

1

The Slant of the Kitchen Chair

Reassessing Virginia Woolf's Relationship to Her Nineteenth-Century Predecessors

The house plays a large role in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary imagination: houses and novels inform one another even as they become intimate spaces that help us to make sense of ourselves. The house serves as an analog for the novel, but it also serves as an analog for the mind and the body, for social status and for the nation.¹ Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Gaston Bachelard have explored the house for its psychic, archetypal, ontological values.² In particular, Bachelard focuses on the house's ability to shelter daydreaming: the house has a dynamic power of integration. Feminist and gender studies have recently analyzed the house for the complicity between architecture and gender.³ As a building and as an idea, the house has inextricable ties to women's daily lives, their labor, their social place, and their identities. Working to untangle the connections between women and fiction and, implicitly, between women and the domestic space that contains them, Woolf acknowledges that explaining these relationships poses an "unsolvable problem."

Gendered representations of houses, writers, and fiction itself saturate her criticism of other writers, especially women writers, becoming sites wherein Woolf both appropriates and contests the specific legacies of Victorian femininity. In an essay on Ellen Terry's autobiographical writing, Woolf aptly captures the house's dynamic power: "But even while she analyses herself, as one artist to another, the sun slants upon an old kitchen chair" (*M* 211). This humorous passage suggests how inescapable the house is for the woman artist: it distorts her vision of herself and her

artistic creation. Much as Woolf works to criticize the house's participation in women's lesser contributions to the arts, however, the repressed returns. Instead of moving away from the domestic focus of nineteenth-century fiction in her innovative modernist narratives, Woolf refashions both the nineteenth-century woman's domestic novel and the materialist and masculinist bias she perceives in Georgian fiction by herself adopting the language and imagery of nineteenth-century domesticity to make a case for a female-centered modernist aesthetic.

This chapter lays the groundwork for examining three overlapping, but "unsolvable" relationships that connect women and fiction throughout Woolf's work: her vexed relationships to the minor Victorian women writers whose work she dismisses, to the house, and to Victorian definitions of femininity. The first section examines Woolf's role in the production of women's writing as a disciplinary field to identify inconsistencies in her selective "thinking back through her mothers," inconsistencies that lead her to dismiss Elizabeth Gaskell and deride and exclude Margaret Oliphant. Paradoxically, while Woolf's conceptions of what constitutes women's writing focus on the central question of women's social history—"the domestic problem" and "the respectability of the woman writer"—at the same time, they advise the woman writer to record the same domestic detail that Woolf seems to eschew. The second section contextualizes the rich history of the relationship in English literature between the architecture of the house and the architecture of the self by reading William Cowper's "The Task," Walter Pater's "A Child in the House," and E. M. Forster's *Howards End*. These literary representations of the house as an essential part of the self provide a background for Woolf's struggle with interior domestic space as a space of masculine retreat. Her own descriptions of the divided and gendered spaces at Hyde Park Gate, the house of her Victorian childhood, support Bachelard's conjecture that the house has a dynamic integrative power. These descriptions both reproduce the way that Victorian architecture inscribed the separation of spheres in domestic structures and anticipate the recent critical work in architecture's complicity in shaping gender.⁴ The chapter closes with an overview of Victorian domestic ideology, its roots in early Evangelical Protestant forms and its popular representations of the art and science of domestic management in the work of female ideologues—Sarah Stickney Ellis and Mrs. Beeton—and in the work of male ideologues—Coventry Patmore and John Ruskin. This work deepens the "unsolvable" connections among the woman writer, her respectability, and the domestic space that contains her.

QUESTIONS OF CANON: A BLACKLIST OF HER OWN

Critics have granted canonical status to *A Room of One's Own*, arguing that it establishes every metaphor American feminists use to discuss women and writing.⁵ Woolf's essay has been tremendously influential in twentieth-century feminist criticism and in creating the woman's tradition in English. The uncritical acceptance of Woolf's structuring metaphor that when we write "we think back through our mothers if we are women" (AROO 76) has initiated a model of feminine influence in the canon that is based on Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's theory of a harmonious, cooperative pattern of maternal influence and on Jane Marcus's theory of "a democratic feminist 'collective sublime'" (*Art and Anger* 82). In their pioneering work, Gilbert and Gubar identify the intensely, exclusively, and necessarily patriarchal dynamics of Western literary history and Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence" wherein a male poet can become a poet only by invalidating his poetic father. In contrast, the female writer experiences "an even more primary 'anxiety of authorship,'" a fear not only that she cannot fight her male precursors, but also that the act of writing goes against the effects of socialization to become self-annihilating (46–53). She must fight against the male writer's "reading of her," redefining her socialization (49). Woolf famously creates a shorthand for the woman writer's struggle against her socialization when she kills "The Angel in the House." "In other words," Gilbert and Gubar explain, "women must kill the aesthetic ideal through which they themselves have been 'killed' into art" (17). The female writer must begin her struggle by actively seeking female precursors (49). Woolf learned early on how women influence one another and provide what Marcus identifies as "a liberation from the loneliness of individual anxiety" (83). Yet Marcus's claim that Woolf might tell 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" (93) implicitly reveals how revisionist Woolf's active search for proper female predecessors was.

