

ELLEN G. FRIEDMAN
MIRIAM FUCHS

Breaking the Sequence

Women's Experimental Fiction



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BREAKING THE SEQUENCE

Breaking the Sequence

Women's Experimental Fiction



INTRODUCED AND
EDITED BY
ELLEN G. FRIEDMAN AND
MIRIAM FUCHS

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For the women in our lives:

Sarah Fuchs, Lola Glazer, Rebecca Friedman, Sonia Friedman

Patriarchal she said what is it I know what it is it is I know I know so that I know what it is I know so I know so I know so I know what it is. Very slowly. I know what it is it is on the one side a to be her to be his to be their to be in an and to be I know what it is it is he who was an known not known was he was at first it was the grandfather then it was not that in that the father not of that grandfather and then she to be to be sure to be sure to be I know to be sure to be I know to be sure to be not as good as that. To be sure not to be sure to be sure correctly saying to be sure to be that. It was that. She was right. It was that.

Patriarchal Poetry.

—Gertrude Stein

By obeying the improvisations born of emotions, by abandoning myself to digressions and variations, I found an indigenous structure, a form born of organic growth, like crystal formations.

—Anais Nin

a night of utterly other discourses that will spark out of a minicircus of light upon a page . . . and generate endless stepping-stones into the dark, gathering up solitude as a needed strength that will nevertheless be resented by one and all especially one.

—Christine Brooke-Rose

I see myself: brown very thick skin tender low breasts with huge violet nipples the skin below them curves downwards over man's hips to heavy long spider's legs. . . . I'm looking down at my body and writing.

—Kathy Acker

Mary is tampering with the expected sequence. First she broke the sentence; now she has broken the sequence.

—Virginia Woolf

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PREFACE

THE task we set for ourselves in embarking on this volume was to introduce and explore the rich tradition of women's experimental fiction in this century. This work, archaeological and compensatory, is in line with one of the important and active projects of feminist literary criticism, the recovery and foregrounding of women writers.¹

The idea for this volume was born at a 1983 Modern Language Association Convention session on postrealism. When asked why there seem to be no women experimental writers, a panelist replied that women writers are too busy trying to enter the mainstream to be concerned with narrative innovation, suggesting that their interests are political, not aesthetic.

This panelist's assumption that literary experimentalism is dominated by men is longstanding, an element of the history of the modern novel, and reiterated in literary criticism of the last several decades. For instance, of the 27 writers listed on the tables of contents in *Literary Disruptions* (1980, 2d ed.) by Jerome Klinkowitz and *Fabulation and Metafiction* (1979) by Robert Scholes, 25 are male. The volume of *American Literary Scholarship: An Annual* published in 1986 lists 14 writers in its "Innovative Fiction" category, all male, and of the 35 writers, musicians, and artists Denis Donoghue mentions in a *New York Times Book Review* article, "The Promiscuous Cool of Postmodernism" (June 22, 1986), the only woman is Virginia Woolf, whom he quotes *about* modernism, but does not include among the modernists. Published in 1987, Brian McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction* mentions or discusses over 150 writers, about a dozen of whom are women. The bio-bibliographical guide to postmodern fiction edited by Larry McCaffery does cover an impressive number of women writers, but in the volume's essay on women, "Feminist Fiction and the Postmodern Challenge," Bonnie Zimmerman writes that feminist "experimentation usually serves the ultimate end of realism" (177).

Until recently, studies of women writers also overlooked the experimentalists. Classic works such as Ellen Moers's *Literary Women* (1976) and Patricia Meyer Spacks's *The Female Imagination* (1975) explore how social, economic, political, and psychological factors influence the way women write and the way their characters behave. Influential, pioneering studies such as Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) and Sandra M. Gilbert's and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) focus on women writers as a literary tradition separate from men

writers, but for the most part, they do not concern themselves with experimentalism.

One of the early studies concentrating on women's experimentalism, *Feminine Consciousness in the Modern British Novel* (1975) by Sydney Janet Kaplan, was followed a decade later by Rachel Blau DuPlessis's *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (1985), an exploration of particular innovations in plot and theme as means of liberating female protagonists. Two works reexamining the formative decades of modernism are Shari Benstock's *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900-1940* (1986) and Gilbert's and Gubar's *The War of the Words* (1987), the first volume of a projected three-volume study entitled *No Man's Land*. *Women of the Left Bank* situates the lives and works of American and British literary women within the sociocultural context of expatriate life in Paris, and *The War of the Words* conducts a broad, cultural discussion of the sexual battle out of which Gilbert and Gubar believe modernism was constituted. These two works focus on the social, historical, and psychological factors that impelled women to write innovatively. But as far as we know, there has been no work attempting to outline the Anglo-American tradition of twentieth-century women's experimental fiction.

