CHAPTER 3

"The Flaw in the Centre": Writing as Hymenal Rupture in Virginia Woolf's Work

In a remarkable letter to Ethel Smyth in 1930, Virginia Woolf locates the source of female creativity in women's "burning centre."

> If only I weren't a writer, perhaps I could thank you and praise you and admire you perfectly simply and expressively and say in one word what I felt about the Concert yesterday. As it is, an image forms in my mind; a quickset briar hedge, innumerably intricate and spiky and thorned; in the centre burns a rose. Miraculously, the rose is you; flushed pink, wearing pearls. The thorn hedge is the music; and I have to break my way through violins, flutes, cymbals, voices to this red burning centre . . . I am enthralled that you, the dominant and superb, should have this tremor and vibration of fire round you—violins flickering, flutes purring; (the image is of a winter hedge)—that you should be able to create this world from your centre. (*L4* 171)

Evocative of Georgia O'Keeffe's paintings or Judy Chicago's dinner plates, the burning rose contests the notion that women's genitals represent lack.[1] Instead, Woolf envisions a female geography of stunning power and presence, and Smyth becomes an erotically charged figure precisely because she is "dominant and superb." Woolf's refashioning of the two stories that undergird this letter—the prince's discovery of Sleeping Beauty inside a castle overgrown with briars and Siegfried's similar discovery of the Valkyrie goddess Brunnhilde inside a flame-encircled castle—grants both women aggressive, even transgressive roles: the woman warrior who defied patriarchal decrees becomes an apt avatar for Smyth, the daughter of a general and a militant feminist. Woolf assumes the role of masculine aggressor,

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"breaking her way" into Smyth's "centre" and seducing Smyth in turn with her writing: "I wont scratch all the skin off my fingers trying to expound," Woolf continues, " . . . I recur to the rose among the briars, like an old gypsy woman in a damp ditch warming her hands at the fire" (*LA* 172).[2]

Woolf describes the creative woman in terms of centrality and centers throughout her career, but this letter to Smyth marks an important shift in her use of this motif.[3] In the 1920s "centrality" serves Woolf as a standard of aesthetic wholeness and completion—and significantly, women's writing often fails to measure up: if "nothing appears whole and entire, then one heaves a sigh of disappointment . . . This novel has come to grief somewhere" (*R* 76). Woolf complains that women's novels suffer from a mysterious defect, a "flaw in the centre" that destroys their structural integrity: "I thought of all the women's novels that lie scattered, like small pock-marked apples in an orchard, about the secondhand book shops of London. It was the flaw in the centre that had rotted them" (*R* 77). But by 1930 Woolf had come to question her investment in "wholeness," apparently, for her descriptions of female creativity begin to foreground moments of rupture in the "complete" atmosphere of the woman artist. This shift in Woolf's aesthetic marks her recognition and "working through" of a conflict that emerges only sporadically and symptomatically in *A Room of One's Own,* where Woolf's imaging of female textuality as inevitably disfigured by rents and tears betrays her unconscious fear that writing for women is an "unchaste activity" that destroys a virginal (hermetically or hymenally sealed) female silence. From this conflicted and unconscious concurrence with patriarchal constraints on female speech and sexuality, Woolf moves to a valorization of the ruptured membrane, now an "elastic fibre," the site of mediation and exchange and the suspension of many elements at once. In effect, Woolf reconceptualizes the hymen, contesting its patriarchal valuations of chastity and presence—woman as intact and closed and silent container for man—and rewriting it as the threshold of communication between women. Decentering the hymen thus, Woolf reclaims it as the site of female difference.

This reclamation of one of the most symbolic—and in some ways most oppressive—aspects of female corporeality anticipates in striking ways Luce Irigaray's call for a "female imaginary" to redress women's "exile" or "homelessness" in the symbolic order. In a series of compelling images—the notorious "lips," but also the placenta and the mucous membranes—Irigaray has brought attention to the way in which female bodies are obliterated by patriarchal systems of representation. Western "isomorphism," the privileging of metaphors that describe male but not female bodies (e.g., unity, form, the visible), leaves women with images of "women-for-men": symbolically speaking, the female body resembles, reflects, or complements the male body, but in all cases maleness is the norm and female specificity is erased.[4] Irigaray writes that "this morpho-logic does not correspond to the female sex: there is not 'a' sex. The 'no sex' that has been assigned to the woman can mean that she does not have 'a' sex and that her sex is not visible nor identifiable or representable in a definite form." ("Women's Exile" 111). Margaret Whitford summarizes Irigaray's position thus:

> [S]ymbolic systems are subtended by a male imaginary which, despite the denials of Lacanian theorists . . . is intimately connected with the phenomenology of the male body and its self-representation as phallic. The specificity of the female body is missing from these systems of representation, and as a result, women are seen—and forced to see themselves—as defective and "castrated" men. It is a regime of sexual "indifference," in which representation accords no specificity to the female. ("Irigaray's Body Symbolic" 104)

Irigaray attempts to restructure the imaginary by deliberate interventions in the symbolic, through the creation of a set of positive metaphors and myths with which women can identify. Those who charge Irigaray with essentialism overlook the ways in which her work powerfully reclaims aspects of female corporeality that have simply vanished from public (or even private) discussion. It is indisputable, for example, that her image of "lips that speak together" challenges "sexual indifference" and restores female specificity to the speaker(s). At one and the same time, Irigaray exposes the limitations of available phallocentric definitions of female sexuality even as she proposes an active, positive, and self-sufficient alternative: "She has produced a powerful metaphor for women's potentially excessive pleasures to hold up against the confining representations granted them in dominant discourses," remarks Elizabeth Grosz (*Sexual Subversions* 117).