Woolf paradoxically juxtaposes the structuring metaphor that "we think back through our mothers if we are women" with her valorization of the "four great women novelists" (*W & W* 45), marking as "possibly relevant" (AROO 66) the fact that "not one had a child, and two were unmarried" (*W & W* 45). This paradox suggests that Woolf's metaphors of cooperation and matrilineage require a new reading. Woolf argues that

The extraordinary woman depends on the ordinary woman. It is only when we know what were the conditions of the average woman's life—the number of her children, whether she had money of her own, if she had a room to herself, whether she had help in bringing up her family, if she had servants, whether part of the housework was her task—it is only when we can measure the way of life and the experience of life made possible to the ordinary woman that we can account for the success or failure of the extraordinary woman as a writer. (*W & W* 44)

Nevertheless, her own narrative of nineteenth-century women's fiction privileges the extraordinary nineteenth-century woman writer: the four great women novelists—Jane Austen, Emily Bronte, Charlotte Bronte, and George Eliot. Woolf's ambition is to place herself—also childless—among the great women writers. Her negative references to the more normative careers of Mrs. Humphry Ward, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Margaret Oliphant, key women in nineteenth-century print culture, suggest her desire to elevate her own career above theirs. Woolf's evaluations of these "minor" nineteenth-century women writers recall dismissive masculinist associations of the feminine and the domestic, yet they also reverse nineteenth-century canonical criteria that valorized the domestic life of the woman writer. Woolf's comments generate a series of nagging concerns, concerns that continue to engage her: chastity and the woman writer, domesticity and the fertilizing power of the domestic woman, and finally, a persistent questioning of the value of domestic creativity and its evanescent nature.

Margaret Ezell shows how Woolf's canon inverts the nineteenth-century value placed on women writers who were also biological mothers and, as such, nineteenth-century models of womanly attainment (97). Ezell's useful study of the writing of women's literary history documents how by 1840 literary biographies had "domesticated" the witty, "androgynous" Restoration woman writer who had competed critically with men in earlier anthologies and assessments of a literary tradition (96). By the nineteenth century, the critical evaluation of women's writing shifts from its eighteenth-century focus on intellectual content and rivalry with men's writing to a separate category of "women's writing." Women's writing begins to function under different criteria that stress the feminine sentiments expressed by a woman writer's style. "Delicacy" becomes the primary standard of judgment in evaluating nineteenth-century women's

writing (93). Thus, major nineteenth-century anthologies examine the woman writer's life in order to illustrate her adherence to modest feminine conduct in a didactic effort to establish role models. These anthologies emphasize the domestic life of the woman writer so that evaluators tend to give more attention to her social background than to her "formal scholastic achievement" (96). Ezell explains how mothers take on a newly prominent place in the literary biographies and become models of womanly attainment. The nineteenth-century woman writer must represent her class and sex: Ezell emphasizes that "Without success as a 'woman,' a female writer can expect little credit to be given to her writings" (97).

Ezell's study identifies key features of the accepted twentieth-century canon that she aligns with Woolf's reversal of these criteria for the twentieth-century woman writer in *A Room of One's Own*: Woolf canonizes women writers based on her theory of "the isolated, self-destructive female artist" (46); "women's books continue each other" (42); thus women's writing establishes, using Marcus's terms, "a 'collective identity' for female writers and readers" (42); such an identity focuses on the means of repressing women writers and historically defines women writers through silence or absence (43). Ezell argues that several anthologies "document" Woolf's thesis as they focus on common and continuing patterns in women's writing (42). Such models of the female writer emphasize professional publication and economic independence, while at the same time they construct a canon that relies on the hierarchies found in the male canon (44). Ironically, Woolf devalues the productive publishing careers of Gaskell and Oliphant because of their apparent adherence to nineteenth-century models of womanly attainment by combining their domestic lives with their careers as writers.

Analyzing the ambivalence of the matrilineage that Woolf claims in *A Room of One's Own*, Elizabeth Abel argues that Woolf "simultaneously promotes a celebration of matrilineage and aggravates a complaint about nurture" (*Fictions* 96). In effect, Woolf creates two mothers: the biological mother and the nurturing mother.⁶ According to Abel, "Woolf systematically depicts the writing daughter only as negotiating issues of difference and continuity with her female precursors, not as hungering for sustenance from them" (96). Woolf's only fictional mother in *A Room of One's Own*, Mrs. Seton, can either bear children or earn money to feed them. Thus, Abel concludes that Woolf compensates for a socially inflicted maternal failure—the inability of women to make money to endow their daughters' educations—by creating a representation of the

woman writer who helps her establish continuity in the tradition that she retrospectively creates: “the woman who is biologically *not* a mother” (100). In Woolf’s creation of her nineteenth-century predecessors, the four great women novelists are childless; their literary careers help Woolf to negotiate difference from a female tradition aligned with nineteenth-century definitions of feminine domestic competence. Mrs. Humphry Ward, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Margaret Oliphant were productive novelists whose work in the literary market place provided money for their children’s—sons’ and, in the case of Elizabeth Gaskell, daughters’—educations. By working to disengage maternity from the “great” nineteenth-century woman writer while simultaneously figuring the history of women’s writing as matrilineal, Woolf defines the twentieth-century woman writer largely by her struggle with nineteenth-century models of womanly attainment.

