



VIRGINIA  
WOOLF  
AND THE   
BLOOMSBURY  
AVANT-GARDE

---

WAR ■ CIVILIZATION ■ MODERNITY

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CHRISTINE FROULA

# VIRGINIA WOOLF

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CHRISTINE FROULA

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS ■ NEW YORK



Columbia University Press  
*Publishers Since 1893*  
New York Chichester, West Sussex  
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Froula, Christine, 1950-

Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury avant-garde :  
war, civilization, modernity / Christine Froula.

p. cm. — (Gender and culture)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 10: 0-231-13444-4 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN 13: 978-0-231-13444-6 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN 10: 0-231-13445-2 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN 13: 978-0-231-0-13445-3 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Woolf, Virginia, 1882-1941—Criticism and interpretation.
  2. Bloomsbury (London, England)—Intellectual life—20th century.
  3. World War, 1914-1918—England—London—Literature and the war.
  4. Women and literature—England—London—History—20th century.
  5. Experimental fiction, English—History and criticism. 6. Avant-garde (Aesthetics)—England—London. 7. Modernism (Literature)—England—London. 8. Civilization, Modern, in literature. 9. Bloomsbury group.
- I. Title. II. Series.

PR6045.072Z6435 2004

823'.912—dc22

2004052774



Columbia University Press books are printed on permanent  
and durable acid-free paper.

Printed in the United States of America

c 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

p 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Frontispiece: Courtesy of the Harvard Theatre Collection, the Houghton  
Library, Harvard University

## ■ ■ ■ ABBREVIATIONS

Epigraph citations to “Woolf” always refer to Virginia Woolf. “Leonard Woolf” is cited in full. Unless otherwise stated, citations are to the Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich current editions. The date of first publication is given here.

### Works by Virginia Woolf

- BA        *Between the Acts*. 1941.
- CDB      *The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays*. 1950.
- CR        *The Common Reader*. 1925.
- CR2      *The Second Common Reader*. 1932.
- CS        *Congenial Spirits: The Selected Letters of Virginia Woolf*. Edited by Joanne Trautmann Banks. 1989.
- CSF      *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*. 2nd ed. Edited by Susan Dick. 1989.
- D         *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*. 5 vols. Edited by Anne Olivier Bell. 1977–84.
- DM      *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*. 1942.
- E         *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*. Vols. 1–4. Edited by Andrew McNeillie. 1986–94.
- GR      *Granite and Rainbow: Essays*. 1958.
- H         *The Hours: The British Museum Manuscript of Mrs. Dalloway*. Transcribed and edited by Helen Wussow. New York: Pace University Press. 1997.
- JR      *Jacob's Room*. 1922.
- L         *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*. Edited by Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann. 1975–80.
- M         *Melymbrosia: An Early Version of The Voyage Out*. Edited by Louise A. DeSalvo. New York: New York Public Library. 1982.
- MB      *Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings*. 2d ed. Edited by Jeanne Schulkind. 1985.
- MD      *Mrs. Dalloway*. 1925.
- MDP     *Mrs. Dalloway's Party: A Short Story Sequence by Virginia Woolf*. Edited by Stella McNichol. 1973.

- ND *Night and Day*. 1919.  
 O *Orlando*. 1928.  
 Oh *Orlando: The Original Holograph Draft*. Transcribed and edited by Stuart Nelson Clarke. London: S. N. Clarke. 1993.  
 P *The Pargiters: The Novel-Essay Portion of The Years*. Edited by Mitchell A. Leaska. 1977.  
 PA *A Passionate Apprentice: The Early Journals 1897–1909*. Edited by Mitchell A. Leaska. 1990.  
 PH *Pointz Hall: The Earlier and Later Typescripts of Between the Acts*. Edited by Mitchell A. Leaska. New York: University Publications. 1983.  
 RF *Roger Fry: A Biography*. 1940.  
 RO *A Room of One's Own*. 1929.  
 TG *Three Guineas*. 1938. First American edition, with illustrations.  
 TL *To the Lighthouse*. 1927.  
 TLhd *To the Lighthouse: The Original Holograph Drafts*. Transcribed by Susan Dick. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 1982.  
 VO *The Voyage Out*. 1915.  
 W *The Waves*. 1931.  
 Wh *The Waves: The Two Holograph Drafts*. Transcribed and edited by J. W. Graham. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 1976.  
 WF *Women & Fiction: The Manuscript Versions of A Room of One's Own*. Edited by S. P. Rosenbaum. Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell's. 1992.  
 Y *The Years*. 1937.