Woolf's metaphorization of the hymen contests "isomorphism" in a manner that closely resembles Irigaray's recent and less well-known theorization of the mucous membranes, and it is here that Irigaray illuminates the political critique implicit in Woolf's imagery. Irigaray envisions the "female sex" as the

> threshold that gives access to the *mucous*. Beyond classical oppositions of love and hate, liquid and ice—a threshold that is always *half-open*.

> The threshold of the *lips*, which are strangers to dichotomy and oppositions. Gathered one against the other but without any possible suture . . . They do not absorb the world into or through themselves . . . They offer a shape of welcome, but do not assimilate, reduce, or swallow up. (*An Ethics of Sexual Difference* 18–19)

Like the hymen, the mucous is a site of mediation and exchange; always open, it challenges the notion that woman is a closed container belonging to man. Furthermore, the mucous cannot be split off from the body and thus resists appropriation by the male imaginary, which Irigaray suggests elsewhere might be "exclusively dependent on organs."[5] Evading binary categories, the mucous refers to both mouth and genitals and refuses definite shape: "It is neither simply solid nor is it fluid. It is not stable in a fixed form; it expands, but not in a shape; its form cannot readily be visualized," Whitford observes ("Irigaray's Body Symbolic" 103). Finally, the mucous images female specificity in a way that includes the maternal body but does not reduce female sexuality to the "maternal feminine"; at the same time, in keeping with Irigaray's tenets for a "female imaginary," it is an image that does not rely for its existence on the repression or symbolic murder of the maternal body. In this respect, it fulfills Irigaray's call for the invention of words and sentences that "translate" the bond between mothers and daughters, "a language that is not a substitute for the experience of *corps-á-corps* as the paternal language seeks to be, but which accompanies that bodily experience, clothing it in words that do not erase the body but speak the body" (Irigaray, "Body Against Body," 18–19).

As we shall see, Woolf's rewriting of the hymen as the site of female creativity and sexual difference exceeds patriarchal constraints in a way reminiscent of Irigaray's use of the mucous. But Woolf's transformation of the hymen also works to illustrate the Italian feminist practice of *affidamento,* or "entrustment," a concept based on Irigaray's theorizing of women's relationships. Teresa de Lauretis defines entrustment as a relationship between women "in which one woman gives her trust or entrusts herself symbolically to another woman, who thus becomes her guide, mentor, or point of reference—in short, the figure of symbolic mediation between her and the world."[6] Significantly, Woolf's valorization of hymenal rupture occurs most vividly—and almost exclusively—in letters written to Ethel Smyth in the 1930s. As Suzanne Raitt points out, Woolf's fascination with "Ethel's exceptional frankness—her unwomanly character, in Virginia's terms" enabled Woolf to confront her conflicts about the female body and sexuality; Raitt speculates that Smyth's frank discussions of her sexuality "perhaps held in their bravado the key to a more authentic feminine honesty" for Woolf. Similarly, Jane Marcus credits Smyth, a militant and angry older woman artist, with helping Woolf "to release all her anger at male aggression . . . [Smyth] taught her how to fight, as earlier she had literally taught Mrs. Pankhurst and the suffragettes how to throw rocks."[7]

Smyth sought out Woolf after the publication of *A Room of One's Own* in 1929, when she saw her own experiences as a pioneering woman composer reflected in Woolf's meditations upon the difficulties that impeded the woman writer. For her part, Woolf perceived in Smyth a source of maternal protection, but an unusual maternal protection composed of courage, artistic drive, and unabashed egotism:

> [W]hat you give me is protection, so far as I am capable of it. I look at you and (being blind to most things except violent impressions) think if Ethel can be so downright and plainspoken and on the spot, I need not fear instant dismemberment by wild horses. Its the child crying for the nurses hand in the dark. You do it by being so uninhibited: so magnificently unself-conscious. This is what people pay £20 a sitting to get from Psycho-analysis—liberation from their own egotism. (*L4* 302–303)

As early as 1921, in a review of Smyth's autobiography and long before she knew Smyth personally, Woolf had remarked Smyth's "extreme courage and extreme candour"; at that time Woolf wrote Lytton Strachey, "I think she shows up triumphantly, through sheer force of honesty" (*L2* 405). This candor and lack of self-consciousness prompted Woolf to question her own bias against self-revelation:

> [F]or months on first knowing you, I said to myself here's one of these talkers. They dont know what feeling is, happily for them. Because everyone I most honour is silent . . . I have trained myself to silence; induced to it also by the terror I have of my own unlimited capacity for feeling. . . . But to my surprise, as time went on, I found that you are perhaps the only person I know who shows feelings and feels. Still I cant imagine talking about my love for people, as you do. Is it training? Is it the perpetual fear I have of the unknown force that lurks just beneath the floor? (*L4* 422)

Smyth's relentless curiosity—her letters often consisted of lists of questions about Woolf's personal life—forced Woolf to confront those lurking and unknown forces that resulted in self-censorship, and eventually Woolf wrote freely to Smyth about her sexual timidity, her suicidal impulses, her bouts of madness, and her development as a writer.[8] In this sense, Smyth licensed a self-interest (Woolf called it egotism) that Woolf had come to abjure as both a personal failing and an aesthetic fault.[9] Woolf came to rely so heavily upon Smyth's directness, in fact, that she once likened her to ozone: "[R]eally I find your atmosphere full of ozone; a necessary element; since in my set they never praise me and never love me, openly; and I admit there are times when silence chills and the other thing fires" (*L*5 2).

Woolf herself recognized that her attraction to Smyth grew out of a need for a maternal surrogate: "[Y]ou are, I believe, one of the kindest of women, one of the best balanced, with that maternal quality which of all others I need and adore," she enthused in one letter (*L*4 188). But Smyth's maternal practice afforded Woolf a very different model of femininity than that promoted by her mother, Julia Stephen. In Woolf's fictional and biographical portraits, the conventional mother undermines the woman artist, urging selflessness and the adoption of a "dishonest" style of flattery and indirection that Woolf labeled the "tea-table manner." Smyth, by contrast, exemplified the "plainspoken" and "downright" and engaged in direct, defiant action and self-promotion; according to Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, "Fighting for a performance of her work gave her almost as much pleasure as composing it" (*L*4 xv). Whereas the Angel in the House urges the woman writer to remain "pure"—that is, reticent—about female sexuality, Smyth wrote openly, and in her volumes of autobiography publicly, about her sexual liaisons and bodily functions: "[H]ow you love periods, w.c.'s, excrement of all sort," Woolf teased in one letter (*L*4 372). Woolf's favorite image for Smyth—an indomitable and uncastrated wild cat whose wounds refuse to heal, an image that almost always recurs in conjunction with Smyth's battles to get her music played and taken seriously—speaks not to Woolf's perception of Smyth as masculine, I think, but rather to Woolf's perception of Smyth as unmastered by patriarchal conceptions of femininity and undaunted by the conflict such self-assertion incurred.[10] Smyth's egotism remained intact, or uncastrated. The corollary of this reading is, of course, that the conventional mother teaches the woman writer to accept subordination and the patriarchal notion that women are castrated, inferior, inadequate.

Hence I believe Woolf was not far off when she told Smyth that her egotism liberated Woolf's and thereby accomplished what psychoanalysts did for their patients at twenty pounds a sitting. Through her letters to Smyth Woolf effects what Susan Stanford Friedman has called a "writing cure"; that is, Woolf both recognizes and works through her fear that writing for women represents a loss of chastity.[11] In Freud's model of this process, the patient moves from the symptomatic behavior that acts out repressed memories (repetition) to remembrance through the mechanism of the "transference," "new editions," or "reprints" of the symptomatic behavior in which the analyst becomes a substitute for one of the original (typically parental) figures.[12] Freud stresses the "intermediary" nature of the transference, its artificiality, its "provisional character": "We render [the behavior] harmless, and even make use of it, by according it the right to assert itself within certain limits. We admit it into the transference as to a playground, in which it is allowed to let itself go in almost complete freedom."[13] Woolf's letters to Smyth function as this kind of intermediate space or playground, for Woolf did not consider letter-writing "serious" work; she often notes that a letter has been sent without revision, and in her letters to her closest friends she strives for a casual intimacy that inscribes her sense of the recipient's personality: "It is an interesting question—what one tries to do, in writing a letter—partly of course to give back a reflection of the other person" (*L4* 98). In her efforts to respond to Smyth's preoccupations with "periods, w.c.'s, and excrement," Woolf took up the question of how corporeality impinged upon her own writing: in the safety of "entrustment," she examined the way in which the Victorian cult of chastity abrogated female sexuality—and with it female speech.[14]

The Rending and Tearing of Instincts

Urging Smyth, in the 1930s, to write her memoirs Woolf describes female sexuality as primary "truths" omitted from women's autobiographies: "There's never been a womans autobiography," Woolf complains. "Nothing to compare with Rousseau. Chastity and modesty I suppose have been the reasons. Now why shouldn't you be not only the first woman to write an opera, but equally the first to the tell the truths about herself?" (*L6* 453). Another letter goes even further: Woolf explicitly compares the woman writer's revelations of her sexual experiences to rupturing the hymen, as if a virginal female silence alone guarantees a woman's purity. "I'm interested that you cant write about masturbation. That I understand," Woolf begins.

