fact Woolf's cultural critique has two main motivating forces, both of which might be described as feminist, and both of which have their origins in the feminist debates and degeneration debates of the turn of the century. The first is a sense of cultural crisis. The second is the need to construct an alternative to the dominant cultural tradition. Like many of her contemporaries and her late nineteenth-century predecessors, Woolf both implicitly and explicitly addresses the question, 'whither civilization?' – is it an illusion and does it have a future? In the course of her writing life, in the aftermath of the First World War and as another major conflict loomed through the low dishonest decade of the 1930s, these questions acquired a greater force and urgency than they had had at the *fin de siècle*. They became particularly pressing for Woolf in her late works, *Three Guineas* and *Between the Acts*, in which she considered the social origins of Fascism and the decline of civilization. However, in all her work these questions were articulated differently for Woolf than they were for her male contemporaries. For her the question of whither civilization was often quite explicitly a gender/ed issue (as it was for D. H. Lawrence). She was faced not simply with the danger of the destruction of civilization, but with the question of whether the ethos of (masculine) civilization was itself destructive.

Woolf's analysis of the crisis of modern culture is inseparable from her sense of its masculinism and of the need to construct a counter-narrative, a counter-tradition to the dominant cultural tradition. 'But what about *my culture*?' she asks in her diary (DVW iv. 298), and in her essays and novels Woolf attempts to answer that question by writing a different story. She attempts to introduce a difference of view, an alternative set of values to those of the dominant culture. In her fiction she does this by means of her focus on female characters, by her continuation of the feminist critique of the family made in the New Woman novel, by her focus on the social and subjective circumstances of women's lives, on interiority, and, in particular, on a socially constructed subjectivity. In her essays she does it by rethinking the history of women, which, as she shows in *A Room of One's Own*, has largely been written by men. She also advocates a process of thinking back through our mothers. Many of the feminist critics who

have done so much to revise our readings of Woolf and enhance her critical reputation in the latter part of the twentieth century have seen her introduction of the difference of view simply in terms of opposing 'feminine' values such as spirituality, interiority, subjectivism, vitalism, and co-operation to the 'masculine' values of objectivity, materialism, scientism, rationalism, and confrontation. There is something to be said for this model, but it has the disadvantage of replicating nineteenth-century gender ascriptions (masculinity equals objectivity, femininity equals subjectivity). Viewed thus, Woolf's project would appear to be merely a continuation of the renovatory project of those late nineteenth-century feminists who wished to rescue a diseased, degenerative patriarchal society by an infusion of womanly, matriarchal values.

Certainly Woolf returns to the questions that preoccupied late nineteenth-century feminists, and to some extent she thinks within the terms in which those questions were posed, but she also attempts to think beyond them, and to complicate gender ascriptions. She does not simply oppose a fixed and essentialist conception of femininity to an equally fixed and essentialist conception of masculinity. Instead, she articulates in her fiction (most dramatically in *Orlando*) a conception of the self and a gendered identity as fluid, unstable, and in process. Most importantly, Woolf articulates a conception of a gendered identity which is produced in particular historical and cultural circumstances, and which is therefore capable of being changed in changed social circumstances. 'Can one change sex characteristics?' she asked in a letter written towards the end of her life. 'How far is the woman's movement a remarkable experiment in that transformation?' The experience of the Second World War led Woolf to believe that it would perhaps be possible 'to alter the crest and spur of the fighting cock': 'It looks as if the sexes can adapt themselves; and here (that's our work) we can, or the young women can, bring enormous influence to bear. So many of the young men, could they get prestige and admiration, would give up glory and develop what's now so stunted.'⁹ When Woolf offers the 'feminine' values of '*my culture*' as an antidote to the competitive, militaristic values of patriarchal culture, she is not, unlike some of her nineteenth-century predecessors, offering the reassuringly stable and natural values of the spiritual mother, but rather the flexible conciliatory values produced by the distinctive social experience of women.

