

A Literature of Their Own

BRITISH WOMEN NOVELISTS FROM
BRONTË TO LESSING

Elaine Showalter

NEW REVISED EDITION



(1982)

KL 250

Moonlight Richardson finally identified her obsession with the process of her own life as guilt: "If one could fully forgive oneself, the energy it takes to screen off the memory of the past would be set free."³⁹

Pilgrimage can be read as the artistic equivalent of a screen, a way of hiding and containing and disarming the raw energy of a rampaging past. Richardson devised an aesthetic strategy that protected her enough from the confrontation with her own violence, rage, grief, and sexuality that she could work. The female aesthetic was meant for survival, and one cannot deny that Richardson was able to produce an enormous novel, or that Virginia Woolf wrote several, under its shelter. But ultimately, how much better it would have been if they could have forgiven themselves, if they could have faced the anger instead of denying it, could have translated the consciousness of their own darkness into confrontation instead of struggling to transcend it. For when the books were finished, the darkness was still with them, as dangerous and as inviting as it had always been, and they were helpless to fight it.

³⁹ *March Moonlight*, p. 607.



Virginia Woolf and the Flight Into Androgyny

It needs little skill in psychology to be sure that a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled apart by her own contrary instincts, that she must have lost her own health and sanity to a certainty.—*A Room of One's Own*

If I were a woman I'd blow someone's brains out.—*The Voyage Out*

In recent years it has become important to feminist critics to emphasize Virginia Woolf's strength and gaiety and to see her as the apotheosis of a new literary sensibility—not feminine, but androgynous. Caroline Heilbrun has described the members of the Bloomsbury Group as the first examples of the androgynous way of life; she demands that we recognize "that they were all marvelously capable of love, that lust in their world was a joyful emotion, that jealousy and domination were remarkably sparse in their lives."¹ Within this milieu, we are to understand, Virginia Woolf was free to develop both sides of her nature, both male and female, and to create the appropriate kind of novel for the expression of her androgynous vision.

The concept of true androgyny—full balance and command of an emotional range that includes male and female elements—is attractive, although I suspect that like all utopian ideals androgyny lacks zest and energy. But whatever the abstract merits of androgyny, the world that Virginia Woolf inhabited was the last place in which a woman

¹ *Towards a Recognition of Androgyny*, New York, 1973, p. 123.

could fully express both femaleness and maleness, nurturance and aggression. For all her immense gift, Virginia Woolf was as thwarted and pulled asunder as the women she describes in *A Room of One's Own*. 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. Woolf inherited a female tradition a century old; no woman writer has ever been more in touch with—even obsessed by—this tradition than she; yet by the end of her life she had gone back full circle, back to the melancholy, guilt-ridden, suicidal women—Lady Winchelsea and the Duchess of Newcastle—whom she had studied and pitied. And beyond the tragedy of her personal life is the betrayal of her literary genius, her adoption of a female aesthetic that ultimately proved inadequate to her purposes and stifling to her development.

In Virginia Woolf's version of female aestheticism and androgyny, sexual identity is polarized and all the disturbing, dark, and powerful aspects of femaleness are projected onto maleness. Woolf deals with her most intimate experience through biographical essays on other women writers, including Jane Carlyle, Geraldine Jewsbury, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot. In her fiction, but supremely in *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf is the architect of female space, a space that is both sanctuary and prison. Through their windows, her women observe a more violent masculine world in which their own anger, rebellion, and sexuality can be articulated at a safe remove. Yet these narrative strategies, as in the novels of her predecessors Schreiner and Richardson, are ultimately unsuccessful. It is a man, of course, who speaks the line from *The Voyage Out* quoted above. The ambiguity of violence in Woolf's fiction is instructive; the vague target, the "someone" whom the sensitive woman is likely to destroy, is inevitably the woman herself. When we think about the joy, the generosity, and the absence of jealousy and domination attributed to Bloomsbury, we should also remember the victims of this emo-

tional utopia: Mark Gertler, Dora Carrington, Virginia Woolf. They are the failures of androgyny; their suicides are one of Bloomsbury's representative art forms.

For the past fifty years, Virginia Woolf has dominated the imaginative territory of the English woman novelist, just as George Eliot dominated it the century before. "The woman writer is urged to be as 'Woolfian' as possible," according to Joyce Carol Oates²—that is, to be subjective, and yet to transcend her femaleness, to write exquisitely about inner space and leave the big messy brawling novels to men. A similar idealization and mystification of Woolf's life style is extending her sphere of historical influence to personal relationships. I think it is important to demystify the legend of Virginia Woolf. To borrow her own murderous imagery, a woman writer must kill the Angel in the House, that phantom of female perfection who stands in the way of freedom. For Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot, the Angel was Jane Austen. For the feminist novelists, it was George Eliot. For mid-twentieth-century novelists, the Angel is Woolf herself.

From the beginning of her life, Virginia Woolf found the achievement of a coherent and comfortable sexual identity an urgent problem. She saw her own life in sexually polarized terms, terms that her biographers and critics have invariably adopted. Quentin Bell repeats the familiar distinction between her maternal and paternal heredity, between the poetic, highspirited Pattles, and the rational, vulnerable Stephens. According to Bell, Woolf herself "believed that she was the heiress to two very different and in fact opposed traditions . . . these two rival streams dashed together and flowed confused but not harmonised in her blood."³ Maleness and femaleness seemed like two distinct principles, which Woolf came to relate to the extremes of her own

² Review of Carolyn Heilbrun and Nancy Topping Bazin, *Virginia Woolf and the Androgynous Vision*, *New York Times Book Review* (April 15, 1973): 10.

³ Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, I, London, 1972, p. 18.

could fully express both femaleness and maleness, nurturance and aggression. For all her immense gift, Virginia Woolf was as thwarted and pulled asunder as the women she describes in *A Room of One's Own*. 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. Woolf inherited a female tradition a century old; no woman writer has ever been more in touch with—even obsessed by—this tradition than she; yet by the end of her life she had gone back full circle, back to the melancholy, guilt-ridden, suicidal women—Lady Winchelsea and the Duchess of Newcastle—whom she had studied and pitied. And beyond the tragedy of her personal life is the betrayal of her literary genius, her adoption of a female aesthetic that ultimately proved inadequate to her purposes and stifling to her development.

In Virginia Woolf's version of female aestheticism and androgyny, sexual identity is polarized and all the disturbing, dark, and powerful aspects of femaleness are projected onto maleness. Woolf deals with her most intimate experience through biographical essays on other women writers, including Jane Carlyle, Geraldine Jewsbury, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot. In her fiction, but supremely in *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf is the architect of female space, a space that is both sanctuary and prison. Through their windows, her women observe a more violent masculine world in which their own anger, rebellion, and sexuality can be articulated at a safe remove. Yet these narrative strategies, as in the novels of her predecessors Schreiner and Richardson, are ultimately unsuccessful. It is a man, of course, who speaks the line from *The Voyage Out* quoted above. The ambiguity of violence in Woolf's fiction is instructive; the vague target, the "someone" whom the sensitive woman is likely to destroy, is inevitably the woman herself. When we think about the joy, the generosity, and the absence of jealousy and domination attributed to Bloomsbury, we should also remember the victims of this emo-

tional utopia: Mark Gertler, Dora Carrington, Virginia Woolf. They are the failures of androgyny; their suicides are one of Bloomsbury's representative art forms.

