Thinking Back through Our Mothers

The Collective Sublime

Writing, for Virginia Woolf, was a revolutionary act. Her alienation from British patriarchal culture and its capitalist and imperialist forms and values was so intense that she was filled with terror and determination as she wrote. A guerrilla fighter in a Victorian skirt, she trembled with fear as she prepared her attacks, her raids on the enemy. She was so hostile to the patriarchy and felt that her anger was so present in all her efforts that no evidence of literary “success” was assurance enough of acceptance, and she collapsed after sending her books to the printer. She always feared she would be found out, that the punishment of the fathers for daring to trespass on their territory was “instant dismemberment by wild horses,” as she told Ethel Smyth. The violence of men’s imagined retaliation was in direct proportion to the violence of her hatred for their values. Like Kafka she felt that writing was a conspiracy against the state, an act of aggression against the powerful, the willful breaking of the treaty of silence the oppressed had made with their masters to ensure survival. Language and culture belonged to them; to wrest it from them was an act requiring the utmost courage and daring. If language was the private property of the patriarchs, to “trespass” on it was an act of usurpation. To see herself as untying the mother tongue, freeing language from bondage to the fathers and returning it to women and the working classes, was also to cause herself acute anxiety about what they would do when they found out. By writing she committed a crime against the fathers, and she expected, like her beloved Antigone, to be buried alive for it. As Antigone’s defiance of Creon was not simply that of the individual against the state, or a woman against men, but the assertion of old matriarchal forms against a new male legalistic and revengeful culture,
so Virginia Woolf's rebellion sought not only the overthrow of male culture but also a return to the oppressed of their rightful heritage and the historical conditions in which to enjoy it. No wonder she was afraid.

When she published "A Society," in which she dared to suggest that a sisterhood of philosophical inquiry might be as necessary to women as male secret societies or brotherhoods to men, Desmond MacCarthy, as "Affable Hawk," showed his claws. She never reprinted the sketch, in which her characters decided that a way must be found for men to bear children to occupy themselves in a useful way and to prevent them from obstructing women's progress toward intellectual freedom. She answered him.

Can he point to a single one of the great geniuses of history who has sprung from a people stinted of education and held in subjection, as for example the Irish or the Jews? It seems to me indisputable that the conditions which make 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 action and experience. Perhaps in Lesbos, but never since, have these conditions been the lot of women.²

Virginia Woolf's position as "daughter of an educated man," a self-styled "outsider in British society," may be likened to the position of the Jewish intellectual in Weimar Germany.³ While the Holocaust provides historical evidence that Kafka and Walter Benjamin were not neurotic in their perception of the hatred of the Germans, British male violence against women took less murderous forms. Nevertheless, Woolf's feelings about women's oppression match those of her German Jewish contemporaries. Even as they felt that as Jews they were administering the intellectual property of a people who denied them the right to do so, Virginia Woolf felt as a woman literary critic that she stood in the same untenable position in relation to British culture. Rationally they could prove that hatred of them as Jews or as women was unfounded. In neither case could that lessen the sting of real and genuine contempt. Kafka regarded words as stolen property; he strove
for perfection in prose style in German, as Woolf did in English, to lessen the anxiety of being found out. The products of bourgeois families, they saw the enemy within as well as without in those who pretended that Jews or women were not the hated objects of society's contempt. For the Jews the way out lay in Zionism and communism. For Virginia Woolf it was feminism and socialism.

Walter Benjamin kept notebooks full of quotations; tearing statements out of context, he felt like a robber making attacks on history. Virginia Woolf did the same thing, as the notebooks for *Three Guineas* and *The Pargiters* show us. By quotation she sought to rob history of its power over women. The quotations she used in *A Room of One's Own*, *Three Guineas*, and *The Pargiters*, the scholarly footnotes in which documentation is a form of possession of the truth and exorcism of evil, are the intellectual pacifist outsider's only weapons against lies and injustice. Like Bernard in the *The Waves* or the eccentric Samuel Butler, the Jewish or female notebook-keepers could, by collecting facts and insults, rob them of their power to hurt. "All notebook literature," she wrote in "Mr. Kipling's Notebook," "produces the same effect of fatigue and obstacle, as if there dropped across the path of the mind some block of alien matter which must be removed or assimilated before one can go on with the true process of reading. The more vivid the note the greater the obstruction." It was with this consciousness of creating an obstacle course for the reader that she used the technique herself. When Virginia Woolf wrote essays on women writers or collected material for her projected *Lives of the Obscure*, part of the excitement lay in her role as raider on received history. She could see herself as a redeemer of lost lives, and she described with rapture the feeling of rescuing stranded ghosts, as their "deliverer." Finding *The Mysteries of Udolpho* much better than she had been led to believe, she declared that she would lead "a Radcliffe relief party." The artist of the oppressed articulates the desire for deliverance of the stranded ghosts of her ancestresses throughout history. She seems hardly to have lived among her contemporaries but to speak directly to the future, to our generation. Leonard Woolf described his wife's peculiar walk, how people stared at her; it is the
same as Hannah Arendt's description of Walter Benjamin's—a mixture of advancing and tarrying, one foot in the past and one in the future. The "incandescent death" which Bertrand Russell found alight in her novels derives from what Lukács called "transcendental homelessness" in the modern novelist and from her identity as spokeswoman for the outsiders. She was a redemptress of time, saying to her contemporaries in *Between the Acts*, with Kafka, "There is an infinite amount of hope, but not for us."

When Clive Bell compared his sister-in-law's style (in living and writing) to Constantin Guys, the Parisian painter and flaneur, he claimed a worldliness and cosmopolitanism which few others have recognized in Virginia Woolf. But a female flaneur is almost a contradiction in terms. For a woman who walks the streets of a big city aflame with curiosity can only be a streetwalker, a prostitute. A self-defined "street-haunter," Virginia Woolf knew all the awkwardness of these contradictions. While Benjamin was haunted by all the Berlin streets from which class and race prohibited him, Woolf was inhibited both by sex and by class from following her nose or her eyes wherever they longed to go. She knew not only the fright which followed Rose's experience of the pervert exposing himself on the corner of her own street in *The Years* but also the humiliating crippling of the imagination which forces Rose to give up thinking of herself as the brave, adventuring Pargiter of Pargiter's Horse. Each excursion was dangerous and debilitating, an antipatriarchal act, a storming of the citadel of male dominance. Whether the men were would-be attackers or would-be protectors, they impeded women's halting progress through the streets. And women whose interest was in maintaining the status quo were the first to stare and point at the eccentric whose relaxed insistence on being her natural self in the street violated all the taboos by which one can always distinguish a lady from a tramp. Caring so little for class distinction signified, ironically, a lack of sexual discrimination in a person so fundamentally pure.

