

“The True Nature of Woman”: From Mary Wollstonecraft to Virginia Woolf
in *The Wollstonecraftian Mind*
(Routledge, 2019)

At the start of *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf speaks of “the great problem of the true nature of woman” as a problem she cannot solve.¹ Yet even to open up this problem, in the way she does in novels and essays, is itself a far-sighted act of imagination. I want to suggest that, in doing so, she is anticipated less by the Woman Question and the associated suffrage movement between 1840 and 1928 than by Mary Wollstonecraft, whose whole existence, as Woolf saw, was an experiment that “cut to the quick of life”:

Many millions have died and been forgotten in the 130 years that have passed since she was buried; and yet as we read her letters and listen to her arguments and consider her experiments... , and realize the high-handed and hot-blooded manner in which she cut her way to the quick of life, one form of immortality is hers undoubtedly: she is alive and active, she argues and experiments, we hear her voice and trace her influence even now amongst the living.

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So said Woolf in an essay “Mary Wollstonecraft” in 1929, the same year as Woolf herself broached a need for “a room of one's own” – a private space to find an authentic voice.

¹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1929), 6. *AROO* in the text.

² Virginia Woolf, “Four Figures: III Mary Wollstonecraft,” *The Uncommon Reader: Second Series* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1932), 163. “MW” in the text.

She republished “Mary Wollstonecraft” in 1932 at a time when she resolved to speak out for the untried possibilities of women: “a great season of liberation,” she notes in her *Diary* on 31 December,³ urged on by her meeting with veteran suffragette Ethel Smyth (who composed the music for *The March of the Women*, and conducted it with her toothbrush from a window in Holloway Prison). I will approach Wollstonecraft through Virginia Woolf’s biographical essay and her feminist treatise so as to ask what both say to us at this distance in time when women’s rights are still wanting: the pay gap, trafficking, genital mutilation and widespread domestic violence ending in some cases in murder.

Both *A Room of One’s Own* and Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) responded to contexts of revolutionary change. For the *Vindication*, the context is the American and French revolutions; in the case of *A Room of One’s Own*, it is the achievement of the vote for all British women in 1928 with Parliament’s passing the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act, an extension of the limited vote for women over thirty at the end of the first world war.

This took place after a struggle that had gone on for almost ninety years. Public protest woke in 1840 after an international anti-slavery meeting in London when women delegates (including Lucretia Mott and Sarah Pugh from America) were not permitted to speak. Their protest took up the whole first day of the conference and turned into what became widely known as the Woman Question. The impact of the *Vindication* had been nullified from the end of the eighteenth

³ *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol iv: 1931-1935, ed Anne Olivier Bell assisted

by Andrew McNeillie (London: The Hogarth Press, 1982), 134. *Diary* in the text.

century by Prime Minister Pitt's counter-revolution and the accompanying slurs on Wollstonecraft, dismissing her as a melancholy wanton to whom no respectable lady would lend an ear. The novelist George Eliot observed that copies of the *Vindication* were scarce in Victorian England; she read it with surprise to find Wollstonecraft "eminently serious, severely moral" in her impatience with silly women.⁴ Many Victorian feminists distanced their politics from Wollstonecraft because they wished to dissociate the Woman Question from those slurs on her private life that had been designed to discredit her revolutionary ideas. In fact she had been a woman of natural dignity, who had impressed thinkers like Dr Johnson and William Godwin. But women, including writers, backed away. Respectability was crucial to the political agendas of nineteenth-century feminism, with its focus on legal obstacles to gender equality. There were a few exceptions including her daughter, Mary Shelley, a disciple Claire Clairmont, the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning and George Eliot who drew on Wollstonecraft's attempted suicide in the Thames for a scene in *Daniel Deronda*, where the deep-souled woman, a singer called Mirah, soaks her dress so as to sink more quickly in the river.

I want to suggest that the political struggle for women's rights co-exists with something less explicit: a notion of women's nature that remains in the wings; that this too was seeded by Mary Wollstonecraft and comes to fruition in Virginia Woolf's Society of Outsiders, formulated in her second feminist treatise *Three Guineas* (1938).⁵ It was a call to contemplate

⁴ George Eliot, "Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft" (1855), *Selected Essays*,

Poems and Other Writings, ed A S Byatt (London: Penguin classics, 1990), 332-8.