When Woolf looks at the question of woman she writes, not in terms of the eternal feminine (as Richardson often does), but rather in terms of the precise economic, material, familial, and social circumstances which shape women's lives and values, and in which those values are articulated. Woolf sees women's lives, feminine values, and women's writing in relation to specific historical cultures. She sees them in relation to the 'law and custom' (CE ii. 142) of a patriarchal society which generated the permissions and constraints which determined whether or not women's

voices were heard, and how they were heard – the law and custom, for example, by which ‘a woman was liable, as she was in the fifteenth century, to be beaten and flung about the room if she did not marry the man of her parents choice’ (CE ii. 142), and by which ‘even in the nineteenth century, a woman lived almost solely in her home and her emotions’ (CE ii. 143).

Like many more recent feminist historians, Woolf attempted to add women’s voices to the conversation of culture and to recover the lost or hidden histories of women. Indeed, in ‘Women and Fiction’ and *A Room of One’s Own* Woolf seems to have set the agenda for much of the Anglo-American feminist literary history of the 1970s and 1980s. In these essays Woolf returned to the question which had been used to taunt nineteenth-century feminists. ‘Where are the female Shakespeares?’ In answering this question Woolf formulated an alternative to the affiliative model of literary history outlined in T. S. Eliot’s ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’. On the contrary, Woolf sees the history of women’s literary endeavour (and indeed of women’s contributions to the dominant culture in general) in terms of the female talent which is isolated and excluded by and from a male-defined tradition. Woolf does not find the absence of a female Shakespeare at all surprising, for ‘masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcomes of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice’ (RO 66).

Woolf also addressed the question of the missing female Shakespeares by developing a materialist history of gender. Her history of Shakespeare’s hypothetical sister Judith in *A Room of One’s Own* is perhaps the most vivid example of the practice. The theory and method of Woolf’s materialist feminist history is briefly outlined in ‘Women and fiction’.

Thus, if we wish to know why at any particular time women did this or that . . . [we] should turn history wrong side out and so construct a faithful picture of the daily life of the ordinary woman . . . It is only when we know what were the conditions of the average woman’s life – the number of her children, whether she had money of her own, if she had a room to herself, whether she had help in bringing up her family, if she had servants, whether part of the housework was her task – it is only when we can measure the way of life and the experience of life made possible to the ordinary woman that we can account for the success or failure of the extraordinary woman . . . (CE ii. 142)

Woolf’s critique of culture, based as it is on a sense of the systematic devaluing, omission, and misrepresentation of women’s voices and women’s social experience in and by the dominant culture, is thus grounded quite differently from the modernist cultural critique of T. S.

Eliot, Ezra Pound, W. B. Yeats, and D. H. Lawrence. Unlike the male modernists and cultural critics, Woolf does not locate the present threat to civilization in the loss of Christianity, or in the erosion of other traditional belief and value systems. Nor does she attribute it to the challenge to social and political structures (ruled by masculine political and cultural élites) posed by the rise of a (feminized) mass society. On the contrary, Woolf offers a critique of the structures and discourses of a hierarchical, capitalist, imperialist, patriarchal culture based on dominance and submission, exploitation and militarism. Very often those values and structures whose disappearance is mourned by the male cultural critics as signs or symptoms of cultural degeneration and disintegration are seen by Woolf as the source of the problem.

Something of the way in which Woolf’s cultural critique differs from that of her fellow (male) modernists can be seen in her treatment of popular culture and the city. Unlike the best known of the male modernists, Woolf does not condemn popular culture as merely sentimental and meretricious, but rather develops a theory of usefulness which gives to the novels of Marie Corelli and to the cinema the saving power which is more conventionally attributed to the works of high culture. Similarly she celebrates the ‘wild confusion’ of the architecture of Oxford Street department stores (‘The London Scene’, CDML 116), and the evanescent ‘charm of modern London’ (CDML 115). Eliot’s representation of London as the ‘unreal city’ has its roots in the late nineteenth-century vision of London as the decaying Heart of Empire, the home of the degenerate masses, the heart of urban darkness and modern neurasthenia. Eliot’s cityscape is one of decay and disillusion. His London is the locus of modernist anomie. It is the nightmarish location in which robotic city workers daily perform their death-in-life routines, silently tracing and retracing their route across London Bridge. London is the space from which culture has vanished, or in which it persists only in historic traces.