The study that has made clear to us the urgency of bringing this tradition into view is Alice A. Jardine's *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (1985). Jardine explores the intersection between feminism and what she calls "modernity" (the effect on traditional belief systems and structures of the new insights from physics, psychology, politics, and philosophy) as inscribed in experimental literature. She points out that although experimental literature and feminism share not only a profound quarrel with established, patriarchal forms, but also a sense of identification with what has been muted by these forms—what even male theorists of modernity call "the feminine"—practitioners and theorists of both camps are not interested in pursuing the issue of their similar concerns. Because it is largely invisible, few have speculated about the role that women's experimental literature plays in this crucial intersection. This literature may be the "missing link"—in some ways problematical and complex—in a chain of common inquiry and vision.

Our endeavor to encourage the pioneering exploration of this body of fiction and the issues it suggests has required the participation of the larger community of critics—feminist critics, as well as critics of the literature of modernity whose perspectives are not self-consciously feminist. Because we have not sought to impose our own perspective—outlined in the Introduction—the essays represent a greater range of methods and viewpoints, complementary and contrary, than is common to volumes of feminist criticism. In fact, the figures and works they treat are in some

cases different from those treated in the Introduction. Other variations in the essays are due to the fact that in the case of some women experimentalists, the essays in this volume represent the first critical considerations of their works, and thus some articles are by necessity introductory. What is consistent in this volume is that all of the essays explore women's experimental fiction, emphasizing its aesthetics, within the context of modernity—many, but not all, from a variety of feminist perspectives. Moreover, because it is clearly an area in which this volume can make an original contribution, the greater portion of space is given to lesser-known writers.

In the introductory essay entitled "Contexts and Continuities: An Introduction to Women's Experimental Fiction in English," we outline three generations (pre-1930, 1930-60, and post-1960) of women's experimental fiction and view them in the perspective of feminine narrative. We pay particular attention to the formal devices by which such narrative is achieved. We have had to be selective in the writers we discuss, and we may disappoint some readers by our omissions, but we hope that they will be inspired to proceed on their own. Since an exhaustive treatment of this tradition is impossible, we have tried to suggest its continuity, as well as its variety and range. In the third generation, covering writers publishing after 1960, we concentrate on figures who may not be well known in order to give them exposure. Our decision to limit the introduction to women experimentalists who write in English was made with difficulty. Women's experimentalism is an international phenomenon, with a great many compelling writers—Nathalie Sarraute, Marguerite Duras, Monique Wittig, Clarice Lispector, Luisa Valenzuela, Isabel Allende, Christa Wolf, among them. The volume's final section, "Literature in Translation," containing essays by Germaine Brée on Nathalie Sarraute and Monique Wittig, and Maria DiBattista on Marguerite Duras, provides a kind of coda, recognizing the international scope of this literature.

As has been suggested, the 18 essays that follow the introduction take diverse approaches to the experimental fiction of women. Two broad discussions of women's experimentalism comprise the "Perspectives" section of the volume. Speaking with the authority that comes from being an experimental woman writer herself, Christine Brooke-Rose in "Illiterations" examines some of the prejudicial ideas of Western intellectual history that have marginalized the experimental woman writer to the point of invisibility. She believes that male writers should learn to identify with the feminine experience and female characters, just as women have been taught to identify with the masculine experience and male characters. The result could be what Brooke-Rose calls a "delightful bisexuality." Though recognizing that all literary experimentalism serves the feminist

purpose of “changing culture by charting alternatives to hegemonic structures of consciousness,” Marianne DeKoven in “Male Signature, Female Aesthetic: The Gender Politics of Experimental Writing,” fears that a merging of the female and the male experimental traditions may not only elide works by women but also the link between feminist and experimentalist narratives, a link she believes is important to emphasize and amplify.

Gillian E. Hanscombe’s essay, “Dorothy Richardson Versus the Novvle,” opens the section of the volume entitled “First Generation: Before 1930.” Hanscombe traces the evolution of Richardson’s radical narrative, which took shape as Richardson refined her determinedly feminine aesthetics. In “WOOLFENSTEIN,” Rachel Blau DuPlessis approaches Virginia Woolf by way of Gertrude Stein, offering an astute intertextual study that links two writers generally regarded as polar opposites; the essay is also a convincing demonstration of the continuities within the women’s experimental tradition.