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Lyndall Gordon, *Outsiders: Five Women Writers Who Changed the World* (London: Virago, 2017).

untested potentialities with a view to changing the world. The assumption is that, when rights are gained, a latent potency, call it “nature” or call it skills, might prevail as women’s contribution to civilization. Wollstonecraft and Woolf share an acute sense of character and morality as these inform a new plot of existence. In this sense both are biographers of the inner life, working through fiction, as Wollstonecraft puts it in her Advertisement to her novel, *Mary, A Fiction* (1788): her aim is to develop a character different from Richardson’s Clarissa or Rousseau’s Sophie, whose perfections “wander from nature.” She means to demonstrate “the mind of a woman who has thinking powers.” Such a creature “may be allowed to exist as a possibility.”⁶

For the real-life Mary, that shadow of possibility was already feeling its way onto the platform of action. As a schoolmistress and governess, she had already published her advanced ideas in *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*: a girl must think for herself, not be a receptacle for Advice books “designed to hunt every spark of nature out of [women’s] composition.”⁷ From her earliest years she is a reader – reading as self-making – and one of a new breed destined to displace the old breed of obedience and passive dependence. The fictional Mary, like the author, is a survivor of setbacks who means to “dart into futurity” [*Mary*, ch 4]. Wollstonecraft insisted that a transformed female character must precede a claim for rights: “still does my panting soul push forward, and live in futurity in the deep shades o’er which darkness hangs” [*Mary*, ch 20].

⁶ Mary Wollstonecraft, *Mary and The Wrongs of Woman* (Oxford: OUP’s World’s Classics, 1980, repr 1987), xxxi. *Mary* in the text.

⁷ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ch 5, section ii. [*RW* in the text.]

A biographical sketch that does justice to a great life will have something to say. The staple of Wollstonecraft's nature, Woolf sees, was independence:

Independence was the first necessity for a woman; not grace or charm, but energy and courage and the power to put her will into effect, were her necessary qualities. It was her highest boast to be able to say, "I never yet resolved to do anything of consequence that I did not adhere readily to it." Certainly Mary could say this with truth....

The [French] Revolution thus was not merely an event that happened outside her; it was an active ingredient in her own blood. She had been in revolt all her life – against tyranny, against law, against convention ["MW," 157-8].

Like all biography that is more than a compendium of fact (a voluminous looseness Woolf deplored), this short but sharply-marked portrait reflects the biographer as much as the subject. Here Wollstonecraft and Woolf come together in their sense of experiment, a determination to discover – by experiment with their own lives – what lies buried (overlaid by habits and customs, which Wollstonecraft deplores in no uncertain terms: to hook men through displays of weakness, silliness and helplessness). At the same time, Woolf acknowledges the effectiveness of Wollstonecraft's public voice and the boldness of her "attempt to make human conventions conform more closely to human needs" ["MW," 163]. Both register how much further women's needs diverge – further than those of men – from public institutions: education, marriage, and in Wollstonecraft's case, the law courts.

The deepest need is to know ourselves and to be known, and this in part explains the attraction of women's fictional heroes like Mr Rochester. It was the prime issue in

Wollstonecraft's and Woolf's choice of exceptional men – William Godwin and Leonard Woolf – who had the intelligence to search out and welcome what lies buried beneath the conventional facades women adopt for their survival. As we know, women still live under the shadow of distorted gender conventions and the wrongs this invites. We have only to look at advertisements to see how women still tolerate – or are seen to tolerate – a limited scope as imitation men, as they swan around board rooms or sit on the front bench in Parliament. The crucial question Wollstonecraft and Woolf put to us is still unanswered: what is a woman?

“That little book [*A Room*] was rather a jump in the dark full of guesses,”⁸ Virginia Woolf commented to Frances Cornford on 29 December 1929. The core of *A Room* is this leap in the dark. Students at Newnham and Girton, the two Cambridge colleges for women, had asked Woolf to talk about women and fiction. She pretended hesitation: the topic was too inconclusive for a public platform, and so, she declared, she would shift to plainer talk of money and space: the room of one's own that colleges had offered young women from the late nineteenth century on. Income of one's own and private space had of course been denied to women for untold centuries. She starts with a semi-fictional anecdote: the speaker arrives in Cambridge; she is turned away from an all-male college library; she trespasses on age-old turf; she's shooed off the grass by an irate beadle. And as she complies, her “fish” slips away. The fish is a fore-glimpse of the “fin in the waste of waters” [*Diary* iv, 10] that was to appear while writing *The Waves* (1931).⁹ It seems negligible beside the overtly feminist topic of the need for £500 a year (or the present-day equivalent). But that fish and its elusiveness marks what is undefined and perhaps

⁸ *Virginia Woolf Bulletin*, No. 13 (May 2003), 4. (Not included in the collected *Letters*.)

