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“Unsolved Problems”: Essayism, Counterfactuals, and the Futures of A Room of One’s Own

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I have shirked the duty of coming to a conclusion upon these two questions—women and fiction remain, so far as I am concerned, unsolved problems.

—Virginia Woolf, A Room of One’s Own

The explicit argument of Virginia Woolf’s famous treatise, that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction,” is immediately complicated by the work’s own indeterminate generic identity (p. 4). Though clearly intended by Woolf to be taken quite seriously, A Room of One’s Own (1929) deliberately straddles fiction and nonfiction, delighting in imaginative sketches of people and institutions as well as in its own ability to manipulate or usurp various aspects of narrative construction. Jane Marcus has called this “the first modern text of feminist criticism.” Yet the colloquial, experimental, and markedly unprogrammatic aspects of Woolf’s work suggest that a very different, decidedly literary project is underway as well. Woolf assumes the pose of the familiar essayist, adopting all of the freedoms that come with this identity. In the process, she raises fundamental questions about the nature of essayistic fiction and the paradoxical means by which the essay can provide access to a reality that is otherwise unavailable.

Based on two lectures given by Woolf at the Cambridge University women’s colleges of Newnham and Girton, A Room of One’s Own is, in many senses, anything but the argument-driven manifesto it is often considered to be. Woolf refuses to stake out a set position in this work or even to offer hypothetical arguments or reflections in her own person. Rather, pointing out that women’s stories are largely missing from history as it stands, her fictional narrator requests license to imagine the women who did not make it into history books. Their ordinary domestic lives were deemed unimportant, and they were prevented, in one way or another, from following the more daring trajectories they might have imagined for themselves. Both unrecorded and unlived personal histories were thus lost, and Woolf attempts to restore both kinds of narratives in her work. Only by means of invention and speculation, of a turn to fiction that is best articulated in the essayistic mode Woolf adopts here, can a meaningful account of the history of the women in her audience (both her original audience of

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Cambridge undergraduates and her more widespread imagined readership) be achieved. Only by adopting the essay’s sense of possibility—and of the value of that which has not yet been determined—can the young women before Woolf see their way to the as-yet-undecided future she desires for them. Her move to counterfactual speculation opens the door for Woolf (and her audience) to experiment with any number of futures that might emerge from the assorted pasts she will imagine and reinvent. Potential outcomes that may not otherwise be visible are thus brought to light.

In a special issue of *Representations* dedicated to Counterfactual Realities, Andrew H. Miller examines “lives unled” in the fiction of Charles Dickens, Henry James, and George Eliot, maintaining that “counterfactual imaginings were built into the realistic novel as a part of its very structure.” This is a surprising claim; surely realism should foreclose rather than encourage the idea of its own lack of solidity? Nevertheless, Miller argues that implicit in the realistic novel’s creation of plausible life narratives is an acknowledgment that there is an element of arbitrariness about all lives: “To the extent that realism proposes to give us stories about how things were, a space naturally opens up within that mode to tell us how things might have been, but were not” (p. 122). In other words, the very fact that it is possible to construct believable narratives about the past suggests that other equally believable narratives might be imagined as well.

While I agree with Miller that this speculative potential is present when one reads a novel, it does not seem to me to achieve anything there like the significance it assumes in the essay—a form built on this very notion of speculation, of trying out different possibilities or imagining different lives—and, perhaps most crucially, of asking the reader not merely to appreciate one’s work, but to collaborate upon it. The essay is not constrained by the rules of plausibility that apply to the novel or by the need to limit itself to a single storyline or course of events. Therefore, it offers even more fertile ground for considering alternative lives and ways of being. By appropriating an essayistic structure, *A Room of One’s Own* takes its fiction a step further than the novel does, as the essay offers possibilities that are closed to the more determinate genre. It is for this reason, I would argue, that the essay is much more important in thinking about Woolf’s writing—about both her essays and her novels—than has usually been allowed. The essay can consider multiple possibilities or directions in which a story might go. What is more, it can do so to a productive or purposeful end. While there is little point in imagining what might have been in a novel (the characters’ fates cannot be changed, and they can be made no wiser by one’s input), the essay’s interactive status invites the chance of change or progress, the possibility that the future may be affected significantly by one’s present reflections. Counterfactual potentiality is not a source of anxiety for the essay but a condition of its very being.
In her engagement with counterfactuals, Woolf blurs the line, in several different senses, between fiction and reality. The generic freedom she assumes allows her to engage in the same process of inquiry and self-determination that she attempted to impart to her work’s original undergraduate audience. What we have come to think of as a groundbreaking feminist text is groundbreaking not in its call to action (which is too vague, non-instructive, and disconnected to be anything of the kind), but in refiguring and plumbing the very idea of speculation. To speculate does not mean to be circumspect or to hedge one’s bets. Instead it is a forceful and simultaneously open-ended (and open-minded) process. This kind of force, rather than the force of prescription and pronouncement, gives the work its traction.

A lack of practical, worldly experience is the most fundamental problem women face, according to Woolf. The dearth of raw material with which they have to work makes it difficult, if not impossible, for women to construct (or reconstruct) probable accounts of people or events of which they do not have first-hand knowledge. This lack is a theme that Woolf returns to multiple times in *A Room of One’s Own*, yet addresses most explicitly quite early on with the image of herself as an angler, attempting to do the imaginative work required of an author but discovering her stores of material inadequate to catch the sort of fish she is after (pp. 5-6). The female Cambridge undergraduates who are figured as the work’s immediate audience are in an even more precarious position. Freed from many of the restrictions that have held previous generations back, they find themselves without a blueprint for their personal and professional lives. They are on their own as they attempt to make sense of their present circumstances and anticipate their possible futures. By the same token, they are without models who could demonstrate methods for grappling with a world become new. Presumably they themselves will provide such models to their successors, but they must develop the models themselves.