Imagining herself a woman warrior, Virginia Woolf stormed the city of London (as she "stormed" the texts of classical male culture with her Greek teacher, Janet Case). London was simultaneously the citadel
of her suffering and the space of her joy. So she enshrined it in memory, while mocking its monuments to patriarchy, imperialism, and capitalism. In her London novels, *Night and Day, Mrs. Dalloway, Jacob's Room, The Waves,* and *The Years,* as well as in her essays, all the temples to great men are desecrated and denounced: St. Paul's, Harley Street, Big Ben and the House of Parliament, the British Museum and Westminster Abbey. She felt the pulse of London all the more powerfully because she was an “outsider.” As Walter Benjamin had recorded a bourgeois Jewish childhood in Berlin, she recorded a ghetto which pretended it was paradise before its members disappeared into the diaspora. Benjamin has captured a whole culture in *Paris: The Capital of the Nineteenth Century.* But Virginia Woolf has memorialized a *London: The Capital of the Patriarchy.* Her own battles for psychic and physical space in that all-male territory which restricted middle-class women to the private house are recorded in *A Room of One's Own.* The woman artist's need for privacy is there declaimed not as a retreat, but rather as a place to put on her armor for her assaults on the public world. When one is both a radical and a feminist, one must build a counterworld to that of both the fathers and the mothers. And, while she was at it, Virginia Woolf also built in her fiction a spiritual protest to the self-righteous ethics of her family.

Virginia Woolf, like Walter Benjamin, was both a “Marxist” and a mystic. It has been far easier for critics to chase the “rainbow” in her style than to knock their heads against the “granite.” When forced to recognize the pervasive feminism, they have diagnosed it as a social disease which breaks out in ugly spots, branding her as a bitter ingrate. Will she ever be greeted with the sum of her attributes rather than with the partial acclaim which must exclude the content from the form or the radical message from the luminous matter? Can we see her as a scholar, a fantasist, a historian and a practical joker, a recluse and a flaneur, a poet and a propagandist, a mystical dreamer and a hard-working journalist? If she could read Proust for the social criticism as well as the poetry, we can learn to read her in the same way. Like Walter Benjamin she reads the things of the real world, the objects and spaces luminous in her own memory, both as sacred texts and
as productions of dialectical historical forces.

For both of these refugees from bourgeois reality, dwellers in the diaspora of dreams, memory is the mother of muses. And she demands that, if you dig deep enough (for Benjamin she embodies the archaeologist digging the layers of Troy, while for Woolf she is the fisherwoman letting down her line into the depths of the unconscious) you can draw out of the individual memory the “illuminations” or “moments of being” which allow the artist to touch the collective memory. By her spiritual geography in the mapping of places and monuments, time is defeated by space and the remembrance of rooms and rhythms and objects (like her mother’s chair in “A Sketch of the Past”). Remembrance, as in Proust, is a triumph over time, the building of a “continuing city.” Recall the moment in *Mrs. Dalloway* when the airplane flies over Greenwich—an intersection of time and space. But here is no hallowed image of time the reaper. Instead, a solitary man rolling the lawn observes the scene. As in Marvell’s “Mower against Time,” time has been the sower of discord and war, and is demolished and rolled flat. Big Ben in her novels, particularly *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Years*, is a great masculine bully, dominating the lives of the citizens.

Like Benjamin, Woolf works topographically against the patriarchal and genealogical imperative, the strength of whose dicta we see in her own remembrance of the inability to step over a puddle (and Rhoda’s in *The Waves*). It is with fear and trembling that one crosses the thresholds of street space strictly forbidden by the fathers. In mapping the diaspora the writer takes on an enormous task, the book’s last gesture of defiance before the loudspeaker and the film drown out the human voice. In both writers a fierce Marxist desire for social change is matched by visionary myths and symbols for order and community. The pacifist’s passion for a violent cleansing is only just held in check. The reader trembles in conspiracy with the writer of *Three Guineas*. Will the patriarchs (pictured like police posters of the enemies of society) leap off the page en masse and imprison us, who have identified them as the real fascists? Woolf’s concept of the collective sublime was Greek, operatic, Brechtian, an anti-authoritarian ra-
tional and mystical answer to individualistic, romantic, and personal traditions of European thought and action. If we see her with Benjamin and Proust, Brecht and Kafka, rather than with Forster and Lawrence, we are doing the right topographical job as critics. With the right maps we may find our way in the city of her novels.

Fascism is what they feared. Both Woolf and Benjamin chose suicide rather than exile before its tyranny. It seems oddly coincidental that they were both tormented by the same dream figure, the little hunchback of German fairy tales, the crippled figure which appears in so many of Woolf's novels. "We are Jews," she described herself and Leonard—meaning they were outsiders, oppressed critics of oppression. *Three Guineas* was the pacifist's last stand against fascism, whose origins were to be found in the family and private poverty. Women and the working classes were not responsible; let the capitalists and imperialists fight it out. In the meantime women and their working-class brothers ought to "trespass" on the private property of language and literature, educate themselves in anticapitalist colleges, and assert their own collective values. This view infuriated her own generation. Its ethical purity appeals to ours, little as we live up to it.