⁹ See *The Waves* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1931), 198, 206, 268, 299 and 311.

indefinable. Woolf only pretends to see the subject slip away – it's too important not to return. The fish flashes again into view when, in a speech of 21 January 1931 for the London branch of the National Society for Women's Service,^{10*} she asks, "what is a woman?" and adds, "I assure you I do not know. I do not believe that you know."¹¹ This picks up the opening proposition of *A Room* that the true nature of woman remains to be defined.

If a woman is an undetected organism, it calls the plot of her life into question. What biographical plots have been imposed on her life in the past? And what will be revealed of her nature when those plots – plots of domestic constriction, plots of keeping off the male turf, and those imitating men – fall away? A turning point in Mary Wollstonecraft's life came in 1787 when she tried out this experiment: she shed the poor expectations of the paid companion, schoolmistress and governess (the limited occupations open to middle-class, eighteenth-century women with no money), and took off for London to be an independent woman who earned her living by her pen. She was then aged twenty-eight. At this moment, when her new life was still a secret, she confided to her sister Everina: "I am... going to be the first of a new genus." At this moment she was more preoccupied with woman's emergent nature than with "rights" (the buzzword of her time). "I am not born to tread in the beaten track," Mary went on to Everina, "the peculiar bent of my nature pushes me on."¹²

^{10*} This is what the suffragettes' WSPU became after women got the vote.

¹¹ Virginia Woolf, "Professions for Women," *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*

(London: The Hogarth Press, 1942), 149-54 at p. 151.

¹² To Everina Wollstonecraft (7 Nov [1787]), *The Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed Janet Todd (London: Allen Lane, 2003), 139-40.

Here is the Wollstonecraft who leads to the exploratory walker in Virginia Woolf. Switch the scene to 1905: Virginia, aged twenty-three, is tramping in her father's footsteps at St Ives, Cornwall, in the year after his death. She turns aside from the public highway to follow a path as thin as though trodden by rabbits.¹³ This woman passes out of our sight, like the fish who slipped away. Through fiction alone could she bring herself to expose states of being that existed in the shadows of the "night," what she called (in "A Sketch of the Past") "being," as opposed to the "non-being" of our visible, day-time selves.¹⁴

Night and Day (1919), Virginia Woolf's second novel, makes an imaginative advance on Wollstonecraft territory: that of her "new genus" and its plot of existence. Katherine Mansfield famously trashed this as an old-fashioned novel: a post-war work that has nothing to say about the Great War. Its focus appears to be the quiet, pre-war life of a daughter at home, Katharine Hilbery, whose days are taken up with a never-to-be-finished memoir of her Victorian grandfather and with tea-parties for elderly gentlemen who are relics of that age.¹⁵ Old-fashioned remained this novel's reputation throughout the twentieth century, as though the novelist had not yet found her Modernist mode. (She herself endorsed this view, as though she had been lagging behind the methodological innovation of Eliot and Mansfield, those avant-garde authors who led the new-formed list of the Woolves' Hogarth Press.)

¹³ Virginia Woolf, *A Passionate Apprentice: The Early Journals, 1897-1909*, ed Mitchell

A. Leaska (London: The Hogarth Press, 1990), 290.

¹⁴Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being*, ed Jeanne Schulkind (London: The Hogarth Press, 1985), 70-1; see also p.136.

¹⁵Katherine Mansfield, "A Ship Comes into the Harbour," *Novels & Novelists*, ed J.

Middleton Murry (London: Constable, 1930), 107-11.

But instead of apologising for *Night and Day*, **the time has come to recognise the writer's repeated treatment of a subject that still lies beyond us, to be determined by a future we can't yet see.**

Looking back for clues to the more hidden nature of women writers, *A Room of One's Own* links its speaker with her predecessors. Boldly, Virginia Woolf beckons us to look back through our mothers, that is, to subvert dominant history (“a King ... with a golden teapot on his head”¹⁶), in favour of a counter-history of women's unrecorded actions in domestic obscurity. In a sense, she is performing this feat in those biographical essays that free themselves of an empowered bias to concentrate on what Wollstonecraft had stressed: domestic nurture and reading as the vital basis of all education. Thus in her essay on Mary Wollstonecraft, Woolf chooses to pursue not so much her public voice but her inward nature: a rare readiness for experiment combined with resilience, homing in on her “most fruitful experiment”: her union with the radical philosopher William Godwin, contriving an equal marriage and bringing a woman's desire into play.