Pierre Bourdieu’s insights into the relationship between cultural practices and broader social processes, including the social position and the role of the intellectual, provide a telling framework for examining Woolf’s struggle—“her anxiety of influence”—with her nineteenth-century female predecessors. Bourdieu posits a “field of cultural production,” a structured space with its own laws of functioning and its own relationships of force independent of the political and economic fields. Literature is one such field of cultural production in which writers, agents in the field, compete for a position—for recognition, prestige, celebrity, and the authority inherent in such recognition. In this way, the literary field becomes a site of struggle in which writers compete for control of the beliefs that govern what constitutes aesthetic value. Bourdieu argues that “what is at stake is the power to impose the dominant definition of the writer and therefore to delimit the population of those entitled to take part in the struggle to define the writer” (*Field* 42).

Early in her journalist career Woolf actively sought a space in the literary field. Jeanne Dubino shows how Woolf “diligently . . . pursued her family’s social connections in order to realize her dream as a writer” (26). Agreeing with Andrew McNeillie, Dubino argues that by 1918 Woolf has a growing tendency to focus less on the texts she is reviewing and more on expressing her own views (37): Woolf “undermines authorities, takes on the position of underdog, emphasizes the reader, demonstrates her interest in the private self, and adopts a mock-serious and playful tone while at the same time making her criticism less covert and more explicit” (38–39). Woolf’s “mock-serious and playful tone,” so present in her

essays on nineteenth-century women writers, suggests Woolf's desire to break with the past and create her own place in the literary field. Bourdieu explains such "position takings":

It is significant that breaks with the most orthodox works of the past, i.e. with the belief they impose on the newcomers, often take the form of *parody* (intentional, this time), which presupposes and confirms *emancipation*. In this case, the newcomers "get beyond" the dominant mode of thought and expression not by explicitly denouncing it but by repeating and reproducing it in a sociologically non-congruent context, which has the effect of rendering it incongruous or even absurd, simply by making it perceptible as the arbitrary convention it is. (*Field* 31)

Woolf "get[s] beyond" the life of the nineteenth-century woman writer by reproducing that "life" parodically in her reviews and critical essays. These reviews and essays slowly increase her literary authority as she creates and defends her own position in the literary field and prepares a readership for her own fiction. In Bourdieu's terms, Woolf begins to delimit the field of women writers. She imposes a retrospective definition of those entitled to take part in the struggle to define what constitutes women's writing.

Even as Woolf transforms the definition by which a woman writer becomes acceptable, however, her polemics against nineteenth-century women writers "imply a form of recognition" that underscores her selective application of matrilineal models (Bourdieu, *Field* 42). Bourdieu observes that "adversaries whom one would prefer to destroy by ignoring them cannot be combated without consecrating them" (42). As Woolf works to establish a break with the generation preceding her, she returns selectively to the traditions of the next generation back from them, a generation "whose influence may have persisted in a shadowy way" (58). Bourdieu's explanation of how such shadowy influence might persist is provocative for examining Woolf's "anxiety of influence" over her disavowed nineteenth-century predecessors:

Each author, school or work which "makes its mark" displaces the whole series of earlier authors. . . . Because the whole series of pertinent changes is present, practically, in the latest . . . a work or an aesthetic movement is irreducible to any other situated elsewhere in the series: and *returns* to past styles . . . are never

'the same thing,' since they are separated from what they return to by negative reference to something which was itself the negation of it (or the negation of the negation, etc.). (60)

Woolf makes her mark on the field of women's writing when she names it as a disciplinary field. Even so, she valorizes some literary mothers and demeans others. As she claims her right to discuss and judge what constitutes women's writing, she inserts herself into a dialogue. Because Woolf's approach in many of her essays is parodic and often polemical, her citation of nineteenth-century women's lives reveals an active ambivalence about her predecessors. Her every word becomes an "absorption of and a reply to another text,"⁷ as she negotiates the terms that might delineate a separate sphere of woman's writing. Nonetheless, as Woolf herself makes clear, "masterpieces are not single and solitary births: 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" (*ARRO* 65). Therefore, Woolf's recognition of the dialogic nature of novels—that "books continue each other" (*ARRO* 80)—belies her own dismissal of lesser-known woman writers.

The legacy of Woolf's female predecessors is vexed. In her early review of R. Brimley Johnson's *The Women Novelists* (1918) and later in her essays "Women and Fiction" (1929), *A Room of One's Own* (1929), and "Professions for Women" (1931), Woolf engages in what Gilbert and Gubar identify as the woman writer's "actively seeking a *female* predecessor who, far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed, proves by example that a revolt against the patriarchal authority is possible" (49). Paradoxically, however, Woolf's "active" search for such female predecessors actually began by excluding, by creating a "blacklist" of literary mothers who represent just such a threatening force that Woolf wants to disavow, even "kill." During her apprenticeship period as a journalist before she had published any of her own fiction, Woolf wrote to Violet Dickinson in 1907 asking for recommendations of books to review: "I wish you could tell me of some books to write about. I am sobbing with misery over Vernon Lee, who really turns all good writing to vapour, with her fluency and insipidity—the plausible woman! I put her on my black list, with Mrs. Humphry Ward" (*L1* 320).⁸ Mrs. Humphry Ward stands for Woolf as an early example of the compromised woman writer who, like Margaret Oliphant and Elizabeth Gaskell, lived life within the boundaries of nineteenth-century descriptions of femininity