Though she has been charged with producing a work that is too restrained in its anger (Marcus) or too escapist in its solutions (Elaine Showalter), once we understand that Woolf is writing an essay rather than an attack piece or a practical guide—and pushing that essay to its limits in her employment of counterfactuals—such criticism loses much of its force. Woolf’s use of essayistic techniques in *A Room of One’s Own* signals her resistance to a dry or didactic manifesto as well as to the assumption of authority that would necessarily accompany such an effort. This is the same authority that keeps the reader at a distance in the conventional nineteenth-century novel. Addressed to a group that has neither its own past nor the insights of its predecessors to draw upon in this regard, *A Room of One’s Own* is a fictional, essayistic work, designed to substitute, to whatever degree possible, for the life experience that is missing. Recognizing
the as-yet-undetermined quality of her listeners (who are also, of course, her subject) and the importance of encouraging rather than eradicating that indeterminacy, Woolf avoids offering prescriptions or directives of a specific nature. Instead, she faces the more daunting task of arming her listeners with the tools to determine their own realities—and futures. Her work must demonstrate, rather than define, the process of self-realization. It is, ironically, the counterfactual lives made visible by the essay that offer the greatest chance of providing access to genuine possibilities.

*The Essay as Form*

The essay has been marginalized in contemporary literary studies. Yet the genre, which originates with Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592), who used the French term *essai* (“trial” or “attempt”) to designate the personal reflections that make up his collection of autobiographical writings, offers freedoms of movement and association, and an ability to balance truth and fiction, that are untenable in other formats. The essay naturally inspires multiple responses or lines of interpretive thought in its readers, making it the ideal genre for Woolf’s undertaking and rendering it a challenging if endlessly fascinating problem for theorists. A notoriously hard to define, protean form, the essay is most frequently categorized by its resistance to categorization. “There is . . . no genre,” says O. B. Hardison, Jr., “that takes so many shapes and that refuses so successfully to resolve itself, finally, into its own shape.” Such openness invites, or rather demands, the process of self-determination in its practitioners, who must define the essay and their own role as essayists as they write. It also calls for a level of responsibility on the reader’s part that is unmatched by other genres, as readers are expected to participate actively—and personally—in the essayistic process.

In *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf takes up the challenge of the essay both in the fundamental sense of “trying out” or “attempting” and, in a more subversive manner, using the genre’s hypothetical powers to reveal alternatives that may otherwise prove invisible to her readers. She suggests to the women in her audience that they do the same, viewing their own potential for self-definition as empowering rather than alarming. Reflecting on both the Cambridge lectures themselves and the published version of *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf explains in a letter to her friend G. Lowes Dickinson, “I wanted to encourage the young women—they seem to get fearfully depressed.” Such sentiments underscore the key fact that Woolf is not attempting to dispense specific advice or transmit political views in *A Room of One’s Own*. Instead, she aims to communicate something more ineffable—encouragement, or a stay against depression. She is not looking to produce particular concrete results in the lives of her listeners. She cannot know with any specificity what the many individuals before her ought
to do (and they are individuals, who should, of course, do many different things to achieve their personal, desired ends). Furthermore, it is crucial that these young women learn to think for themselves rather than to follow even the most well-intentioned advice as they determine their own paths. What they do is far less important than that they do it of their own volition with conscious understanding of their respective situations.

The appeal of the essay to Woolf is self-evident. A great essayist in her own right, she wrote several pieces that deal explicitly with the genre and far more studies of individual essayists and their works. In addition, she repeatedly adopted essayistic techniques and conventions in order to bring an essayistic voice to her fiction. This appropriation can be seen both in her literal attempt to combine the essay and the novel in The Pargiters (1977) and in the fragmented, nonlinear, and inwardly-directed meditations that characterize more well-known works such as Mrs. Dalloway (1925), To the Lighthouse (1927), Orlando (1928), The Waves (1931), and Between the Acts (1941). Throughout her career, Woolf treated the essay with a seriousness equal to that she afforded her novels. This seriousness may be attributed in part to her ongoing fascination with genre and its limits, but it also reflects her conviction that “we write essays as though this were beyond all others our natural way of speaking.” The essay, in Woolf’s conception, allows for an intimacy of communication—and a degree of revelation—that is otherwise unattainable:

Woolf does not elaborate here upon the additional freedoms of the essay’s “I”—that it need not be a fixed or wholly autobiographical “I”—but may rather, through its careful construction, do much of the work of allowing for a direct and equal exchange between author and reader.

Perhaps the most influential twentieth-century account of the essay is offered by T. W. Adorno. His apology for the genre (framed as a response to Georg Lukács’s “On the Nature and Form of the Essay”) argues that the essay is an inherently modern form, one unique in its ability to bridge the divide between science and art:

The essay . . . acquires an aesthetic autonomy that is easily criticized as simply borrowed from art, though it distinguishes itself from art through its conceptual character and its claim to truth free from aesthetic semblance. . . . Self-relativization is immanent in its form; it must be constructed in such a
way that it could always, and at any point, break off. It thinks in fragments, just as reality is fragmented and gains its unity only by moving through the fissures, rather than by smoothing them over. . . . Discontinuity is essential to the essay; its concern is always a conflict brought to a standstill.  