> What puzzles me is how this reticence co-habits with your ability to talk openly magnificently, freely about—say H.B. [Henry Brewster, Smyth's lover]. I couldn't do one or the other. But as so much of life

> is sexual—or so they say—it rather limits autobiography if this is blacked out. It must be, I suspect, for many generations, for women; for its like breaking the hymen—if thats the membrane's name—a painful operation, and I suppose connected with all sorts of subterranean instincts. I still shiver with shame at the memory of my half brother, standing me on a ledge, aged about 6, and so exploring my private parts. Why should I have felt shame then? (459–460)

The sexual is "blacked out" for women because of the need to preserve "chastity and modesty," a process of censorship Woolf claims has been imposed upon women for so many generations that it has become habitual, a kind of instinct. Thus even to speak of the sexual is akin to the loss of a fetishized virginity: to write is to fall. Louise DeSalvo has argued that Woolf's intensified efforts to discover the source of her depression resulted in the recovery of this memory of molestation, recorded not only here but in the contemporaneous "A Sketch of the Past," where Woolf searches unsuccessfully to locate the "word" that could define "so dumb and mixed a feeling" (S 69) as her sense of the impropriety of sexual assault. DeSalvo links Woolf's concern about self-censorship to the repression of this memory.[15] But although Woolf indeed associates hymenal rupture with memories of her molestation, she does not use it as an image of self-censorship—on the contrary, breaking the hymen becomes an explicit image here for self-revelation and for writing about female bodily and sexual experience. In this context, the contrast Woolf draws in her earlier letter—between women's "chastity and modesty" and Rousseau—assumes added meaning: just as Rousseau attributes a portion of his literary creativity to sexual self-satisfaction, so Woolf reappropriates the scene of female sexual dispossession, depicting the woman writer as the breaker of her own hymen, her seal of silence.

This letter contains Woolf's clearest equation of writing with hymenal rupture. Yet once alerted to the existence of this trope, it is possible to discern its symptomatic, deeply censored movement in *A Room of One's Own,* the 1929 text that is Woolf's most celebrated analysis of women and writing.[16] The draft revisions of *Room* tie Woolf's preoccupation with the structural "flaw in the centre" of women's texts to an unspoken, unconscious anxiety that breaking silence for women is a violation of female chastity; over and over again Woolf figures that violation as an agonizing "rending and tearing" at the "root" of the woman writer's "being."[17] In the published version, the fictional web is gender neutral, and only the text's imperfections reveals its human creator: "[W]hen the web is pulled askew, hooked up at the edge, torn in the middle, one remembers that these webs are not spun in mid air by incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to grossly material things" (*R* 43–44). But the draft of this passage implicitly connects the tear "in the middle" with the woman writer's body:

> [W]hen the web is pulled askew, hooked up here, or with a great hole in it there, [the centre] then one remembers that these webs are not spun in mid air by incorporeal creatures, but . . . are attached to grossly material things . . . in short the spider is a human being: I was [no doubt] thinking as I [made] this simile of the spiders web, of certain strains & holes that to my mind still slightly disfigure the webs made by women.[18]

Woolf's language repeatedly breaks down the distinctions between woman writer and female body: beginning with an attack on the notion that writers are incorporeal, Woolf ends by suggesting that the woman writer is only too corporeal, too much a victim of that "grossly material thing," the female body. Women writers hence produce texts "disfigured" by "strains" and "holes," an equation that equates the "great hole" in the female web with a hole in the woman writer's sexual/textual center. But although this "great hole" might suggest Woolf's anxious concurrence with then-current sexological formulations that women "lack" penises, it soon becomes clear that the "great hole" speaks to Woolf's internalized belief that breaking silence for women is as traumatic as the rupture of the virgin's hymen.

As Woolf explains to Smyth, the rupture of the hymen is a "painful operation . . . connected to all sorts of subterranean instincts." As Woolf explicitly notes in these later letters, to break silence is akin to breaking the hymen because both acts violate internalized prohibitions against female self-assertion, and in *Room,* where hymenal imagery only emerges in shadowy and fragmentary fashion, the act of breaking "chaste" silence is an act of such defiance and compulsion that it results in stillborn or illicit language and acute mental anguish. Woolf's hypothetical sixteenth-century woman writer suffers from this hymenal proscription. With her desire to write at war with the "impurity" of breaking silence, she is "tortured and pulled asunder by her own contrary instincts" and "lost her health and sanity to a certainty" (*R* 51). The published version mutes the violence attendant at the scene of writing: in the draft this woman remains Judith Shakespeare, and only the irresistible "force of her gift broke through" her father's ban on her writing. This compulsive force causes enormous "pain, with what rending & tearing of instincts . . . <she was> up against something so deep in herself" (*W&F* 82–83). In both the draft and published versions of *Room,* the governing metaphor of writing as childbirth subsumes hymenal imagery: hence Judith Shakespeare's illegitimate pregnancy, a synecdoche in the published version for her stillborn literary creations, drives her to suicide and eternal silence. Yet writing remains a primarily sexual lapse, and the social disgrace pertaining to illicit and unchaste female textuality repeatedly mars women writers' productions: it remains residually in Woolf's images of textual stillbirth and twisted and deformed offspring as well as in the narrator's assertion that "whole flights of words would need to wing their way illegitimately into existence before a woman could say what happens when she goes into a room" (*R* 91).