and compromised her artistic integrity for the demands of the marketplace. Woolf's evaluation of these women's literary careers ironically suggests, as Gilbert and Gubar argue, that the woman writer must struggle against the male writer's and indeed her own internalization of his reading of her as "angel in the house." Following Woolf's lead, Gilbert and Gubar quote her 1931 speech "Professions for Women" in which Woolf famously kills "The Angel in the House," which is in their words "the most pernicious image male authors have ever imposed upon literary women" (20). Yet Mrs. Humphry Ward, like Margaret Oliphant, was a historical figure in Woolf's childhood and early adolescence, a vivid, living model of a Victorian woman writer, not an image. Woolf's reading of Mrs. Humphry Ward as a compromised figure and the point of origin in her "blacklist" erases and diminishes the debt Woolf owes to women writers who colluded with the male image of "The Angel in the House." Thus, the "linked chain of sisterhood" selects whom it will redeem and rescue. Marcus's substitution of "sisterhood" for "mothers," indeed for "motherless daughters," reveals a crucial slippage in the interpretation of "thinking back through our mothers" as it suggests that our historical and biological mothers must be revised.

One of Woolf's earliest efforts to enter the discussion of what constitutes a woman's writing is her review "Women Novelists" of R. Brimley Johnson's *The Women Novelists* (1918).⁹ Woolf's repetition of Johnson's title, omitting the definite article "the," represents her treatment of Johnson's study: Woolf wants to generalize what Johnson makes particular. She recognizes Johnson's "attempt to prove that [women novelists] have followed a certain course of development" (*W & W* 69). Yet she questions "what his theory amounts to" as she begins to sketch out her own theory about the course of development that women writers have followed: "The question is one not merely of literature, but to a large extent of social history" (*W & W* 69). In beginning to examine this question of "social history," Woolf's review of Johnson initiates every key notion that she will later develop into the complex matrix of the woman writer's life, her art, and the ways that her art engages in the dominant nineteenth-century discourse about the Woman Question.

From Johnson's study, Woolf begins to select those women writers who will occupy the field of production of women's literature and to sketch out the question of social history. Her review erases Johnson's brief coverage of the Elizabethan and Restoration writers—the Duchess of Newcastle and Aphra Behn, which she will later include in *A Room of*

One's Own—and moves to Johnson's consideration of Fanny Burney, "the mother of English fiction"—provocatively one of Johnson's "The Great Four" women novelists: Fanny Burney, Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot (226).¹⁰ Woolf reproduces and parodies Johnson's descriptions of Miss Burney's stepmother, who burned her manuscripts and inflicted needlework as a penance, and his picture of Jane Austen, who "worked in the family sitting-room, writing on slips of paper that could immediately, without bustle or parade, be slipped *inside* her desk at the call of friendship or courtesy" (Johnson 272). From Johnson's images of the repressed woman writer she extrapolates two significant obstacles that the woman writer must overcome—the domestic and the moral. "But," Woolf argues, "the domestic problem being overcome or compromised with, there remained the moral one. Miss Burney had showed that it was 'possible for a woman to write novels and be respectable,' but the burden of proof still rested anew upon each authoress" (*W & W* 69). These two obstacles—"the domestic problem" and the respectability of the woman writer, her breach of chastity when she speaks in public—hinge upon one another and run throughout Woolf's comments on women and writing. Confronting these obstacles engages her in the larger dialogue of Victorian conduct literature. Woolf is interested in the way that the "effect of these repressions" is "wholly to the bad" and the way that sex becomes "a tyranny" (*W & W* 69, 70).

When she questions Johnson's claim that "A woman's writing is always feminine," Woolf outlines the double bind of the woman writer: the woman writer decides between "the attempt to conciliate, or more naturally to outrage public opinion" (70). She continues: "As Mr. Brimley Johnson again and again remarks, a woman's writing is always feminine"; but, Woolf argues, "it cannot help being feminine: the only difficulty lies in defining what we mean by feminine" (*W & W* 70). Woolf concludes her review of *The Women Novelists* by noting that "each sex describes itself" and by suggesting the transgressive appeal of women's writing: "the desire and the capacity to criticize the other sex had its share in deciding women to write novels" (*W & W* 71). Her final sentences gesture toward her development of an aesthetics of women's writing. Woolf poses "the very difficult question of the difference between the man's and the woman's view of what constitutes the importance of any subject" (*W & W* 71). And she answers, "From this spring not only the marked differences of plot and incident, but infinite differences in selection, method and style" (*W & W* 71).

In reviewing Johnson's study, Woolf begins to narrate the history of women's writing by employing what Allon White calls "the single most important organizational metaphor in Victorian fiction"—the journey toward truth (56).¹¹ She begins her search for female predecessors who courageously overcome the many phantoms and obstacles in their way.¹² Ten years later, Woolf writes "Women and Fiction" (1929), the essay based on the two talks she delivered at Newnham College and Girton College, talks that eventually became the basis for *A Room of One's Own*. She continues to define how the woman writer's work has "been influenced by conditions that have nothing whatever to do with art" as she challenges twentieth-century women to strengthen their gift for fiction (*W & W* 43). Here Woolf generates an important negative statement concerning nineteenth-century women's fiction that we will return to and explore in depth throughout this study. Woolf condemns the nineteenth-century woman's novel for its indirection, its focus on the personal, its lack of critical analysis, and its obsession with detail.