Adorno situates the essay partly in the world of imagination, crediting the form with "an aesthetic autonomy" that distinguishes it from scientific inquiry. At the same time, he characterizes the essay as an investigative or fact-seeking genre, differentiated from art by its claim to "truth free from aesthetic semblance." The essay’s concern with truth (a notoriously slippery term that suggests both historical accuracy or verisimilitude and a more abstract, inclusive account of the laws governing a system) leaves it necessarily fragmented and discontinuous—"a conflict brought to a standstill." Because truth in the broader sense cannot be derived from a single case or an individual experience, it is necessary to expand one’s inquiry and, in so doing, to admit of possibilities that could have occurred, or might have occurred, or that were, deliberately or inadvertently, prevented from occurring.

The protagonist of Robert Musil’s Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften (1951, The Man Without Qualities) defines the essayistic approach as “a mode of living hypothetically,” a way of experiencing the alternate lives that are ever-present intellectually but shut out by the limitations of a world in which only one set of choices can be played out—choices largely determined by temporality, situation, and any number of arbitrary (seen and unseen) factors. By adopting a fictional persona as the speaker of her work and allowing that narrative voice free play, Woolf attempts to overcome the very limitations that Musil names. Over the course of A Room of One’s Own, the speaker, who, as any number of critics have noted, is never exactly Woolf (“Call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please—it is not a matter of any importance,” p. 5) but never very far from the esteemed author either, imagines women, in the past and the present, who are neither real in the most literal sense nor quite fictional, but who are rather her own counterfactual or “essayistic” constructions. This move to self-erasure reflects Woolf’s desire, as outlined in her famous letter to Ethel Smyth, to avoid charges of having “an axe to grind” by keeping her “own figure fictitious; legendary.” It is also, as Tuzyline Jita Allan observes, an indication that Woolf “feared [female authorial presence’s] potential to validate the stereotype of the autobiographically-prone and therefore unserious woman writer.” Yet it may be seen, in addition, as a more deliberate and affirmative move. Lisa Low asserts that in A Room Of One's Own, Woolf stakes out an intentionally nonauthoritative, impersonal role in which she “refus[es] to be authoritarian” or “to tell people what they must think and do.”

Most immediately, however, the adoption of multiple (intangible) nar-
rators enables Woolf to enact the very fictional occupation of alternative identities that she endorses throughout the work. By giving these narrators and their stories life in her writing, Woolf is able to conceive not only of the past that has been lost, but also of the future toward which the essay, in its compulsive need to try out scenarios and lives, is always pointed. Her attempt to represent and give voice to the women whose lives have gone unrecorded leads Woolf to the far more difficult task she sets herself—to record the potential lives of these women, what they might have done under other circumstances or conditions, and what, presumably, their successors might yet do. The modernity of the essay itself serves as the ideal vehicle for the modernity of the young women Woolf is addressing, allowing for freedom of association, internal debate, and the nonteleological process of developing ideas as one goes. The form’s fragmentation and uncertainty reflect the profound anxieties of literary modernism as well as the break between these particular women and past and future generations.

“I will try to explain”

A sense of fracture or interruption is present right from the start of A Room of One’s Own. The book begins in medias res, the speaker’s thoughts well underway as she anticipates objections and attempts to justify herself in advance against charges of having strayed from her assigned topic: “But, you may say, we asked you to speak about women and fiction—what has that got to do with a room of one’s own? I will try to explain” (p. 3). The ability of Woolf’s audience to engage—and to disagree with—her assertions is critical to her overarching project. In Play and the Politics of Reading: The Social Uses of Modernist Form (2005), Paul B. Armstrong highlights the “play” implicit in the act of reading. The author, says Armstrong, initiates an exchange of ideas that may be rooted in an attempt to direct readers’ attention in a particular way or to persuade an audience to view a situation in a given manner. However, the give-and-take that constitutes a successful reading experience depends also on difference—the reader’s freedom to disagree with the writer, to engage actively a book’s ideas with one’s free will intact:

Reading can be a paradoxically reciprocal but nonconsensual activity, in the sense that it requires mutual recognition (the text depends on the reader’s powers to bring its meanings into existence) but does not have to culminate in agreement (indeed, the disjunctive tension between the worlds of the text and the reader is a typical, important value of the experience of reading). (pp. x-xi)

Woolf’s respect for the “disjunctive tension” that Armstrong identifies, and for her audience’s ability—and need—to arrive at conclusions on its own, renders A Room of One’s Own a multilayered and unsettled text. Woolf asks
for a degree of trust from her audience members: that they should follow along as she examines the relation of women to fiction—and implicitly, of an author to her writing—without any real certainty as to where she, or they, will end up. This uncertainty is crucial not only to the author’s connection with her listeners (and her subsequent readers) but also to the sense of possibility she is working to instill in the women in front of her. There is no clear, determined path lying before the undergraduates who have turned to Woolf for advice. Instead, they are on the cusp of creating that path, which may yet take any number of forms. Were their courses fixed, there would be no task remaining to these women or to Woolf herself in addressing them. The need to imagine potential lives without committing to them, or asking others to commit to them, binds Woolf to audience members of different generations, classes, and abilities—be they those sitting before her at Cambridge, those within the fiction of the text, or those who will read the work many decades later in places and conditions Woolf herself could not have imagined.