For the past fifty years, Virginia Woolf has dominated the imaginative territory of the English woman novelist, just as George Eliot dominated it the century before. "The woman writer is urged to be as 'Woolfian' as possible," according to Joyce Carol Oates²—that is, to be subjective, and yet to transcend her femaleness, to write exquisitely about inner space and leave the big messy brawling novels to men. A similar idealization and mystification of Woolf's life style is extending her sphere of historical influence to personal relationships. I think it is important to demystify the legend of Virginia Woolf. To borrow her own murderous imagery, a woman writer must kill the Angel in the House, that phantom of female perfection who stands in the way of freedom. For Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot, the Angel was Jane Austen. For the feminist novelists, it was George Eliot. For mid-twentieth-century novelists, the Angel is Woolf herself.

From the beginning of her life, Virginia Woolf found the achievement of a coherent and comfortable sexual identity an urgent problem. She saw her own life in sexually polarized terms, terms that her biographers and critics have invariably adopted. Quentin Bell repeats the familiar distinction between her maternal and paternal heredity, between the poetic, highspirited Patties, and the rational, vulnerable Stephens. According to Bell, Woolf herself "believed that she was the heiress to two very different and in fact opposed traditions . . . these two rival streams dashed together and flowed confused but not harmonised in her blood."³ Maleness and femaleness seemed like two distinct principles, which Woolf came to relate to the extremes of her own

² Review of Carolyn Heilbrun and Nancy Topping Bazin, *Virginia Woolf and the Androgynous Vision*, *New York Times Book Review* (April 15, 1973): 10.

³ Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, 1, London, 1972, p. 18.

personality. Nancy Bazin has convincingly shown that Woolf later related manic stages of her mental illness to her mother and the feminine vision of life, and depressive periods to her father and the masculine vision of life.⁴ These arbitrary divisions of personality into sexual stereotypes were reinforced by her personal experience. The female model her mother represented led to self-annihilation, to what the Victorians called selflessness. The masculine model offered more opportunities for self-realization, but to choose it meant to renounce womanhood, to declare herself deficient in sexual and maternal energy. Thus Woolf's "androgyny" was a struggle to keep two rival forces in balance without succumbing to either. Full "femaleness" and full "maleness" were equally dangerous.

It is customary to make Leslie Stephen the heavy in Virginia Woolf's personal drama. Critics often refer to the entry that Woolf made in her diary in 1928, on what would have been her father's ninety-sixth birthday: "His life would have entirely ended mine. What would have happened? No writing, no books;—inconceivable." In his biography of Lytton Strachey, Michael Holroyd describes the dynamics of Virginia's relationship with her father as a kind of possession:

However she might respect his various gifts and achievements objectively, she still felt in an organic sense that his dominating presence had squeezed the very lifeblood from her veins. Somehow he had taken away from her the ability to nourish her ravenous unappeased appetite for life. As she helped to nurse him through his long, last appalling illness she must already have known that her hopes of liberation, of spiritual release, centred upon his death. The consciousness of this had filled her with a dreadful sense of guilt, and in 1903, a few months before

⁴ Nancy Bazin, *Virginia Woolf and the Androgynous Vision*, New Brunswick, 1973, pp. 6ff.

her father's death, she suffered a mental breakdown. . . . From him she had inherited a strong egoism together with a neurotic and demanding conscience; from her mother a fine, artistic delicacy and sensitivity. These diverse elements were not to be resolved, but waged within her a tangled and exhausting conflict. Her increasing obsession with death indicated a growing awareness that a part of her father still lived on in her. While she breathed, his alien spirit continued to enshroud her. She could not wash it off. So death became for her the ultimate release, the resurrection through patricide by *felo de se*.⁵

Holroyd's vision of Woolf's mortal combat with her father's shade is romantically compelling, and to see Stephen as the patriarchal villain also permits a feminist reading of her suicide as a triumphant overthrow of maleness. Examining the numerous accounts of Woolf's mental breakdowns, I am struck by the way in which critics have abstracted and mythologized her experience; almost without exception they have linked it to the conflict with her father or to an even more romantic artistic possession, a divine seizure by the muse. Considered from another perspective, however, her major breakdowns were associated with crises in female identity: the first occurred in 1895, after the death of her mother and the onset of menstruation; the second from 1913 to 1915, after Leonard decided that they should not have children. Her suicide in 1940 followed menopause; though less information about it has been published, it seems to have repeated elements of the earlier episodes. While I have no wish to substitute one magical explanation of her anguish for another, it is clear that most of the information we have about her comes from those most concerned to deny or repress their own complicity in her sicknesses. Leslie Stephen, safely dead since 1904, is a con-

⁵ Michael Holroyd, *Lytton Strachey: A Critical Biography*, 1, London, 1967, p. 401.

venient, even a reasonable, scapegoat. It is riskier, but more promising, I think, to ask how Virginia felt about people a little closer at hand.

Quentin Bell tells us that Virginia "forgot" all but the physiological symptoms of her breakdown after her mother's death. As she recalled them, her symptoms were a racing pulse, nervousness, depression, excitability, and excessive shyness: "She became terrified of people, blushed scarlet if spoken to and was unable to face a stranger in the street."⁶ Although none of Woolf's biographers mention it, this breakdown must have coincided with the onset of menstruation, and its symptomatology is precisely that of female adolescent shame and anxiety. "Abnormal reactions to the first menses are extremely varied," writes Helene Deutsch. "Intensified excitability, feelings of discomfort, greater susceptibility to fatigue, and depressions are frequent manifestations of puberty as a whole; usually they increase during menstruation." Deutsch records numerous case histories of adolescent girls who feel unclean, who avoid going into the street, who blush violently, and who even attempt "suicide during menstruation because they were tormented by terrible fear of a painful disease." The death of her mother, and the death in 1897 of her half sister Stella, in her early pregnancy, further emphasized the connection for Woolf between femaleness and death. "With the onset of menstruation," writes Deutsch, "the associative connection between death and birth is particularly strengthened. . . . It is innate in the feminine psyche to bring blood, conception, birth and death into close connection with one another."⁷

Another symptom now understood as an aspect of female adolescent trauma is *anorexia nervosa*, or willful self-starvation. Helene Deutsch explains anorexia as an attempt "to

⁶ Bell, *Virginia Woolf*, I, p. 45.

⁷ Helene Deutsch, "Menstruation," *The Psychology of Women*, I, New York, 1973, pp. 169, 159, 183.

combat the evil" of menstruation and puberty; recently, physicians have defined the anorexic girl as one who "is trying desperately not to grow up. Her body is becoming a woman's, against her will. That's got to be stopped."⁸ Anorexia was to become the most predictable accompaniment of Virginia Woolf's attacks. Leonard Woolf speculated about the symptoms: "It might have been said that she had a (quite unnecessary) fear of becoming fat; but there was something deeper than that, at the back of her mind or in the pit of her stomach, a taboo against eating."⁹ One of Leonard's regular responsibilities during their marriage was to watch over her diet in health and spoon-feed her in sickness.

It was also during the period 1896-1897, according to Virginia, that she was sexually molested by her half-brother George Duckworth, then in his midtwenties. Fear, ignorance, shame and shyness kept her from confiding these incidents (Bell thinks they continued until 1904 or 1905) to anyone but Vanessa. Gordon Haight has suggested that Virginia's overheated adolescent imagination led her to invent these stories: "The slight evidence of his 'fondlings and fumbings' in the schoolroom and night nursery originates mostly in Virginia's confidences to women with whom her relations were decidedly queer."¹⁰ Of course, it is impossible to know exactly what George did, but it is altogether reasonable to believe that his attentions were a terrifying sign to Virginia that people *knew* about her, that her changed state was a signal to men.

A famous story that Virginia told to the Memoir Club illuminates her adolescent sense of shame and the relief she

⁸ Sam Blum, "Children Who Starve Themselves," *New York Times Magazine* (November 10, 1974): 68.