Taken together, her essays in the late 1920s challenge the twentieth-century woman writer to "use writing as an art, not as a method of self expression" (*AROO* 80). Her imaginary novelist Mary Carmichael's *Life's Adventure* suggests to Woolf how women can break the sentence and "tamper with the expected sequence," how they can complicate the relationship of two women outside their relationships to men.¹³ Woolf finds evidence in Mary Carmichael's novel that "women, like men, have other interests besides the perennial interests of domesticity" (*AROO* 81–83). In the future, Woolf argues, the twentieth-century woman writer needs to act for herself, not be content to use her influence indirectly on others as angelic models of feminine behavior counsel: "She will not need to limit herself any longer to the respectable houses of the upper middle classes" (*AROO* 88). To be sure, Woolf counsels the twentieth-century woman writer to explore the "accumulation of unrecorded life" in the "infinitely obscure lives [of women that] remain to be recorded" (*AROO* 89). Yet paradoxically in her exhortations, Woolf calls upon women writers to record the same domestic detail that she seems to eschew in nineteenth-century domestic novels: the meals cooked, the children going to school, the shopping for gloves and shoes in an astonishingly beautiful shop hung with colored ribbons. These, Woolf argues, are the very stuff of women's fiction: its marked difference in selection, method, and style.

Woolf has a vexed and conflicted relationship to nineteenth-century descriptions of femininity. Her words enter into an implicit argument

with the other voices in her texts: the voice of the patriarchy and male writers' representations of the "pernicious image of the angel in the house" certainly, but also the voices of her acknowledged and unacknowledged female precursors—in Woolf's own words the "many famous women, and many more unknown and forgotten, [who] have been before me, making the path smooth, and regulating my steps" (*W & W* 57). As this acknowledgment of her predecessors suggests, Woolf's construction of a tradition of women's writing works to establish her own place among the great women novelists. In her essays on her nineteenth-century predecessors—Charlotte and Emily Bronte, George Eliot, Christina Rossetti, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Elizabeth Gaskell—Woolf follows nineteenth-century critical patterns, often, for example, relating biographical anecdotes before she moves into a discussion of the writer's work. This makes sense in that most, though not all, of these reviews are about biographies of the writers. Yet her juxtaposition of the biographical sketch with an evaluation of the literary production ironically creates the same didactic tie between life and literature that conduct books and nineteenth-century anthologies established. In other words, Woolf instructs women in how to conduct themselves as woman writers by using the negative examples of these women and their literary careers. In doing so, her sketches of her nineteenth-century predecessors employ a consistent shorthand in describing the lives of their subjects. The signifiers of femininity so frequently discussed in the conduct and etiquette literature merge into Woolf's evaluation of the literary works. Woolf comments on the "affection," beauty, personality, clothing style, marital status, maternity, and physical position of the woman writer within the space of the house before she addresses her nineteenth-century predecessor's literary production. The polyvalence of her language is clear in her location of Elizabeth Barrett Browning downstairs in the great mansion of literature within the servants' quarters "[banging] the crockery about and [eating] vast handfuls of peas on the point of her knife" (*W & W* 134). Not only does this image position Barrett Browning in a lower caste of women writers, it also demeans Barrett Browning by its class-inflected, negative imaging of her table manners.

"All writing is simultaneously fiction and autobiography," argues Madelon Sprengnether (97). Sprengnether's notion that literary criticism is "haunted or shadowed" by unconscious dreams and desires is consistent with Bourdieu's theory of position taking, but her argument productively expands our use of Bourdieu for examining Woolf's "necessary inscription

of the unintended” as she explores her nineteenth-century predecessors (Sprenghether 87–88 and 95). Sprenghether suggests that the texts we are always “most drawn to” are ones that give expression to issues we dimly perceive (94). She suggests that these texts act as “extended metaphors or objective correlatives,” and our engagements with them represent “an attempt through narrative to draw into consciousness some of the buried metaphors by which [we] live” (94). In “The Leaning Tower” (1940), Woolf expresses a similar conception when she suggests “anybody can make a theory: the germ of a theory is almost always the wish to prove what the theorist wishes to believe” (M 129). To be sure, Woolf’s criticism of her Victorian predecessors reveals the shape of her own desire to make sense of how a woman’s art relates to her life.

The novels of Elizabeth Gaskell and Margaret Oliphant provide Woolf with rich examples of how to negotiate the feminine in fiction and valorize the unrecorded lives of obscure women through subversively elevating the domestic detail that Woolf elsewhere claims compromises the integrity of the lesser woman’s novels. Before moving into this examination, however, I wish to provide some background of the literary and popular representations of the house and the “angel” it contained. This will help us understand how these representations underlie and structure Woolf’s negotiation with nineteenth-century descriptions of femininity.