In the book’s famous opening, the speaker declares that she foresaw almost immediately upon receiving the invitation to speak on the subject of “women and fiction” that she would be unable to follow a straight line of reasoning to a neat conclusion:

The title women and fiction might mean, and you may have meant it to mean, women and what they are like; or it might mean women and the fiction that they write; or it might mean women and the fiction that is written about them; or it might mean that somehow all three are inextricably mixed together and you want me to consider them in that light. But when I began to consider the subject in this last way, which seemed the most interesting, I soon saw that it had one fatal drawback. I should never be able to come to a conclusion. (p. 3)

The lack of completion that Woolf acknowledges here is a quality that the essay values rather than disdains. To be unable to come to a conclusion can signify a number of different things. It can mean that the aspirant has assumed a task beyond her abilities, that her own inadequacies render her unable to work through a given problem and a more advanced thinker is required to address the matter satisfactorily. Or it can mean that the topic itself is inconclusive, that the problem is intrinsically paradoxical or insoluble, and there is no logical stopping point. But also—and I think this is what Woolf is indicating here—it can mean that one has placed herself in the middle of an ongoing process and discussion, finding it is impossible to come to a conclusion at the given point and time because events have not yet reached one. Any authoritative statement she might offer would be, by definition, wrong—or at the very least, speculative and preliminary. This refusal to make a definitive claim is a guiding feature of modernist experimentation, as is the gesture to a time that has yet to arrive, in which
problems that are currently insoluble may be brought to a resolution. The openness of Woolf’s democratic aesthetic allows her to think aloud about the possible meanings of her subject and to side with process and reflection, accepting that future events must be left to unfold at their own pace. Developments cannot be predetermined or hurried merely to satisfy the impatience or curiosity of interested parties.

The distinctions among the three possible independent meanings of “women and fiction” proposed seem simple enough, but it soon becomes clear that we cannot consider any of them individually; they are too closely linked. One cannot talk about esteemed female authors (such as Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot) without considering these writers’ own lives and the influence of their gender on their work. Nor can one read the works these authors produced without noting the representation of female characters in them and considering what, if any, differences of attitude or perception may be due directly or indirectly to the author’s sex. Furthermore, these writers and their representations lead us by various avenues to the ultimate question of “women and what they are like.” “All three are inextricably mixed together,” yet impossible to consider without filling in much missing information, without engaging in an essayistic endeavor that sets aside questions of fact in order to pursue truth—the definition of which grows increasingly troubled by the unavailability of so much basic data, both in terms of what has happened and of what could have, or perhaps did, happen.

To present a fair and objective account of women’s history, as writers and as citizens, is impossible for two distinct but related reasons. First, the lack of verifiable evidence available in attempting to construct (or reconstruct) the history of women whose lives were not recorded or who were prevented from fulfilling their clear potential means that the project must necessarily be a speculative one. Then, the feelings stirred up on various sides of the issue are so strong as to make collaborative philosophical inquiry impractical. In an attempt to mitigate both problems, Woolf acknowledges the limitations of her source material and the reasons for this lack, then she proceeds to imagine the realities implicit in these lacunae. Readers who are skeptical about considering undocumented premises or ideas offered as “truths” may nonetheless be willing to “play along,” imagining different scenarios as the author puts them forward for consideration, clearly marked as her own inventions and offered for the sake of argument:

When a subject is highly controversial—and any question about sex is that—one cannot hope to tell the truth. One can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold. Fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact. . . . I need not say that what I am about to describe has no existence; Oxbridge is an invention; so is Fernham; “I” is only a convenient term for somebody who has no real being. Lies will flow from my lips, but there may
perhaps be some truth mixed up with them; it is for you to seek out this truth and to decide whether any part of it is worth keeping. (p. 4)

While seemingly paradoxical, the notion that “fiction is likely to contain more truth than fact” is repeatedly underscored by the narrator’s emphasis on the scarcity of reliable information to be had. Without sufficient evidence to work with, one might simply use what data are available and draw conclusions accordingly. However, the point being made here is that the very selectiveness of the facts that are known or recorded, by chance or design, makes the most meticulous, fact-based inquiry not the shortest path to truth but a necessarily biased and incomplete one. Far better, then, to invent, as plausibly as one might, using whatever information can be unearthed, a probable fiction that will allow for an engaged and thoughtful inquiry into the particular as well as the general. Woolf turns to an essayistic mode to address the position of the women to whom she is speaking: young women who find themselves in a situation very unlike that of Woolf at the time of this work’s composition—a successful writer in her late forties, secure financially and professionally, with no authentic battles for personal recognition left to fight.

Declaring herself to be the beneficiary of a legacy in the exact amount that she deems necessary for those to whom she is speaking to flourish, the speaker informs her audience that the money has been left to her by an aunt who bequeathed it “for no other reason than that I share her name” (p. 37). To suggest that each of the women she is addressing should have a similar inheritance is, of course, unrealistic. The unlikelihood of women accumulating wealth that they may then bequeath to their daughters and granddaughters is the very topic of the narrator’s post-dinner discussion with her friend Mary Seton. The responsibility for bearing and raising children, in conjunction with laws that barred women from asserting the right to their own earnings, combined to make such acquisitions and bestowals of wealth impossible in the past and highly implausible in the present. The students to whom she is speaking cannot count on the implicit or explicit backing of family or institutions. Consequently, they must earn their own livings. Woolf’s project is not to lay out a plan for their doing so or even to suggest what (beyond writing and presumably being paid for publishing what they write) they are to do to prepare themselves for this new approach to life. The absence of such practical guidance leads to what is, to my mind, one of the most misguided complaints lodged against both A Room of One’s Own and the later Three Guineas (1938)—that the texts are without “real” or large-scale application, speaking only to a small group of elite readers. Says Laura Rusk: “In the talk from which Woolf’s essay arose, she speaks as a woman fortunate enough to have an independent income, addressing women blessed with the opportunity of studying at Cambridge.”18 Implicit
in Rusk’s criticism are two problematic assumptions—first, that the speaker’s privileged status renders her opinions irrelevant to a more general or “common” audience, and second, that there is no meaningful difference between Woolf’s position and that of her undergraduate addressees. Neither is the case, clearly. Woolf’s book continues to resonate with readers of all classes and backgrounds, and her inaugural undergraduate audience is in many ways the most difficult test case, rather than the easiest.