Not until the fifth chapter does *A Room* dare to emerge from the shade to make a daylight, non-fiction statement about what, in fact, Woolf has been exploring all along through the medium of fiction. (It now becomes evident that she is talking about women and fiction, after all.) We see here, close up, not the negative aspects, the frustrations and distortions of women's history, but the present and the future. There is the image of Chloë and Olivia supporting each other through creative friendship. (This is a central subject for Woolf, going back to her earliest story, “Phyllis and Rosamond” (1906): the undefined nature of two sisters as samples of those who “cluster in the

¹⁶ *The Waves*, 248.

shade”).¹⁷ Woolf’s eye to women’s hidden nature goes back to this time, a sketch called “The Mysterious Case of Miss V” (1906) with its metaphor of a ghost life;¹⁸ to *The Voyage Out* (1915) with its metaphor of the great white monsters of the lower waters, who would explode if brought to the surface; and then of course to Katharine Hilbery, that determinedly unshaped daughter at home in *Night and Day*, where the metaphor of the title rises out of Woolf’s essay on Henry James (1917): “the shadow in which the detail of so many things can be discerned which the glare of day flattens out”.¹⁹ Katharine’s secret night-life is committed to mathematics, representing any creative activity.

Votes for women are seen in tandem with a larger question of lives for women. What is Katharine to be? The question rises near the end of the novel in the mind of Ralph Denham, a man who is very like Leonard Woolf and, in his intelligent sympathy for a far-out woman, the only conceivable mate for Katharine. “What woman did he see? And where was she walking, and who was her companion?”²⁰ As Henry James had put it in his preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, what will a free creature “do”? Before Katherine comes to see that the energetic Denham is the right man for her, she wonders if marriage into her own upper middle class, a gentleman called William Rodney, whom she doesn’t much want, will grant her liberty to pursue mathematics and astronomy – more liberty than she can

¹⁷ *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, ed Susan Dick (London: The Hogarth Press, 1985), 17-29 at p. 17.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 30-2.

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The Essays of Virginia Woolf, vol ii 1912-1918, ed Andrew McNeillie (London: The Hogarth Press, 1987), 168.

²⁰ *Night and Day* (Harmondsworth, Middx: Penguin, 1969), 470.

command as a dutiful daughter at home. But signs of her fiancé's oblivion are ominous. He's a self-regarding aesthete. *Night and Day* tests possibilities for a new plot in the context of women's traditional adventure: marriage. Jane Austen jokes at the predictability of the wedding-bell ending of *Northanger Abbey* when she nudges the reader on the second last page: "we are hastening together to perfect felicity." That has to be a romantic illusion. Should marriage itself go?

This is a question for today, but the question goes back to Mary Wollstonecraft as a child in the 1760s, witnessing the destruction of her mother's morale in a violent marriage. She never forgot, and frequently repeated, her mother's dying words, "a little patience, and all will be over." Wollstonecraft resolved on a biographic plot that would cut out marriage in favour of work, propped by the balm of friendship. And when, in her late thirties, she did marry, she devised a new, more independent form of marriage which would not curtail the wife. Given Wollstonecraft's public fame as a political innovator, it's startling to find Virginia Woolf proclaiming the marriage to Godwin as "the most fruitful experiment" of Wollstonecraft's life. The same could be said of her own experimental marriage to Leonard Woolf. There had been a daring tone to her announcements to family and friends that she was marrying "a penniless Jew."²¹ In this context *Night and Day* offers two plausible alternatives for thinking women. Katharine's night-nature contrasts with the visible purpose of an active single woman, bent on the Vote.