For Woolf, on the other hand, as for Richardson (as I indicated in the previous chapter) London is a space of vitality and adventure which liberates rather than confines the imagination. Woolf uses the city setting in this way in some of her fiction, most famously in *Mrs Dalloway*, but also in *Night and Day*, and in *The Years* (though in the latter case there is also the undercurrent of sexual danger in the city streets, figured in Rose’s meeting with the strange man at the postbox). Woolf’s most interesting representation of the city belongs more to the Auden generation than to the moment of *The Waste Land*. In ‘Street Haunting: A London Adventure’ (first published in 1927 and reissued as a pamphlet in 1930) Woolf represents London as a place of endless possibilities, an imaginative space to be occupied and colonized by the female narrator who glories in the city as a spectacle which she not only observes but also invents. As the narrator journeys across London on the pretext of buying a pencil, the city becomes a narrative space which demands interpretation and

completion through the making-up of stories. Woolf, like Richardson, represents the city as particularly liberating for the woman. Street haunting is a means of escaping from the confinement of the interior private spaces of the domestic setting and of occupying a different form of interiority in the public spaces of the streets: 'We are no longer quite ourselves. As we step out of the house . . . we shed the self our friends know us by and become part of that vast republican army of anonymous trampers' (CDML 70). On the city street identity and subjectivity are dispersed and reconfigured. 'Am I here, or am I there? Or is the true self neither this nor that, neither here nor there, but something so varied and wandering that it is only when we give the rein to its wishes and let it take its way unimpeded that we are indeed ourselves' (CDML 76). When Woolf depicts alienation in the city it is as much the product of gender as it is of modernity. '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 civilization, she becomes, on the contrary, outside of it, alien and critical' (RO 96).

Despite her own social position as a daughter of the upper middle classes, Woolf was suspicious of cultural and political élites, and she became increasingly suspicious of coterie culture. Her feelings about the barbarian hordes pressing at the gates of civilization were, perhaps, almost bound to differ from those of Eliot and Pound, and indeed of her fellow Bloomsburyites, since, as a woman, she too was a cultural outsider. As her fiction graphically demonstrates, and as her essays fiercely assert, Woolf felt that because of her gender she was marginalized and excluded from the privileges of her social class. In *A Room of One's Own* she figures this sense of cultural alienation in the trespasser caught walking on the lawns of an Oxbridge college.

Instinct rather than reason came to my help; he was a beadle; I was a woman. This was the turf; there was the path. Only the Fellows and Scholars are allowed here; the gravel is the place for me. Such thoughts were the work of a moment . . . The only charge I could bring against the Fellows and Scholars . . . was that in protection of their turf, which had been rolled for 300 years in succession, they had sent my little fish [her train of thought] into hiding. (RO 8)

This passage suggests with great force and economy the history and psychology of the processes by which women internalize patriarchal culture's sense of their inferiority. It also demonstrates how women who stray from their socially prescribed territories, and who cross the boundaries put in place by masculine culture, are positioned as transgressors. But Woolf does not simply use the figure of the trespasser to articulate a rather pessimistic psychology of subordination, she also seeks to put it to work in new ways as an instrument of change. The project of *A Room*

of *One's Own* is precisely to incite women to trespass: 'Let us trespass freely and fearlessly and find our own way for ourselves' (CE ii. 181). She pursues a similar line in her 1930s' polemic *Three Guineas*, in which she exhorts women to make positive use of the fact that they are positioned outside the political structure. She proposes the creation of an oppositional Society of Outsiders (made up of 'educated men's daughters working in their own class'), a title chosen, despite its lack of resonance, because 'it has the advantage that it squares with facts – the facts of history, of law, of biography; even, it may be, with the still hidden facts of our still unknown psychology'.¹⁰