While she lived and wrote and battled against the fathers, she sought relief from anxiety about these attacks in the imagination of a linked history of literary and political mothers. (Her childhood, she told Ethel Smyth, was dominated and depressed by "those 68 black books," her father's *Dictionary of National Biography*; her *Lives of the Obscure* would slay the patriarchal ghost.) "Thinking back through our mothers," a necessary act for all women writers, would afford one maternal protection for one's own raids on the patriarchy and simultaneously raise female consciousness. For finding our mothers is no easy task (Woolf was particularly tormented about the gap between Sappho and Jane Austen). She expected that women artists would become feminists through this experience and also that they would make common cause with other oppressed groups. She herself found Joseph Wright, who wrote the *English Dialect Dictionary*, to be a brother; the witty Sydney Smith so "lovable" a man that she wished she could have married him.
All her life, Woolf sought “protection” from living women as well as from historical mothers. “What you give me is protection,” she wrote to Ethel Smyth.

I look up at you and think if Ethel can be so downright + plainspoken . . . I need not fear instant dismemberment by wild horses. It is the child crying for the nurse’s hand in the dark—you do it by being so uninhibited—so magnificently unselfconscious. This is what people pay £20 a sitting to get from Psychoanalysts—liberation from their own egotism.

Woolf knew by experience how women influence each other. Far from Harold Bloom’s concept of the “anxiety of influence,” it is rather the opposite, affording the woman writer relief from anxiety, acting as a hideout in history where she can lick her wounds between attacks on the patriarchy. Anxious Virginia Woolf was indeed, but not out of the need to appease her ancestresses or outdo her mothers. She did desire to surpass her sister contemporaries, but laughed at Katherine Mansfield, calling her the new Jane Austen. Her own portrait of Jane is in fact a self-portrait set a century before (“She, too, in her modest, everyday prose, chose the dangerous art where one slip means death”), and Mrs. Dalloway is not even a new Clarissa except in so far as English fiction demands that chastity is woman’s character.

When Virginia Woolf wrote that “we think back through our mothers,” she had, as usual, a triple point to make, since her roles as artist, feminist and socialist were subtly intertwined in what she called “the triple ply,” and her literary criticism is always a braided narrative with three strands of thought. She meant here, I think, to assert that fiction had long been female territory, but, more than that, that each generation of women writers influences each other, that style evolves historically and is determined by class and sex. She expected her literary “daughters” to take up where she left off; they would not be so discreet about sex, and they would not have “the shoddy fetters of class on [their] feet.” “For masterpieces are not single and solitary births,” she wrote in A Room of One’s Own, still using her maternal metaphor, “they are the outcome 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.\footnote{4} And her letters
always maintain to her critics that if the Edwardians had been better
writers, the Georgians would have been better still.

Was she trying to establish a female “canon” of great works by
women as an alternative to male critical authority? I think not. She
saw herself as a link in a long line of women writers; she knew just
where her own work fitted and what heritage she was leaving for the
women writers who would come after her. She wrote to Ethel Smyth
of her

eccasy at your defence of me as a very ugly writer—which is
what I am—but an honest one, driven like a gasping whale to
the surface in a snort—such is the effort and anguish to me of
finding a phrase—and then they say I write beautifully! How
could I write beautifully when I am always trying to say some­
thing that has not been said, + should be said for the first time,
exactly. So I relinquish beauty, leave it as a legacy for the next
generation.\footnote{5}

It is interesting that Woolf characterizes women’s protection as lib­
eration from the ego. For the ego is the enemy; even in herself, where
she fought fiercely to control it, she saw the ego as male, aggressive,
and domineering. In the psychic triangle of mother, father, child, it
was an attempt to eliminate the father. In Freudian terms, she sought
to fuse the id and the superego—in her artistic terms, granite and
rainbow—leaving the mental, the personal, out altogether. The
“damned egotistical self” must be repressed, and one can even see in
Marxist terms that her worship of solid objects and their spiritual
reality is a fusion of sub- and superstructure, avoiding as much as
possible the middle term of patriarchal society as it exists. What some
readers have seen as her incapacity to create character is not an
incapacity at all, but a feminist attack on the ego as male false con­
sciousness. She will not supply us with characters with whom we
may egotistically identify. This would be weakness on her part, encour­
ageinent of self-indulgence on the part of the reader. She disarms us.
We are forced to lay down our weapons as readers. All our egotism and individuality, the swords and shields of the hated "I, I, I" must be abandoned outside the doors of her fiction. Not only do her novels advance a collective idea of character, but the common reader is stripped of his individual relationship to author and text. We are to see ourselves as part of a collective audience, as in Brecht’s epic theater, linked to readers of the past and future as the writer is engaged in building the structure of "literature" as a historical effort. In “How It Strikes a Contemporary” she urges us to see “writers as if they were engaged upon some vast building . . . being built by common effort . . . Let them scan the horizon; see the past in relation to the future; and so prepare the way for masterpieces to come.” (T. S. Eliot uses a similar idea in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” to enforce reactionary patriarchal ideas.)

The final apotheosis of this anti-individual “philosophy” is expressed in *Moments of Being*:

We—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art, that we are parts of the work of art. *Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself.

This is the final victory over the ego, the utter identification of art with human struggle, as Marx and Engels defined history as "nothing but the activity of man pursuing his aims." The rapture which the writer feels on perception of the collective unity of art and life in history is extraordinary. As a philosophy of art, it revives the romantic idea of literary progress while eliminating the idea of artists as a priesthood of men of genius. While the poet is still for her the legislator of morality, his authority is derived not from his individual talent but from his expression of collective consciousness. The "egotistical sublime" of the patriarchy has been replaced by a democratic feminist "collective sublime."

Her model is the opera house—Bayreuth, to be specific. Her 1909
visit had filled her with the desire to make fiction aspire to the condition of Wagner's opera: a unity of the audience and the natural world with the words and music, the nearest approach to the sublime she had experienced. It was epic theater for ordinary people, an aspiration fulfilled in The Years and Between the Acts. As in Brecht (whose essay on epic theater she may have read in Desmond MacCarthy's Life and Letters in 1936), there is no Aristotelian catharsis, no empathy with the stirring fate of the hero. We are educated to be astonished at the circumstances in which the characters function, and dramatic moments are caused by interruptions of daily life. The reason for the "plotlessness" of Woolf's novels is that they reverberate to the rhythm of the common life, not of the individual life. She could say with Proust, what is the plot of Ecclesiastes or the Divine Comedy? She wants to close the gap, to fill in the abyss which separates the players from the audience, art from life. In an age in which fascism and socialism fought for the allegiance of the masses, she sought to hold history, art, and the people in the embrace of a giant "we."