Mary Datchet works for the Cause in the political daylight of the previous sixty to eighty years, from the time that JS Mill proposed votes for women to the British Parliament in 1867 or,

²¹ *The Flight of the Mind: The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, vol i: 1888-1912, eds Nigel

Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (London: The Hogarth Press, 1975), 500-1.

going back further, from the time American women met at Seneca Falls in 1848. The suffragists and suffragettes were making their existence felt as “new women” in the Nineties and first decade of twentieth century leading up to the Great War – the period of *Night and Day*. The date of its publication coincides with votes for women. Mary Datchet is, then, a solid, familiar figure of her day. Why do two wholly different men, the aesthete, William Rodney, and the solicitor, Ralph Denham, endorse the suffragist, Mary, while they are exasperated by the unreadability of the deep-souled and obscurely gifted Katharine? Can the answer be that Mary Datchet has modelled herself on practical men? In seeking the vote, she has the kind of political goal a man can understand. In so far as her thinking replicates his, it is unimaginative – in a sense, unambitious. Conceivably a female diplomat or artist or doctor or judge or teacher or executive may have to imitate the dominant model in order to succeed, but in doing so, she may not use the innate skills or forms of alertness, whatever they may be, that Woolf demonstrates in her novels, in particular her zooming in on Mrs Dalloway’s awakening to the underside of existence for Septimus Warren Smith, an anti-hero of the Great War. Her need to understand his madness and suicide comes to her as she stands apart from her fashionable, Westminster party, at the window at midnight. Instead of Cinderella’s romance with a prince, an older woman’s insights deepen as the clock strikes.

What makes the female brain differ from the male brain? One difference lies the *corpus callosum* that develops in mammals within six weeks of conception, before the genitalia: a thicket of pathways linking the two halves of the brain and already gendered in so far as tests have shown it to be proportionally larger in most females. What this may mean, we do not yet know. This century has yet to unwrap such secrets of the gendered brain. Katharine’s mathematics are symbols of an unknown quantity.

In this novel, Woolf approached what is unknown in women through the unlikely character of a domestic, unassuming daughter. Yet her inward life links her to an alternative tradition, that of Wollstonecraft, the Brontës, George Eliot, and the American heroines of James who “affront their destiny” when they come to Europe – all who advance a more creative and speculative womanhood. These living and fictional women have close ties, of course, with fighters for rights. Charlotte Brontë reads Harriet Taylor on “The Emancipation of Women” in 1851 in the *Westminster Review*; George Eliot is friends with Barbara Bodichon, co-founder of Girton College in 1869, the first Oxbridge college for women; Virginia Woolf is taught Greek by one of Girton’s earliest graduates, the suffragist Janet Case, and agrees to seal envelopes for the Women’s Social and Political Union. They belong together as “Outsiders” (Woolf’s term, we recall, in *Three Guineas*), yet within that encompassing party, creative women form a distinct group concerned with inward potentialities – something more innate, more differentiated and long-term than votes for women:

Ralph: “Has Mary [Datchet] made a convert of you?”

Katharine: “Oh no. That is, I’m a convert already.”

Ralph: “But she hasn’t persuaded you to work for them?”

Katharine: “Oh dear no – that wouldn’t do at all.”²²

There’s a silence around what Katharine can say, beyond affirming her deviation from the suffragists. At the time this novel came out, 1919, women for the first time had the right to vote, but for the next nine years it remained a right granted only to women of property, in other words, privileged women, *safe* women who could be relied on to dissipate the women’s vote in the established parties – as they still do. Katharine’s silence is

²² *Night and Day*, 85.

potentially more radical; it is the precursor to the volcanic political voice of *Three Guineas* two decades later. This is the voice of the Outsider party which Virginia Woolf declares to be already in existence, when she argues that a sex who had always been denied education and a say in public affairs, can have no patria, can belong to no party shaped by men. As she completed this unpopular book – for bookshops declined to stock something so controversial about women – she was exhilarated by her defiance, whirled like a top across the Sussex downs and wrote, “I feel myself enfranchised till death & quit of all humbug.”²³

Neither Mary Wollstonecraft in the revolutionary Paris and counter-revolutionary London of the 1790s nor Virginia Woolf in the London of the first half of the twentieth century can be, as yet, defined. Biographically, that is the challenge. Katharine Hilbery embodies this impossible challenge, which means that she is not vague because her author has failed to delineate her properly. She’s intentionally unformed, an elusive, even faceless phenomenon, like the faceless portraits that Vanessa Bell painted of her sister Virginia at the time she finished her first novel in 1912.