“The fairyland of the Girton reception-room”

Kathleen Raine was an undergraduate at Girton when Woolf delivered her famous speech. In her Autobiographies (1991), Raine describes the excitement of the occasion but also the clear divide that existed between the renowned author and the largely undergraduate audience:

In the fairyland of the Girton reception-room, then, members of the Literary Society were gathered for coffee, after Hall; young Eton-cropped hair gleaming, Chinese shawls spread like the plumage of butterflies . . . . With Virginia Woolf had come her friend Victoria Sackville-West: the two most beautiful women I had ever seen. I saw their beauty and their fame entirely removed from the context of what is usually called “real” life, as if they had descended like goddesses from Olympus, to reascend when at the end of the evening they vanished from our sight.¹⁹

Raine cannot imagine the life that Woolf, a famous author, lives, nor is she able to think about the goals that Woolf lays out for her own generation as realistically attainable. Instead Woolf’s ideas (and Woolf and Sackville-West themselves) appear to belong to a fantasy world, incompatible with “what is usually called ‘real’ life”:

A Room of One’s Own made claims on life far beyond mine: a room and a small unearned income were, to me, luxuries unimaginable. To elude the vigilance of my parents, and to write poems on the marble-topped table of a Lyons’ or an ABC tea-shop was all I had at home, or for long after, hoped for. At Girton I had a room of my own; but while feeling it my due, I did not, at the same time, expect it to last, any more than a dream lasts. (p. 125)

Raine is impressed by the daring of Woolf’s speech but does not feel that it has any concrete bearing on her own life. If the purpose of the speech is to persuade her audience of a practical course of action, then, in Raine’s case at least, she has failed entirely. There is no sense in which Woolf’s injunctions can offer Raine a direct plan. Only if we see Woolf’s intent as more subtle, do we find indications that the author has accomplished her mission in the very thoughtfulness with which Raine finds herself weighing the various impressions she takes away from the talk (and, perhaps, in the fact that the undergraduate went on to become an accomplished poet.
and critic in her own right). While the young Raine reflects seriously upon Woolf’s ideas, she—appropriately—interprets the talk along imaginative rather than prescriptive lines.

Other records of Woolf’s talks similarly reflect interest and engagement on the part of her audience and attentiveness to Woolf’s ideas, but also a decided distance from the speaker. In the Newnham magazine Thersites, quoted by S. P. Rosenbaum in his introduction to Women and Fiction: The Manuscript Versions of “A Room of One’s Own” (1992), E. E. Phare observes, “It was a characteristic and delightful lecture and we are most grateful to Mrs. Woolf for coming to us as well as to Miss [Philippa] Strachey for consenting to preside over the meeting.” Phare points out in later reflections, also cited by Rosenbaum, that Woolf arrived at Newnham nearly an hour late for the dinner at which she was to speak (which, Phare suggests, may have had something to do with the poor quality of the meal, later fictionalized by Woolf as the Fernham dinner of cheap meat and dry biscuits) and brought her husband Leonard Woolf along with her, which upset the seating arrangements—further evidence that she did not quite seem to “get” the situation at these colleges (p. xv). This sense of admiration without identification is confirmed by Muriel Bradbrook, who in 1969 remembered that “we undergraduates enjoyed Mrs. Woolf, but felt that her Cambridge was not ours.” Even Woolf herself seems to recognize the disconnect in her diary, noting after her Girton visit that she “blandly told [the students] to drink wine & have a room of their own.” Paradoxically perhaps, it is the gap that exists between Woolf and her listeners that allows them the necessary space to develop their own responses to the talk—and to proceed accordingly.

These sorts of gaps, which always capture Woolf’s imagination, are at the heart of A Room of One’s Own. They are undefined spaces in which a writer—or a woman—might come, uncoerced, to a personal understanding of the world that surrounds her. The essay’s ability to facilitate, and to represent, such moments assumes significant value in Woolf’s work. As the narrator walks back to her inn at the close of the day’s activities, she finds a moment of solitary reflection in which she is able to “roll up the crumpled skin of the day, with its arguments and its impressions and its anger and its laughter, and cast it into the hedge” (p. 24). It is not the disappointments and frustrations chronicled here—being locked out of the library or finding the women’s college poorly funded and austere in comparison with the men’s—that signify. Rather, it is just this sort of moment, an instance of solitary reflection that allows for the reexamination of the feelings one has experienced from a calm, meditative perspective unspoiled by the aggravations of the day, that suggests and enacts an alternative way of life and thought—one too often closed to women.

The inn itself offers a striking example of this kind of escape or tem-
temporary self-removal, as it provides the literal “room of one’s own” that is desired. It is an anonymous space—the rooms available for rent are left to be defined (and redefined) by their occupants. The solitary walk that brings the narrator to the inn demonstrates that a broader freedom—one that extends beyond the solitude of an insulated private room—is necessary for the development of women in general and female authors in particular. In *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (2000), Rebecca Solnit explores the restrictions placed on would-be flâneuses in the second half of the nineteenth century. While the cruel and archaic measures she describes (the arrest of innocent women and girls as prostitutes, forced medical examinations, and so forth) may have been safely in the past by Woolf’s day, Solnit traces the more insidious methods by which female wandering was restricted, quoting the nineteen-year-old Sylvia Plath on her own desire to broaden her horizons and her resentment of the limitations that her sex imposes on her:

> Being born a woman is my awful tragedy. . . . Yes, my consuming desire to mingle with road crews, sailors and soldiers, barroom regulars—to be part of a scene, anonymous, listening, recording—all is spoiled by the fact that I am a girl, a female always in danger of assault and battery. My consuming interest in men and their lives is often misconstrued as a desire to seduce them, or as an invitation to intimacy. . . . I want to be able to sleep in an open field, to travel west, to walk freely at night. (p. 233)