### Supplementary Works

- BGMC *The Bloomsbury Group: A Collection of Memoirs and Commentary*. Edited by S. P. Rosenbaum. Rev. ed. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 1995.  
 BGR *A Bloomsbury Group Reader*. Edited by S. P. Rosenbaum. Oxford: Blackwell's. 1993.  
 HL Lee, Hermione. *Virginia Woolf*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1997.  
 QB Bell, Quentin. *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*. 1971.  
 VW:CH *Virginia Woolf: The Critical Heritage*. Edited by Robin Majumdar and Allen McLaurin. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. 1975.  
 VWM *Virginia Woolf Miscellany*. Nos. 1–63. Fall 1973–Summer 2003.

## ■ ■ ■ PREFACE

Bertie [Bertrand Russell] . . . thinks he's going to found new civilisations.

—Woolf, *Letters*, 23 January 1916

[You women] who are trying to earn your livings in the professions . . . call out . . . all those sympathies which, in literature, are stimulated by the explorers who set out in crazy cockle shells to discover new lands, and found new civilisations.

—Woolf, *The Pargiters*, 1932

**T**his book situates Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury within a modernity understood as a “permanent revolution” in the sense Thomas Jefferson evoked when he wrote that he could die content if he knew that the revolution he had helped to make would never be written in stone but would remain always alive—not laying down the law for generations to come but always debated and contested, actively reaffirmed or creatively transformed by the living.<sup>1</sup> Twenty years ago the intellectual historian Perry Anderson could write, “My own country England, the pioneer of capitalist industrialization and master of the world market for a century, . . . beachhead for Eliot or Pound, offshore to Joyce, . . . produced virtually no significant native movement of a modernist type in the first decades of this century—unlike Germany or Italy, France or Russia, Holland or America.”<sup>2</sup> Today Virginia Woolf has emerged on the world stage, read around the world in English and translation amid an array of Bloomsburies: Leon Edel’s house of lions, Raymond Williams’s oppositional fraction of England’s ruling class, S. P. Rosenbaum’s interconnected writers, as well as wide-ranging discussions of Bloomsbury biographies, personalities, sexualities, friendships, lifestyle, decor, and affinities with material culture, consumer culture, and the popular imagination. Still, it is easy to overlook Bloomsbury’s import and specificity as a *modernist movement*, in part because its enormous multidisciplinary archive tends to obscure the strong lines of

force in its associates' work and thought beneath the glitter and glamour of their everyday lives.

But if we understand modernity's permanent revolution as a perpetual effort to reclaim the purpose and vitality of the Enlightenment project—as an unfinished and unfinishable struggle for human (including economic) rights, democratic self-governance, world community, and peace—then Bloomsbury puts England on the map of modernist movements as decisively as more commonly recognized movements do Germany, Italy, France, Russia, Holland, and America. In a half-century blighted by two European “civil wars,” Bloomsbury carried forward and made new the Enlightenment project's self-critical and emancipatory force and meaning. As the 1914 war plunged Europe into crisis, as belligerent nationalisms (even in England) and rising totalitarianisms threatened to eclipse Europe's Enlightenment ideal, Bloomsbury artists and intellectuals entered a struggle not to “save” their civilization but to help advance Europe toward its own unrealized ideal, a civilization that had never existed. Bloomsbury carries the Enlightenment struggle for civilization dialectically into the twentieth century in its pacifism and internationalism, its sense of history not as inevitable progress but as an unending fight for a future that is always open and free, and—most tellingly—its address to barbarity *within* Europe and the West.

Along with Freud and Keynes, Virginia Woolf is as powerfully analytic, critical, and imaginative a proponent as the Enlightenment project has had in the last century. In alliance with Bloomsbury and in some measure against it, Woolf linked the breakdown of England's sex/gender economy and women's emergence into public voice with Bloomsbury's critique of the class system, imperial domination, racialized economic exploitation, and militant nationalisms. Like her contemporary James Joyce, who, inspired by Ibsen, saw women's struggle for economic, political, and social emancipation as the greatest revolution of their time, Virginia Woolf framed the women's movement as an avant-garde in the struggle for freedom, peace, and the rights of all within modernity's unfinished project.

