

II

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Political activism and women's modernism

Politics and aesthetics

Within one tradition of Western thought, politics and the arts have been categorized as distinct and separate entities. So when aesthetics is under discussion, political concern is often dismissed as dogmatic, ephemeral, or partial, and when politics is of chief interest, aesthetics is swept aside as immaterial, insubstantial, or obscure. The way literature has been defined and categorized in the West has been shaped by such binary formulations. Consequently, there has been a long and deep conflict between the model that regards art as representing eternal ideas that are antecedent to human thinking and the model that understands art as a form of concrete communication or social interaction that is historically situated. The two models are predicated on radically different kinds of relationship between the writer and the world: the former requires the writer to have an aesthetic knowledge of the world that comes from detachment whereas the latter demands the writer to possess and to actively use cognitive knowledge.

Such categorical division based on mutual exclusivity has been rejected by the Frankfurt school of Marxist critics between the 1930s and the 1950s, either by claiming that every literary practice mediates a socio-political content, or conversely, by seeing political discourse as a form of literature.¹ This alternative view, that literature and politics are inevitably bound together, mutually entailed and so inseparable, has become almost as familiar as the traditional view in the postmodern era.

When it comes to women's politics and literature, the problem of this categorical division and mutual exclusivity does not quite follow the same historical trajectory. This is because women's writing and political engagement have always been evidently mutually dependent. Between 1890 and 1920, for example, the first-wave feminist movement ignited a veritable

explosion of literature written about, by, and for women. In the form of poetry, sketches, plays, burlesques, polemical essays, tracts, articles, short stories, and novels, feminist activism generated an unprecedented amount and range of literature. Furthermore, feminist politics transformed the institutionalization and production of women's writing through newly created suffrage and popular presses, creating new socio-cultural conditions. So, important shifts in the literary field of British women's writing were the direct consequences of women's political activism. This, in turn, was made possible by the power of the written word to formulate, disseminate, and consolidate ideas of selfhood and to construct a sense of unified gender identity.

This interdependence between politics and literature as exemplified by the first-wave women's movement provides a great counter-example to the mutually exclusive formulations of politics and aesthetics, but it was, for most of the last century, largely dismissed by literary critics, including feminists. There are two reasons. First, there is the adoption of modernism as a normative ideal in much of the literary criticism of the twentieth century. As the scope of modernist literature, in the early stages of the development of its field, was predominantly masculine, feminist modernist critics made huge interventions and succeeded in reinscribing women writers into the canon. But as a corollary, there existed a tendency in literary criticism to divide women modernists who revolutionized form in literature from the "conventional" writers, including those who produced campaign literature with a view to revolutionizing the world. The ascendancy of modernism also meant that the realist mode of writing has often been relegated to an inferior status. This division not only created false, or overstated, differences and very important ellipses, but also established a hierarchy so that texts that exhibited certain kinds of modernist experimentation were focused upon, analyzed, evaluated, and validated at the expense of the realist writers. Even the texts that are remarkable in their reflections of, as well as interventions in, the advent of modernity have been occluded by modernist works of this period that exhibit textual experimentation of a particular kind. But the history of women's literature is not identical to canonical literary history, and attempts to illuminate women's contributions to existing literary movements, such as modernism, are often inadequate to bring to light the significant and fundamental points in women's literary development.

Second, feminist theory itself has contributed to the neglect of the interface between women's aesthetics and politics. Toril Moi's championing of Virginia Woolf as a *political* writer in her landmark study *Sexual/Textual Politics* in 1985, and her implacable ideological denunciation of "anglo-american"

literary criticism, set the stage for the series of interconnected developments that associate modernist stylistic traits like frequent ellipses, open-ended sentences, multiple climaxes, and non-linear narratives with the “feminine” or the politically feminist. Moi’s polemic in which she extolled Woolf as a revolutionary feminist writer because she rejected the “metaphysical essentialism underlying patriarchal ideology, which hails God, the Father or the Phallus as its transcendental signified,” was followed by important studies such as Ellen Friedman and Miriam Fuchs’s *Breaking the Sequence*. They asserted:

In exploding dominant forms, women experimental writers not only assail the social structure, but also produce an alternative fictional space, a space in which the feminine, marginalized in traditional fiction and patriarchal culture, can be expressed. Thus the rupturing of traditional forms becomes a political act, the feminine narrative resulting from such a rupture is allied with the feminist project.²

Readings based on French feminist theory dominated literary criticism in the 1980s and 1990s and resulted in brilliant excavations of women modernists to complement the narrow masculinist models. But equating experimental poetics with feminist politics gave rise to an inadequate account of the historicity of both. The postulation of a vigorous opposition between politically naïve “realist” literature and truly subversive semiotic “modernist” literature not only silences the vast quantity and array of writing prompted by the first-wave women’s movement but also mystifies and rarefies feminist aesthetics, producing the stark alternative between agitational didacticism and a minority elite modernism in which our thinking about feminist political aesthetics is too often locked.

The avant-garde aesthetics of suffragette politics

Militant in action and militaristic in spirit, the British suffragettes created and sustained a mass political movement which, in both dimension and kind, was unprecedented. Though various feminist political issues – access to higher education and the professions, prostitution, venereal disease, married women’s property, divorce, children, and suffrage – had been pledged causes in the more progressive circles for the preceding half-century, the modern suffragettes succeeded in heralding a new stage in the public perception of women as agents of political change through their radical agitation for the vote.³ The rapidity with which they became entrenched in British culture was remarkable. Within five years of its inception, the National Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU, 1903–17) had branches and representatives all

over the country and held some 60,000 public meetings, and its weekly paper *Votes for Women* had reached sales of 30,000. The WSPU's expansion also rapidly fostered a revival of "constitutional" suffrage activism which had slumped for twenty years after the defeat of the 1889 women's suffrage bill. The number of branches for the constitutionalist suffragists who campaigned under the umbrella organization of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS, 1897–1919) increased sharply from 33 in October 1907 to 474 in February 1914. In addition, the suffragettes provoked tremendous reaction among thousands of anti-suffragists who banded together in national organizations. A slice of militant history gives some idea as to the extent of the suffragettes' operation. The cases of suffragette arson or attempted arson recorded between April 1913 and May 1914 in England alone include 19 churches destroyed or damaged, 100 houses and buildings burnt, 13 stations burnt, 6 trains fired, 11 golf links or bowling greens damaged, 27 bombs found, and 29 cases of attempted arson. The militants' agitations were not always unlawful or violent. The act of standing up and heckling during speeches and in theatre performances, for example, was regarded as militant as it was something that ladies simply did not do. In addition to arson, hunger strikes, and public displays, one group lowered a suffragette on a rope outside the building where the Prime Minister, Mr. Asquith, was having dinner, and another carved "Votes before Sports" on his golf green.

Though their illegal and semi-illegal activism was frequent, often extreme, and wide-ranging, the suffragettes took great care to project an image of virtuous gentility. As Cicely Hamilton (1872–1952), feminist activist, theorist, novelist, and playwright, noted, "A curious characteristic of the militant suffrage movement" was "the importance it attached to dress and appearance and its insistence on the feminine note."⁴ Suffrage leaders – such as Charlotte Despard, the President of the Women's Freedom League (WFL, 1907–61); Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, the leaders of the WSPU; Flora Annie Steele, the Second President of the Women Writers' Suffrage League (WWSL, 1908–19) – were all exceptionally feminine in dress and all took particular care to appear so in public. The WSPU meetings were stage-managed so as to have younger and feminine girls sitting in the first row on the platform. Official dress code dictated frilly dresses and not coats and skirts. Editorials in *Votes for Women* stressed the importance of visual presentation and for their group in the Women's Coronation Procession of June 1911 the WSPU chose twenty-one girls dressed in long white frocks with elbow sleeves presenting an image of gentle, innocent purity. Image-control was regarded as a fundamental political strategy. As Joel H. Kaplan and Sheila Stowell have noted in their study of the production and consumption of images of women in the early twentieth century:

Suffrage supporters embraced *haute couture* as a means of combating anti-suffrage propaganda. Dressing well, as a retort to caricatures of the dowdy spinsters or “would-be man,” became, under the circumstances, a political act, as women fought for their rights *as women* to occupy space previously occupied by men alone.⁵