Essays on the second generation include that of Donna Gerstenberger who, in “The Radical Narrative of Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood*,” contends with the influential male interpretations of *Nightwood*—those of T. S. Eliot and Joseph Frank. She argues that Eliot’s conservative evaluation and Frank’s application of “spatialization” do not appreciate the degree to which Barnes subverted “conventional readings of experience.” Ellen G. Friedman’s “Breaking the Master Narrative: Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*” is an intertextual study of the resonances between Rhys’s text and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. By violating the sanctity of the “mother-text” and rupturing its smooth patriarchal outlines, Rhys recasts Brontë’s narrative, “edging the canonical with the subversive” and “the patriarchal with the feminine,” thus writing Brontë into modernity. Millicent Dillon attributes Jane Bowles’s inability to complete work on her novel *Out in the World* to a failure to recognize fragmentation as a viable narrative procedure and to a capitulation to her husband’s sense of narrative order. The essay examines Bowles’s increasing paralysis as a writer, describing her as torn between will and instinct: the conscious will to follow traditional modes, subverted by her instinct that fragmented forms better expressed her sense of experience. Linda W. Wagner-Martin attributes H.D.’s elliptical and allusive style to her attempts to make prose reveal “the idea *behind* the idea,” the woman behind the writer, the “intimate moments of being” behind any specific moment in time. Sharon Spencer shows Anaïs Nin repeatedly striving to define and practice feminine narrative. Exploring exemplary novels, Spencer proposes that Nin’s theories of lyricism, her textured imagery, and feminine subject matter converge in a style that can be characterized as “music of the womb.”

The section “Third Generation: After 1960” contains almost half of

this volume's essays; this is to emphasize the least known of the three generations of women experimental writers. Richard Martin explicates the highly innovative *Amalgamemnon* by Christine Brooke-Rose in terms of "redundancy" and "generation," the generation that is paradoxically implied by redundancy. Martin characterizes this narrative strategy as a deconstruction of "male supremacy." According to Perry Nodelman, such a sense of generation or "unending" is the quality distinguishing Joyce Carol Oates's *Bellefleur* as "feminine storytelling." Opposed to phallogentric fiction, which proceeds linearly from beginning to end, *Bellefleur* is marked by the repeated interruptions and incompletions of the multitude of tales that comprise it. Indeed, the apocalyptic ending of the novel mocks the requisite climax and resolution of traditional fiction.

Miriam Fuchs presents Marguerite Young's *Miss MacIntosh, My Darling* as an exemplary feminine narrative, built on a multileveled paradox and an amorphous, but encompassing structure. Her essay "Liquescence as Form" explores ways in which Young casts her theories of creativity in terms of fecundity but not necessarily birth—emphasizing conception over procreation, potential over fulfillment. Philip Stevick's study of Ann Quin, who committed suicide in 1972, illuminates the disturbing mode in which Quin represents consciousness in the four novels that make up her life's work—a mode Stevick views as unique, evoking a consciousness that is at the same time personalized, eroticized, fragmented, transforming, and operating on "several levels of discourse simultaneously." Focusing on minimalist writers Maxine Chernoff and Lydia Davis, Marjorie Perloff investigates their attempts to mediate between what they see as a necessary return to the "real" and their acceptance of the assumptions underlying experimentalism, a mediation between the referential impulse of words and the absolute impossibility to fix the reference of words. Perloff views this attempt as a new direction in fiction, which she designates as "post experimental."

In defining the space in which Marguerite Duras unfolds her fiction, Maria DiBattista appropriates Duras's word "clandestine," the "domain (assigned or preferred?) of women's literature, the literature of an unknown and . . . unformulated language, the 'silence of women.'" Kathy Acker is more aggressive in defining female fictional space. According to Larry McCaffery, not the clandestine but the outlawed is the context for her "delirious" narratives. Against a collection of punk, feminist, and experimentalist manifestoes, McCaffery defines and measures Acker's radical texts. Kathleen Fraser explores Barbara Guest's *Seeking Air* as a fictional space comprised of elements that break the narrative surface, fragmenting it into a collage of "half-seen clues," "collapsed chapters," and "reframed genres"—methods by which the authority of traditional narrative patterns is interrogated. Germaine Brée examines Nathalie Sar-

raute and Monique Wittig, both of whom reshape the contours of fiction by infusing it with sensations that ordinarily lie below consciousness. Saraute excavates what she calls the inner “magma” of the psyche through prevocal impulses and “subconversations,” while Wittig finds literary strategies that uncover lesbian “truths,” compelling readers to experience them as “truths,” not as “stories” outside and separate from their own traditions.