Vanessa Bell recalled that her sister's first short story was “a wildly romantic account of a young woman on a ship,” rejected by *Titbits* (the same that Leopold Bloom peruses in *Ulysses*) (*BGR* 335). From this first, lost story to her last novel in which the playwright La Trobe voyages away from the shore toward her next play, Woolf made the voyage of exploration her central metaphor for modernity's great adventure toward “new lands, . . . new civilisations.” Her first novel departs from Joseph Conrad's inaugural modernist voyage to the heart of European barbarism, which

brings Marlow to tell an evil-tasting lie to help women “stay in a beautiful world of their own, lest ours gets worse.” As Marlow confronts the lies that found racialized imperialism, Woolf parlays the European rhetoric of imperialist exploration and conquest into a metaphysical voyage toward a civilization that has never existed. A woman “writing against the current” yet (as Clive Bell thought) too much of a genius to believe in either sex, Woolf ventured upon seas of thought that her male contemporaries left unexplored (*D* 5:189). With her family birthright of radical skepticism and a fortuitous education in her father’s library and Cambridge-educated Bloomsbury, she embarked on a writing career that now seems scarcely less a miracle than she considered Jane Austen’s to be, her pen flying after the elusive “wild goose” of modern experience to net its traces in the “silver-grey flickering moth-wing quiver of words” (*O* 313, *W* 215). If, as Philippe Sollers put it, “they who know not language serve idols; they who could see their language could see their gods,” Woolf’s novels, diaries, letters, and essays embody this unending quest for and responsiveness to the world as a luminous alternative to the twentieth century’s totalitarian longings for “a new god.”<sup>3</sup> Entering into modernity as a permanent revolution, Woolf forges a dialogic art that shatters outworn conventions not “for art’s sake”—in isolation from everyday life and the social world—but to call her public to active debate of an ever changing *sensus communis* or common understanding. Bringing readers in sight of new lands, new civilizations, her writings inspire “modern men and women” to “yearn for change: not merely to be open to changes in their personal and social lives but positively to demand them, actively to seek them out and carry them through.”<sup>4</sup>

In framing Woolf and Bloomsbury in this way, this book joins the contemporary effort across several disciplines to rethink European modernity’s Enlightenment project in face of modern and antimodern forms of violence and exploitation.<sup>5</sup> We are not accustomed to seeing Woolf and Bloomsbury in this light, and I have accordingly emphasized their contributions more than their lapses and failures, their critical and creative opposition to the wartime nationalism that shadowed British foreign policy and public culture from 1914 to the Second World War more than their implication in class privilege and racialized imperialism—in the unenlightened barbarism that post-World War II and postmodern critiques rightly address. Yet my purpose is not to present Kant and Freud, Woolf and Bloomsbury, as incontestable heroes, paragons of Enlightenment modernity. Rather, believing that in speaking only of their failures we risk forfeiting what is potentially most vital and most fruitful in their historical legacy, I pose the question of that legacy for a world still struggling

with the economic, political, social, and ethical challenges that confront women and men, races, religions, and cultures, classes and nations, as they seek to negotiate differences not by violence but through the power of speech, the effort and “the art of understanding other people’s lives and minds” (*TG* 50).



This project evolved over many years, and I am deeply grateful for the help and support of innumerable benefactors—colleagues, students, friends, libraries, institutions—along the way. Nancy K. Miller, the late Carolyn Heilbrun, and Jennifer Crewe, the humanities editor at Columbia University Press, encouraged this project from its beginnings. Carolyn’s pioneering work on Woolf and Bloomsbury was an early inspiration and her generosity to me, as to so many other scholars, was a tremendous force in my life. I cherished the gift of her friendship, and I cherish her memory. Maud Ellmann, Susan Stanford Friedman, Karen R. Lawrence, and Brenda R. Silver gave invaluable support; and Marianne DeKoven and Karen Lawrence offered excellent advice on the entire manuscript. I thank Gayle Rogers and Emily Sheffield for help in preparing the manuscript and Susan Heath, Anne McCoy, Michael Haskell, and Liz Cosgrove at Columbia University Press for their meticulous and imaginative care.