RETREAT: THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE HOUSE AND THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE SELF

Hermione Lee remarks that “Woolf’s lifelong argument with the past took its central images from the leaving, and the memory, of the Victorian house” (46). Woolf clearly feels nostalgia for the domestic as a space of personal retreat and for its iconic associations in English literature. For Woolf, the figure of the house merges memory of her Victorian childhood with the desire to make interior domestic space legible for a feminine tradition of writing.¹⁴ She herself succinctly identifies how fiction and the house are linked when she posits that “an old house with many rooms each crammed with objects and crowded with people who know each other intimately, whose manners, thoughts, and speech are ruled all the time, if unconsciously, by the spirit of the past” lies at the center of English fiction (M 126). The space of the house and the social behaviors it contains and manages will become Woolf’s metonymic register for conceptualizing what a

Georgian/modernist fiction should become and, more interestingly, for questioning the limits of femininity. Nevertheless, Woolf's movement among the literary work, the Victorian house, the objects in the house, the people and their manners does not simply substitute one term for another; rather, her repetition of these terms and their shifting, often slippery, interrelationships help her to figure a definition of feminine creativity and women's fiction. The physical solidity of the house becomes her representation for the English literary tradition—"the great mansion of literature"—and an emblem for the success of the nineteenth-century male novelist. At the same time, the building of houses provides a metaphor for how the Edwardian novelist, and by association the Victorian novelist, constructs his "two and thirty chapters." In her essays on women and fiction, Woolf identifies the house as the site of women's social history and the scene of women's writing wherein the "middle-class drawing-room" circumscribes both women's experiences and their imaginations. In attempting to feminize the field of aesthetics and reappropriate the domestic ground that fertilizes and cossets male creativity, Woolf had to confront her memories of the Victorian house with its gendered conceptions of domestic space and the double retreat that it provided for the male writer.

The house has a history, yet as a cultural artifact it has an "uncanny inaccessibility," especially for women, as Woolf repeatedly seeks to articulate in her work.¹⁵ According to Mark Wigley, the development of architecture contains the woman within the house at the same time that it gradually creates a space for the private male self. Through a careful examination of Renaissance and classical texts, Wigley demonstrates how the house protects the father's genealogical claims by isolating women from other men: the role of architecture is to control women's sexuality. Wigley explains that for the Greeks the house "assumes the role of the man's self control. The virtuous woman becomes woman-plus-house or, rather, woman-as-housed, such that her virtue cannot be separated from the physical space" (337). The woman manages the house and other possessions for the man who cannot stand at the center of his estate without losing his masculinity. Inside the house, woman enforces the law of place: she guards the house and the assignment of things to their proper place in the same way that her husband guards her by keeping her inside the house. By the fifteenth century, Wigley explains, domestic architecture differentiates "between male and female spaces in the house in terms of locations, access, and levels of comfort" (341). Notably, the first truly private domestic space is the man's study, a small room located off the bed-

room which no one else enters, an intellectual space beyond the space of sexuality (347). In his study, the paterfamilias can consolidate his control over his house by secreting family documents in a locked chest. "The whole economy of the household is literally written down at the hidden center of the space that organizes it," Wigley explains, "The image of the house is hidden within it, just as the image of public space is hidden within the house. The woman maintains a system without access to its secrets" (348).¹⁶ The house's existence within a social and economic history of male privilege always already compromises Woolf's attempts to locate a specifically feminine space within the house. When Woolf suggests that the answer to the question of why women write fiction lies "locked in old diaries, stuffed away in old drawers," she evokes women's relationship to domestic secrets (*W & W* 44). While Woolf here certainly refers to the diaries of obscure women, she also suggestively alludes to a long history of enclosed domestic space that both circumscribes women's lives and remains opaque to them.

In early Evangelical Protestant forms, which, as we will see in the subsequent section, underlie nineteenth-century English domesticity, the house becomes associated with the self. For Evangelicals, the home alone could provide a private space for religious retreat, self-examination, and self-renewal. By the nineteenth century, the house becomes a common metaphor for the self and especially the mind.¹⁷ The buildings people live in become reflections of who they are and have a powerful effect on their journeys toward self-awareness.¹⁸ In much nineteenth-century literature, the return to the house allows an adult character to bridge the gap between childhood memory and the home of the present, which can then become an environment to meet a character's psychic needs.¹⁹ While one could call up any number of literary houses, especially those nineteenth-century houses of Charles Dickens and Charlotte Brontë, to explore how this engagement with the home works, the imaginative houses of William Cowper, Walter Pater, and E. M. Forster employ the return home to create an aesthetic domestic space that suggests how the house becomes "body and soul" of the literary work.

An examination of their imaginative houses provides a context for Woolf's struggle with how the house creates a space for masculine writing and retreat from the outside world into the comfort and pleasure of home created by feminine domesticity. As Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall make clear, the Evangelical calls to retreat in the home were different for men and women. The home was the site of women's domestic labor and

responsibilities: “The pleasures and privileges of daily ‘entering into her chamber, and shutting the door’ were always in danger of becoming a luxury” for the woman (90). In her novels, Woolf subversively dramatizes this danger of feminine retirement. Yet here it is important to explore how domestic retreat can provide what Woolf herself identifies as “some stimulus, some renewal of creative power” that comes from man’s association with the private center of order and system of life that the woman creates inside the house, “something that their own sex was unable to supply” (*AROO* 86, 87). Woolf argues that when he opened the door to the drawing room or nursery, the man returning home would feel refreshed, invigorated. Woolf writes that “the dried ideas in him would be fertilized anew; and the sight of [woman] creating in a different medium from his own would so quicken his creative power that insensibly his sterile mind would begin to plot again, and he would find the phrase or scene which was lacking when he put on his hat to visit her” (*AROO* 87). Cowper, Pater, and Forster draw on this fertilizing power of the domestic space. Their literary houses suggestively conflate the English domestic idyll with Evangelical notions of self-improvement wherein a literary architecture overlaps with an architecture of the self. Thus, Woolf had to contend not only with her own memories of the Victorian house but with the house’s powerful representation as a muse for the male writer. Especially because Woolf associates each of these male writers with some fusion of male and female characteristics, their returns to the house begin to plumb its uncanny inaccessibility.