The volume ends with a list—organized by generations—of primary works by writers considered in this volume and by lesser-known contemporary, “third-generation” experimentalists writing in English who are not considered in this volume. We offer the expanded third-generation list in the hope that it will open up some paths of investigation for interested readers.

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NOTE

1. This task is described by Nancy K. Miller as an “archaeological and rehabilitative act . . . [toward] a reconstituted record of precession and prefiguration . . .” (“Emphasis Added: Plots and Plausibilities” 342).

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INTRODUCTION

Contexts and Continuities: An Introduction to Women's Experimental Fiction in English

ELLEN G. FRIEDMAN AND
MIRIAM FUCHS

THE search for or theorizing of an exemplary feminine literary discourse has occupied both Continental and American critics. American critics have sought this discourse in the muted themes of women writers, particularly of the nineteenth-century.¹ They have found that women writers expressed dissatisfaction with or ambivalence toward prevailing ideas of appropriate behavior in fiction and life through covert means—subtexts, minor characters, patterns of imagery that undermine or question the values that the surface plot and major characters seem to confirm. For instance, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar see Jane Austen's deep ambivalence toward prevailing values in the "duplicity" of the "happy endings" of her novels, "in which she brings her couples to the brink of bliss in such haste . . . or with such sarcasm that the entire message seems undercut" (*Madwoman* 169). Thus, Jane Austen and, as feminist literary criticism has revealed, other women writers provided mainly (and not always with full awareness) hidden or disguised challenges to patriarchal notions of fiction. Having turned their attention in recent studies to twentieth-century writers, American critics have searched for similar covert inscriptions. A trend in Gertrude Stein criticism, for instance, has been to suggest that her radical aesthetics were formulated to disguise her lesbianism.² By emphasizing the ways in which the text holds the particular writer's life or psychology, this way of viewing women's writing has advanced the cause of finding the woman in the text. At the same time, however, it overlooks other, perhaps broader achievements in producing feminine narrative. Although the woman in the text may be the particular woman writer, in the case of twentieth-century women experimental writers, the woman in the text is also an effect of the textual practice of breaking patriarchal fictional forms; the radical forms—nonlinear, non-hierarchical, and decentering—are, in themselves, a way of writing the feminine.³ In subverting traditional modes of narrative, writers from Ger-

trude Stein, Dorothy Richardson, and Virginia Woolf to Christine Brooke-Rose, Eva Figes, and Kathy Acker have been undermining the patriarchal assumptions that inform these narrative modes. Plot linearity that implies a story's purposeful forward movement; a single, authoritative storyteller; well-motivated characters interacting in recognizable social patterns; the crucial conflict deterring the protagonist from the ultimate goal; the movement to closure—all are parts of dominant fictional structure. Since this fiction is metonymic, reflecting cultural values in its order and progression, its themes and ideals, this fiction represents patriarchal mastery in Western culture. In exploding dominant forms, women experimental writers not only assail the social structure, but also produce an alternate 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, and the feminine narrative resulting from such rupture is allied with the feminist project.

The subject of feminine narrative occupied early women experimentalists, particularly Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf, who attempted to carve out a new fictional territory, a territory of difference and otherness in which the feminine would reign. Richardson explicitly associated the modes of her fiction with what she called "feminine prose," a fluid, interior narrative reflecting a woman's mind. Woolf, criticizing the lack of a female literary tradition and dissatisfied with the conventional novel as a vehicle for women's experiences, called for sentences and narratives that were "rightly shaped for [a woman's] use" (*Room* 80). In charting a feminine aesthetic, both writers were well aware they were developing techniques for a new fiction that innovative male writers, such as Joyce and Proust, also wrote (Woolf, "Modern Fiction" 106–07). Richardson even refers to Joyce's "feminine prose" in her 1938 Foreword to *Pilgrimage* (10, 12).