To produce the desired effect, the suffragettes felt obliged to obliterate every trace of unfemininity so that they could not be belittled by the hierarchy of heterosexual economy. But while taking pains to employ the set of signifiers which denote femininity, and thus, on the surface, the dominant social norms constructed around patriarchal structures and ideologies, they radically broke away from the denoted implications through their violence, creating a discourse constructed around ambivalence. The effect was continual “estrangement” – because the force of the suffragettes came from the fact that their acts of militancy were committed, not from the outer fringes of society, but from its very heart. Some of the central tenets of gender and class were destabilized by window-smashers dressed in identical fashion to the ladies pouring tea in middle-class drawing rooms. “Agitation by Symbol” was what the suffragettes called this strategy and its force came from a semiology that juxtaposed femininity – an emblem of Victorian gentility – with violence, its antithesis, generating what is now called subversive mimesis. Since the overall effect of this procedure on the public was to be one of shock, one had to wrench elements of everyday life from their original contexts, denuding them of their familiarity and thereby stirring the beholder from a state of passivity into an active and critical posture. This method is, in essence, identical to the artistic technique developed more self-consciously by other contemporaries now grouped under the umbrella of “modernists.” In literary terms, it is the method called estrangement effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*) that Brecht and the Russian Formalists developed and which the Surrealists were to perfect in the ensuing years.

Artistic estrangement was carried over to larger cultural formations in suffrage politics.⁶ An example is their refusal to separate art and other forms of social life. Just as the avant-gardists of the Weimar Republic and the early Soviet Union revolted against the elitism of high modernism with their slogans, “Art in the service of the revolution” and “the Artist as a humble functionary and social engineer,” suffragettes believed art should be integrated with revolutionary social practice. A typical example was on March 10, 1914, when Mary Richardson slashed Diego Velázquez’s *The Toilet of Venus* (known as “The Rokeby Venus”) in the National Gallery. The reason she gave afterward was as follows: “I have tried to destroy the picture of the most beautiful woman in mythological history as a protest

against the government for destroying Mrs. Pankhurst who is the most beautiful character in modern history.”⁷ Richardson's destructive act is in fact a creative bid to re-shape the way of looking at female nudes as well as to question the validity of their cultural location. Like the Vorticists and the Futurists whose masculinist “blasting and bombardiering” have been extensively discussed in the context of the gender of modernism, the suffragettes were equally committed to wiping the slate of tradition clean and “making it new.” The revolutionary music in Baku made by factory hooters in the open air in 1922 can be seen in the same frame with the suffragette marching songs sung in Holloway conducted by Ethel Smyth with a toothbrush.⁸

Some feminists had deep reservations about the avant-garde strategy of the suffragettes. For example, Teresa Billington-Grieg (1877–1964), a “non-violent militant” suffragette leader and the author of *The Militant Suffrage Movement* (1911) criticized this form of feminist strategy as inauthentic:

I do not condemn the present day militancy because it has gone too far. I fear that it will never rise to the heights to which it originally showed potential aim. What I condemn in militant tactics is . . . the playing for effects and not for results – in short, the exploitation of revolutionary forces and enthusiastic women for the purposes of advertisement . . . The crime of the militant suffrage movement in my eyes is that it is not real.⁹

Playing for effects and privileging the appearance of things over the “real” strongly prefigure the culture of postmodernism, including the detractors it attracts. The mainstream histories, on the whole, view the militancy of the WSPU and the WFL as an obstruction rather than a service to equal franchise.¹⁰ Furthermore, the distinction between the constitutionalist suffragists and militant suffragettes is by no means sustainable when examined in depth, so permeable are the boundaries which circumscribe the two positions. But the significance of the suffragettes is much broader than the issue of suffrage and therefore suffrage should not be the foremost criterion in assessing them. As they themselves continually asserted, their campaign was for “Not the Vote only but what the Vote means.” As Lady Rhondda (1883–1958), a suffragette, journalist, editor of *Time and Tide*, and co-founder of the Six Point Group, argued, “The vote was really a symbol. And the militant fight itself did more to change the status of women – because it did more to alter our own opinion of ourselves – than ever the vote did.”¹¹ The suffragettes' theatrical and sensational avant-garde strategies, mediated by images through mass print, re-negotiated the idea of Woman in the public arena and produced new relations within gender politics.