⁹ *Beginning Again*, London, 1964, p. 163. Eleanor Marx was another late-Victorian anorexic. Until recently, *anorexia nervosa* was usually treated as a physical problem.

¹⁰ Review of Quentin Bell's *Virginia Woolf: a Biography*, *Yale Review* (Spring 1973): 427.

felt when liberated from it. In the summer of 1908, she and Vanessa were sitting in their drawing-room when

the door opened and the long and sinister figure of Mr. Lytton Strachey stood on the threshold. He pointed his finger at a stain on Vanessa's white dress.

"Semen?" he said.

Can one really say it? I thought & we burst out laughing. With that one word all barriers of reticence and reserve went down. A flood of the sacred fluid seemed to overwhelm us. Sex permeated our discussion. The word bugger was never far from our lips. We discussed copulation with the same excitement and openness that we had discussed the nature of good. It is strange to think how reticent, how reserved we had been and for how long.¹¹

In fact Woolf was far from sexless; her view of the world seems to have been quite sensual, even erotic, until she was forced to translate her feelings into sexual events. And Bloomsbury set high standards on sexual performance. Copulation and buggery, to use the engaging Bloomsbury terminology, were suddenly fashionable. Despite her delight in this new verbal freedom, Virginia felt a new anxiety when she contrasted her life with that of her sister, Vanessa, a cheerful heroine of free love, marriage, and motherhood—a natural woman. Phyllis Rose has brilliantly analyzed Virginia's fear that writing was an act that unsexed her, made her an unnatural woman, and isolated her from the world of female fulfillment represented by her mother and Vanessa:

A crude summary of the chain of causality might go like this: Everyone loved and admired her mother (and after her mother's death, her sister . . .). To be loved she must be like her mother. Committing herself to children of the mind over children of the body, art over people, is not

¹¹ Bell, *Virginia Woolf*, 1, p. 124.

being like her mother. Therefore, after producing every work of art, she feels excessively unlovable; having reaffirmed her difference from her mother, she fears people will ignore or reject her, and so she needs excessive reassurance that she is loved and protected.¹²

Marriage to Leonard Woolf in 1912 seemed like a guarantee of love, security, and normalcy, although, as she wrote to him brutally, she felt "no physical attraction" for him.¹³ Perhaps they hoped the honeymoon would solve their sexual problem; predictably, it did not. Undoubtedly Virginia was awkward, shy, and frightened of male passion; on the other hand, Leonard Woolf does not seem to have been a passionate man. At Cambridge his friends found him a "rather dry, nervously unemotional young man"; he was famous for his Puritanism.¹⁴

Their honeymoon, spent wandering about Provence and Spain, ended with a rough Mediterranean voyage on a Hungarian ship; it did not encourage sexual confidence and relaxation. When they returned, apparently disturbed by Virginia's "frigidity," they innocently sought Vanessa's counsel; she made the most of the opportunity. "They seemed very happy," she wrote to Clive, "but are evidently both a little exercised in their minds on the subject of the Goat's coldness. I think I perhaps annoyed her but may have consoled him by saying I thought she never had understood or sympathised with sexual passion in men. Apparently she still gets no pleasure at all from the act, which I think is curious. They were very anxious to know when I

¹² Phyllis Rose, "Mrs. Ramsay and Mrs. Woolf," *Women's Studies*, 1 (Summer 1973): 212.

¹³ Bell, *Virginia Woolf*, 1, p. 185.

¹⁴ Michael Holroyd, *Lytton Strachey*, 1, p. 108. Leonard Woolf writes about himself that when he learned about sex at the age of twelve "it was only with the most heroic effort that I was preventing myself from being sick." *Sowing*, London, 1960, p. 66. He lost his virginity in Ceylon at the age of twenty-five.

first had an orgasm. I couldn't remember. Do you? But no doubt I sympathised with such things if I didn't have them from the time I was 2."¹⁵

In short, after a mere six weeks' trial, Virginia was confirmed in her "frigidity" and encouraged to think of herself as a hopeless case. At the same time it was implied that *real* women—i.e., Vanessa—experienced these ecstasies instinctively, and that Leonard was much to be pitied. We know more now about so-called frigidity; perhaps Vanessa really had no better advice to give. Yet her cheerfulness in the face of Virginia's anxiety is unmistakable, as is the destructiveness of her "consolation" of Leonard. Perhaps Vanessa liked her role as the sensual woman and had no wish to share it with her sister. At any rate, the contemporary view of Leonard as a martyr and saint begins with their honeymoon; Elizabeth Hardwick considers Leonard's "endurance of Virginia's famous frigidity . . . altogether to his credit."¹⁶

The inadequacy Virginia felt when she contrasted the sexual side of her life with Vanessa's was compounded by Leonard's decision that they should not have children. The sources of this decision are rather obscure. According to Quentin Bell, Virginia had happily anticipated having children and did not know of Leonard's misgivings until some time after they married. Her ill health in the fall of 1912 was the immediate source of Leonard's concern; it was not until later, however, that he became aware of the seriousness of her medical history. In January 1913 Leonard consulted a number of doctors, looking, it appears, for someone to lend medical authority to a decision he had already made. Quentin Bell describes his search: "Leonard talked to Dr. (now Sir George) Savage, and Sir George, in his breezy way, had exclaimed that it would do her a world of good; but Leonard mistrusted Sir George; he consulted

¹⁵ Bell, *Virginia Woolf*, II, p. 6.

¹⁶ "Bloomsbury and Virginia Woolf," *New York Review of Books*, (February 8, 1973): 16.

other people: Maurice Craig, Vanessa's specialist, T. B. Hyslop and Jean Thomas, who kept a nursing home and knew Virginia well; their views differed, but in the end Leonard decided and persuaded Virginia to agree that, although they both wanted children, it would be too dangerous for her to have them. In this I imagine Leonard was right. It is hard to imagine Virginia as a mother. But it was to be a permanent source of grief to her and, in later years, she could never think of Vanessa's fruitful state without misery and envy."¹⁷

Male critics have generally agreed that Leonard's decision was correct. Michael Holroyd, for example, maintains that "children with their wetness and noise would surely have killed off the novels in her: and it was about novel-writing that she cared most."¹⁸ Behind this confident diagnosis are the old stereotypes about the incompatibility of childbearing and art, as well as a peculiarly English upper-class aversion to infantile squalor. Surely Virginia would have had nannies for her children; Cynthia Ozick (one of the few female critics who have lately challenged Leonard's authority and motives in this decision) reminds us that Vanessa had two.¹⁹ Besides, it was Leonard who hated disorder, Virginia who worked amidst chaos. Leonard's view was that childbirth would endanger Virginia's health and precarious mental stability, and he may have been right. On the other hand, it is impossible not to suspect that he had much more complex unconscious motives: jealousy of prospective children, as Cynthia Ozick suggests, or possibly some deficiency in passion of his own.

Virginia was led to feel not only that she had renounced a primary female role, failed to accomplish the act that is woman's rite of passage into adulthood, but also that in marrying Leonard she had destroyed his opportunities to be a father. Soon after this decision, in the spring of 1913, ac-

¹⁷ Bell, *Virginia Woolf*, II, p. 8.

¹⁸ Review in the *London Times*, October 19, 1973.

¹⁹ "Mrs. Virginia Woolf," *Commentary* (August 1973): 40.

ording to Leonard, Virginia suffered one of her most terrible attacks.