Plath’s frustration at the experiences that are closed to her offers an example of just the kind of subtle and not-so-subtle limitations that Woolf is attempting to expose throughout *A Room of One’s Own*. The freedom to have a wide range of experiences and to explore the world unmolested is not a luxury or a matter of convenience. Rather, it is a necessity for the development of basic analytical and imaginative abilities—one that is of especial urgency for the would-be writer. As the speaker loses her way while heading from Oxbridge to Fernham, she observes that the same houses and scenes appear different to her when viewed under changed conditions. This difference leaves unresolved the question of their true identities, which must, somehow, encompass both pictures:

> For truth . . . those dots mark the spot where, in search of truth, I missed the turning up to Fernham. Yes indeed, which was truth and which was illusion, I asked myself. What was the truth about these houses, for example, dim and festive now with their red windows in the dusk, but raw and red and squalid, with their sweets and their boot-laces, at nine o’clock in the morning? And the willows and the river and the gardens that run down to the river, vague now with the mist stealing over them, but gold and red in the sunlight—which was the truth, which was the illusion about them? (p. 15)

The simple answer to Woolf’s question is to say that both observations—or multiple observations—are true, that subjects’ perspectives change the
way objects look, and that each view is a legitimate “truth” in its own right. However, it is impossible to realize this without having access to a broader understanding of the world in which the phenomena occur. Without enough in the way of actual information or experience to go on, one cannot judge what is possible or probable and cannot without great difficulty go to the next step of imagining what might happen under altered conditions.

Fiction is used here to test propositions, to see whether a given set of circumstances will lead naturally to a particular outcome, and to consider what the possibilities are when elements of those circumstances—legal, social, or economic—are changed, for better or worse. It also allows for the testing of two or more separate courses of action in one situation, something that cannot, of course, be done in reality. In other words, we know of the frustrations of the women whose disappointments are chronicled here (at least, to a certain extent we do, though it requires imaginative speculation and deduction from limited evidence to reconstruct their experiences, even roughly), but if we can look with any kind of plausibility into what might have been under different conditions, then we can perhaps judge more effectively the objective situation before us and what it results in and from. Two simultaneous projects are thus embarked upon. First, to rediscover the actual lives of women whose stories have gone unrecorded, and second, to imagine what might have been possible for these women—or others—under altered conditions. The literal truth of what happened—even if we can determine it with some certainty—is made suspect by the many additional or alternate truths that are just as plausible under altered conditions or expectations. On the other hand, truth becomes more inclusive as we begin to imagine all of these truths coexisting and forming a larger, more abstract truth. The arbitrariness of circumstance and events is diminished by such speculation or, at the very least, highlighted in such a way that it becomes a known and considered entity.

Conceding that the bishop who declared that a woman would be incapable of writing the plays of Shakespeare was, in an important sense, right—an Elizabethan woman would not have had the opportunities necessary to make such an accomplishment possible, even if she had the latent ability—the narrator acknowledges that such being the case, one cannot test the theory of women’s equality in a systematic way, but only fictionally, or probably. Because equal conditions have not existed in any general way under recorded circumstances, the “evidence” is largely hypothetical. One must assemble it or conjure it from the bits and pieces of historical and biographical evidence that are available. Neither reality nor fiction, then, alone supplies adequate context; both are necessary. Thus Woolf creates the figure of Judith Shakespeare, a character who is both wholly fictional and entirely plausible, and who might just as well have existed as not:
This may be true or it may be false—who can say?—but what is true in it, so it seemed to me, reviewing the story of Shakespeare's sister as I had made it, is that any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at. (p. 49)

The moral of Judith Shakespeare's story is not simply that a lack of money and opportunities thwarts creative genius and easily defeats youthful ambition. Rather, it is that such stories can be recovered—and must be. Without the positive evidence to support the theoretical case that increased income and education would produce an increase in qualified female writers, Woolf can only construct her argument from speculations based upon the information she does have. Hence, A Room of One’s Own is not only about women or what might have been or might yet be under the proper circumstances, but also about what it means to speculate and what the value content of this particular kind of creative endeavor is. Not that it endorses action, but that it frees imaginative thought and allows for a view of previously unlived—and unimagined—lives.25

“All these infinitely obscure lives remain to be recorded”26

In A Room of One’s Own, Woolf gestures toward an imaginative investigation of the possible lives that real individuals might have led under different conditions in juxtaposition with those that they actually led or with what remains of them to be deciphered. Her essay is a type of truth-based (or truth-seeking) narrative that is put together from pieces of historical fact but acknowledges the gaps and fissures present as the result of both unrecorded and unknowable aspects of individual lives. The invocation of this kind of deductive composite form makes it possible to assert the presence of possibilities for which hard evidence does not exist—and to do so in a way that suggests more than simple speculation, as it is the carefully determined result of a logical reasoning process:

Yet genius of a sort must have existed among women as it must have existed among the working classes. Now and again an Emily Brontë or a Robert Burns blazes out and proves its presence. But certainly it never got itself on to paper. When, however, one reads of a witch being ducked, of a woman possessed by devils, of a wise woman selling herbs, or even of a very remarkable man who had a mother, then I think we are on the track of a lost novelist, a suppressed poet, of some mute and inglorious Jane Austen, some Emily Brontë who dashed her brains out on the moor. (p. 48)

Because there is no systematic way to evaluate how conditions have affected women in the past, no method of controlled experimentation (certainly none as straightforward as the dairy company experiment with
raths described by the narrator) can be employed to determine whether individuals would have been more or less successful or happy under changed circumstances or conditions.