Textual strategies

If the suffragettes used aestheticization as a primary means of their political campaign, the literature of the period was no less affected by politics. For one thing, feminist politics was crucial in the shaping of modernism, in both form and content.¹² But modernism was just one part of the large-scale transformation that took place in the literary marketplace as a result of the women's political negotiations. Feminist politics also created the conditions for a new culture of women's literary output.

The spectacle of woman that the suffragettes staged through their sophisticated, large-scale, and frequent public marches was sensationalized in the newly formed daily newspapers. Photography and reportage went hand in hand with the suffragette displays. The synergy of mass print and the suffragette spectacle was made possible by the tremendous increase in the scale of the production and distribution of newspapers.¹³ Indeed the suffragette spectacle was shaped and to an extent created by the needs of the newspapers, which in turn were driven by the necessity to meet their readers' appetite for sensational spectacles and stories. Before the militancy, reports of feminist issues in the established papers were minimal, with the exception of the *Manchester Guardian*. Women's suffrage, for example, was discussed within the confines of periodicals with a small circulation like the *Contemporary Review* or the *Westminster Review*. Then spectacle exploded the mass print media and revived the interest in the cause, which in turn dramatically increased the number of suffrage and feminist journals. *Jus Suffragi* (1906–29), *Women's Franchise* (1907–11), *Votes for Women* (1907–18), *The Vote* (1909–33), *Common Cause* (1909–20), *The Suffragette* (1912–15), *Women's Dreadnought* (1914–24), *Independent Suffragette* (1916–17), *Freewoman* (1911–12), *Time and Tide* (1920–77), and *Woman's Leader* (1920–32) were sites in which women identified and affirmed their private experiences and consolidated them into collective, public, political knowledge, and were repositories of a wide range of polemics, plays, short stories, mini-biographies, and news.¹⁴ Some of the national newspapers began to take a pro-suffrage stance: the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Herald*, *Pall Mall Gazette*, and the *Standard* (which had a page devoted to suffrage called "The Woman's Platform") gave substantial space for feminist discourse and even anti-suffrage papers like the *Times* carried debates surrounding the issue. Journals like the *Contemporary Review*, *Clarion*, *Examiner*, *Fortnightly Review*, *Nineteenth Century*, and *Westminster Review* all regularly published feminist articles and literature.

So not only did the politicization of women impel them to write, many for the first time, and bring disparate women writers together, but it also drove

them to take an active role in publishing and distribution. The Woman's Press and their iconic shop in 156 Charing Cross Road were not only fundamental to the political campaign of the WSPU but also formed a landmark as an independent publisher of women's literature, prompting a new degree of professionalism in all aspects of literary production. Organizations like the WWSL and the Actresses' Franchise League provided a cohesive and potent base from which the writers and the actresses produced a steady stream of political literature and performances; and this further enabled women to experiment as a group with the possibilities of a discourse of political dissent and political aesthetics.¹⁵

If politics raised women's literary production to a new scale, literature was a formative force in the politicization of women. Suffragettes of all classes professed that texts had been crucial in the shaping of their political identity.¹⁶ The world of the written word, as any political leader cannot fail to be aware, overlaps considerably with the world of action. Elizabeth Robins (1862–1952), the first President of the WWSL and an Ibsenite actress, playwright, novelist, and feminist activist, vigorously belabored the political importance of words. Like other suffrage leaders, Robins stressed that the world was changing so fast that people had a tendency to see it in language that had been left behind by events. She also observed that it was represented according to male and class interests. This outmoded, mistaken way of seeing or thinking about the world caused women to act in ways inappropriate to their situation and hence was a practical political problem. "One of the most important, most indispensable services to Social Reform would have to be undertaken by the writers," Robins stated to the WWSL, because it was the writers' role to discern what an insidious influence the language in which we think exerts on the way we act.¹⁷

Just a cursory inspection of the correlation between the world of ideas and the world of action around this period evinces that, concomitant with feminist politics, a new articulation of terms such as "feminist," "new woman," "suffragist," "suffragette," "free woman," and "androcentricity" came into circulation, embodying a different way of looking at gender and a resistance to categories and concepts constructed around dominant patriarchal norms. The writers of the league, who included Olive Schreiner, May Sinclair, Evelyn Sharp, Violet Hunt, and Ivy Compton-Burnett, had, of course, a more profound commitment to this project: they were to forge a new language to correspond to the realities of modernity and to resist inequality, as women's lives did not correspond to the vocabulary they had for describing them. The new language they had in mind was not that of syntactical dislocations and formal disruptions now more habitually associated with radical dissent, but one that represented truth as it was politically, philosophically, and socially lived.