Woolf also put her outsider status to new uses in her own writing practice. She began her fiction-writing career as an insider-outsider, that is to say, as a modernist experimenter who, like her fellow modernists, wrote for a fit audience though few: 'I write for half a dozen instead of 1500' (D. ii. 107). Although she retained her fear and suspicion of the public in an age 'deafened with boom and blatancy' ('The Humane Art', CE i. 105), and although (to my ear at least) her voice retained the mandarin tones of her class, she nevertheless sought to find a voice in which to address 'the common reader', and a polyphonic fictional form (based on giving a voice to, rather than speaking on behalf of, characters) that would include rather than exclude by its difficulty (though it has to be said that 'difficulty' remains a problem for many of Woolf's readers).

In her essays she developed a reflective, conversational voice designed to include her readers in a sharing of knowledge and perceptions, and to empower them. Like Richardson, Woolf developed a sentence structure and a mode of address designed to embody the voice and restore the speaking presence to writing. In those essays which have their origins in lectures, such as *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf deconstructs the form of the lecture. She occupies the authoritative position of the lecturer only to give back that authority to her audience. She does this by constantly undermining her own positions, by presenting the members of her audience with questions which she is unable to answer, but to which she challenges them to find an answer if they can, and by setting up projects which she refuses or is unable to complete: 'I have shirked the duty of coming to a conclusion upon . . . the true nature of women,' she concedes in *A Room of One's Own* (RO 6).

Woolf's cultural critique is thus based on the difference of view provided by a self-consciously gendered perspective. Woolf's own writing and her writing about writing suggest that this difference of view is both produced by and requires a different language, a gendered language. Similarly Woolf's project of cultural renovation, based as it is on the addition of women's voices to the cultural narrative, is also a project of linguistic renovation. Again this involves an awareness of the gender of language. Woolf's project of remaking the novel and her own struggles with the language and form of fiction also has to be seen in the context of her

views on the gender(ing) of language. In Woolf's view women's relationship to language and literary form was different from that of men. Women, she argues, have had to write against the grain of a literary tradition whose dominant forms and genres were

made by men out of their own needs for their own uses. There is no reason to think that the form of the epic or of the poetic play suits a woman any more than the [man's] sentence suits her. But all the older forms of literature were hardened and set by the time she became a writer. (RO 77)

This is one reason, Woolf argues, why women in the eighteenth century took to the newest form of writing, the novel (there was no 'anxiety of influence'). It is also perhaps why women writers tend to go in for 'genre bending'.

Like the New Woman writers of the 1890s, Woolf herself persistently crossed generic boundaries, turning her essays and reviews into narratives, mixing fiction and polemic, writing novels which use the techniques of drama and/or aspire to the lyric intensity of poetry. 'The book has somehow to be adapted to the body,' Woolf maintained, and it seems clear that she meant the social body rather than the biological rhythms which characterize the feminine writing more recently advocated by Cixous and others. Woolf exhorted women to find new forms which they might adapt to their specific social circumstances: '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' (RO 78). In this last sentence Woolf conjures up a host of New Woman novels which explore the predicament of a woman writer, and which focus on her search for an appropriate form in which to articulate both an aesthetic vision and a sense of the lack of fit between a woman's desires and the social actualities of woman's lives, while at the same time negotiating the constraints imposed by those social circumstances.