Virginia Woolf pursued the tantalising question of women’s nature through the great works of her maturity. Following *Night and Day*, in *To the Lighthouse* (1927) Mrs Ramsay and Lily, “an independent little creature”²⁴ who is painting Mrs Ramsay by day, meet in the dark bedroom, where Lily tries to determine

²³. *Diary* (28 Apr 1938), v, 136-7. [NOTE TO EDITOR: AM NOT PUTTING THIS SOURCE IN THE TEXT BECAUSE THE CLUTTER WILL SPOIL THE DRAMA OF THIS STATEMENT.]

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[EDITOR: PLEASE ELIMINATE THE LINES]

To the Lighthouse (London: The Hogarth Press, 1927), 31.

what is written on tablets locked up in the heart and mind of her subject:

she imagined how in the chambers of the mind and heart of the woman who was, physically, touching her, were stood, like the treasures in the tombs of kings, tablets bearing sacred inscriptions, which if one could spell them out, would teach one everything, but they would never be offered openly, never made public. What art was there, known to love or cunning, by which one pressed through into those secret chambers?²⁵

In *A Room*, conceived a year later, as lectures, Woolf imagines a woman who “will light a torch in that vast chamber where nobody has yet been. It is all profound shadows like those serpentine caves where one goes with a candle peering up and down, not knowing where one is stepping” [AROO, 126]. A recorder must ‘set to work to catch those unrecorded gestures, those unsaid or half-said words, which form themselves, no more palpably than the shadows of moths on the ceiling, when women are alone, unlit by the capricious and coloured light of the other sex’ [AROO, 127].

It's crucial, then, to catch women in their un-posturing state, “in words that are hardly syllabled” yet and record what happens “when this organism that has been under the shadow of the rock these million years – feels the light fall on it, and sees coming its way a piece of strange food – knowledge, adventure, art” [AROO, 127]. It is an organism “almost unclassified” [AROO, 129]. One element in this organism is the question of gendered passion.

²⁵

Ibid, 82.

In her speech for the National Society for Women's Service, she told a parable of a fisherwoman whose line races in vain after the elusive fish of woman's desire. The question of woman's obliterated desire is re-explored more specifically in the honeymoon-and-after story, "Lappin and Lapinova" (1939).²⁶ Moonlit love-play filled with character charms the bride, Lapinova, whose bridegroom, King Lappin, lends himself to her game. But after the honeymoon, the playful character of Lappin is lost. He becomes a traditional type of marksman who turns from sporting with Lapinova to shooting her. She becomes the wife he wants: a lifeless, stuffed trophy, in fact the opposite of what Woolf commends in Wollstonecraft who has the resilience to remain "alive".

During their lifetimes, both Wollstonecraft and Virginia Woolf found protection for their daring in a congenial milieu: Wollstonecraft was fortified by closeness to her benevolent publisher, Joseph Johnson, and his circle of gifted men, including Erasmus Darwin, Tom Paine and Blake, who did wonderfully touching illustrations for her children's stories from *Real Life*.²⁷ Virginia Woolf wrote from the citadel of the Bloomsbury set, including fellow-novelist E M Forster, the biographer Lytton Strachey and the economist Maynard Keynes.

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The Complete Shorter Fiction, 255-62.

²⁷ Mary Wollstonecraft, *Original Stories from Real Life; with conversations calculated to regulate the affections, and form the mind to truth and goodness*, in *The Collected Writings of Mary Wollstonecraft*, vol iv, ed Marilyn Butler and Janet Todd (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1989).

But after their untimely deaths, these two women each suffered an eclipse. Critical attempts (over the course of two centuries) to fit Wollstonecraft to standard images of wild woman, hysteric, termagant, or depressive, were admissions of failure to see what she was. The challenge is to detach her from the distorting categories. In the same way we must detach Virginia Woolf from the stale, movie-image (in *The Hours*) of a moody, frigid lady-writer who lies eye-to-eye with a little dead bird – all those belittling, ready-made categories that remove a rare woman from what she is.

Wollstonecraft's alternative model of womanhood resembles the rational, moral Mrs Mason in *Real Life*. Much that is sober in this model was designed to counter the coquette trained to live through her sexuality. At her core is the revolutionary idea Wollstonecraft had first put out, while a practising teacher, in her *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, where she insists on an education in domestic affections as opposed to governance based in contests and power. Domestic affections cut across distinctions of gender, offering a basis for a common morality. It is easy to pass over this domestic ideology as old-fashioned femininity, but nowhere does she dare more the judgement of the reader. By domesticating an aggressive order she wants nothing less than to change the world. The resistance then and now comes from a fear of feminisation as weakness – hence the imitation man who will claim to be strong and fixed – rather than what Wollstonecraft actually advocates: the political empowerment of gentleness, nurture, compromise and listening – all traits which civilised men and women already share.