The clear-sighted strictures of Elizabeth Robins on the misuse of language emphasize the need to correct the overwhelming misrepresentation of women's lives that was paraded as reality. Indeed, a large proportion of suffrage periodicals was devoted to the repudiation of "androcentrism" that was too naturalized for most people to see: well-known songs, sections from plays, novels, and familiar narratives such as fairy tales, and conventional myths were parodied and revised. In addition to feminist rereadings, the task of the woman writer was to penetrate deeper into the structure of reality and provide an authentic account of the world as it was actually experienced by women, for that was a crucial step in the bigger project of instructing, persuading, and inciting. To give the air of authenticity, the methodology adopted by women writers was often documentary realism. Some sections in Robins's play *Votes for Women* and its novel counterpart, *The Convert*, for example, are almost verbatim reports of the meetings and speeches at the Huddersfield by-election in 1906, aimed to cut through the tremendous misrepresentations of political dealings in the established press and to communicate to the reader who did not have access to the political world. An affirmation of this world would enable both men and women to see the "real" world hidden from view by the fog of patriarchal ideology, and this cognition would set people free. "There she stands – the Real Girl! – waiting for you to do her justice," Robins exhorted her fellow members of the WWSL.¹⁸

Doing justice to the "real" girl and the "real" world and discovering truthful social reality are attendant upon the idea of the writer uncovering her own eyes and discovering her own sense of self through that process. "Let us open our eyes, and we shall also find the fog of illusion lifting," urged Charlotte Despard.¹⁹

Consequently this period is rich in women's narratives that focus heavily on the twin process of political and individual awakening. But the *bildungsromane*, memoirs, biographies, and autobiographies are often overshadowed by studies of those narratives of the same period that foreground the instability of the "I," made by feminist postmodernists eager to sanction poststructural ideas of unstable subjectivities. But to assert that for the woman writer, the position of "I" is necessarily displaced or never at one with itself because the subjectivity in language is positioned as male, is to ignore that women writers not only fought to achieve unified subject positions in contemporary and historical dialogues but also enacted them socio-politically.

The predominance of the first-person point of view in political literature is closely related to another of the distinctive methodological emphases of suffrage literature: interpellation of the reader as a subject. The process of reader-identification governed by a female point of view through woman-centered

narratives is a powerful component made stronger by the lines of women's publishing that extended themselves forcefully through the political process. The interpellation worked particularly powerfully in narratives that created symbolic identification with the protagonist. So biographies of the "pioneers" constituted a particularly strong sub-genre of suffrage periodicals. In the frequent biographical sketches in suffrage magazines and newspapers and in suffrage pageants and plays, women intellectuals, writers, artists, spiritual leaders, and warriors were enthusiastically celebrated, ranging from Boadicea to Queen Victoria to St. Hilda to Madame Curie. But the figure most often used was the virtuous virgin soldier, as embodied by Joan of Arc. The ideal ego provided by St. Joan constituted the female subject as an enabling and empowering source of agency against the patriarchal order and is reflected widely in the literature: Emily Wilding Davison's "L'Envoi" (1912), Ethel Smyth's *Female Pipings in Eden* (1934), and Evelyn Sharp's "The Women at the Gate" (1910) all equate the saint with the suffragette by making into spiritual causes what were essentially political struggles. Likewise, Constance Lytton's *Prisons and Prisoners: The Stirring Testimony of a Suffragette* (1914), Annie Kenney's *Memoirs of a Militant* (1924), Helena Swanwick's *I Have Been Young* (1935), and Hannah Mitchell's *The Hard Way Up: The Autobiography of Hannah Mitchell, Suffragette and Rebel* (1968) are some of the autobiographies that focus heavily on the process of political awakening, as do the novels *Suffragette Sally* (1911) by Gertrude Colmore, *The Soul of a Suffragette* (1913) by W. L. Courteney, and *The Cost of a Promise* (1914), by Mrs. Bailey Reynolds.²⁰ If the reader's interpellation and symbolic identification were prominent devices employed by suffrage writers, it was because they were both instrumental in creating, encouraging, and sustaining the goal of personal political agency.