In this, as in all her attacks of madness, Virginia Woolf was treated by variations of the "rest cure," a therapy for neurasthenic people, particularly women, that had been developed by the American physician Silas Weir Mitchell. Dr. Mitchell specialized in cures of neurotic women through a drastic treatment that reduced them "to a condition of infantile dependence on their physician."²⁰ The ingredients of the rest cure were isolation, immobility, prohibition of all intellectual activity, and overfeeding, accompanied in some cases by daily massage. In the cases of American women patients like Jane Addams and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the cure had nearly killed; Mrs. Gilman wrote a powerful short story, "The Yellow Wall-Paper" (1891), about a woman *driven* mad by her enforced confinement and passivity. Besides forcing a woman to stifle the drives and emotions that had made her sick with frustration in the first place and depriving her of intellectual outlets for their expression, the rest cure was a sinister parody of idealized Victorian femininity: inertia, privatization, narcissism, dependency. In particular, the weight gain that was considered an essential part of the cure was a kind of pseudo-pregnancy. Ann Wood, who has studied Mitchell's theories in the context of nineteenth-century attitudes toward female health and sexuality, argues that Mitchell was an outspoken misogynist, whose methods punished "deviant" and discontented women by forcing them into an allegedly therapeutic female role.²¹

Virginia's treatment was carried out in a nursing home "for female lunatics" in Twickenham, where she was re-

²⁰ Gail Parker, *The Oven Birds: American Women on Womanhood 1820-1920*, New York, 1972, p. 49.

²¹ Ann Douglas Wood, "The Fashionable Diseases: Women's Complaints and Their Treatment in Nineteenth-Century America," in *Clio's Consciousness Raised*, ed. Mary S. Hartman and Lois Banner, New York, 1974, pp. 1-24.

quired to remain in bed in a darkened room, eating well, drinking milk in the daytime and mulled wine at night, and taking "Robin's Hypophosphate." This was not her first trip to Twickenham; she had been sent there in 1910, and the experience of boredom, loneliness, and repression had nearly made her suicidal. Nonetheless she was sent there again in 1913 against her will. "A few miserable shaky pencil-written notes to Leonard survive from that time," writes Bell. "They make one think of a child sent away by its parents to some cruel school. Childlike, she burst out against the husband who had put her away in this awful place. But then, seeing his worn and distressed face, she was overcome with guilt and misery."²²

The treatment itself left her shaky and desperate. When she came out she still seemed sick, and in the summer of 1913 Leonard insisted that she should return to the nursing home. Virginia insisted that she was perfectly all right. Leonard, having secretly consulted a new physician, suggested that they should go to a doctor and each present their case. He was delighted when Virginia suggested they visit the very physician he had consulted; predictably, the verdict was that she was ill and that she should enter the home. That night she attempted to kill herself.

In *Asylums*, Erving Goffman explains how the progress from home to hospital leads to a sense of betrayal for the mental patient:

His next-of-relation presses him into coming to "talk things over" with a medical practitioner. . . . But typically the next-of-relation will have set the interview up, in the sense of selecting the professional, arranging for time, telling the professional something about the case, and so on. This move effectively tends to establish the next-of-relation as the responsible person to whom pertinent findings can be divulged, while effectively establishing the other as the patient. . . . Upon arrival at the office the pre-

²² Bell, *Virginia Woolf*, II, p. 13.

patient suddenly finds that he and his next-of-relation have not been accorded the same roles, and apparently that a prior understanding between the professional and the next-of-relation has been put in operation against him.²³

This is precisely the coalition Leonard (with the advice of Vanessa) had arranged. Virginia was powerless to assert herself against such massed authority. Having attempted suicide, she was, of course, put under nurses' care. Later that year she was sent back to Twickenham for more rest cures. Thus Woolf became the real-life epitome of that feminine archetype, the Mad Wife.

It was the illness of 1913-1915 that, in John Bayley's words, "ratified" Leonard's doubts about having children. In fact the outstanding symptom of this particular episode of madness was fury toward Leonard. In 1915 Virginia's expression of her anger was interpreted by Vanessa, among others, as a sign of the severity of her illness: "She won't see Leonard at all & has taken against all men."²⁴ The dynamics of this particular attack suggest that Virginia recognized the tyranny of Leonard's decision at the same time that she was guiltily coerced into accepting it. Madness was the role in which she articulated her resentment and rage, and feeling rage against someone who loved her and wanted to care for her redoubled her sense of guilt.

Woolf used this episode as a central theme of *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), presenting her own experience through a male character, Septimus Smith. She had emerged from the rest cures of 1915 weighing 168 pounds; in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Septimus fights against the maddening therapy of "rest in bed; rest in solitude; silence and rest; rest without friends, without books, without messages; six months rest; until a man

²³ Erving Goffman, *Asylums*, Harmondsworth, 1968, pp. 128-129.

²⁴ Bell, *Virginia Woolf*, II, p. 26. John Bayley reviewed the Bell biography in *The Guardian*, October 19, 1973.

who went in weighing seven stone six [104 pounds] comes out weighing twelve [168 pounds]."²⁵

A great deal of her anger comes out in the portrait of Sir William Bradshaw, the Harley Street nerve doctor. Personal experience explains the inartistic lack of proportion most critics have noticed as a "flaw" in this fiercely vibrant section of the novel. When Sir William tries to talk Septimus Smith into going for a rest cure, he is clearly attempting to punish and imprison him: "Sir William had a friend in Surrey where they taught, what Sir William frankly admitted was a difficult art—a sense of proportion. There were, moreover, family affection; honour; courage; and a brilliant career. All of these had in Sir William a resolute champion. If they failed, he had to support him police and the good of society, which, he remarked very quietly, would take care, down in Surrey, that these unsocial impulses, bred more than anything by the lack of good blood, were held in control. . . . Naked, defenceless, the exhausted, the friendless, received the impress of Sir William's will. He swooped; he devoured. He shut people up. It was this combination of decision and humanity that endeared Sir William so greatly to the relations of his victims."²⁶

She could hardly have expressed her feelings of victimization and rage more plainly. This passage is almost Kafkaesque in its sense of conspiracy and guilt; Sir William is a vulture backed by the authority of the state. Woolf's personal experience also dictated Sir William's insistence that Septimus should not have children; he "forbade childbirth, penalized despair, made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they too shared his sense of proportion."²⁷ And the "relations of the victims"? There is no record that Leonard and Vanessa recognized themselves as collaborators, nor that in Sir William they detected Virginia's doctor, Sir George Savage. It is Savage's surname,

²⁵ *Mrs. Dalloway*, London, 1976, p. 89.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

so appropriate, from Virginia's point of view, that generates much of the imagery surrounding Sir William. It is not even certain that Woolf acknowledged her own motives or felt relieved in exorcising some of this anger. The people who had most betrayed her were those to whom she owed the most. Her marriage, in some ways so admirable and fulfilling, placed her in a position of perpetual guilt and dependence; and, despite such covert protests as this one, she seems to have abdicated her right to make basic decisions in it.

In 1940, after the years at the uncannily named Monks House, there was a question of the rest cure again. Virginia made her woman physician promise that there would be no rest cure "ordered," but it was clear that no such promise would be kept. She killed herself the next day. Her three suicide notes express her guilt about spoiling Leonard's life; indeed, they exonerate Leonard so completely that Mrs. Ian Parsons felt it necessary in 1973 to present them to the British Museum as proof that Leonard had not made them up himself.²⁸ Nancy Bazin sees the suicide as "both an act of despair and an act of faith—despair that the androgynous whole would ever be established on earth but faith in the existence (in the timeless realm of death) of its mystical equivalent—oneness."²⁹ Woolf's suicide has thus come to represent an ultimate gesture of self-sacrifice and "feminine" nobility.