We are to play the role of the chorus in a Greek play: we share her risk—"how dangerous this poetry, this lapse from the particular to the general must of necessity be"; "the intolerable restrictions of the drama could be loosened" by the comments of the chorus, "the undifferentiated voices who sing like birds in the pauses of the wind" to capture "those ecstasies, those wild and apparently irrelevant utterances" which characterize her novels from Jacob's Room onward. Participating in the collective sublime of Woolf's narrative voice, we share her dangerous mission, become co-conspirators against culture. In redeeming our own past we become our own redeemers.

Redemption and Resurrection

Virginia Woolf first learned to say "we" as a woman. It was not so much a liberation from her own ego, as she explained to Ethel Smyth, as a liberation from the loneliness of individual anxiety. Thinking back through her mothers gave her her first collective identity and strengthened her creative ability. Her whole career was an exercise in
the elimination of the ego from fiction in author, characters, and readers. It was the expansion of the word we in a world of women writers past and future which grew eventually to speak for all the alienated and oppressed, as Mary Datchet's feminism expands in *Night and Day* to international socialism.

Virginia Woolf's "mothers" and aunts and women friends brought her into being as a writer, encouraging her efforts, publishing her work in the *Guardian* (a church weekly.) In this circle of female friendship the members collected the letters and diaries of their mothers and aunts, wrote their biographies, shared faded photos and anecdotes of ancestresses. The first lives of the obscure which attracted Virginia Woolf's romantic vision of herself as "deliverer" were women's. She would untie their tongues—"the divine relief of communication will soon again be theirs." Her essays provide an example and a methodology for feminist critics and biographers, extending the literary and political rescue and redemption to obscure and working-class men (such as Joseph Wright) and to "the eccentrics." "Sometimes, though it happens far too seldom, lives have been written of these singular men and women, as, after they are dead, someone half-shamefacedly has put together their papers." Coming to their rescue she found them often so dishevelled, in such *dishabille* from their long obscurity and fantastic behavior that we are not certain of remembering even their names. Without names and so strangely inspired, leaving behind them now one line, now one word, and now nothing at all, what whim is it that bids us go seeking them round the corners and just beneath the horizons of so many good books devoted to good men? Surely the world has been right in conferring biographies where biographies are due? Surely the shower of titles and honours has not always descended on the wrong heads? That the world's estimate has been perverse from the start, and half her great men geese, are themes too vast to be disposed of in one short article.

If our mothers provide us with protection, camouflage, and courage, the duties of daughters include not only redemption of their lives and
works but resurrection as well. In the "heart of the woman's republic"—a place Virginia Woolf felt had a reality in the company of Margaret Llewelyn Davies and her companion Lillian Harris, Janet Case, her Greek teacher, and her sister Emphie—the lives of women would be brought to light and life. In the women's republic all our sainted mothers are present only by our efforts in raising them from obscurity and reprinting their works.9

What Virginia Woolf sought in her intense personal and artistic relationships with women may best be explained in mythological rather than psychological terms. The work of the great classical scholar Jane Harrison had a powerful influence on Virginia Woolf's imagery and metaphors.10 Harrison's work on mothers and daughters in preclassical Greece, her study of the transition of the powerful myths of mother-goddess worship into patriarchal Greek thought as we know it, was very important to Virginia Woolf's writing and thinking. The "Hymn to Demeter" and the story of Persephone were especially moving for a writer who always thought of herself as a "motherless daughter." It may help us to understand what she meant by "thinking back through our mothers." She sought in her friendships with women both freedom and protection. The Demeter-Persephone myth affirms eternal refuge and redemption as well as resurrection. The mother will never abandon her daughter. She will weep and wail and search the underworld, bring her out of the darkness of sexual experience, childbirth, madness, back into the world of light and freedom. She will restore her virginity.

Woolf's mother died just as her daughter reached puberty, linking sexuality and death forever in her mind. Marrying, she added a note of savagery to the chastity of her name and self-image. In "A Sketch of the Past" she recalled the intense pleasure she felt when her mother praised a story she had written: "It was like being a violin and being played upon." Her mother's praise unleashed all the dormant creative forces within her, untied her tongue, gave her freedom and speech. Did she relive the experience when her women friends approved her manuscripts? "It is true," she wrote to Ethel Smyth in 1930, "that I only want to show off to women. Women alone stir my imagination."
She sought out people who remembered her mother, cherishing Elizabeth Robins’ description of Julia Stephen as “half madonna, half woman of the world.” She and her friends discussed their mothers. Early in her relationship with Ethel Smyth she wrote, “Yes, I think your mother adorable. So was mine.” “Odd as it may seem to you,” Ethel Smyth wrote on May 2, 1930, “I did love you before I saw you, wholly and solely because of A Room of One’s Own.” Woolf’s feelings confirm Smyth’s theory that

with me and I think many women the root of love is in the imaginative part of one—its violence, its tenderness, its hunger . . . the most violent feeling I am conscious of is . . . [her ellipses] for my mother. She died thirty-eight years ago and I never can think of her without a stab of real passion; amusement, tenderness, pity, admiration are in it and pain that I can’t tell her how I love her (but I think she knows). Now you can imagine how much sexual feeling has to do with an emotion for one’s mother!

(About as much sexual feeling as Woolf dramatizes in Lily Briscoe’s love for Mrs. Ramsay, one imagines.)