This was in great contrast to modernist writers who often sought forces beyond the individual, tended toward the "impersonal" in their literary ideals, and put great stake in the "autonomy" of their art. Among the high modernist circles, there were also growing tendencies to believe that art is not an expression of the individual but a medium of a higher tradition. Paradoxically, elitist notions of cultural aristocracy were burgeoning at this point in history and the idea of a supremely achieved individual also became prevalent. Terry Eagleton has pointed to this contradiction and has argued that it is at this moment in history that the "impersonality" of art and the "uniquely particular" became the aesthetic aim of many writers – T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, W. B. Yeats.²¹ At the same time, the market value of art was becoming more dependent upon the signature – the authenticity of the producer – than on the work itself. Thus while high literary ideals were gravitating toward the notion of the impersonal, literary pieces were becoming firmly

located under the individual signature. By contrast, political writers had little interest in social distinction and prestige while being intransigently committed to constructing a sense of personal agency – literature was less of an “emotive” or “poetic” act than a “conative” one. The political writers’ concern that society should appropriate its texts helps explain the writers’ relative indifference about the socio-legal ownership of them. As Robins noted in 1911, “a vast amount of the most effective work done by the Writers has been anonymous.”²² That anonymous, collective art was not only possible but actually thrived under the same conditions that are habitually regarded as the inevitable causes for human isolation serves as a valuable corrective, providing an outlet from the dead end of alienation in which so much thinking about high art remains confined. The political solidarity, community, and friendship found in the very texture of suffrage literature – in both content and form – puts a welcome perspective on the fragmented and solipsistic modernist protagonist, locked in his or her own private world. If, for the suffrage writer, the negotiations with modernity were given collective direction by political faith, that direction led them to a position diametrically opposite to the developments in high modernist aesthetics.

The tension between the elitist literary culture and the populist political culture is summed up in a scene in Christopher St. John’s suffrage play, *A Defence of the Fighting Spirit* (1909). Two girls are discussing the Woman question. Gertrude, the protagonist, enumerates at length a list of what is unjust in the relationship between the sexes. “Then become a suffragette!” suggests Diana, her friend. “The word offends my literary taste!” flinches Gertrude unequivocally. This send-up of the attitudes of the upper classes toward the popular political movement of suffrage re-affirms the now familiar view that literature or art, by the early twentieth century, was constituted as more or less the opposite of political engagement. Art, as the aestheticists would have it, starts to exist for its own sake by the end of the nineteenth century, turning its back on drab utility, announcing autonomy from social functions. Though the contempt of the elite for the masses is, of course, not unique to the early twentieth century, the hierarchy becomes more pronounced then. Indeed, the “great divide” thesis that modernist “high” art constituted itself through a “strategy of exclusion by an anxiety of contamination by its Other: an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture” is now widely accepted.²³ The dynamic between the elitist literary culture of the early twentieth century and the popular political culture of women’s suffrage goes some way toward explaining why it was that many distinguished writers were ambivalent about women’s suffrage.

The difficult relationship between political activism and literary expression is illustrated by the general pattern followed by many prominent modernist

writers' involvement with suffrage politics: initial sympathetic involvement, passing to disillusionment and varying degrees of rejection. One of the more common reasons for the writers' renunciation stemmed from the feeling that feminist politics was just bad art. Rebecca West captured this typical disaffection in her novel *The Judge*. Ellen, the protagonist, is magnetically drawn to suffrage politics but finds herself antagonized by the unaesthetic features of the speech at a suffrage rally:

Here was a cause so beautiful in its affirmation of freedom that it should have been served only by the bravery of dignified women and speeches lucent with reason and untremulously spoken, by things that would require no change of quality but only rearrangement to be instantly commemorable by art; yet this Scotch woman, moving with that stiffness of the mental joints which nations which suffer from it call conscientiousness, had managed to turn a sacramental gathering of the faithful into a steamy short-tempered activity, like washing day.²⁴