French women critics such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray have taken up the issue of "feminine prose."⁴ Rather than looking at specific works, these critics—for the most part— theorize. They call for a feminine literature, *écriture féminine*, that "writes the body" by imitating the rhythms and sexuality of women. Disrupting conventional narrative, this writing is nonlinear, polyphonic, open-ended, subverts hegemonic forms, and arises, in Julia Kristeva's terms, out of the "semiotic"—pre-Oedipal primary processes.⁵ These theorists have rarely applied their ideas to women writers and often exemplify their theories with male models—Joyce, Proust, Lautréamont—thus leading to the improbable situation of women literary critics proposing that feminine writing has been accomplished mainly by men.⁶

American feminists regard theories of *écriture féminine* with interest, but Nancy K. Miller and Elaine Showalter view them largely as an “ideal”—something for the future of women’s literature.⁷ It seems likely that there are critics in both groups who would agree that if one locates the politics of writing in textual practice, the experimentalists, if they were women, would be the most exemplary writers.⁸

Moreover, the manifestoes of the (male) experimentalist canon, in substance, are nearly indistinguishable from Cixous’s well-known manifesto, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” for *écriture féminine*. In *Surfiction*, Raymond Federman writes, “The most striking aspect of the new fiction will be its semblance of disorder. . . . [I]t will be . . . illogical, irrational, unrealistic, non sequitur, and incoherent” (13). In more poetic language, Cixous presents a similar vision of narrative: writers “must . . . wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes . . . take pleasure in jumbling the order of space, in disorienting it, in changing around the furniture, dislocating things and values, breaking them all up, emptying structures, and turning propriety upside down” (886–87). Thus, the critics of the experimentalist canon and both American and French feminist critics define an ideal literature similarly. However, they all have overlooked the long tradition of women who have attempted to write this literature, despite the historical evidence that from the beginning the feminine and the experimentalist aesthetics were linked by common techniques, some common roots (Richardson and Woolf), and the common purpose of subverting traditional modes of discourse.

This neglect of women innovators is partially a legacy of modernism as interpreted through its male critics. Although Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein have been credited with helping to formulate experimental fiction, the credit inadequately expresses their achievements since they are commonly described as having been second, if not secondary, to Joyce and Proust. T. S. Eliot set the pattern for such judgments in his famous declaration that with the “immense prodigy” of *Ulysses*, Joyce had “killed the nineteenth century,” leaving nothing more to accomplish (Eliott 528). This judgment, almost universally taken up, left no doubt that modernism for fiction had a monarch and had the effect of diminishing the achievements of Joyce’s contemporaries. Thereafter, Woolf and Stein appeared as after images, even imitators. In the very early study *The Novel and the Modern World* published in 1939, David Daiches proposed a minor standing for Virginia Woolf and reaffirmed this position in the “Preface” to the 1960 edition.⁹ In the face of such judgments, Woolf embraced the role of “outsider,” a position she rationalized as liberating (*Writer’s Diary* 292). Less resigned to a marginal position, Stein met Joyce’s challenge to her reputation as “arch-experimentalist” with the

futile question, “But who came first, Gertrude Stein or James Joyce? Do not forget that my first great book, *Three Lives*, was published in 1908.¹⁰ That was long before *Ulysses*” (Ellmann 528–29).

Despite their pioneering work, women were cut out or subordinated in the first assessments of early twentieth-century experimentalism, fixing the response to succeeding generations of women. However, this neglect is also partially a legacy of the last decades of feminist criticism, which has hunted subtexts and muted texts to uncover a feminine discourse while overlooking the texts by women experimentalists who may be writing that discourse in deliberate, open, and varied ways.

Alice Jardine in *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* probes the conjunction of modernity and feminism. Modernity (including the epistemological assumptions governing modernist and postmodernist writing) has forced a “crisis-in-narrative” by calling into question the Western paternal disciplines (or narratives) of philosophy, religion, and history. The loss of belief in, and consequent delegitimation of, these paternal narratives has provoked an exploration of “newly contoured fictional spaces” (69), spaces not dominated by discursive rationality but by multiplicity and difference. Construed by theorists such as Jacques Derrida as other-than-logocentric, these spaces have been designated as feminine. Woman, therefore, is at the core of the resulting discourse and thus “intrinsic to new and necessary modes of thinking, writing, speaking” (25). However, as Jardine points out, despite the fact that the feminine is central to the discourse of modernity, theorists of modernity and feminist literary critics resist acknowledging the similarities in their projects (61)—a resistance animated by the difference between “woman” (an abstraction) and flesh and blood “women.” Theorists are interested in “woman” as an object of inquiry, but not necessarily in “women”; feminists, on the other hand, are interested in “women,” but suspicious of the theorists’ use of “woman.” The natural convergence of “woman” and “women” would seem to take place in women’s experimental narratives. Thus addressing the question posed by Jardine, “What happens when women take over this discourse [of modernity] in the name of woman?” (263) could begin with a reading of these works. The possible significance of a joint venture between modernity and feminism is articulated by Jardine: “The potentials for modernity and feminism to unite in their efforts are strong and exciting primarily because . . . the theories and practices of modernity, *when taken up by female voices*, become strangely and irresistibly subversive, promising new questions and answers unburdened . . . by the dominant ideology in the West” (258). The implications for feminism and modernity certainly seem compelling enough to warrant a persistent examination—with particular attentiveness to their radical aes-