Woolf also argued that women have had to write against the grain of the dominant language. The woman writer had 'no common sentence ready for her use' (RO 76), because the history of writing is dominated by 'the man's sentence' which is 'unsuited for a woman's use' (RO 77, 73). In the matter of linguistic renovation, as in so many other matters, Woolf advocated renewal by means of trespassing and transgression. In order to express 'the whole of that extremely complex force of femininity', 'whole flights of words would need to wing their way illegitimately into existence' (RO 87). Thus, although she had reservations about the tendency to egotistical restriction and fragmentation of Dorothy Richardson's fictional form, Woolf was unequivocal in her praise for Richardson's feminine remaking, or feminization, of language. As far as Woolf was concerned, Richardson's major achievement was that:

She has invented, or, if she has not invented, developed and applied to her own uses, a sentence which we might call the psychological sentence of the feminine gender. It is of a more elastic fibre than the old, capable of stretching to the extreme, of suspending the frailest particles, of enveloping the vaguest shapes. Other writers of the opposite sex have used sentences of this description and stretched them to the extreme. But there is a difference. Miss Richardson has fashioned her sentence consciously, in order that it may descend to the depths and investigate the crannies of Miriam Henderson's consciousness. It is a woman's sentence, but only in the sense that it is used to describe a woman's mind by a writer who is neither proud nor afraid of anything she may discover in the psychology of her sex.¹¹

Woolf's views on feminine language are complex. They are also contradictory. In her review of Brimley Johnson's *The Women Novelists* Woolf expresses agreement with his contention that 'a woman's writing is always feminine', but goes on to suggest that 'the only difficulty lies in defining what we mean by feminine' (WE 13). This 'difficulty' is present in the above extract, her best-known pronouncement on the subject. The reference to 'other writers of the opposite sex' would suggest that 'the psychological sentence of the feminine gender' is not necessarily tied to the biological sex of its user, nor, despite the reference to 'a woman's mind', to a specifically gendered experience. The distinctive qualities of the psychological sentence of the feminine gender would appear to be its elasticity, its modernity (as opposed to the 'old' sentence), and its ability to 'descend to the depths' of consciousness. It is here that I think we encounter a different sense of the 'femininity' of the Richardsonian sentence. It is a sentence that can chart the 'dark places of psychology' (CDML 10) which, Woolf argued in 'Modern Fiction', constituted the chief 'point of interest' of 'the moderns' (CDML 10). Woolf's attempts to think the gender of writing thus seem to be caught up in a specific discourse of gender in which the feminized dark places of the world which so preoccupied late nineteenth-century writers join up with the 'dark continent' by which Freudian psychology figured female sexuality.

Ambivalence and contradiction also characterize Woolf's views on difference and androgyny. In her insistence in her cultural critique and in her own writing practice on the importance of difference – the difference of standard, the difference of view, the difference of language of men and women – Woolf seems to be polarizing and possibly reinforcing gender categories. Elsewhere, however, she appears to argue for a transgressing or erosion of traditional gender categories. 'It is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex,' she asserts when considering the task of the woman writer in *A Room of One's Own*. 'It is fatal to be a man or a woman pure and simple . . . one must be woman-manly or man-womanly'

(RO 156–7). In the figure of Mary Carmichael, Woolf represents the woman writer who masters the art of writing as a woman, by writing 'as a woman who has forgotten that she is a woman, so that her pages were full of that curious sexual quality which comes only when sex is unconscious of itself' (RO 92).

Woolf's apparent slipperiness on the question of androgyny and difference to some extent replicates the confusions and contradictions of the late nineteenth-century concepts of sex-gender difference which she was trying to rethink. In her cultural critique and in her attempt to formulate a theory of women's writing Woolf does sometimes polarize gender categories, but she does so in such a way as to challenge the separate-spheres ideology of the nineteenth century. In her novels and in her essays Woolf seeks to interrupt that nineteenth-century explosion of discourse on woman which I discussed in earlier chapters. This move is foregrounded in *A Room of One's Own* in her narrative about her visit to the British Museum to research the topic of 'W.' (woman).

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? . . . Why are women . . . so much more interesting to men than men are to women? (RO 28–9)

In all of her writings Woolf seeks to rescue women from being the objects of the masculine gaze, and make them speaking subjects.