Yet to see Woolf's suicide as a beautiful act of faith, or a philosophical gesture toward androgyny, is to betray the human pain and rage that she felt; to see the suicide as a proof of her feminine neurosis is to condemn her in death

²⁸ "I am particularly anxious that it should be known that these letters are now in the British Museum because lately I have been disturbed by a rumour that Virginia never wrote the letters quoted by Leonard in the last volume of his autobiography, and that—incredible as this may seem—he had concocted them himself" (*Times Literary Supplement*, July 13, 1973).

²⁹ *Virginia Woolf and the Androgynous Vision*, p. 222.

to the stereotype that imprisoned her in life. The feelings of guilt and inadequacy as a woman that she had always struggled with, and often succumbed to, intensified in the mid-1930s, when she was going through menopause. In March of 1936 she had tried to describe her symptoms in her diary: "I wish I could write out my sensations at this moment. They are so peculiar and so unpleasant. Partly T[ime] of L[ife]. I wonder? A physical feeling as if I were drumming slightly in the veins: very cold, impotent and terrified. As if I were exposed on a high ledge in full light. Very lonely. L. out to lunch. Nessa has Quentin, don't want me. Very useless. No atmosphere around me. No words. Very apprehensive. . . . And I know that I must go on doing this dance on hot bricks till I die."³⁰ For a woman, and especially for a childless woman, menopause itself can be a kind of death. For Virginia Woolf, it meant facing the fact that her reproductive life was over, a life that Leonard, in some sense, had denied her. Vanessa's maternal fulfillment, even after the death of Julian Bell in the Spanish Civil War, was still a source of jealousy and torment.

I have not meant to attack Leonard's motives or his sincerity, nor to deny that he loved Virginia. We cannot penetrate the private mystery of their life together. It is clear, however, that his view of her has prevailed over her own to such a degree that some critics have outrageously concluded that his genius was dominant as well. Gordon Haight has said of Leonard, "It is not too much to say that to him we owe the whole of her contribution to English literature."³¹ It is far too much to say, even with the kindest interpretation of Leonard's role; and it ignores the fact that there are ways in which love can usurp a woman's responsibility for her own life, cripple her, and destroy her.

³⁰ Bell, *Virginia Woolf*, II, pp. 190-199. John F. Hulcoop calls the menopause a "preoccupation or even obsession," in Woolf's writing ("McNichol's Mrs. Dalloway: Second Thoughts," *Virginia Woolf Miscellany*, [Spring 1975]: 4).

³¹ Review of Quentin Bell's *Virginia Woolf*, *Yale Review* (Spring 1973): 429.

Woolf's illnesses had always had some source in female experience; they had taken the classic female forms of frigidity, depression, and suicide attempts, and had been treated in female asylums with a therapy intended to induce female passivity. It is the peculiarly poignant irony of female depression that it decreases the ability to express hostility. The guilt, which so puzzled Leonard, and which I have described as her feelings of female inadequacy and her immense internalized anger against him and against Vanessa, became so overwhelming in this last attack that only self-destruction seemed commensurate with her despair. On previous occasions, suicide attempts had been punished by more rest cures, more guilt. This time she would not risk recovery, would not face what Sylvia Plath called the "peanut-crunching crowd," the accusing faces that defined her eternally as weak, feminine, and dependent. Deprived of the use of her womanhood, denied the power of manhood, she sought a serene androgynous "oneness," an embrace of eternity that was inevitably an embrace of death. In recognizing that the quest for androgyny was Woolf's solution to her existential dilemma, we should not confuse flight with liberation.

Woolf's ideas about women's literature were closely connected to her personal struggle for self-definition. In 1918, in an anonymous review of R. Brimley Johnson's *The Women Novelists*, Woolf expressed her dissatisfaction with the feminine novelists, who wrote under "the tyranny of what was expected from their sex," and the feminist novelists, "the women who wish to be taken for women." "The change," she argued, "is hardly for the better, since any emphasis, either of pride or of shame, laid consciously upon the sex of a writer is not only irritating, but superfluous." In this early essay, Woolf was raising some of the problems that she dealt with in *A Room of One's Own*; she was attempting to find a way of talking about women's writing that would accept the continuity of the literary tradition, yet transcend what she described negatively as "the tyranny

of sex." Woolf agreed completely with Johnson that the novels of women were special: "A woman's writing is always feminine; it cannot help being feminine; at its best it is most feminine; the only difficulty lies in defining what we mean by feminine." She believed the sex of a novel to be an elusive but unmistakable aura, at once a Zen mystery, like the sound of one hand clapping, and a matter of values, from which spring "not only marked differences of plot and incident, but infinite differences in selection, method, and style."³² What she wanted was an impersonal and inconspicuous technique in which femaleness was neither flaunted nor renounced, a separate literary and sexual peace.

Much of Woolf's writing at this point was concerned with the external difficulties and obstacles of the woman writer—an emphasis connected to her own struggles to find a voice. In 1919 her second conventionally structured novel, *Night and Day* (dedicated to Vanessa), was not a success. She was in an anxious state of transition between two ways of writing; consequently, her view of the straitened possibilities for the woman artist was defensively pessimistic. She expressed this view in a good-humored exchange with "Affable Hawk" (Desmond McCarthy) in the *New Statesman*:

It seems to me that the conditions which made it possible for a Shakespeare to exist are that he shall have had predecessors in his art, shall make one of a group where art is freely discussed and practiced, and shall himself have the utmost freedom of thought and experience. Perhaps in Lesbos, but never since, have these conditions been the lot of women.³³

Lesbos or not, London provided these conditions in 1920, and they were substantially the lot of Virginia Woolf. She was deeply aware of the female literary tradition and cog-

³² *Times Literary Supplement* (October 17, 1918): 1183 (reprinted October 17, 1968).

³³ Letter, *New Statesman* (October 16, 1920): 45-46.

nizant of her own place in it. Her many affectionate essays about women novelists, poets, diarists, and letter-writers reveal her need to define her own literary identity in some real relationship to her predecessors. And whatever one might think of Bloomsbury, it was certainly a group in which art was freely discussed and practiced. But that last condition—freedom of thought and expression—she could not meet. Even in the moment of expressing feminist conflict, Woolf wanted to transcend it. Her wish for experience was really a wish to forget experience. In the 1920s, as her fiction moved away from realism, her criticism and her theoretical prose moved away from a troubled feminism toward a concept of serene androgyny.

The most famous of Woolf's statements about androgyny is *A Room of One's Own*. A. J. Moody is in the minority when he objects that "the title has enjoyed a fame rather beyond the intrinsic merits of the work" (Woolf's most conspicuous antagonists, the Leavises, found *Room* too flimsy to warrant their close attention).³⁴ What is most striking about the book texturally and structurally is its strenuous charm, its playfulness, its conversational surface. There is nothing here to suggest the humorless polemics of *Votes for Women* or the *Egoist*. The techniques of *Room* are like those of Woolf's fiction, particularly *Orlando*, which she was writing at the same time: repetition, exaggeration, parody, whimsy, and multiple viewpoint. On the other hand, despite its illusions of spontaneity and intimacy, *A Room of One's Own* is an extremely impersonal and defensive book.

Impersonality may seem like the wrong word for a book in which a narrative "I" appears in every third sentence. But a closer look reveals that the "I" is a persona, whom the author calls "Mary Beton," and that her views are carefully distanced and depersonalized, just as the pronoun "one" in the title depersonalizes, and even de-sexes, the subject. The whole book is cast in arch allegorical terms from the start:

³⁴ Moody, *Virginia Woolf*, London, 1963, p. 41. See also Q. D. Leavis, "Caterpillars of the World, Unite," *Scrutiny* VII (1938): 205.