Her private letters and political writings are attuned to states of mind: all assume that right action comes from within, not from soundbites nor party platforms, but from a capacity to

judge in a way that breaks the mind-sets of her sex. That word “nature” underpins her enterprise as much or more than “rights”. She herself demonstrates “natural strength”, eloquence not silent obedience, and passion in place of the “unnatural coldness” women were taught to cultivate. She questions Rousseau’s belief that women exist to please and that works of genius are beyond them. Above all, she calls on women of the future to outlaw war. “Brutal force has hitherto governed the world,”²⁸ she observes. “Man accustomed to bow down to power in his savage state, can seldom divest himself of this barbarous prejudice...” [RW, ch 3]. Military heroes are no longer wanted. “It would puzzle a keen casuist to prove the reasonableness of the greater number of wars that have dubbed heroes... I sincerely wish the bayonet to be converted into the pruning hook” [RW, ch 9]. Future hopes may lie with “moral agents” [RW, ch 12] who have not accustomed themselves to brutal force: “It is time to effect a revolution in female manners – time to restore them to their lost dignity – and make them, as a part of the human species, labour by reforming themselves to reform the world” [RW, ch 3].

Nearly a century and a half after the *Vindication*, Virginia Woolf makes an identical case that military heroes are no longer wanted as part of the human species. If women hope to save the messed-up world they must come together to oust them – a far-sighted and at this point perhaps impossible prospect. Many readers throughout the world appropriated Virginia Woolf in feminist terms during the 1970s and 1980s, and the corrective image of Virginia Woolf as spokesperson for her sex puts her in line with Wollstonecraft. Yet the justified hurrah for these fighters for rights and opposers of war co-exists with a different kind of courage: the prominence Woolf grants to what Wollstonecraft claimed as a new genus. I have

²⁸ RW, ch 2.

proposed that both are compelled in the first place by character and a wish to define how it comes into being so as, in each case, to issue forth in a tremendous, world-changing voice of her own. It is their tones that differ: Wollstonecraft's eloquence is rational; Woolf's humorous, playful. Don't be angry, she advised her readers in *Three Guineas*, since rage saps the spirit. Be amused.

Both Wollstonecraft and Woolf perceive accurately that women have yet a long way to go. Wollstonecraft, visiting Eton, took a dim view of the character produced by public schools, which remove boys from a mother's influence. She observed how boys were warped by the loss of home tenderness and by an ethos of invulnerable power. As a governess to the Irish Ascendancy, Wollstonecraft despised the shallowness and insensitivity, even cruelty, of the ruling class. Woolf's image of the fisherwoman who fishes for women's submerged desires shuts off with a statement that men are not yet ready to hear what women could tell them. A proposition is voiced in *The Voyage Out* that it will take six generations for women to come into their own. So this writer remains increasingly our contemporary, as her own generation recedes further into the past. Above all, both Wollstonecraft and Woolf, like all the "true nature" party, are appalled by violence, from the bloodshed that shocked Wollstonecraft when she arrived on the scene of the Terror in Paris to Woolf's hatred of bullies pulling the wings off butterflies.

Looking back, looking forward, I see the Wollstonecraftian "genus" evolving across generations, and see it most strongly in the robust walker and "restless searcher" (as Virginia Woolf perceived herself on 27 February 1926 [*Diary*, iii, 62]). Towards the end of her life she said that she and her sister, Vanessa Bell, were "explorers, reformers, revolutionists."²⁹ Along with the

²⁹ "A Sketch of the Past" in *Moments of Being*.

revolutionary in Mary Wollstonecraft, she inhabits and hands on that “new genus” of womanhood as it swerves from “the beaten track.”

ABSTRACT:

This essay explores the links between Mary Wollstonecraft and Virginia Woolf, both as political writers and as proponents of an education in what Wollstonecraft terms “tenderness” and the “domestic affections.” This suggests that both writers match their concern for women’s rights with explorations of what Woolf calls “the true nature of woman” as an aspect of feminist advance that remains relatively unexplored except through fiction.