But, the question remains, how can Woolf's insistence on the importance of difference be made to square with her apparent advocacy of androgyny, a concept which seems to move outside or beyond difference? As Rachel Bowlby points out, among all the 'models of what constitutes the relation between "women" and "writing"' in Woolf's work, it is androgyny which 'has provoked some of the wildest outbursts of indignation and celebration'.¹² The indignation has come from those feminists who, believing that women's writing should articulate a specifically feminine subjectivity, disapprove of Woolf's insistence on the need for the woman writer to forget her sex. On the other hand, Woolf's concept of androgyny has been celebrated by those who see it as a utopian, post-gendered state. The crux of the problem seems to be that Woolf wants to think beyond sex-gender difference, but that she remains locked in a discourse of difference in which the masculine is the privileged term. It is worth quoting at length from the passage in *A Room of One's Own* in which Woolf formulates her 'vision' of androgyny. It is also worth emphasizing that it is a vision – it is a scene in which the female lecturer/narrator watches herself watching a man and a woman meet together and enter a taxi. As she meditates on the scene she has 'witnessed' (conjured into being), Woolf implicitly thinks back through the turn-of-the-century

concepts of bisexuality and the bisexuality or the intermediate sex found in Weininger, Ellis, and Carpenter.

When I saw the couple get into the taxi-cab the mind felt as if, after being divided, it had come together again in a natural fusion. The obvious reason would be that it is natural for the sexes to cooperate . . . But the sight of the two people getting into the taxi and the satisfaction it gave me made me also ask whether there are two sexes in the mind as in the body, and whether they also require to be united in order to get complete satisfaction and happiness? And I went on amateurishly to sketch a plan of the soul so that in each of us two powers preside, one male, one female; and in the man's brain the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman's brain the woman predominates over the man . . . If one is a man still the *woman part of the brain must have effect*; and a *woman also must have intercourse with the man in her* (RO 96–7; emphasis added)

Not only does this passage reproduce, as Rachel Bowlby argues, 'the dualism according to which the difference between the two sexes is known in advance',¹³ but it also (unconsciously?) reproduces the hierarchizing of gender categories in which the masculine is the privileged term. In a man 'the woman part of the brain must *have effect*,' but the woman (in an interestingly sexual metaphor) must '*have intercourse with the man in her*'; the man contains an element of the woman, but the woman is suffused by the man. In any case, the concept of androgyny that Woolf invokes is that of a male writer, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In this case Woolf does not think back through her mothers as she has previously suggested, but tentatively attempts to interpret the male poet to her audience of women. 'Coleridge *perhaps* meant this when he said that a great mind is androgynous . . . *Perhaps* a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine, I thought' (RO 97; emphasis added). Woolf is considerably less tentative in suggesting what 'Coleridge certainly did not mean, when he said that a great mind is androgynous'. He did not mean 'that it is a mind that has any special sympathy with women; a mind that takes up their cause or devotes itself to their interpretation. Perhaps the androgynous mind is less apt to make these distinctions than the single-sexed mind' (RO 97). The androgynous mind, it would appear, has an Arnoldian disinterestedness. Here is another contradiction in Woolf's theory of fiction, and a tension between her theorizing and her practice of gendered writing. Although she herself was so forceful an advocate of the woman's cause, Woolf repeatedly protested against the introduction into women's writing of that sex consciousness that took the form of arguing the cause of women: 'It introduces a distortion and is frequently the cause of weakness' (CE 144). Like W. L. Courtney, Woolf – at least in theory – saw the 'truly artistic mind [as] neutral, it does not . . . take sides'.¹⁴

Woolf's protests against feminist protestation are perhaps inadvertent or unconscious examples of the persistence in her own writing of that nineteenth-century figure 'the Angel in the House' whose death sentence Woolf issues in 'Professions for Women'. Like the heroine of May Sinclair's *Life and Death of Harriett Frean* (1922), the 'Angel in the House' is obsessed with 'behaving beautifully'. She is the internal censor, the still small voice who whispers her insidious message into the ear of the woman writer: "My dear, you are a young woman. You are writing about a book that has been written by a man. Be sympathetic; be tender; flatter; deceive . . . Never let anybody guess that you have a mind of your own. Above all, be pure" (CDML 102). Similarly, Woolf's strictures against sex-consciousness and her advocacy of androgyny can perhaps be explained (if not explained away) by placing them in their historical context, in the context of a culture in which the discourse on sexual difference had become extremely polarized.