thetics—of the works of modernity that women have produced. In addition to the promise of expanded horizons for feminine discourse, such investigations may eventually provide the impetus for a new alliance between male and female writing based, after so many centuries, on privileging feminine discourse with which writers of both sexes can write their lives and times. However, before such a utopia can be seriously entertained, over 80 years of women's experimental narratives need to be recovered and recognized.

In addition to Woolf, Richardson, and Stein, there has been a steady and strong tradition of women experimentalists. Subverting closure, logic, and fixed, authoritarian points of view, they undermine patriarchal forms and help fulfill the prophecy of a truly feminine discourse, one practiced by women. Their innovations stretch from the exploded syntax of Gertrude Stein to the anarchistic narrative collages of Kathy Acker; they include Dorothy Richardson's stream of consciousness, Djuna Barnes's flat, dehumanized characterization, and Anaïs Nin's blurring of genres among numerous other innovators and innovations.

Women experimentalists can be grouped into three generations, according to the publication dates of the most substantial portion of their work. Such generational grouping clarifies the evolution and continuity of this tradition and also focuses the similarities and differences among contemporaries. The reason for classifying according to publication dates is that classification according to birthdates is not particularly useful with these writers since some did not publish until late in life and some have big gaps between works. For instance, although Marguerite Young was born in 1909, only 27 years after Virginia Woolf, she did not publish her epic novel, *Miss MacIntosh, My Darling*, until 1965, 24 years after Woolf's death. Born in 1894, Jean Rhys published four novels by 1939 but did not publish her fifth until 1966, a gap of 27 years between *Good Morning, Midnight* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

The writers in the first generation produced a substantial body of work before 1930. This group includes Dorothy Richardson (1873–1957), Gertrude Stein (1874–1946), and Virginia Woolf (1882–1941). The writers in the second generation produced a substantial body of work between 1930 and 1960. Four major figures of this group include Djuna Barnes (1892–1982), Jean Rhys (1894–1979), Anaïs Nin (1903–77), and Jane Bowles (1917–73); H.D. (1886–1961) straddles the first two generations since she wrote experimental novels in the twenties, thirties, and forties (though some were published decades after they were composed), but seems by temperament and practice, at least in her novels, to belong here. The third-generation writers include Christine Brooke-Rose, Marguerite Young, Kathy Acker, Eva Figes, Marianne Hauser, Ursule Moli-

naro, Lydia Davis, Maxine Chernoff, Ann Quin—all of whom are not well known—as well as many more, some better known such as Susan Sontag, whose major work was published after 1960.

Once manifest, the tradition of experimental women writers alters received ideas of the beginnings of modernism in fiction. The singularity of the few dates and works that comprise the old timeline fades—1913, *Remembrance of Things Past*; 1916, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*; and 1922, *Ulysses*—as the dates and works of women arrive. The new timeline begins earlier with *Three Lives* in 1909. Nineteen-fourteen, the year of *Dubliners*, is also the year in which Stein published *Tender Buttons*, a virtuoso display of the possibilities of language in contrast to Joyce's collection, which still reflects nineteenth-century forms. In 1915 *Pointed Roofs*, the first volume of Richardson's *Pilgrimage*, appeared. Additionally, *Ulysses* shares 1922 with Woolf's first experimental work, *Jacob's Room*, and Stein's *Geography and Plays*. Other years and works populate the timeline: *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Making of Americans* were published in 1925; H.D.'s *Palimpsest* in 1926; and Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* in 1927.

Presence on the timeline, accorded by publication dates, does not fully reveal the extent to which women practiced the new fiction, since women's books habitually did not see print until many years, sometimes decades, after composition. A sense of this phenomenon gives urgency to the task of recovery and revision. For instance, although H.D. finished *HERMIONE* in 1927, it was first published in 1981. Stein composed the first draft of *The Making of Americans* in 1903, while Joyce began *Portrait* in 1904, but a crucial and regrettable fact of literary history is that Stein's book was not published until nine years after Joyce's, and then in an abridged version, thus dulling its impact as an early experiment. Still another 40 years passed before the unabridged edition made its way into print. Yet Stein was writing years before many other experimentalists were attempting their first, tentative steps, and her early use of repetition, accretion, and nonlinearity, in addition to her grammatical dislocations, point to her pioneering role in shaping the new fictional spaces.