There is a poignant irony in the situation, given the real Julia Stephen’s actual opposition to women’s emancipation. She signed the ardent antisuffragist Mrs. Humphry Ward’s petition in the Nineteenth Century, joining the ranks of middle-class mothers who were the worst foes of women’s freedom in the eyes of radical feminists from Mary Wollstonecraft to Olive Schreiner, George Meredith to Virginia Woolf. Meredith mocked his friend, “ ‘Enough for me that my Leslie should vote, should think.’ Beautiful posture of the Britannic wife! But the world is a moving one and will pass her by.” Julia Stephen remained his “stout Angel,” but he never ceased to criticize her for playing the reactionary role of “princess to a patriarch.” For he knew that it was the daughters of such mothers who suffered, and he asked to see the children before their father had convinced Thoby that he was superior to his sisters, and before Julia had insisted that they accept the role of inferiors. “Courage is proper to women,” he told her, “if it is properly
Meredith was having a difficult pregnancy with his great feminist novel Diana of the Crossways as she was bringing to birth her daughter Virginia. The feminist novelist wrote to the mother of his successor as feminist novelist, worried mother to worried mother. But Julia Stephen had no sympathy whatever with Diana, the fictional motherless daughter who wants both a political and an artistic career.12

Virginia Woolf kept her mother’s copy of Diana of the Crossways, inscribed by Meredith, “An Emma might this Julia have been,/To love at least forgive, the heroine.”13 She did not live to love or forgive her own Diana-like daughter. And other women—Margaret Llewelyn Davies, Madge Vaughan, Violet Dickinson, Vita Sackville-West, Ethel Smyth—were able and willing to play the role of Emma. The most important relationship in Meredith’s novel is between Diana and her friend Emma. The two intellectual women belong to the “sisterhood of sensibility.” They play the roles of mother and daughter and of lovers to each other. In an extraordinary scene which makes “George Verimyth” worthy of his nickname and echoes with the power of the Demeter and Persephone myth, Emma brings Diana back to life by feeding her from the same spoon and sleeping with her. Diana’s suicide attempt was to starve herself to death. Emma brings her back to life and into marriage with a “radical,” warning her in the end of the dangers of childbirth and the terrors of the journey.

Life, of course, often imitates fiction, but seldom as accurately as Virginia Woolf lived the life of her fictional stepsister, Diana. As we know from the Letters, her relationship with Violet Dickinson exactly paralleled that of Diana and Emma, even down to the details of Violet nurturing the postsuicidal Virginia back to life after her disappointing sexual experiences with a man. Diana’s “betrayal” of the Corn Law repeal as an antipatriarchal act is like Virginia Woolf’s involvement in the Dreadnought hoax.

Violet Dickinson’s wedding gift of a cradle to Virginia Woolf seems explicable in the same terms. After an apprenticeship (both literary and human) as daughter, then as lover, the young woman is sent into the world of men by the childless older woman to become a mother and an artist. But, as Persephone comes back to the woman’s
world of sunlight and freedom for half the year, so the daughter fears separation but hopes for protection. Their shared ideal is an ideal of freedom, and freedom is symbolized by virginity. The fear of marriage (in fiction and in life) is the fear of loss of freedom with loss of virginity. Maternal love makes one both chaste and free. In Woolf's female utopia written for Violet Dickinson (in the Berg collection), freedom is the theme in a world much like Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's "female world of love and ritual." Liberty is eroticized by the idea of the power of maternal love to redeem and rescue the daughter, who can enter the male world but return for rebirth into light and freedom, back in her mother's arms, a virgin.

Woolf sought from many "mothers," including her husband, maternal protection from her own suicidal impulses. The letters, early and late, refer to the "ethical" aspects of suicide. She demands from her sister Vanessa, and from Ethel Smyth, philosophical arguments on the ethics of suicide. That Leonard agreed to a suicide pact in case of Nazi invasion was enough "maternal" approval for her to sink herself forever in mother water.

She had demanded to know how her friends wrote, painted, composed music, thought—and she shared with them her own deepest analysis of writing. She also flirted outrageously, courted affection and then withdrew, wanting love letters more than love scenes, for words to her had as much potency as acts to other people. She explained that words, like women artists, need privacy. "Why?" she asked in A Writer's Diary, and answered herself, "for their embraces, to continue the race." In "Craftsmanship" she claimed, "Our unconsciousness is their privacy; our darkness is their light." Words, she wrote, "are much less bound by ceremony and convention than we are. Royal words mate with commoners. English words marry Irish words, German words, Indian words, Negro words, if they have a fancy. Indeed, the less we enquire into the past of our dear Mother English the better it will be for that lady's reputation. For she has gone a-roving, a-roving." Language can mean liberation, Woolf believed, and her image here of Mother English as promiscuous is another of those forays against patriarchal culture. Not only has she changed
the sex of language and culture; she has robbed them of respectability.

In "Royalty" she wrote of Queen Victoria,

between the old Queen and the English language lay an abyss which no depth of passion and no strength of character could cross. . . . When she feels strongly and tries to say so, it is like hearing an old savage beating with a wooden spoon on a drum. . . . But probably she owed much of her prestige to her inability to express herself. The majority of her subjects, knowing her through her writing, came to feel that only a woman immune from the usual frailties and passions of human nature could write as Queen Victoria wrote. It added to her royalty.

Here she has completely turned the tables of history: the Queen is a savage because she misuses language; commoners who can express themselves are the real aristocracy of culture. The woman who was the symbol of an age's repression of women, symbolic of their loss of freedom in politics and art, is reduced to a stone-age caricature, a primitive animal. "We begin to wish that the Zoo should be abolished; that the royal animals should be given the run of some wider pasture—a royal Whipsnade." Then she attacks: "Words are dangerous things let us remember. A republic might be brought into being by a poem." Certainly she believed that the "woman's republic" might be brought into being by the extension of the literary franchise to "the feminine sentence"—that is, as she wrote in the original "Professions for Women," if men could be educated to stand free speech in women.