Woolf's study of the Bible and Christian history during her composition of *Three Guineas* would later enable her to clarify the latent and symptomatic connections *Room* draws between female speech and the loss of chastity.[19] In this later essay, Woolf shows how Saint Paul defines chastity not only as an aspect of female sexuality—"The woman's mind and body shall be reserved for the use of one man and one man only" (*TG* 167)—but as an aspect of female *speech:* "'Let the woman keep silence in the churches,'" Woolf quotes, "'for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but let them be in subjection . . . And if they would learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home: for it is shameful to speak in the church'" (167).[20] As Woolf points out, the focus of this ban is on the spectacle of speech issuing from the female body: hence Saint Paul requires women to veil themselves when speaking publicly (122). In *A Room of One's Own,* where the connections between chastity and silence remain more muted, Woolf invokes the veil as the "relic of chastity" that conceals, not the female body, but the woman writer's ruptured hymen and loss of chastity.[21] Thus the great nineteenth-century women writers whose writings prove them "victims of inner strife . . . sought effectively to veil themselves by using the name of a man. Thus they did homage to the convention . . . that publicity in women is detestable. Anonymity runs in their blood. The desire to be veiled still possesses them" (*R* 52). In the drafts, where women's writing also suffers from "a radical fault in its structure," the veil of anonymity pays "homage to the profound instinct which lay at the root of womens being" (*W&F* 83, 84). Veiled and concealed, hymenal rupture still disfigures women's writing in the published text, however; like the hole in the spider's web, the "flaw in the centre" destroys all pretense of structural integrity in women's writing:

> She was thinking of something other than the thing itself. Down comes her book upon our heads. There was a flaw in the centre of it. And I thought of all the women's novels that lie scattered, like small pock-marked apples in an orchard . . . It was the flaw in the centre that had rotted them. (*R* 77)

Rotten at the core, women's texts, like Eden apples, betray their creators' unseemly trespass upon the male preserves of literature, their unholy defiance of patriarchal taboos.[22]

Women writers cannot deliver a "whole and entire" literary text in *Room,* then, in part because their work issues from a mind that has been "pulled from the straight," but more importantly because Woolf involuntarily assents to the Pauline proscription: women must remain silent in order that they themselves remain "whole and entire." Thus in the drafts Woolf images the eventuality of delivering a "whole and entire" work of art to "a man carrying a precious jar through a crowded street, <afraid> that it may be broken at any moment,—can scarcely fail to be cracked & damaged in transit" (*W&F* 85). This choice of a conventional image of female virginity to render the fragility of the work of art has the effect of collapsing women themselves into works of art: by this logic, the woman who writes, who tries to create herself as subject, inevitably damages her worth as object. In this context, it is significant that Woolf envisions the profession of writing as an alternative to the "oldest profession": "the shady and amorous" Aphra Behn must write for money after "the death of her husband and some unfortunate adventures of her own" (*R* 67). The sacrifice of her chastity and reputation "earned [women] the right to speak their minds": "Here begins the freedom of the mind," Woolf writes, "or rather the possibility that in the course of time the mind will be free to write what it likes" (*R* 62, 67). Woolf suggests that the freedom of the mind depends upon the sexual freedom of the body, yet in acting upon either freedom, *Room*'s woman writer inevitably becomes damaged goods—and her work reflects that damage.

In fact, in the 1920s Woolf consistently faults women's texts for improperly inscribing their authors' female bodies. She claims, for example, that "in the early [eighteen] forties . . . the connexion between a woman's art and a woman's life was unnaturally close, so that it is impossible for the most austere of critics not sometimes to touch the flesh when his eyes should be fixed upon the page" (*W&W* 137). That unnatural proximity seems to be a result of Woolf's own apprehension that the woman writer's body impinges upon her work and causes defective writing. Writing of Lady Winchelsea and the Duchess of Newcastle in *A Room of One's Own,* Woolf notes that "In both burnt the same passion for poetry and both are deformed and disfigured by the same causes" (*R* 64): the body of the woman and the body of her text become indistinguishable. (The sentence might better read, "In both women burnt the same passion for poetry and *both women's works* are deformed and disfigured by the same causes"). Furthermore, because the language of deformation remains independent of the poetry it ostensibly describes, it inadvertently outlines another possibility: it suggests that the woman writer's female body (internally disfigured by her ruptured hymen?) deforms her literary efforts. This misshapen body gives birth only to misshapen writing. Thus images of deformation undermine the distinctions Woolf draws between the "free life in London" of *Room*'s hypothetical sixteenth-century woman writer and the chaste nineteenth-century Charlotte Brontë.[23] Of the former, Woolf writes that the stress of defying sexual codes creates "a strained and morbid imagination," whence issues writing that is "twisted and deformed" (*R* 52). The latter, on the other hand, cannot "get her genius expressed whole and entire" because of her inner, figurative self-divisions: "Her books will be deformed and twisted," Woolf writes (*R* 72–73).