Ellen feels estranged because the speaker does not have "something of the dignity of nature and art."²⁵ Virginia Woolf's enthusiasm waned for reasons not dissimilar. Like Ellen, Woolf was, in principle, an eager supporter of women's suffrage, but the realities of political engagement conflicted with her taste; after attending a suffrage rally in Kingsway, London, she lamented:

I get one satisfactory thrill from the sense of multitude; then become disillusioned, finally bored and unable to hear a word . . . I watched Mrs Pethick-Lawrence rising and falling on her toes, as if half her legs were made of rubber, throwing out her arms, opening her hands, and thought very badly of this form of art.²⁶

It is an aesthetic objection that increasingly alienates her and there is a clear dissociation of herself from the suffragists which keeps her from direct political engagement. After this, Woolf stopped attending the suffrage rallies, though she continued to organize and run meetings of the local Women's Cooperative Guild in Hogarth House in Richmond until 1920 and continued to go to the annual conferences of the Guild until 1922.

It is edifying to remember that the mainstays of the opposition to women's suffrage were educated literary women such as Mrs. Humphry Ward, "Ouida," Beatrice Webb, and Elinor Glyn. Their attitudes do not seem so peculiar when it is remembered that Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot, and Mrs. Oliphant had, for different reasons, at different times, all opposed women's suffrage. Anti-suffragism among middle- and upper-class literary women was so prevalent that Brian Harrison in his study of anti-suffragism concluded, "Anti-suffragism was the

obvious destination for well-to-do late Victorian literary women.”²⁷ As one prominent anti-suffragist, Violet Markham, who later converted to suffragism, confessed in her autobiography, “if I erred, I erred in good company.”²⁸

Another reason behind the ambivalence or antipathy was the belief that political reform was futile – that the vote, for example, was of little value to women. Underlying this belief is the assumption that liberation and development rely on sheer individual will, rather than originating from social structures. It is, therefore, no surprise to find that these opinions came from the section of society that could overcome barriers to educational and social opportunities by virtue of birth. As Dorothy Richardson explained:

In principle much had been gained. The exclusively sexual estimate of women had received its death-blow. But it soon became apparent that academic education and the successful pursuit of a profession implied a renunciation of domesticity. The open heaven of “emancipation” narrowed to the sad and sterile vista – feminism for spinsters. From that moment public opinion see-sawed between the alternatives of discrediting domesticity and of dividing women into two types – “ordinary” women, who married, and “superior” women who did not. . . . This feminism was, therefore, in practice, a class feminism – feminism for ladies.²⁹

Those who gained the first fruits of feminism based on the higher-education road to emancipation and equality were alienated from the less fortunate, and the model of feminism worked, in this sense, to reinforce the sense of division among women as a group. Conversely, in feminist politics, unity arose from strengthening the category of women as a victimized group, and hence the reluctance of women who did not feel victimized to identify with political causes. Beatrice Webb succinctly stated in 1926, “At the root of my anti-feminism lay the fact that I had never myself suffered the disabilities assumed to arise from my sex.”³⁰ It was for these reasons that Elizabeth Robins declared that “the exceptional woman is one of our biggest obstacles.”³¹

It is a critical commonplace to note that, by the end of the nineteenth century, the waning of religious faith brought about the collapse of fundamental assumptions and certainties; and that modernism is, among other things, an expression of the anxieties of personal and cultural displacement, and of attempts to come to terms with the “relative” spirit of the times. If, for the modernist writer, a “uniquely particular” aesthetic became an expression of these anxieties, then the modernist aesthetic precluded the kind of collective faith that drove political art.

Oscar Wilde observed that, “[modern] art finds her own perfection within, and not outside of, herself,” and recent methods of construing the narrative text as a free play of signifiers are agreeable to that idea. But no text is entirely

free-floating, which is not to imply it is securely tethered either. If feminist literature of the early twentieth century sought to find perfection outside itself and not within, it is because its practitioners could neither afford to assert, nor believe in asserting, the autonomy of the work from life; thus they made it possible for us to create some full account of texts wherein their roots in historically specific human practices are a very part of their aesthetics.