The fertile and promiscuous mother tongue is the first mother we think back through in Virginia Woolf's theory of how collective history and the collective unconscious collaborate in the female artist's mind. In "English Prose" she has robbed culture not only of its male origins but also of its princely pretensions, for she sees prose as Cinderella, occupied with "menial tasks." "She has to do' all the work of the house; to make the beds, dust the china, boil the kettle, sweep the floors." And in The Years she has accomplished the final revolution, the creation of the artist as charwoman to the world. This is a startling concept and as radical as the New York playwright who makes God
a Puerto Rican janitor. In "Men and Women" she wrote, "For the first time for many ages the bent figure with the knobbed hands and the bleared eyes, who, in spite of the poets, is the true figure of womanhood, rose from her wash-tub, took a stroll out of doors, and went into the factory. That was the first painful step on the way to freedom," but "it will not be in this generation or the next that she will have adjusted her position or given a clear account of her powers." She quotes Bathsheba in *Far from the Madding Crowd* on having the feelings of a woman but "only the language of men" in which to express them. "From that dilemma," wrote Woolf,

arise infinite confusions and complications. Energy has been liberated, but into what form is it to flow? To try the accepted forms, to discard the unfit, to create others which are more fitting, is a task that must be accomplished before there is freedom or achievement. Further, it is well to remember that woman was not created for the first time in the year 1860. A large part of her energy is already fully employed and highly developed. To pour such surplus energy as there may be into new forms without wasting a drop is a difficult problem which can only be solved by the simultaneous evolution and emancipation of man.

Each of her novels is an experiment in the evolution of these new forms; they are to be forms "appropriate," as she says in another essay, to women; the role of the chorus and of the reader as collaborator grows greater and greater. The gap is bridged as the prose imitates music more than speech, and the form of fiction dissolves in epic operatic theater for ordinary people. The woman artist has evolved from anonymity through egotism and female identity back to anonymity. She wrote to Ethel Smyth in 1933,

I didn’t write “A Room” without considerable feeling even you will admit; I’m not cool on the subject. And I forced myself to keep my own figure fictitious, legendary. If I had said, “Look here, I am uneducated because my brothers used all the family funds”—which is the fact—“Well,” they’d have said, “she has an axe to grind”; and no one would have taken me seriously,
though I agree I should have had many more of the wrong kind of reader, who will read you + go away + rejoice in the personalities, not because they are lively and easy reading; but because they prove once more how vain, how personal, so they will say, rubbing their hands with glee, women always are; I can hear them as I write.  

While she herself was pushing the literary she-condition further and further towards the objective universal condition, she nevertheless valued very highly women writers who told the truth about their feelings. In February 1940, Woolf wrote to Ethel Smyth:

I was thinking the other night that there’s never been a woman’s autobiography. Nothing to compare with Rousseau. Chastity and modesty I suppose has been the reason. Now why shouldn’t you be not only the first woman to write an opera, but equally the first to tell the truth about herself? But the great artist is the only person to tell the truth. I should like an analysis of your sex life as Rousseau did his. More introspection. More intimacy.

Ethel Smyth had written in her diary that after meeting Virginia Woolf in 1930 she thought of little else for eighteen months. “I think this proves what I have always held—that for many women, anyhow for me, passion is independent of the sex machine.”

I have written elsewhere of the important influence in Virginia Woolf’s life of two contemporary “mothers,” Margaret Llewelyn Davies and Ethel Smyth. Here let me suggest that the social worker and the musician embodied the dual characteristics which fascinated her in her own mother. One might see Margaret Llewelyn Davies as the Mrs. Ramsay who goes off to visit the sick and worries about how sanitary the milk is and Ethel Smyth as the Mrs. Ramsay who gives a glorious dinner and draws people together. Woolf once told her friend that she had given a party as classical as Jane Austen’s Box Hill party and tried to describe its effect (July 1930). She had mastered “the difficulty of keeping one’s atmosphere unbroken . . . rolling and warbling from melody to melody like some divine quartet, no, octet. I say, Ethel, what a party! What a triumph.”
Remembering her mother in “A Sketch of the Past” she uses the same musical imagery. Julia Stephen brought people together, made life musical and whole. Leslie Stephen was deaf to music, interrupted and destroyed the family harmony.

The first raiders on the patriarchy have untied the mother tongue and come back with words. Then we must have music, and that too is marked “female” and associated with the harmony and rhythm of daily life with her mother, before the interruptions of the aggressive male ego of her father. She wrote to Ethel Smyth, “Writing is nothing but putting words on the backs of rhythm. If they fall off the rhythm, one’s done.” Earlier she had written to Vita Sackville-West, “Style is a very simple matter; it is all rhythm. Once you get that, you can’t use the wrong words,” in “Professions for Women” words are fish caught by letting down one’s line in the collective unconscious of mother water. The rhythm then rides the back of that dolphin of The Waves, whose fin shows above the waste of waters. All this activity of the artist is “dangerous”; “one slip” means death for Jane Austen, “instant dismemberment by wild horses” for herself. It is as if the generations of women artists are marching single file across the “narrow bridge of art,” crossing the “abyss” or “chasm,” as she called the male mind, “to find a sentence that could hold its own against the male flood.” The path has been cleared by “some mute inglorious Ethel Smyth,” for men have always obstructed the way. (Woolf wrote that a history of male opposition to women’s emancipation might be more interesting than the story of women’s struggle.) Of the fact that it was a battlefield, she had no doubt.

With all the violence of her pacifist conviction she described Ethel Smyth’s work for women artists:

She is of the race of the pioneers: She is among the ice-breakers, the window-smashers, the indomitable and irresistible armoured tanks who climbed the rough ground; went first; drew the enemy’s fire; and left a pathway for those who came after her. I never knew whether to be angry that such heroic pertinacity was called for, or glad that it had the chance of showing itself. Ethel Smyth, who only wanted to write symphonies, was forced into
being "a blaster of rocks and the maker of bridges," and in literature "I owe a great deal to some mute and inglorious Ethel Smyth." "All that we have ought to be expressed—mind and body—a process of incredible difficulty and danger." It is indeed "dangerous" to say, as she said, "I detest the masculine point of view," but it is worse to compromise one's moral feminism, as in her fight with Bruce Richmond of the *Times Literary Supplement*. She wanted to describe Henry James's fiction as "lewd"; it was not allowed to criticize "poor, dear Henry James."