For inviting me to present aspects of this work in a variety of venues, I warmly thank Rebecca Beasley, Catherine Bernard, Deborah Clarke, Pamela Caughie, Antoine Compagnon, Beth Rigel Daugherty, Maud Ellmann, Susan Manning, Natalya Reinhold, Christine Reynier, Natania Rosenfeld, Pierre-Eric Villeneuve, and Nicola J. Watson. For thoughtful and challenging responses and conversation that strengthened this book in countless ways, I thank Brian Artese, Nina Auerbach, Miriam Bailin, Gillian Beer, Kevin Bell, Shari Benstock, Paul Berliner, Diana Black, Françoise Bort, Rachel Bowlby, Paul Breslin, Marilyn Brownstein, Dorit Cypis, Patricia Dailey, Scott Durham, Rosa Eberly, Betsy Erkkila, Penelope Farfan, Daniel Ferrer, Elzbieta Foeller-Pituch, Nancy Fraser, Reginald Gibbons, Michal Ginsburg, Susannah Young-Ah Gottlieb, Christopher Herbert, T. William Heyck, Margaret Homans, Myra Jehlen, Christopher Johnson, Patricia Klindienst, Cassandra Laity, Christopher Lane, Jules Law, Karen Leick, Joanna Lipking, Larry Lipking, Michael Maness, Celia Marshik, Stephanie McCurry, Leslie Melchert, Adrienne Munich, Barbara Newman, Richard Pearce, Christina Pugh, Alessia Ricciardi, Carol Rifelj, Julie Rivkin, Gayle Rogers, Mary Beth Rose, Mireille Rosello, Carol Shloss, Carl Smith, Lynne Sowder, Glenn Sucich, Patricia

Swindle, Marian Tolpin, Joseph Urbinato, Robert von Hallberg, Paul Wallich, Sarah Winter, Anne Winters, Randall Woods, John Young, and Linda Zerilli. I have also benefited enormously from the work, friendship, and conversation of many people in the ever widening community of Woolf scholars, including Elizabeth Abel, Murray Beja, Melba Cuddy-Keane, Laura Davis, Louise DeSalvo, Maria diBattista, Rachel Blau duPlessis, Jane Garrity, Sally Greene, Molly Hite, Mark Hussey, Ellen Carol Jones, Jane Lilienfeld, Jane Marcus, Vara Neverow, Merry Pawlowski, Lisa Ruddick, Susan Squier, and Diana Swanson. My students at Yale, Northwestern, and Washington University—far too many to name here, some now colleagues and friends—have made teaching Woolf a perennial adventure and a seemingly inexhaustible source of joy and surprise.

Several grants for the academic year 2002–2003 enabled me to consolidate the work of many years into this book. I am deeply indebted to Northwestern's Alice Berline Kaplan Humanities Center for a Senior Faculty Fellowship that freed me for a year of research, thinking, and writing. I am also grateful to Clare Hall, Cambridge, for a Visiting Fellowship in spring 2003; and, for support for research travel abroad, to Northwestern's University Research Grants Committee, Dan Linzer (dean) and Adair Waldenberg (associate dean) of the Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences, and Reginald Gibbons (chair) and Kathy Daniels (administrative goddess) of the English department. I thank President Ekhard Salje, Lisa Salje, Elizabeth Ramsden, Ann Little, Andrew Goadby, and all the staff and friends at Clare Hall who made my family's stay there so happy and productive, and, again, Maud Ellmann, whose hospitality, sense of fun, and delightful friends made our sojourn as much a social and gastronomic adventure as an intellectual one. I am fortunate to have held a Guggenheim Fellowship, a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Stipend, a Northwestern University President's Fund Fellowship, a Yale Senior Faculty Fellowship, and research grants from Northwestern's Office of Research and Sponsored Projects during earlier periods of work on this project, and I thank Lawrence B. Dumas, former dean of the college, for the Herman and Beulah Pearce Miller Research Professorship in Literature, which supported my work from 1992–1994.

My work on this book has been greatly assisted by the librarians and archivists of the Northwestern University Library, Yale University Library, Houghton Library of Harvard, Harvard Theatre Collection, British Library, Cambridge University Library, Berg Collection of the New York Public Library, Virginia Woolf Archive at the University of Sussex, the Fitzwilliam Museum (who kindly made room for me to study the manuscript of *A Room of One's Own* in their temporary quarters during

renovations), the Wren Library at Trinity College (who enabled me to see the word Milton changed in the manuscript of “Lycidas”), Clare College Library, and the Freud Museum in London. I owe very special thanks to Elisabeth Inglis, curator of the Virginia Woolf Archive at Sussex, who not only made my visits fruitful beyond all expectation but each time extended a splendid welcome with unforgettable excursions to Firle, Lewes, Monk’s House, Charleston, Asheham House (now razed), the river Ouse, Newhaven, Glyndebourne, some memorable pubs, and her own home; and to Rachel Bowlby, who joined us in some of these pilgrimages, conversed about the genius loci, shared the pleasures of her life in Brighton, and bestowed warm hospitality. I also thank Jeffrey Garrett, until recently our library’s humanities bibliographer, who in the course of keeping up the Woolf holdings acquired the Primary Source Media CD-ROM Virginia Woolf Archive, edited by Mark Hussey, which makes nearly all of Woolf’s writings available on one’s computer. And I thank Russell Maylone, curator of our Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, who not only showed my students and me the library’s extensive early Hogarth Press holdings but—in what can only be called a labor of love—guided us expertly and patiently through a Woolfian printing project on the library’s 1837 Washington and Hoe hand press.