The author is not asserting that the figures she puts forward are real, but, in the genuine spirit of the essay, she is asking the reader to try them out, to see whether they work. We will remember here that the narrator’s friend Mary Seton is a science professor and that Chloe and Olivia, the two main characters in the novel by Mary Carmichael quoted toward the book’s end, work together in a laboratory. The value of experimentation, in all its forms, is underscored implicitly and explicitly throughout this work. The translation of scientific approaches (the objective testing of hypotheses, the refusal to form judgments without the necessary data) into practical and literary endeavors is held out as a fruitful and promising alternative. Since certain situations and the people they produce are either untried combinations or implicitly the kinds of combinations that leave obscure or nonexistent records, it is necessary to call a speculative possibility into play in several different senses at once: “For one often catches a glimpse of them in the lives of the great, whisking away into the background, concealing, I sometimes think, a wink, a laugh, perhaps a tear” (p. 45).

“But these are difficult questions which lie in the twilight of the future”

Woolf cannot direct these young women in practical terms because the paths they are to take are not hers to determine. Instead, it is the very ability of this group to engage in self-definition that will ultimately define it, circular though this claim may sound. Much like the essayist herself, these women will solidify their position as they create it. What Woolf can offer is encouragement, not direction: “When I ask you to earn money and have a room of your own, I am asking you to live in the presence of reality, an invigorating life, it would appear, whether one can impart it or not” (p. 109). The objections of those who find the work elitist are hereby refuted. This text is premised on the very indeterminacy of the subjects Woolf is discussing. The potential courses open to her listeners are exciting, innovative, entirely unformulated, and, by their nature, unformulatable.

Finally, the essay serves as an intermediary form. Much as the women to whom she is speaking are, by definition, transitional figures, so too is the format in which they and Woolf herself must work, a transitional one. The format is not on this account of less value. It is important for the women’s own sake, and for the sake of their predecessors and descendants, that they understand and believe in this value. The suitability of the essay to express just this paradox is articulated by Georg Lukács, who defends the form against charges that its fragmentary or counterfactual nature renders it val-
ueless when placed against an ideal of progress toward final completion.29
The women in Woolf’s audience are necessarily an undetermined—indeed, an essayistic—group. It is axiomatic that their daughters and granddaughters will become increasingly integrated into the many professions and other societal arenas now beginning to allow them access, just as their own mothers and grandmothers must stand as negative examples of opportunities denied. It does not follow that the value of their work (and of their lives) is only to serve as the sacrificial bridge from the one to the other.

NOTES

A version of this article was published as part of chapter 3 in Randi Saloman, Virginia Woolf’s Essayism (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).

1 Virginia Woolf, A Room of One’s Own, ed. Susan Gubar (Orlando: Harcourt, 2005), 4. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

2 A Room of One’s Own is a text with an extensive critical history. It is perhaps Woolf’s most written-about book, outranking even the more frequently read and famous novels. The vastly contradictory positions critics have taken with regard to its argument and construction suggest a Houdini-like quality to the work. It, like Woolf herself, has been appropriated by nearly every school of criticism and political stance imaginable. In “Still Practice, A/Wrested Alphabet: Toward a Feminist Aesthetic,” Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature, 3 (1984), 79-97, Jane Marcus famously declares Woolf’s essay to be the foundational work of feminist criticism. Berenice A. Carroll similarly argues for a politically-minded feminist Woolf in “To Crush Him in Our Own Country: The Political Thought of Virginia Woolf,” Feminist Studies, 4 (1978), 99-132. However, in her own groundbreaking feminist work, A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), Elaine Showalter maintains that A Room of One’s Own’s ultimate “flight into androgyny” is a weakness in the book and in Woolf’s writing, reflecting the author’s desire to evade some of the difficulties of owning her sex (p. 263). A decade later, Toril Moi disputes Showalter’s position, asserting in Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002) that Woolf “seems to practise what we might now call a ‘deconstructive’ form of writing, one that engages with and thereby exposes the duplicitous nature of discourse” (p. 9), while in “Sexual Identity and A Room of One’s Own: Secret Economies” in Virginia Woolf’s Feminist Discourse,” Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 14 (1989), 634-50, Ellen Bayuk Rosenman takes up the question of female sexuality in the work, arguing that Woolf’s failure to identify as a lesbian is both a reflection of the constraints of the time period in which she was writing and a subversive refusal to fix female relations into absolute categories. Closest to my own concerns are Anne Fernald, who imagines a reconsideration of personal criticism and the essay in “A Room of One’s Own, Personal Criticism, and the Essay,” Twentieth Century Literature, 40 (1994), 165-89, and Beth Carole Rosenberg, who argues in “Virginia Woolf’s Postmodern Literary History,” MLN, 115 (2000), 1112-30, for a more nuanced understanding of Woolf’s fictional literary history, one concerned as much with the reader (and that reader’s perceptions and
experiences) as it is with historical accuracy and the development of a single female lineage. This brief sampling is of course only the tip of the iceberg, but it gives some sense of the disparate positions critics have adopted toward this work. In this article, I want to step back, to a degree, from the major political debates that have monopolized much of the discussion of *A Room of One's Own* to consider the kinds of power the work assumes through its essayistic construction and what the implications of this approach are, both in aesthetic terms and in practical ones.


7 While Woolf’s essays have been largely neglected in comparison with her novels—or, in the case of *A Room of One’s Own* and some of her better known shorter essays such as “Modern Fiction” (1919) and “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (1924), have been treated primarily in the context of those novels—several important studies of the essays have emerged in recent years. These include Elena Gualtieri’s *Virginia Woolf’s Essays: Sketching the Past* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000); a collection edited by Beth Carole Rosenberg and Jeanne Dubino, *Virginia Woolf and the Essay* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997); and Leila Brosnan’s *Reading Virginia Woolf’s Essays and Journalism: Breaking the Surface of Silence* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997). Most recently, Katerina Koutsantoni has published *Virginia Woolf’s “Common Reader”* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), a study of Woolf’s two self-prepared collections of literary criticism, *The Common Reader: First Series* (1925) and *The Second Common Reader* (1932).