"I need not say that what I am about to describe, Oxbridge, is an invention; so is Fernham; 'I' is only a convenient term for somebody who has no real being." In fact the characters and places are all disguised or delicately parodied versions of Woolf's own experience. "Fernham" is Newnham College, Cambridge, where she had given the lectures that were the genesis of the book. Woolf's cousin Katherine Stephen was Vice-Principal of Newnham; she is the "Mary Seton" who explains to Mary Beton why the women's colleges are so poor. Her mother, "Mrs. Seton," has had thirteen children (actually Mrs. Stephen had seven). The narrator, Mary Beton, lives in a London house by the river. Before 1918 she made her living in the jobs open to untrained middle-class women: amateur society journalism, clerical work, and teaching. Then she inherited 500 pounds a year from an aunt, also named Mary Beton, who had fallen off a horse in Bombay. Woolf had inherited 2,500 pounds from her aunt Caroline Emelia Stephen, whose life was much less romantic.³⁵ The last Mary, Mary Carmichael, author of *Life's Adventure*, is probably also a parody or a composite figure.

The entire book is teasing, sly, elusive in this way; Woolf plays with her audience, refusing to be entirely serious, denying any earnest or subversive intention. As M. C. Bradbrook has written, "The camouflage in *A Room of One's Own* . . . prevents Mrs. Woolf from committing the indelicacy of putting a case or the possibility of her being accused of waving any kind of banner. The arguments are clearly serious and personal and yet they are dramatized and surrounded with all sorts of disguises to avoid an appearance of argument."³⁶ In the opening chapters, this defensiveness

³⁵ Aunt Caroline Emelia, called "The Nun" by Virginia and Vanessa, had been jilted by a young man who went out to India. At one point Virginia wrote a "comic life" of her aunt, but it has been lost. Bell, *Virginia Woolf*, I, pp. 6-7, 93.

³⁶ "Notes on the Style of Mrs. Woolf," in *Critics on Virginia Woolf*, ed. Jacqueline E. M. Latham, London, 1970, pp. 24-25.

leads to a rather unpleasantly Stracheyesque kind of innuendo, as if the Cambridge setting had recalled the style of the Apostles. An example is the appearance of a Manx cat in the Oxbridge luncheon scene. Mary Beton is suddenly convulsed with laughter at the sight of "that abrupt and truncated animal. . . . I had to explain my laughter by pointing at the Manx cat, who did look a little absurd, poor beast, without a tail, in the middle of the lawn. Was he really born so, or had he lost his tail in an accident? . . . It is strange what a difference a tail makes—you know the sort of things one says as a lunch party breaks up and people are finding their coats and hats."³⁷ This certainly sounds like a feline swipe at Cantabrigian impotence.

In chapter 3, however, the narrative finally moves beyond this kind of gamesmanship and focuses on the question of women and fiction. Woolf insists that a woman must have an independent income and a room of her own if she is to write fiction, and that the mind of the artist should be androgynous. Apart from the specific question of income, to which Marxists object, these ideas are very nearly as civilized and unabrasive as the style, and it is easy to get caught up in the seductive flow. Who could possibly object to the idea of androgyny? Even clinical psychology confirms that "the really creative individual combines 'masculine' and 'feminine' qualities";³⁸ indeed, since masculine and feminine personality qualities are stereotypes to begin with, it is virtually a tautology to say that creative people are not limited to one set. Woolf's selection of Shakespeare to exemplify the androgynous artist also provokes little disagreement, especially since we know so little about Shakespeare's life; although there is no obvious connection between her other examples—Keats, Sterne, Cowper, Lamb, and Coleridge—one could probably discover some similarities, perhaps in their attitudes toward fantasy and madness.

³⁷ *A Room of One's Own*, London, 1945, p. 15.

³⁸ Judith Bardwick, *The Psychology of Women*, New York, 1971, p. 203.

Woolf, however, does not supply the connections; nor does she encourage the reader to pursue them very strenuously. If one can see *A Room of One's Own* as a document in the literary history of female aestheticism, 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.

Virginia Woolf was extremely sensitive to the ways in which female experience had made women weak, but she was much less sensitive to the ways in which it had made them strong. Filling in the outlines of her 1918 review, she wrote finely about the problems in the lives of several of her predecessors: their domestic responsibilities, their narrowness of range, and their frustration and anger. "We feel the influence of fear in it," she wrote of Charlotte Brontë's portrait of Rochester, "just as we constantly feel an acidity which is the result of oppression, a buried suffering smouldering beneath her passion, a rancour which contracts those books, splendid as they are, with a spasm of pain."³⁹ All of these passionate responses she deplored because she thought that they distorted the artist's integrity. She describes with compassion and scornful illustration how women writers were disadvantaged and harassed—an important and fully realized discovery. But in wishing to make women independent of all that dailiness and bitterness, so that they might "escape a little from the common sitting-room and see human beings not always in their relation to each other but in relation to reality,"⁴⁰ she was advocating a strategic retreat, and not a victory; a denial of feeling, and not a mastery of it.

We can see this withdrawal most plainly in the theory of androgyny presented in the last chapter of the book, which is the psychological and theoretical extension of the material reform implied in the private room. Woolf brings in

³⁹ *A Room of One's Own*, p. 74.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

the discussion of androgyny in a characteristically low-keyed way, as if it were an afterthought; but it is central to her thinking not only in this book but also in her novels. The androgynous vision, in Woolf's terms, is a response to the dilemma of a woman writer embarrassed and alarmed by feelings too hot to handle without risking real rejection by her family, her audience, and her class. A room of one's own is the first step toward her solution; more than an office with a typewriter, it is a symbol of psychic withdrawal, an escape from the demands of other people. Mary Beton or Mary Carmichael would not, in entering that room, be liberated from the fear of what people might say or fortified to express her anger or her pain; instead, she would be encouraged to forget both her grievances and her fellows, and seek an underlying or transcendent meaning. Woolf had faith that the androgynous vision would express itself in uniquely feminine terms, but purely and unconsciously, as femininity's essence distilled in a new supple sentence and open structure, as a pervasive but inoffensive quality of perception, "that curious sexual quality which comes only when sex is unconscious of itself."⁴¹ Stripped of its anger, femininity would spread out over fiction to become a smooth and absorbent surface.

In describing androgyny, Woolf goes a step further to imagine that the highly developed creative mind needs no such crutch as physical privacy to transcend the burden of sex consciousness. The passage in which she gracefully leads up to the idea intimates unmistakably that feminist awareness is a painful state of mind:

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. But

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

some of these states of mind seem, even if adopted spontaneously, to be less comfortable than others. In order to keep oneself continuing in them one is unconsciously holding something back, and gradually the repression becomes an effort. But there may be some state of mind in which one could continue without effort because nothing is required to be held back.⁴²

Despite a certain fluttering of indefinite pronouns here, I think that the less comfortable states of mind that Woolf refers to are the angry and alienated ones, the feminist ones, and that she would like to possess a more serene and thus more comfortable consciousness.