NOTES

1. See Ronald Taylor, ed., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 1977).
2. Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs, eds., *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 4.
3. The suffrage movement refers to the period from 1867, when suffrage societies were becoming organized, to 1918, when British women were given limited franchise. The suffragette movement is more specifically associated with the activities of the Women's Social and Political Union and the Women's Freedom League.
4. Cicely Hamilton, *Life Errant* (London: Dent, 1935), p. 75.
5. Joel H. Kaplan and Sheila Stowell, *Theatre and Fashion: Oscar Wilde to the Suffragettes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 7.
6. See Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 125.
7. Mary Richardson, *Laugh a Defiance* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1953). Richardson stood (unsuccessfully) three times as a socialist parliamentary candidate and joined Mosely's British Union of Fascists as its women's organizer in 1934. Mrs. Pankhurst, the president of the WSPU, was moved in and out of prison nineteen times between April 1913 and July 1914 under the Temporary Discharge for Ill Health Act (April 1913), dubbed "The Cat and Mouse Act" by the suffragettes. Mrs. Pankhurst had been on numerous hunger strikes and was forcibly fed and was often on the verge of death.
8. See John Willett, *The New Sobriety 1917-1933: Art and Politics in the Weimar Period* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978).
9. Teresa Billington-Greig, *The Militant Suffrage Movement: Emancipation in a Hurry* (London: Franklin Palmer, 1911), p. 138.
10. See Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain* (London: Macmillan, 1992) and Brian Harrison, "Women's Suffrage at Westminster 1866-1928," in *High and Low Politics in Modern Britain*, ed. John Stevenson and Michael Bentley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983) for historical readings that downgrade the suffragettes for their inability to win favours from the political establishment.
11. Margaret Haig, Viscountess Rhondda, *This Was My World* (London: Macmillan, 1933), p. 299.
12. See Marianne DeKoven, "Modernism and Gender," in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, ed. Michael Levenson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 174-93.
13. The *Daily Mirror* was launched in November 1903 as a newspaper for women with a woman editor and women staff, reflecting the growing female readership in

- the market. It was not a success and the editor Mary Howarth was succeeded by Hamilton Fyfe.
14. There were also important antecedents: see pro-suffrage/feminist periodicals and newspapers such as *Englishwoman's Review* (1866–1910), *Women's Suffrage Journal* (1870–90), *Shafts* (1892–1900), *Woman's Opinion* (1874), *Woman* (1887), *Women's Gazette* (1888–91), *Women's Penny Paper* (1888–90), *Woman's Herald* (1891–3), and *Woman's Signal* (1894–9).
 15. See Katharine Cockin, Glenda Norquay, and Sowon S. Park, eds., *Women's Suffrage Literature*, 6 vols. (London: Routledge, 2007), for a range of literature prompted by the suffrage movement.
 16. See, for example, Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, "Why I Went to Prison," WSPU pamphlet in the Museum of London Suffragette Files, and Cicely Hamilton, *Life Errant*.
 17. Elizabeth Robins, "To the Women Writers," in *Way Stations* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1913), p. 110 (a speech given to the members of the WWSL at the Waldorf Hotel, May 14, 1909).
 18. Elizabeth Robins, "The Women Writers," in *Way Stations*, p. 236 (a speech given to the members of the WWSL at the Criterion, May 23, 1911).
 19. *Vote* (January 27, 1912).
 20. For a list of suffrage novels, see Elizabeth Crawford, *The Women's Suffrage Movement: A Reference Guide 1866–1928* (London: UCL Press, 1999), pp. 467–71.
 21. Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1990), pp. 374–5.
 22. Elizabeth Robins, *Way Stations*, p. 225.
 23. See Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).
 24. Rebecca West, *The Judge* (1922; reprinted London: Virago, 1980), p. 52.
 25. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
 26. Diary entry, Saturday March 9, 1918, in *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell, vol. 1, 1915–1919 (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), p. 125.
 27. Brian Harrison, *Separate Spheres* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), p. 22.
 28. Violet Markham, *Return Passage* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 96.
 29. Dorothy Richardson, "The Reality of Feminism," *Ploughshare* (1917), 241.
 30. Beatrice Webb, *My Apprenticeship* (1926; reprinted Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 355.
 31. Elizabeth Robins, "The Suffrage Camp Revisited," in *Way Stations*, p. 66.