Throughout *A Room of One's Own,* then, the ideal of the "whole and entire" work of art is at variance with Woolf's concomitant definition of the work of art as a precious jar that "can scarcely fail to be cracked & damaged in transit": given *Room*'s conviction that writing is akin to a rupture in chastity, women writers seem doomed to producing flawed and damaged work. In the 1930s, however, the conflicted valuation of chastity evinced in *Room* gives way to Woolf's anger about patriarchal culture's arrogation of female sexuality. Woolf now portrays female socialization and the patriarchal emphasis on chastity as the source of women's crippling and deformation. Woolf's diary establishes the moment of this shift as the preparation for the lecture "Professions for Women": Woolf suddenly "conceived an entire new book—a sequel to *A Room of One's Own*—about the sexual life of women: to be called Professions for Women perhaps—Lord how exciting! This sprang out of my paper" (*D*4 6). If a specific project never materialized, "the sexual life of women" did become Woolf's abiding concern in the 1930s; in effect she undertook the very study she had first outlined in *Room* as a worthy project for a student at Girton or Newnham, "[t]hat profoundly interesting subject, the value that men set upon women's chastity and its effect upon their education" (*R* 67).

Although Woolf's analysis of chastity emerges—albeit in fragmentary form—in many writings in the 1930s, I want to highlight some of the specific ways that analysis reshaped her vision of the creative woman.[24] Consider, for example, Woolf's depictions of the successful woman writer as tea-table hostess. In the 1924 "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," Woolf compares the conscientious writer to a skillful and sensitive society hostess: "Both in life and in literature it is necessary to have some means of bridging the gulf between the hostess and her unknown guest on the one hand, the writer and his unknown reader on the other" (*CDB* 110). At this point, Woolf self-consciously singles out Jane Austen as Shakespeare's equivalent and Woolf's own most honored foremother. But Austen's status for Woolf as the greatest of her literary foremothers is inseparable from Austen's status as a *ladylike* woman writer, one who has perfected the tea-table manner that Woolf herself had mastered as a girl, a manner Woolf portrays elsewhere as the quintessential trait of the Victorian lady. In the essay "Indiscretions," Woolf even likens Austen to the pure woman pouring out tea: "[F]rom the chastest urn into the finest china Jane Austen pours, and as she pours, smiles, charms, appreciates" (*W&W* 73). Austen resembles the Angel in the House who advises the woman writer to charm, to conciliate (60); a pure vessel herself, her art evokes the porcelain fragility Woolf figures as artistic perfection in *Room's* draft. Unlike other women writers whom Woolf criticizes for overly watery and diffuse female fluidity, Austen's textual fluids remain pure and contained, social fluids suitable for public consumption, and a direct contrast to those produced by the rupture of the woman writer's hymen.[25]

After writing "Professions for Women" in 1931, however, Woolf condemned this kind of conciliatory manner in women's writing. In that essay, the woman writer murders the Angel in the House because the latter's advice of flattery and indirection makes it impossible for the woman writer to say what she really thinks in her review of a man's novel. "'Above all, be pure,'" the Angel admonishes the woman writer, as if speaking the (female) mind inevitably leads to a loss of chastity. Woolf's account of the conciliatory manner in "A Sketch of the Past" visits the same ground, although the shadowy figure of the mother no longer haunts the scene of writing. Acknowledging that "the surface manner allows one . . . to slip in things that would be inaudible if one marched straight up and spoke aloud" (Ethel Smyth's tactic, one imagines), Woolf goes on to criticize her early reviews for their ladylike decorum, the product of "tea-table training":

> When I read my old *Literary Supplement* articles, I lay the blame for their suavity, their politeness, their sidelong approach, to my tea-table training. I see myself, not reviewing a book, but handing plates of buns to shy young men and asking them: do they take cream and sugar? (S 150)

Nowhere is this condemnation of the tea-table manner more marked—or more ambivalent—than in Woolf's disavowal of Jane Austen as her favorite literary woman in a letter to Ethel Smyth. Here Woolf finally admits that she prefers the imperfect and passionate Brontës to Austen's technical perfection:

> JA is not by any means one of my favorites. Id give all she ever wrote for half what the Brontes wrote—if my reason did not compel me to see that she is a magnificent artist. What I shall proceed to find out, from her letters . . . is why she failed to be much better than she was. Something to do with sex, I expect; the letters are full of hints already that she suppressed half of her in her novels—Now why? (*L*5 127)

Austen, mermaid-like, hides the "half of her" that has "something to do with sex," and only Woolf's "reason," the half of Woolf similarly disconnected from "something to do with sex," compels her to recognize Austen's formal and technical prowess, that which renders Austen "a magnificent artist." Yet Woolf is no longer content to celebrate the technical mastery that necessitates the erasure of female corporeality. Austen could have been, should have been, much better. She failed where the Brontës didn't; she failed to inscribe her anger and rage at the repression of female sexuality. The woman writer as hostess no longer obtains. With this shift in mind, then, let us turn to Woolf's reconceptualization, in the 1930s, as of the hymen the site of female exchange and creativity.