But the full force of Woolf's violence in this speech/essay is reserved for her description of the murder of the "Angel in the House," who is throttled and bombarded by inkpots. This creature is the ladylike self, the pride of Victorian parents, that prevents the artist from telling the truth. Despite the romantic tone of her memories of her mother, Woolf dared in *To the Lighthouse* to express her ambivalence as well as her love. That indeed is one source of the novel's greatness. For Mrs. Ramsay demands that all women be angels, and as readers we lay at her door the deaths of a son in battle and of a daughter in childbirth, for she has demanded that men and women play their Victorian roles. Not only is Lily freed for art at her death, but Mr. Ramsay has an identity crisis in old age and grows up. Thus James can identify with him and come to manhood, and Cam can vaguely fish in imaginative streams. While Julia Stephen is not the angel in any neat equation, the psychic difficulties of coming to terms with one's own mother in personal as well as historical ways is given dramatic form by Virginia Woolf.

Are we then to murder in our minds our own mothers (and all the messages they gave us about how to live in the patriarchal world) in order to think back through the mothers of literature and history? Is mental matricide necessary for the woman artist? No, Woolf tells us. Abandoned, motherless daughters must find new mothers, real and historical, a linked chain of sisterhood over past time in present space, and rescue and redeem their own mothers' lives from their compromises with the patriarchy. She set us a good example, Persephone who rescues herself from the underworld, forgiving and understanding why Demeter died.
The Irresistible Armored Tank

In her 1931 speech to professional women, Virginia Woolf followed Ethel Smyth onto the platform, publicly giving her praise in Dame Ethel’s presence. (She had also praised Margaret Llewelyn Davies at a Working Women’s Cooperative Guild meeting.) After attending her concerts Woolf had always wanted to meet Ethel Smyth, and had praised her memoirs in print as well as arguing with “Affable Hawk” in The Nation that there were few such women composers not because of “intellectual inferiority,” but because men refused to train women except to sing and play for men’s amusement. Their meeting and their intense relationship was very important for Virginia Woolf as an artist, for she had worked all her life to give her fiction musical form and operatic structure. To be loved by the great composer of English opera was a trying but thrilling experience. The Waves owes some of its beauty to the intensity of its author’s relationship with the composer, and Ethel Smyth’s memoir, As Time Went On, is dedicated to Virginia Woolf. Finishing The Waves while writing “Professions for Women,” Woolf wrote that “the mind bobs like a cork on the sea” and imagines Ethel (who had tried conducting) “waving your hand over that chaos.” The Prison, which Ethel was composing at the same time as The Waves, is set to a poem by Henry Brewster on Plotinus’ lines about individual death as merging with the universal sublime—surely a source for Bernard’s brave and beautiful challenge.

Virginia told Ethel that her own speech was “clotted up and clogged,” that she would not print it as it stood, but it might make “a small book, about the size of A Room.” “Your speech, meanwhile, was divine and entirely expressive,” she praised Ethel. “Leonard says about the best of its kind he ever heard, and done, he says, with supreme skill, which I interpret to mean that you liquidated your whole personality in speaking and threw in something never yet written by being yourself there in the flesh—anyhow we must print your speech, by itself entire.”

Hogarth Press did not publish Dame Ethel’s speech, but she published several amusing lectures on women and music in Female Pippings in Eden. Chapter 4, “The Difficulties of Women Musicians,”
must have been at least part of her speech because it contains a funny story about the Working Golf Course which Vera Brittain reported in her column in *The Nation* (January 31, 1931, p. 571).

Dame Ethel begins with the legend of Eve “picking out a tune” in a hollow reed in which she has bored holes. Adam tells her to stop that horrible noise and, “if anyone’s going to make it, it’s not you but me.” She is tired of being asked the same question for the millionth time, and her answer is “There are no great women composers for the same reason there are no female Nelsons... it is absolutely impossible in this country for a woman composer to get and to keep her head above water; to go on from strength to strength, and develop such powers as she may possess.” Nowadays Adam silences the hollow reed with cotton wool and the music dies down. Dame Ethel explains the determination with which men have kept women out of orchestras and confined them to singing in choruses and teaching children their scales. “I burned with curiosity as to whither woman’s wings will carry her once she is free to soar... . Few deny that the Brontës and Jane Austen brought a new note into our literature. Why then should not our musical contribution be equally individual and pregnant?” She describes her slow process of infiltration into the second violins only to find the taboos against women enforced again after the war—“a metamorphosis such as we read of in V. Sackville-West’s *Orlando* took place... [Woolf pointed out the error, but Ethel let it stand] only the other way around. By degrees these female back-benchers turned into men and as in the “Orlando” business it seemed impossible to learn how and when and why the change had come about.” Men’s “vicarious sense of modesty” has kept women from playing the cello but allowed her to play the “unlucrative” harp, cherishing her “white-armed presence in their midst, much as the men in the Welch regiment cherish the regimental goat.” Not a single woman alive has had the musical training necessary to compose, so it is no surprise that “no advancing army of eminent women composers is to be described on the horizon.”

Ethel Smyth then contrasts literary and musical careers, agreeing with Virginia Woolf that since Jane Austen’s time women have been allowed to write “on the sly.” It is not expensive, there is only a
publisher between a writer and her public, and she stands in no one else's way. But musical engraving is very costly; conductors add little to the standard repertory and less that is controversial because of the composer's sex or difficulty. In an Appendix Dame Ethel lists sixteen performances of her important choral works in England in forty years, despite rave reviews from isolated critics, such as Shaw's for her Mass in 1892, when he prophesied the conquest of musical composition by women. As did Virginia Woolf in her speech, Ethel Smyth cautions against "natural bitterness" and for patience. She tells the story of the fourteenth hole at Cromer Golf Course falling into the North Sea. Several generations of committees had seen the erosion but wanted it to remain a purely seaside links, and so they waited a century to lay out new holes. A man disapproved of Amy Johnson's flight over Africa.

"Well," I said, "speaking for myself, at any age [she was in her seventies] I would willingly risk all that happened to that lady, and worse, rather than have men settling for me what I might and might not do! If one came to grief among these savages it would be a bit of bad luck, but to be deprived of one's freedom would be a bit of bad luck that would go on all the time!"

She tells how disappointed she was to read that Albert Einstein was opposed to women in science. "Are then even the greatest men half­witted?" she asked herself, on the subject of women. She wrote to inquire, and he replied denying that he had said such things and insisting on women's right to participate in "all branches of intellectual endeavour." She says, "Surely there are enough rocks, papyri, flowers, insects, stars and corpses to go round?"