No age can ever have been as stridently sex-conscious as our own; those innumerable books by men about women in the British Museum are a proof of it. The Suffrage campaign was no doubt to blame. It must have roused in men an extraordinary desire for self-assertion; it must have made them lay an emphasis upon their own sex and its characteristics which they would not have troubled to think about had they not been challenged. (RO 97-8)

Like Havelock Ellis and Edward Carpenter had done before her, Woolf attempted to dance through this particular minefield by developing a conciliatory model of the post-gendered mind, a concept of gender that lay both between and beyond traditional sex-gender categories.

A final word on Woolf and the gender of writing. Woolf's fiction, like Dorothy Richardson's, developed and refined the 'super-subtlety and microscopic self-examination'¹⁵ that was said to characterize the New Woman writing of the 1890s. Woolf's own critical reputation has always been mediated through the complex of ideas about gender that I sketched in earlier in this book, and by means of a critical discourse whose descriptive and evaluative terms are themselves gendered. Whether it is praised or disparaged, her writing is described as being feminine or as having characteristics which are coded feminine in a critical discourse which increasingly associated the fictional forms and processes of interiority and subjectivity with the feminine. The operations of this gendered critical discourse produce some surprising critical meeting points. So, for example, we find a pioneering feminist critic of the 1970s and an anti-feminist and aggressively masculinist writer of the 1930s discussing Woolf's work in much the same terms. The feminist critic, Elaine Showalter, represents Woolf as taking 'flight into androgyny' and (like other women writers of her time) withdrawing into a 'female aesthetic' that was a 'retreat from

the material world, retreat into separate rooms'¹⁶ – in other words a retreat into a privatized space of femininity which was a perpetuation of the nineteenth-century separate sphere. Woolf's contemporary (and sometimes critical tormentor), the masculinist misogynist Wyndham Lewis, also identified Woolf as a distinctively, even iconically, feminine writer. As such, she is a writer of restricted scope and importance, if not significance:

while I am ready to agree that the intrinsic literary importance of Mrs Woolf may be exaggerated by her friends, I cannot agree that as a symbolic landmark – a sort of party-lighthouse – she has not a very real significance. And she has crystallized for us, in her critical essays, what is in fact *the feminine* – as distinguished from the feminist standpoint. (MWA 159-60)

Lewis located Woolf in the feminine private sphere. He represented Woolf's subjective writing as symptomatic of the feminization of culture that threatened to annihilate the masculine:

we have been invited, all of us, to instal ourselves in a very dim Venusberg indeed: but Venus has become an inverted matriarch, brooding over a subterranean 'stream of consciousness' – a feminine phenomenon after all – and we are a pretty sorry set of knights too . . . at least in Mrs Woolf's particular version of the affair. (MWA 168)

In *Men Without Art*, as elsewhere in his writings, Lewis traced this feminization of culture (and Woolf's aesthetic) back to the 1890s:

there is, of course, a very much closer connection than people suppose between the aesthetic movement presided over by Oscar Wilde, and that presided over in the first post-war decade by Mrs Woolf . . . It has been with a considerable shaking in my shoes, and a feeling of treading upon a carpet of eggs, that I have taken the cow by the horns in this chapter, and broached the subject of the part that the feminine mind has played – and minds as well, deeply feminized, not technically on the distaff side – in the erection of our present criteria. For fifteen years I have subsisted in this to me suffocating atmosphere. (MWA 170)

In the next two chapters I shall examine some of the ways in which early twentieth-century male writers subsisted in, or resisted, the 'suffocating atmosphere' of a feminized fiction.