In Virginia Woolf's case, agitation was the first symptom of mental collapse, and the personal need for equanimity without repression is very close to the surface of these carefully abstract sentences. "Equanimity," said her physician in 1925, "practice equanimity." But how can one, if one is a woman, be serene in the face of injustice? There is an eerie hint that in the androgynous solution Woolf provides there lurks a psychological equivalent of lobotomy. Yet when she actually describes androgyny, Woolf uses a literal sexual imagery of intercourse between the manly and womanly powers of the mind:

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. Coleridge perhaps meant this when he said that a great mind is androgynous. It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilised and uses all its faculties. Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine.⁴³

The minutely Freudian analogy with biological sexuality here, particularly in the last sentence, continues a few pages later in a passage of almost erotic reverie:

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

Some marriage of opposites has to be consummated. The whole of the mind must lie wide open if we are to get the sense that the writer is communicating his experience with perfect fullness. There must be freedom and there must be peace. . . . The curtains must be close drawn. The writer, I thought, once his experience is over, must lie back and let his mind celebrate its nuptials in darkness. He must not look or question what is being done.⁴⁴

Obviously Virginia Woolf had not looked at or questioned what she had done in this passage: made the writer male. In a book exquisitely in control of its pronouns, this is not a small thing. It suggests, I think, how unconsciously she had felt the soft, dead hand of the Angel in the House descend upon her shoulder, censoring even this innocent metaphorical fantasy, and transferring it to the mind of a male voyeur. How could any woman writer pretend to be androgynous—indifferent, undivided—in the grip of such inhibition? At some level, Woolf is aware that androgyny is another form of repression or, at best, self-discipline. It is not so much that she recommends androgyny as that she warns against feminist engagement: "It is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly. It is fatal for a woman to lay the least stress on any grievance; to plead even with justice any cause; in any way to speak consciously as a woman. And fatal is no figure of speech; for anything written with that conscious bias is doomed to death. It ceases to be fertilised."⁴⁵ In many respects Woolf is expressing a class-oriented and Bloomsbury-oriented ideal—the separation of politics and art, the fashion of bisexuality. It is only fair to note that she found male writers ruined by exaggerated, or exacerbated, virility. But there is also more than a hint of fear in her warning. She had taken to heart the cautionary tales to be found in the lives of earlier women writers. She had seen

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 102–103.

the punishment that society could inflict on women who made a nuisance of themselves by behaving in an uncivilized manner. It seems like a rationalization of her own fears that Woolf should have developed a literary theory that made anger and protest flaws in art.

The androgynous mind is, finally, a utopian projection of the ideal artist: calm, stable, unimpeded by consciousness of sex. Woolf meant it to be a luminous and fulfilling idea; but, like other utopian projections, her vision is inhuman. Whatever else one may say of androgyny, it represents an escape from the confrontation with femaleness or maleness. Her ideal artist mystically transcends sex, or has none. One could imagine another approach to androgyny, however, through total immersion in the individual experience, with all its restrictions of sex and anger and fear and chaos. A thorough understanding of what it means, in every respect, to be a woman, could lead the artist to an understanding of what it means to be a man. This revelation would not be realized in any mystical way; it would result from daring to face and express what is unique, even if unpleasant, or taboo, or destructive, in one's own experience, and thus it would speak to the secret heart in all people.

One can see the problem more clearly, I think, in a different context. Woolf disliked partisanship in fiction, and she interpreted it as broadly as possible. In a review of American fiction, she objected to the pervasive sense of national identity and compared it revealingly to the sexual identity of women:

Women writers have to meet many of the same problems that beset Americans. They too are conscious of their own peculiarities as a sex; apt to suspect insolence, quick to avenge grievances, eager to shape an art of their own. In both cases all kinds of consciousness—consciousness of self, of race, of sex, of civilization—which have nothing to do with art, have got between them and the paper, with results that are, on the surface at least, unfortunate.

It is easy enough to see that Mr. Anderson, for example, would be a much more perfect artist if he could forget that he is an American; he would write better prose if he could use all words impartially, new or old, English or American; classical or slang.

Nevertheless as we turn from his autobiography to his fiction we are forced to own (as some women writers also make us own) that to come fresh to the world, to turn a new angle to the light, is so great an achievement that for its sake we can pardon the bitterness, the self-consciousness, the angularity which inevitably go with it.⁴⁶

I suspect that few readers will agree that the great flaw in American literature is its national consciousness, its insistence on exploring what is local and special in American culture, or its use of the language which that culture has generated. The sort of perfect artist who can forget where he comes from is a figure more pathetic than heroic. Similarly, the notion that women should transcend any awkwardly unorthodox desire to write about being women comes from timidity and not strength.

Virginia Woolf herself never approached the state of serene indifference she called androgyny; as shown in the quotation above, she was even able to appreciate the excellence of a partisan art. She did try, however, to get away from personal identity, from the claims of the self to be expressed. In terms of the female aesthetic, as I have shown, egolessness was associated with the highest form of female perception. Thus James Naremore, writing of the duality of Woolf's vision, says:

On the one hand is the world of the self, the time-bound, landlocked, everyday world of the masculine ego, of intellect and routine, where people live in fear of death, and where separations imposed by time and space result in agony. On the other hand is a world without a self—

⁴⁶ "American Fiction," *Collected Essays*, II, London, 1966, p. 113.

watery, emotional, erotic, generally associated with the feminine sensibility—where all of life seems blended together in a kind of "halo," where the individual personality is continually being dissolved by intimations of eternity, and where death reminds us of sexual union.⁴⁷

Naremore argues that both of these worlds are equal in Virginia Woolf's writing, except that the second is a little more equal. The chasm between them, however, is never bridged. Indeed, an extended residence in the world without a self is the worst possible preparation for a sojourn in the other world: skills atrophy, courage evaporates, and self-deception becomes habitual. Woolf's books show signs of a progressive technical inability to accommodate the facts and crises of day-to-day experience, even when she wanted to do so.

Woolf did change her ideas over a period of years. In 1928, androgyny, which she had also celebrated in the tedious high camp of *Orlando*, represented her ambivalent solution to the conflict of wishing to describe female experience at the same time that her life presented paralyzing obstacles to such self-expression. The novel, she wrote firmly, should not be "the dumping-ground for the personal emotions." Woolf seems to have been echoing the formidable Beatrice Webb, who had told the Woolfs in 1918 that "marriage was the waste paper basket of the emotions."⁴⁸ But where would female emotions and experiences find an outlet?

In the 1930s Woolf tried to deal with the problem by splitting her writing into "male" journalism and "female" fiction. David Daiches has noticed that the mannerisms of her fiction frequently disappeared in her criticism and biography: "The force and clarity of much of her occasional prose sometimes makes us wonder whether she would not

⁴⁷ *The World Without a Self*, New Haven, 1972, p. 245.

⁴⁸ "Women and Fiction," *Women and Writing*, p. 61. Leonard Woolf quotes Beatrice Webb's remark in *Beginning Again*, London, 1964, p. 117.

have made a brilliant political pamphleteer. For while in her fiction her prose tends to be subtle and lyrical, elsewhere she can write in a most forthright and virile idiom."⁴⁹ Woolf's most complex and candid analysis of her own inhibitions as a writer is found in the 1931 essay, "Professions for Women," in which she described the phantom of the Angel in the House, and her own self-censorship:

I want you to imagine me writing a novel in a state of trance. I want you to figure to yourselves a girl sitting with a pen in her hand, which for minutes, and indeed for hours, she never dips into the inkpot. The image that comes to my mind when I think of this girl is the image of a fisherman lying sunk in dreams on the verge of a deep lake with a rod held out over the water. She was letting her imagination sweep unchecked round every rock and cranny of the world that lies submerged in the depth of our subconscious being. Now came the experience that I believe to be far commoner with women writers than with men. The line raced through the girl's fingers. Her imagination had rushed away. It had sought the pools, the depths, the dark places where the largest fish slumber. And then there was a smash. There was an explosion. There was foam and confusion. The imagination had dashed itself against something hard. The girl was roused from her dream. . . . To speak without figure, she had thought of something, something about the body, about the passions, which it was unfitting for her as a woman to say. Men, her reason told her, would be shocked. The consciousness of what men will say of a woman who speaks the truth about her passions had roused her from her artist's state of unconsciousness. She could write no more.⁵⁰

There is much in this passage worth discussing at length—the shift from the first to the third person narrative, the

⁴⁹ *Virginia Woolf*, New York, 1963, pp. 150–151.