"(Its never too late to rend)"

Although Woolf continued to describe the successful work of art in terms of "wholeness" and "completion" in the 1930s, she no longer envisioned the ruptured membrane as a flaw in the woman writer's work.[26] Woolf now depicts the hymen as a mediating membrane, an "elastic fibre" that suspends diverse elements in its capacious folds, a creative element specific to women. A symptomatic marker of Woolf's sense of the disfigurement and anguish of female creativity in *Room,* the hymen now becomes an emblem of communication. The problematic "centre" gives way to a valorization of "centrality," an atmosphere created for and around others by the creative woman.

A scene in *The Waves* illustrates this deliberate linkage of the ruptured hymen to female creativity and communion. Reading Shelley's "The Question" as a virginal schoolgirl, Rhoda imagines herself, like the poet, wandering down a "lush hedge" and gathering the flowers growing therein; she repeatedly stresses her desire for a receptive, empathic audience ("I will give; I will enrich . . . I will bind my flowers in one garland and . . . present them—Oh! to whom?" [*W* 214]). In contrast to the poet, however, Rhoda's offer of flowers develops from a voluptuous creative release Woolf depicts as a fantasy of autoerotic self-defloration:

> There is some check in the flow of my being; a deep stream presses on some obstacle; it jerks; it tugs; some knot in the centre resists. Oh, this is pain, this is anguish! . . . Now my body thaws; I am unsealed, I am incandescent. Now the stream pours in a deep tide fertilising, opening the shut, forcing the tight-folded, flooding free. To whom shall I give all that now flows through me, from my warm, my porous body? I will gather my flowers and present them—Oh! to whom? (*W* 213–214)

Images of rupture and release, fused with other favorite images for female creativity (the "incandescent" work that "consumes all impediments" in *Room;* the woman writer as fisherwoman in "Professions for Women"), underline the complex notion of audience that informs this passage: Rhoda refers to herself both as active "giver" and as porous and receptive. That Rhoda fails in her attempts to communicate with others and eventually commits suicide does not alter the fact that Woolf has begun to use the ruptured hymen as a positive emblem of women's creative powers.

I suggested earlier that Woolf's relationship with the pioneering composer Ethel Smyth provided the impetus for this transformative symbolization of female corporeality. Smyth's unique combination of maternal solicitude and artistic and feminist ambition enabled Woolf to develop an image of female creativity that encompassed the creativity of both the mother and the woman artist. Earlier, in the 1920s, the decade in which Woolf first began to formulate a "female aesthetic," Woolf represents the mother's creativity as far more powerful and far-reaching than that of the (often marginalized) female artist.

For example, in *A Room of One's Own,* the male poet of Woolf's description relies upon female domestic creativity to "fertilise" his literary vision: "He would open the door of drawing-room or nursery . . . and find her among her children perhaps, or with a piece of embroidery on her knee . . . the centre of some different order and system of life" (*R* 90). This scene revisits the famous passage in *To the Lighthouse* in which Mr. Ramsay breaks in upon Mrs. Ramsay's reading to James, only to plunge his "beak of brass" into the "fountain and spray" of her "delicious fecundity" (*TTL* 58–59). The painter Lily Briscoe, by contrast, remains isolated; literally standing at the verge of the lawn, she negotiates her vexed relation to the maternal surrogate by drawing "a line there, in the centre" (*TTL* 310)—a line that speaks to Mrs. Ramsay's, not Lily's, "centrality."

Woolf's work on female creativity in the 1920s thus seems haunted not only by the bad-faith advice of the Angel in the House, but by a deep anxiety that the creative woman competes with the mother who inevitably "wins" by cultural decree.[27] Yet it is also true that Woolf's first attempts at bridging this division occur in this decade. Consider Woolf's well-known discussion of the "woman's sentence," a term Woolf first uses in her review of Dorothy Richardson's *Revolving Lights* in 1923:

> She has invented, or, if she has not invented, developed and applied to her own uses, a sentence which we might call the psychological sentence of the feminine gender. It is of a more elastic fibre than the old, capable of stretching to the extreme, of suspending the frailest particles, of enveloping the vaguest shapes . . . It is a woman's sentence, but only in the sense that it is used to describe a woman's mind by a writer who is neither proud nor afraid of anything that she may discover in the psychology of her sex. (*W&W* 91)

Despite Woolf's disclaimer—a sentence can only be gendered insofar as it describes the psychology of the writer—her images suggest another difference for the formal differences she detects in the "woman's sentence." Woolf's imagery evokes both the hymen and the pregnant body: both are "capable of stretching to the extreme, of suspending the frailest particles, of enveloping the vaguest shapes." This "float" between pregnancy and the hymen is unusual in Woolf's descriptions of creative consciousness, although other descriptions of creative perception similarly figure the creative mind enveloped by a uterine or other transparent membrane: in "Modern Fiction" consciousness is a "luminous halo," the "semi-transparent envelope [that] surround[s] us from the beginning of consciousness to the end." And Woolf explicitly associates consciousness with a kind of preoedipal synaesthesia in "A Sketch of the Past," where she gropes for the words to capture "the feeling, as I describe it sometimes to myself, of lying in a grape and seeing through a film of semi-transparent yellow":

> If I were a painter . . . I should make a picture that was globular; semi-transparent. I should make a picture of curved petals; of shells; of things that were semi-transparent; I should make curved shapes, showing the light through, but not giving a clear outline. Everything would be large and dim; and what was seen would at the same time be heard; sounds would be indistinguishable from sights. (66)

Here Woolf celebrates creation as quintessentially preoedipal, a "globed compacted thing" (*TTL* 286) that remains protected from outside contact by a benign, apparently maternal surround.