Man will not "see a woman's work until the psychological moment has arrived" and "the male eye has been broken in": "that is, as eventually happened in literature, prejudice has been broken down, twig after twig." Like Virginia Woolf, Ethel Smyth believed that the development of genius takes generations of moderate exercise:

you cannot get giants like Mont Blanc and Mt. Everest without the mass of moderate­sized mountains on whose shoulders they
stand. It is the upbuilding of this platform that is impossible so long as full musical life is denied to women, and I suppose it is unnecessary to say that conductors and Committees are generally of one mind about keeping us out of Parnassus. . . . We know what "Candide" said about the duty of cultivating your garden; but what if the authorities keep all the agricultural instruments under lock and key?

Like Woolf, she could go on composing because of a small independent income and the money she earned by writing memoirs. This was the only way to eternal fame for a composer whose operas were not staged, as it has been for women painters whose pictures were not hung, and for actresses before film and tape could record their gestures and voices. Their memoirs sometimes save them from total oblivion.

“So far,” Ethel Smyth wrote in the 1930s, “admission to the house of music on equal terms with men is unthinkable for a composer of my sex.” But taboos can be broken “though a future chain of great women composers may seem as improbable even today as the arrival in the channel of a battleship full of incipient female Nelsons.” She complained that it was nonsense to insist on all-male orchestras in the interests of “unity of style”; “Art is bi-sexual.” Keeping women out is like Nazi propaganda about racial superiority “bullying the Jews,” she argues here (though her private letters contain anti-Semitic remarks about Leonard Woolf).

The situation for women in music has been so bad for so long that some women have accepted male values in order to survive. All good voice teachers are women, she asserts, but to get ahead the woman student may ask for a singing master. “I hope she gets a bad one and that he ruins her voice!” Once women have “slipped the slave’s collar” they will show “mental independence” and “directness.” The directness she illustrates with a story of the substitution in Spain of cows for bulls in the ring, unsuccessful because the cows paid no attention to the red flags but went straight for the toreadors and killed them all. She urges her audience to form local branches of the SPCWM, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Women Musicians. “That men have been on top of the wave since time was, whereas we are
still fighting our way upwards from the bottom of the sea, is a fact that will surely set an eternal stamp on our destiny as does the difference of sex."

She wants women to be original and say with James Fitzjames Stephen exactly what they think and feel:

perhaps it lies at the bottom of the sea, where we are at home; and perhaps our fate, not an ignoble one, is to bring it up to the surface ... non-creative women, listening to the song of their sisters, be it literature, painting, or music, will say: "O what is this that knows the way I came?" ... then would my girl student pause a moment, contemplate her half-finished serenade for eight harps, eight trumpets, ten trombones, twelve percussion instruments, and two dozen explosive bombs, and murmur: "But this is imitative rubbish," tear up her MS. and throw it into the wastepaper basket.

The peroration of the speech Virginia and Leonard Woolf admired so much is worth quoting in full, for, despite its unfortunate title, Female Pipings in Eden does for women in music what Virginia Woolf did for women in literature; it gives women artists a myth of their own creative origins and urges them to struggle for possession of the past in order to forge the future. Ethel Smyth's Eve is the mother of music:

Let her once more take up her hollow reed and start afresh. And if Adam should again awake and bid her stop that horrible noise, Eve need not be rude. Let her merely say dolce senza expressione: "My dear Adam, if you don't admire my tunes I don't always admire yours. But don't threaten as you once did to make this particular horrible noise yourself, for it's my own composition and I hold the copyright. Besides which you couldn't make it yourself it you tried. Some other tune, yes. But not this." . . .

Ah me! if Act I Scene I of the human drama had only been more carefully thought out, what happy days might have been spent in Eden! No hunting poor Eve into the marsh; no ramming
cotton wool up the little reed she had fashioned for her own fingers! She and Adam would each have constructed a sound-proof hut in different corners of the garden (as far apart as possible), and towards evening they would have been heard piping peaceful pastorals in two parts, later on taking it in turns to conduct the family orchestra... if from the very first Eve had been granted a chance of self-development, there would have been no furtive hanging about the Tree of Knowledge, no illicit truce with serpents and apples, and of course—this would have been rather sad—no Militant Suffragettes.

There were thirty years between Dame Ethel and Virginia Woolf, great differences in temperament and political ideas. Ethel Smyth (who appears as Rose in *The Years* and contributes to Miss Latrobe in *Between the Acts*) was as thoroughly British as Virginia Woolf was internationalist. She was as fiercely militant, patriotic, and egotistical as Woolf was pacifist, socialist, and “anonymous.” Yet on the question of women and art their answers and actions formed a united feminist front. Ethel Smyth drove a tank across the narrow bridge of art; danger and struggle were her element, and her music reaches sublime heights after ferocious skirmishes in the field. Virginia Woolf was a sniper in the ranks of women writers, leading the unknown female foot soldiers across less difficult territory.

While the composer was in the position of Jane Austen with a gap unfilled by those necessary “second rankers” between her and the Greeks, the novelist claimed many good mothers. Conscious of being women warriors, they were struggling toward a “woman’s republic” in art in which their daughters would be free. The word, the sentence, the appropriate female form would be found; the serenade for explosive bombs would go off, and all the flutes, cleared of cotton wool, could play any tune they wished. But the battles are not all won; some daughters are still skirmishing on the bridge, and some men still need education in tolerating free speech in women. It is still “dangerous” for a woman to say what she really thinks and feels, but we are almost over the abyss and we can see the other side. Because of women like Virginia Woolf and Ethel Smyth, we know our own voices
when we hear them; they sing in Ethel Smyth's and Virginia Woolf's choruses, and the "we" expands to include others whose tongues have been tied, whose flutes have been silenced. The "heart of the woman's republic" will be reached by thinking back through our mothers. As Woolf wrote to Ethel Smyth in 1930 while writing *The Waves*, "though the rhythmical is more natural to me than the narrative, it is completely opposed to the tradition of fiction and I am casting about all the time for some rope to throw the reader." Catch.