Even when publication was timely, women's achievements were often diminished by either the kind of attention they received or the slippage from it. Stein, for instance, experimented with narrative almost as soon as she arrived in Paris from the United States. *Tender Buttons*, complete by 1912, was in print nearly four years before *Ulysses* began to appear in *Little Review*. Both works created a furor. But the public's response to *Tender Buttons* was parody; *Life* magazine even ran a series of Stein imitations (*Autobiography* 171). She became a figure of fun. Joyce, on the other hand, was regarded as morally dangerous; his book was censored

and confiscated, the subject of serious action and serious debate over serious issues. Richardson also achieved a good deal of attention during her lifetime; though regarded as an eccentric and difficult writer, she interested serious readers of fiction who watched for each volume of *Pilgrimage*. Richardson began work on *Pointed Roofs* in 1912. By the time *Ulysses* was published, six books of *Pilgrimage* had already appeared in print. Along with Joyce, she was serialized in *Little Review*. When the June 1919 issue was seized by the United States Postal Service because it contained a section of *Ulysses*, her installment of *Interim* was seized as well (Fromm 65, 118–19). The fame Richardson had 50 years ago has now dissolved, and she is generally regarded as an obscure woman writer, occasionally remembered as a practitioner of the stream-of-consciousness technique.

In studies of modernism, Virginia Woolf is the only one of the three women pioneers habitually considered with Joyce and Proust, but often not as their equal. Leon Edel expresses this view quite clearly: “I think of *Mrs. Dalloway* as a Joycean novel, diluted, and washed and done in beautiful water-color; and *To the Lighthouse* is Proustian in its time sense, but again the medium is a kind of water-color of the emotions” (128). The now critical clichés that her fiction illustrates innovative techniques that others pioneered and is flawed by its narrow scope are typified in the comments of David Daiches who found Woolf handicapped by her circumscribed subject matter, implying *female* subject matter: “delicate rendering of the different shades of experience” (*Novel* 189). *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* may focus on women and, to some extent, their private musings, but—it must be added—so does *Moby-Dick* focus on men and the male activity of whaling. Daiches’s comment—if readers “have not been captured by the initial appeal of the texture . . . there is nothing more to be said. . . . [O]ne’s response to her novels will depend in the last analysis on one’s temperament”—reveals the kind of masculine bias contributing to the invisibility of women in the experimentalist tradition (191).

Unlike their male counterparts, early women innovators exercised distance and caution in their relations with one another, providing perhaps another partial explanation of their particular status in literary history.¹¹ These three women attempted to make their way independently of one another, each working to alter the course of Western fiction. In a self-addressed pep talk, Woolf writes, “I can take my way: experiment with my own imagination in my own way” (*Writer’s Diary* 292). They never attempted even a loose association, let alone declaring a movement. The record of their public acknowledgments of one another is meager. Of the three, Woolf was the most generous. Reviewing *Revolving Lights* (1923),

the seventh volume of *Pilgrimage*, Woolf praised Richardson's sentence "capable . . . of enveloping the vaguest shapes" ("Romance and the Heart" 124). Although she applauded Richardson's techniques, her judgment of Richardson's achievement was ambivalent, as evidenced in her 1919 review of *The Tunnel*:

That Miss Richardson gets so far as to achieve a sense of reality far greater than that produced by the ordinary means is undoubted. But, then, which reality is it, the superficial or the profound. . . . When we are in a position to make up our minds we cannot deny a slight sense of disappointment . . . We want to be rid of realism . . . and further require that Miss Richardson shall fashion this new material into something which has the shapeliness of the old accepted forms. We are asking too much; but the extent of our asking proves that *The Tunnel* is much better in its failure than most books in their success. (121-22)¹²

The coolness of this public assessment seems more emphatic when compared with the camaraderie of Pound's salutary response to Eliot's *The Waste Land*. The relations among the women never warranted the kind of tribute that Eliot gives to Pound with "*il miglior fabbro*." Woolf did not review Richardson's fiction after 1923, and for her part, Richardson maintained a careful distance from Woolf. Without naming her, she alludes to Woolf in the 1938 Foreword to *Pilgrimage*, although she does name Proust and Henry James. Moreover, she turned down the opportunity to review Woolf's *The Years* (1937) (misspelling Woolf's name in the letter), asserting, as Gloria Fromm reports in her Richardson biography, that "none of [Woolf's] preceding books had moved her deeply, and . . . in spite of her admiration for the work . . . the book [should be] in the hands of someone to whom she meant a good deal." At the same time, she accepted an offer to review Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* despite the months of intensive study the task required (Fromm 319).