As the letter that celebrates Smyth's "burning centre" demonstrates, however, Woolf saw in Smyth a model of the female creative process in which the woman artist's atmosphere *requires* rupture to succeed—and that rupture, tellingly, is the presence of her intimates, other creative women. Woolf's allusions to the Sleeping Beauty story thus feature the moment of violent rupture, the moment of female communication that enables female creativity. In a letter in which Woolf casts herself as the imprisoned and quiescent princess, she tells Smyth, "[A]lready I am spun over with doubts and impaled with thorns. Would you and Vanessa know how to burst through, free and unscathed? I suppose so . . . (a joke—if I had any red ink, I would write my jokes in it, so that even certain musicians—ahem!)" (*L4* 168). Frequently Woolf deliberately moves between images, from creation as pregnancy to the creativity of hymenal communion. Preferring to keep her "atmosphere unbroken," her shell protected, Woolf explains, "If I stay away [from her work in progress] . . . I break the membrane and the fluid escapes—a disgusting image, drawn I think from the memory of Vanessa's miscarriage." Teasingly, she adds, "All the same, I shall come, for a night, and let the membrane break if it will" (185). Finally, despite Woolf's enduring, residual "disgust" with female fluidity, the membrane exists to rupture. "Take away my affections and I should be . . . like the shell of a crab, like a husk . . . I should be nothing but a membrane, a fibre, uncoloured, lifeless, to be thrown away like any other excreta," she told Smyth (202–204); the hymen only exists insofar as it receives the precious life-blood of female communion. Smyth thus compares favorably to the "sun-dried and shell-like" Vernon Lee: "[Y]ou *do* continue, being, thank God, not a finished precious vase, but a porous receptacle that sags slightly, swells slightly, but goes on soaking up the dew, the rain, the shine, and whatever else falls upon the earth" (*L*6 406).

That Smyth understood the import of Woolf's language and responded to it in kind emerges in an astonishing exchange the two conducted concerning an alleged "maidenhead removal" operation (*L*5 223). Smyth writes Woolf that "lots of girls have themselves operated on nowadays so as not to endure tortures on marriage nights. . . . Why not try it now? (Its never too late to rend)." "[W]hat a lark!" Woolf responds. "Shall we go and be done together? Side by side in Bond Street?" (*L*5 223).[28] With her determination to express sexual experiences as openly as possible in her writing, her compassionate curiosity about Woolf's own self-confessed frigidity, and her easy participation in the teasing metaphors Woolf delighted in, Smyth became Woolf's most important sounding board for the creation of a female imaginary, a discourse that reappropriated female sexuality and that celebrated female specificity: the power of women *together* to re-create the world with themselves as central. Smyth's power and vitality created a protective aura in which Woolf no longer feared "dismemberment by wild horses." A figure of "entrustment" or "symbolic mediation," Smyth encouraged Woolf's "putting it into words" by listening to Woolf's stories about herself: because of Smyth's "maternal quality," Woolf wrote, she could "chatter faster and freer" to her than to anyone, certain Smyth's "perspicacity" would "*penetrate* . . . [her] childish chatter" (*L*4 188, my emphasis). And Woolf could then respond in kind: "Next time it shall be the other story—yours" (*L*4 188).

The violent rupture that becomes for Woolf the image of this exchange thus conflates birth with sexual penetration and rewrites the daughter's aching eroticism for a lost maternal protection as the scene of mutual exchange, mutual support, mutual erotic dependence. Each woman enters and exits the other's symbolic "centre," sure of her welcome and hopeful that the example of female creativity contained therein will further her own creative efforts. Of all the important women in Woolf's life—many of whom similarly functioned as maternal surrogates in Woolf's imaginative life—it was Smyth alone whom Woolf described in language identical to the language she used to describe her mother. Woolf's exultation in Smyth's ability to create a world "from her centre" resonates with Woolf's similar celebration of her mother's centrality: "[T]there she was, in the very centre of that great Cathedral space which was childhood"

(S 81); "[s]he was central. I suspect the word 'central' gets closest to the general feeling I had of living so completely in her atmosphere that one never got far enough away from her to see her as a person" (S 83); "[G]eneralised; dispersed . . . the creator of the crowded merry world which spun so gaily in the centre of my childhood . . . she was the centre; it was herself" (S 84).[29] Smyth thrilled Woolf by demonstrating how the woman artist also creates a world from her centre, and how such creation need not require the woman writer to "put down the body she has so often laid down," the fate Woolf had herself assigned to her paradigmatic woman writer Judith Shakespeare. With Smyth's encouragement, Woolf discovered creativity is incarnation, the word made female flesh. Such a discovery is, indeed, the very material of writing.