In his recent consideration of the proof copy of *A Room of One’s Own*, acquired in 2007 by the New York Public Library’s Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, Issac Gewirtz takes issue with the lines from which I draw my title and epigraph, noting that Woolf replaced her “more metaphysical and poetic” proof copy designation of the question of women and fiction as “*mysterious, unknown*” with what he declares to be the “prosaic ‘unsolved problems’” in the published version, “a typical phrase in any standard expository essay”; see Gewirtz, “‘With Anger and Emphasis’: The Proof Copy of *A Room of One’s Own*,” *Woolf Studies Annual*, 17 (2011), 17-18. Gewirtz uses this revision on Woolf’s part to support his larger claim that Woolf’s changes to the proof copy moved towards adopting male standards and eliminating potentially unpalatable ideas from her work:

One can conclude only that she feared that the proof copy phrase might help male critics to perpetuate a stereotype of women as embodiments of “mystery,” the corollary of which would be that this essential quality of their natures limits their understanding of whatever subject they are supposedly investigating. Ideas presented by a woman who commences her examination of the subject(s) of women and fiction by calling them mysteries and unknowns (implying “unknowable”) would fit too easily into stereotypical male conceptions of women’s “essential nature.” Woolf, understandably, feared exposing herself to accusations of being a “typical woman,” dependent on intuition and unable to analyze the subjects about which she writes. The phrase “unsolved problems,” however, denotes analysis, allegedly the male domain. “I can argue with (and like) the best of you,” Woolf implicitly asserts in such changes. But in excising “mysterious, unknown”—in submitting to male judgment—Woolf was denying an essential feature of her approach to literature and was committing the very sin of which she found Charlotte Brontë guilty. (p. 18)

In this reading, it seems to me, Gewirtz is wholly off-base. The designation of women and fiction as “unsolved problems” does not indicate a masculine “solvable” puzzle to replace the female mystery of the proof. Rather, Woolf is underscoring the temporal (and changing) nature of the problem. The issue is not a failure to solve the problem, but a recognition of what it means to understand a problem as dynamic rather than static—as something to be lived, rather than eliminated. I have tried to develop this idea here, as Woolf develops it throughout her work.


*Thersites* (No. 87, Michaelmas, 1928) is quoted in S. P. Rosenbaum, introduction to *Women and Fiction: The Manuscript Versions of “A Room of One’s Own,”* ed. Rosenbaum (Oxford: Shakespeare Head Press, 1992), xvi. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.
Quoted in Rosenbaum, *Women and Fiction*, xvii.


Both Victoria Rosner's *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005) and Wendy Gan's *Women, Privacy, and Modernity in Early Twentieth-Century British Writing* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) take up the question of the physical room Woolf describes. While Rosner believes that Woolf is attempting to usurp the masculine arena of the study, Gan maintains that the room Woolf describes is not a traditional study at all but a more open, changeable, and self-defining space.


This projection of future possibilities in Judith Shakespeare is not without difficulties, however. While the female Shakespeare imagined by Woolf has been taken up to champion women's writing in various contexts, the conditions necessary to create “a collective body from which Shakespeare's fictional sister will be reborn” are to be achieved only with great effort—and, perhaps more importantly, only over a considerable period of time—leaving the present generation without a direct payoff:

To fulfil the promise embodied by Judith’s myth, the professional young women of Woolf's time are invited to “live another century or so . . . and have five hundred a year each,” to learn “the habit of freedom” and to “escape a little from the common sitting room,” so that they might produce for their successors the conditions which the poor Mrs. Seton was unable to provide for her daughters. . . . [T]he position of the audience of Cambridge undergraduates within the text is essentially a sacrificial one, which sees them not as the inheritors of Shakespeare's mantle, but as the providers for daughters who, like Woolf herself, will be absolved from the need to earn their own living and free to produce art unencumbered by fear, bitterness and anger. (Gualtieri, pp. 73-74)

The internal quotes are from *A Room of One's Own*.


“[S]urely it is time that the effect of discouragement upon the mind of the artist should be measured, as I have seen a dairy company measure the effect of ordinary milk and Grade A milk upon the body of the rat. They set two rats in cages side by side, and of the two one was furtive, timid and small, and the other was glossy, bold, and big. Now what food do we feed women as artists upon? I asked, remembering, I suppose, that dinner of prunes and custard.” (*A Room of One's Own*, pp. 52)

Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 76.
Lukács writes, “The essayist is a Schopenhauer who writes his *Parerga* while waiting for the arrival of his own (or another's) *The World as Will and Idea*, he is a John the Baptist who goes out to preach in the wilderness about another who is still to come, whose shoelace he is not worthy to untie. And if that other does not come—is not the essayist then without justification? And if the other does come, is he not made superfluous thereby? . . . But this longing for value and form, for measure and order and purpose, does not simply lead to an end that must be reached so that it may be cancelled out and become a presumptuous tautology . . . For in the system of values yet to be found, the longing we spoke of would be satisfied and therefore abolished; but this longing is more than just something waiting for fulfilment, it is a fact of the soul with a value and existence of its own: an original and deep-rooted attitude towards the whole of life, a final irreducible category of possibilities of experience. Therefore it needs not only to be satisfied (and thus abolished) but also to be given form which will redeem and release its most essential and now indivisible substance into eternal value. That is what the essay does.” (pp. 16-17)