Woolf identifies Cowper as an androgynous writer. She directly locates his “incandescence” with the fertilizing power of domestic space.²⁰ In a letter to Vita Sackville-West, she praises *The Task* and its lyrical domesticity: its “lovely domestic scenes” and its “white fire”; its “central transparency” and its “triumph of style” (*L3* 333). *The Task* (1785), in fact, occupies a central place in the imaginative development of the nineteenth-century English concept of the home. Cowper’s poem celebrates the comfort and peace of the domestic setting as it establishes the dialectics of a secure retreat: inside the cozy fire and the closed shutters, outside the wind, rain, and social disorder.²¹ Significantly, *The Task* blends the Evangelical quest for self-examination and salvation with a nostalgic turning toward the house. Cowper’s house celebrates a private, feminized rural domestic setting in which the first tasks are drinking tea, conversing, and reading; he opposes these to a public, masculine urban setting where the tasks are the military, commerce, and politics.²² The

secluded domestic interior becomes the site for Cowper's journey of self-renewal: his autobiographical retrospection, confession, and self-presentation to his reader. More significantly, Cowper's poem imbricates this process of self-examination with the literary "task" of writing his poem inside the refuge of the house.²³ In *The Task*, the domestic interior fertilizes the birth of a literary self.

Like Cowper, Pater imagines a domestic space of masculine refuge: a space he leaves and returns to in order to explain himself and hone his aesthetic perceptions against the chaotic outside world.²⁴ Pater's late Victorian essays "Style" (1888) and "A Child in the House" (1878) deepen the associations of the house as a space for literary self-examination. While Woolf does not articulate Pater's androgynous qualities,²⁵ she was certainly indebted to Pater's aesthetics and his conceptions of the self as fluid.²⁶ And while she explicitly criticizes his literary architecture,²⁷ her own "Sketch of the Past," as Perry Meisel has argued, has similarities with Pater's "A Child in the House" in that returning to the childhood house allows both writers to articulate the birth of their aesthetic sensibilities (162–170). In "Style," Pater suggestively extends the notion of domestic retreat from the outside world to the retreat offered by the work of literature: "all disinterested lovers of books," Pater tells us, look to literature for "a refuge, a sort of cloistral refuge, from a certain vulgarity in the actual world" (18). This notion of refuge evokes a sense of mental and physical space inside the book that allows for expansion into self-examination. As a "cloistral refuge," this space has both religious and homosocial associations that underscore the trauma of gendering identity, a suggestion that Woolf develops in *Mrs. Dalloway*. For Pater, the literary artist builds this mental and physical space in his composition: he sets joint to joint until his conclusion where "he finds *himself* at the end" and "all becomes expressive" (24). In a truly provocative sentence, he collapses the literary work and the house into a living physical space: "The house [the writer] has built," ventures Pater, "is rather a body he has informed" (24). Thus, Pater not only invests the figure of the house with coherence and intelligibility, he also endows it with materiality and corporeality.

In fact, in "A Child in the House," Pater enacts this conflation of literary architecture with an architecture of the self: Florian's journey through his childhood memories informs the growth of his sensual and aesthetic sensibilities. The old familiar, childhood house becomes the "earthly tabernacle" (7), "a sort of material shrine or sanctuary of sentiment" (6) that encloses Florian's process of "brain building," and his

“house of thought” (10) wherein “All the acts and accidents of daily life borrowed a sacred colour and significance” (16). Pater nuances the dialectics of inside and outside in Cowper’s domestic idyll: the fictional house contains and structures the development of Florian’s sensibility through a double return whereby he turns toward the house of the past to explain himself and, at the end, still a child in his memory, he returns physically to the empty house. Florian’s descriptions of this empty house personify it: it is like the “face of one dead”—pale, denuded, and stripped bare. It causes the child to “[cling] back towards it,” and the sense of loss that Florian feels in leaving a second time assures him that “the aspect of the place . . . would last long” (17). Pater’s narrative of self-development not only enacts the shuttling movement of nostalgia between memory and desire, it also conceives of the house as a coherent structure that can reveal the self.

Before examining Woolf’s own representation of the masculine space of retreat in the Victorian house, it is useful to look at how E. M. Forster’s *Howards End* figures the female presence that creates the house of masculine, even national, retreat. Forster was one of Woolf’s closest Bloomsbury friends, a friend whose literary opinion counted heavily in her assessment of her own work. Amusingly, Woolf ties Forster to feminine interior space when she comments that the lady of fiction in her slippers and dressing gown has invited Forster into her bedroom (*M* 106). Forster, like Cowper, aligns the creative powers of the house with a feminine fertilizing spirit even as he deploys the house itself to transcend “similes of sex.” As numerous critics have indicated, most succinctly Fredric Jameson, Mrs. Ruth Wilcox is the spirit of the house, *Howards End*, “who begins to merge with her dwelling to the point of becoming almost literally a ‘genius loci.’” (56).²⁸ Mrs. Wilcox becomes the shuttle that weaves the fertilizing power of femininity back into a house that is threatened by modernity, and thus Forster grants the house the power to remake English identity.