I acknowledge with thanks the following editors and publishers. *Modernism/Modernity* published chapter 4, “Mrs. Dalloway’s Postwar Elegy” (special issue on gender and war, winter 2002); *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* published a version of chapter 8, “St. Virginia’s Epistle to an English Gentleman: Sex, Violence and the Public Sphere in Woolf’s *Three Guineas*” (spring 1994). An early version of chapter 2 appeared as “War, Civilization, and the Conscience of Modernity: Views from *Jacob’s Room*,” in *Selected Papers from the Fifth Annual Virginia Woolf Conference*, ed. Beth Rigel Daugherty and Mark Hussey (1996). Part of chapter 6 appeared as “‘A Fin in a Waste of Waters’: L’Esthétique Moderne et la [Femme] dans *The Waves*,” trans. Pierre-Eric Villeneuve, in *Virginia Woolf: Le Pur et l’Impur, Colloque de Cerisy-2001*, ed. Catherine Bernard and Christine Reynier (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2002). I also draw briefly on my “Out of the Chrysalis: Female Authority and Female Initiation in Virginia Woolf’s *The Voyage Out*” (*Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* [spring 1986]); “Virginia Woolf as Shakespeare’s Sister,” in *Women’s Re-Visions of Shakespeare*, ed. Marianne Novy (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), and “Modernism, Genetic Texts, and Literary Authority in Woolf’s Portraits of the Artist as the Audience,” *Romanic Review* (special issue on *critique génétique*, ed. A. Compagnon and A. Grésillon [spring 1996]).

My deepest thanks go to John Austin, who inspired, discussed, read, pruned, queried, and otherwise improved this book in ways no words can touch while buoying me along on that great voyage life's adventure. Finally, I thank Sasha Austin Schmidt for illuminating Lily Briscoe's struggle to picture the world, for the everyday joys of her young family, and for her own adventurous spirit. I dedicate this book to her.

# VIRGINIA WOOLF

AND THE BLOOMSBURY AVANT-GARDE





We were in the van of the builders of a new society.

—Leonard Woolf, *Sowing: An Autobiography of the Years 1880 to 1904*

Let us never cease from thinking—what is this “civilization” in which we find ourselves?

—Woolf, *Three Guineas*, 1938

The barbarian . . . is not only at our gates; he is also within the walls of our civilization, within our minds and hearts.

—Leonard Woolf, *Barbarians Within and Without*, 1939



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## Civilization and “my civilisation”

### Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Avant-Garde

**B**orn in London in 1882 and educated in her father's library, Virginia Woolf came of age at a moment when, as Leonard Woolf put it, political and social movements gave hope that Europe “might really be on the brink of becoming civilized.”<sup>1</sup> Leonard's prospective formulation reanimates Kant's dynamic understanding of Enlightenment as no completed, secure achievement but an unfinished and unfinishable struggle against barbarism *within* Europe.<sup>2</sup> In the early twentieth century, Bloomsbury modernism addressed barbarities “within the walls” of European civilization, “within our minds and our hearts”: belligerent nationalisms, racialized imperialisms, the class system, the sex/gender system, genocidal persecution, and war.<sup>3</sup> For the artists and thinkers of Bloomsbury—among them the Woolfs, Clive Bell, Vanessa Bell, John Maynard Keynes, Roger Fry, Duncan Grant, and Sigmund Freud, published in English by the Woolfs' Hogarth Press—as for many others, the 1914 war was a “Civil War” that rent what had been an increasingly international civilization.<sup>4</sup> This eruption of collective violence not only destroyed the illusion that Europe was “on the brink” of an international, economically egalitarian civilization committed to human rights, political autonomy, and world peace but threatened to eclipse even its idea. Before, during, and after the First World War, when democracy's triumph over fascism and communism was by no means assured, Bloomsbury's thinkers and artists contributed richly to the struggle for “civilization” in debates on Europe's future: among other works, Keynes's *Economic Consequences of the Peace* (1919); Leonard Woolf's *Empire and Commerce in Africa* (1920) and *Imperialism and Civilization* (1928); Woolf's great postwar elegy, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), as well as *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938); Freud's *Future of an Illusion* (1927) and *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1929/30).<sup>5</sup>