Preface

Central to my analysis of Woolf’s work are five novels: *Jacob's Room*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *Orlando* and *The Waves*. These are written in pursuit of her modernist project but, as I shall argue below, her modernism was at the same time a feminist subversion of conventions. Woolf’s fiction has, surprisingly, been relatively underemphasised in the recent intense revival of interest in her work. Directed towards the centenary in 1982, the revival has at its centre a ‘family’ industry which includes Quentin Bell’s biography, and publication of Woolf’s innumerable letters and diaries and of other previously unpublished material. This extensive new access to Woolf’s personal life has generated a psychoanalytical criticism that focuses on her actual mental illness rather than the possibility of new readings of her texts—a neglect which this book hopes to remedy. The linkage of psychoanalysis and Woolf is of course not an arbitrary one. The Hogarth Press has been Freud’s English publisher since 1921, and we can sense the great impact of Freudian psychoanalysis in Woolf’s references to ‘our psychoanalytical age’ (*CE*, 2:142). In a review called ‘Freudian Fiction’ she criticised the particular use the novelist J.D. Beresford had made of Freudian theory: ‘It simplifies rather than complicates, detracts rather than enriches’ (*CW*, 154). I shall seek to heed this caveat in the studies that follow.

The second major impulse behind the recent Woolf revival is contemporary feminism. Feminist assessments of Woolf’s aesthetics (Elaine Showalter, Sidney Janet Kaplan) have often been on the whole negative, continuous with the Marxist or *Scrutiny* critiques of the 1930s: Woolf as sheltered, hypersensitive invalid lady, unable to cope with a harsh ‘reality’. But a major shift in
evaluation has been initiated by American feminists around Jane Marcus, who aims to retrieve the radical political dimension of Woolf's writing. This has been a deeply valuable project, but precisely because these writers are so eager to dispel the old image of ethereal aestheticism, they tend to eschew full-scale dealings with Woolf's formal experimentation in the series of novels from *Jacob's Room* to *The Waves*. What is needed now, however, is to radicalise the reading of these texts and of the aesthetic behind them, and I have sought to bring the resources of contemporary critical theory to bear upon them, stressing those aspects of theory which seem to me most germane and illuminating for each particular novel. Far from being a flight from social commitment into an arcane modernism, Woolf's experimental novels can, I shall argue, best be seen as a feminist subversion of the deepest formal principles—of the very definitions of narrative, writing, the subject—of a patriarchal social order.

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