⁵⁰ "Professions for Women," *Women and Writing*, p. 51.

"figure" of fishing as an allegory of woman's failure to reach orgasm, the significance of the hard explosive somethings that rouse the girl from her dream, and the projection of responsibility at the end onto men. Here I wish to emphasize the last part, the most typical, I think, of the direction of Woolf's thought: it is men who mysteriously control these fantasies by judging them harshly. The sense of this judgment is plain enough, and true enough, to a point, but Woolf wished neither to accuse men nor to look very closely at her own capitulation and self-repression. On the other hand, she was much too honest and perceptive not to see the evasion in her own writing; even if she had not been, there was the composer Ethel Smyth to point it out to her. Smyth had been a co-performer at the Women's Service League when the paper was read, and she urged Woolf to try to write about her "experiences as a body." Woolf in turn suggested that Smyth attempt a novel about the sexual lives of women. At any rate, Woolf began to think in terms of a nonfictional work, "a sequel to *A Room of One's Own*—about the sexual life of women."⁵¹ The fact that this work eventually turned out to be *Three Guineas* demonstrates that she was incapable of carrying out her plan.

Furthermore, the decade of the thirties brought Woolf into repeated contact with death and tragedy; the deaths of Lytton Strachey, Roger Fry, and her nephew Julian Bell were devastating. Julian's death in the Spanish Civil War seemed particularly senseless and tragic because of its associations with the male world of aggression, uniforms, and glory. At the same time she felt a kind of guilt about it; she could not understand his intensity and commitment, and she was forced to question her own attitudes. In a private memoir of her nephew written shortly after his death, she asked herself, "What made him do it? I suppose it's a fever in the blood of the younger generation which we can't possibly understand. I have never known anyone of my generation have that feeling about a war. We were all C.O.'s in the

⁵¹ *A Writer's Diary*, pp. 158–159.

Great war. And though I understand that this is a 'cause,' can be called the cause of liberty & so on, still my natural reaction is to fight intellectually: if I were any use, I should write against it: I should evolve some plan for fighting English tyranny."⁵² Here is the motive behind *Three Guineas*: an effort to write, for once, a serious, angry manifesto against war from a feminist viewpoint, partly as a gesture for Julian, partly as her own way of fighting tyranny.

Finally, throughout the latter part of the thirties Woolf was experiencing menopause. Still unable to ignore—much less transcend—the claims of female experience, and also unable to express them in her novels, she sought to evade them once more in a sexless secession from the male world. *Three Guineas* (originally called *On Being Despised*) was the book nobody liked—not even Leonard. Not only did it advocate an almost total withdrawal from male society, on the lines of *Lysistrata*, but it also refused steadfastly to be charming. To the question, How shall we prevent war? *Three Guineas* replies that women should found an "Outsiders Society," honorable, anonymous, indifferent, and self-sufficient, completely detached from the bloody patriarchy.

Whereas the tone and the repeated allusions to men hiding behind the curtains in *A Room of One's Own* show a controlled awareness of a male audience, *Three Guineas* is basically concerned with a female audience, "the daughters of educated men." And here Woolf was betrayed by her own isolation from female mainstream. Many people were infuriated by the class assumptions in the book, as well as by its political naiveté. More profoundly, however, Woolf was cut off from an understanding of the day-to-day life of the women whom she wished to inspire; characteristically, she rebelled against aspects of female experience that she had never personally known and avoided describing her own experience. Thus for all its radical zeal in linking war with patriarchy (Engels had made the same kind of point in

⁵² Bell, II, pp. 258–259.

Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State), its careful research (there are 123 lengthy footnotes), and its courage, *Three Guineas* rings false. Its language, all too frequently, is empty sloganeering and cliché; the stylistic tricks of repetition, exaggeration, and rhetorical question, so amusing in *A Room of One's Own*, become irritating and hysterical.

Most of the flaws of *Three Guineas* were exposed in Q. D. Leavis's cruelly accurate *Scrutiny* review. Leavis addressed herself to the question of female experience, making it clear that from her point of view, Woolf knew damn little about it:

"Daughters of educated men" [she quoted] "have always done their thinking from hand to mouth. . . . They have thought while they stirred the pot, while they rocked the cradle. It was thus that they win us the right," etc. I agree with someone who complained that to judge from the acquaintance with the realities of life displayed in this book there is no reason to suppose Mrs. Woolf would know which end of the cradle to stir. Mrs. Woolf in fact can hardly claim that she has thus helped us to win the right, etc. I myself, however, have generally had to produce contributions for this review with one hand, while actually stirring the pot, or something of that kind, with the other, and if I have not done my thinking while rocking the cradle it was only because the daughters even of educated men ceased to rock infants at least two generations ago. Well, I feel bound to disagree with Mrs. Woolf's assumption that running a household alone and unaided necessarily hinders or weakens thinking. One's own kitchen and nursery, and not the drawing-room and dinner table where tired professional men relax among the ladies (thus Mrs. Woolf), is the realm where living takes place, and I see no profit in letting our servants live for us. The activities Mrs. Woolf wishes to free educated women from as wasteful not only provide a valuable dis-

cipline, they serve as a sieve for determining which values are important and genuine and which are conventional and contemptible.⁵³

Despite its bias, this view is very persuasive. *Three Guineas* is often indignant, articulate, solid—even powerful—but the metaphor of an Outsiders Society is all too accurate a picture of Woolf's world.

In George Lukacs' formulation, the ethic of a novelist becomes an aesthetic problem in his writing. Thus it is not surprising to recognize in Virginia Woolf's memorable definition of life: "a luminous halo, a semitransparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end," another metaphor of uterine withdrawal and containment. Woolf's fictional record of the perceptions of this state describes consciousness as passive receptivity: "The mind receives a myriad impressions . . . an incessant shower of innumerable atoms."⁵⁴ In one sense, Woolf's female aesthetic is an extension of her view of women's social role: receptivity to the point of self-destruction, creative synthesis to the point of exhaustion and sterility. In *To the Lighthouse*, for example, Mrs. Ramsay spends herself in repeated orgasms of sympathy: "There was scarcely a shell of herself left for her to know herself by; all was so lavished and spent."⁵⁵ Similarly, Woolf herself was drained and spent at the conclusion of each novel.

Yet there is a kind of power in Woolf's fiction, that comes from the occasional intense emotion that resists digestion by the lyric prose. There is also a kind of female sexual power in the *passivity* of her writing: it is insatiable. There is a sexual ecstasy in Mrs. Ramsay's exhaustion: "She seemed to fold herself together, one petal closed in another . . . while there throbbed through her, like the pulse in a

⁵³ "Caterpillars of the World, Unite," *Scrutiny* (September 1938): 210-211.

⁵⁴ "Modern Fiction," *Collected Essays*, II, p. 100.

⁵⁵ *To the Lighthouse*, London, 1964, p. 45.

spring which has expanded to its full width and now gently ceases to beat, the rapture of successful creation."⁵⁶ The free-flowing empathy of woman seeks its own ecstatic extinction. For Mrs. Ramsay, death is a mode of self-assertion. Refined to its essences, abstracted from its physicality and anger, denied any action, Woolf's vision of womanhood is as deadly as it is disembodied. The ultimate room of one's own is the grave.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 45.