Forster’s characterization of Mrs. Wilcox relies on both Evangelical connections between the woman’s ability to create a resonant space for self-examination and mid-nineteenth-century characterizations of woman’s intuition, an ability to feel rather than to know and to carry the sense of the house with her. Ruth Wilcox is clearly the spiritual center of *Howards End*. By the end of the novel, the house and her mind and her spirit have become synonymous. Margaret Schlegel confesses to her sister Helen: “I feel that you and I and Henry are only fragments of that

woman's mind. She knows everything. She is everything. She is the house, and the tree that leans over it" (248). Margaret even wonders if Leonard Bast was a part of Mrs. Wilcox's mind. Because she finds in Margaret a spiritual heir for the house, Mrs. Wilcox bequeaths Howards End to her. This causes the narrator to interpret the transference as an expression of Mrs. Wilcox's desire early in her marriage to Henry to seek "a more inward light," solidifying the early ties of English domesticity with the Evangelical terms of self-improvement (70, 78).²⁹ Spiritually aligned with the house, Margaret and Helen proceed to "open" the empty house as they give its rooms an airing. Through the return of the feminine spirit and its moral alignment with the regeneration of England, the house attains the potential to challenge family and class structure, sexual difference, and the concept of England and its imperial inflections.

Like Cowper, Pater, and Forster, Woolf's imaginative houses merge with her experience of the nineteenth-century house: Woolf, too, aligns its security with the feminine spirit, the spirit of her mother, Julia Stephen. But the easy equation the male writer draws between the house and the body becomes for Woolf the source of tremendous anxiety. Woolf takes issue with the house as a space of male retreat and artistic inspiration. As she struggles with separating the house from the lives of the people who live there, Woolf revises how and what the house can tell us about the self. Her description of her childhood Victorian house, Hyde Park Gate, problematizes the dialectics in nineteenth-century male-authored representations of an ideal domestic inside that keeps social disorder outside. She figures a double space of male retreat: a retreat from the outside world and a retreat into the mind. Following the normative literary models of house-as-haven, Woolf locates the space of male retreat in the house's drawing room, a feminine "heart" around the tea table that received the "sons returned from their work" (*MOB* 118). She then dissects the Victorian home into a body of gendered spaces. Above the tea table is the parents' bedroom, whose walls are soaked with the most private and intense being of family life: this room is "the sexual centre, the birth centre, the death centre" (*MOB* 118); above this, the house mounts to the children's bedrooms. Above it all, at the top of the stairs, is the "great study," "the brain of the house" (*MOB* 119). In this way, Woolf's description of interior domestic space follows a corporeal register that echoes the nineteenth-century separation of spheres: her description begins with the feminine "heart" around the tea table, a public space in the private house that signifies woman's interrelation to the other members of the family, and it

ascends to the masculine “brain” at the top of the house in the privacy of the study. Her father not only returns from the outside world to the first space of masculine retreat around the tea table, but he also withdraws into the house where he enters the space of writing.

Significantly, for Woolf the study at the top of the house was not an imagined place of retreat, but it was, in fact, a real one opposed to the life of conventional behavior in the drawing room. In “A Sketch of the Past,” she describes returning a book to her father’s attic study: there she finds him, an unworldly, distinguished, and lonely man. After she and her father discuss her reading, Woolf feels “proud and stimulated,” but she must return to the downstairs drawing room. Woolf comments that there was no connection between her father in the study and the life in the drawing room; importantly, she emphasizes that “There were deep divisions,” thereby analyzing the house for architecture’s complicity in the separation of spheres (*MOB* 158). Woolf identifies additional divisions in her own adolescent bedroom at Hyde Park Gate where she first began writing. In order to create a private study for herself, the young Woolf divided the room between the “living half” and the “sleeping half” (*MOB* 123–124).³⁰

Woolf’s writings about women and fiction are tormented by how this nineteenth-century house with its gendered spaces inserts women into a field of relationships that circumscribe their experience. Certainly, the actual role the house plays in scenes of women’s lives differs significantly from male representations of domestic refuge either around the tea table or in the study. Woolf questions what price the feminine imagination must pay since the spaces of male retirement and writing are founded on women’s management of the house. The desirable space around the tea table becomes, paradoxically, a space of repression when Woolf imagines her mythological “great four women writers” (Austen, the Brontes, and George Eliot). The drawing room is simultaneously the site of women’s social history, the site where women struggle to produce, and the site where women balance the competing demands of domesticity and artistry. These conflicting demands become the subject of their fiction: the desire to create the self in the house and through domesticity vies with the desire to create the self through what is for women the transgressive artistry of writing. In contrast to male representations of the aesthetic possibilities offered by domestic retreat like those of Cowper, Pater, and Forster, the “horrible domestic tradition” interrupts the woman writer. To be sure, Woolf often images domestic space as repre-