In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), which comments on and gossips about dozens of artists and writers, Stein does not refer to either Woolf or Richardson, though the Hogarth Press published Stein's *Composition As Explanation* in 1926. Stein's reputation for encouraging other women writers is not exemplary. The struggling American journalist and writer Djuna Barnes complained bitterly about Stein's insulting reception of her: "D'you know what she said of me? Said I had beautiful legs! Now what does that have to do with anything?" (Field 104).

Each of the three women was responsible for a radical reformulation of narrative. Together, they constitute a formidable force in the development of new ways of writing and thinking, a force the significance of which is clouded by their self-sustained, though relative, isolation from

one another. In contrast, the largely male Imagist and Vorticist circles were supportive of their members: Pound cut and shaped *The Waste Land*, published William Carlos Williams, Richard Aldington, and H.D. in *Poetry*, and got sections of *Portrait* and *Dubliners* into *The Egoist*. In the 1930s Stein sold a work by Picasso to finance the publication of five of her books, and she did not find a major American publisher until she was fifty-nine years old (Kostelanetz xxix). Woolf knew quite well the significance of the Hogarth Press: "I'm the only woman in England free to write what I like. The others must be thinking of series & editors" (*Diary* 3: 43).

Perhaps one result of this complicated history of coolness and distance is their location in literary history as theorists who exercised their ideas in works. Richardson's reputation, for instance, is based on her Foreword to *Pilgrimage* in which she outlines her new form. However, seen together as the progenitors of a tradition, in their theories and practice, Richardson, Woolf, and Stein defined and exemplified the new fiction, providing arenas of revolution, spaces in which the West's prevailing conceptual structures were renounced with the renunciation of established narrative forms; such renunciation was also the enunciation of the feminine presence in writing and culture.

FIRST GENERATION

Although Richardson deliberately embarked on a "fresh pathway," she appears to state her goal quite modestly: to create a "feminine equivalent of the current masculine realism" (Foreword 9–10). But no one should underestimate what she meant by feminine realism—nothing less than a fiction written about women, exclusively by women, anticipating the call by some feminists for a literature in which a woman, as Claudine Herrmann writes, can "conserve some space for herself, a sort of *no man's land*, which constitutes precisely what men fail to understand of her" (169). The task of the woman writer was immense, for Richardson believed there were no models upon which to base her work. Her approach was at least twofold. First, she presented details of a woman's life—concerns with domestic chores, friends, gossip, and clothing as suitable for literature. Second, she reproduced—rather than described or summarized—those concerns without poeticizing or generalizing them. In other words, the prose had to *be* her protagonist's thoughts.¹³

In order to explore a woman's space, what she called feminine "contemplated reality," Richardson imitated the movement of the female mind as it drifts through memory and the perception of the sensible world (Foreword 9–10), thus inventing what the novelist May Sinclair, borrow-

ing a term from William James, called the “stream of consciousness” (57–58). When she adopted this technique, Richardson changed the nature of the novel. In reproducing a character’s thoughts without authorial revelation of their significance or relation to the rest of the text, the authoritarian and omniscient gave way to the tentative and impressionistic.¹⁴

Accommodating the flow of consciousness demanded other departures from conventional narrative. Richardson developed a fluid prose, unrestrained by unnecessary punctuation or other inhibiting “stereotyped . . . signs.” As she describes it, she means her narrative to flow from “point to point without formal obstructions” (Foreword 12). Thus the thoughts and perceptions of her protagonist Miriam Henderson stream unimpeded through 13 volumes and 2,000 pages.¹⁵

Richardson not only challenged conventions of grammar, but also abandoned traditional plot structure. In its place, she constructed a fluid chronicle of multiple climaxes and resolutions, but no definite beginning, middle, and end.¹⁶ To the repeated disappointment of her contemporary readers, Richardson’s *Pilgrimage* has no ending. The first volume published in 1915, the novel was still in progress at the time of her death in 1957. If she had lived beyond her 84 years and if her health had been better, *Pilgrimage* might have been longer, and still incomplete. By refusing to move her narrative to closure, she took a brave and iconoclastic route, for closure in the traditional novel usually means that the heroine gets married, goes mad, or dies. Richardson’s protagonist, Miriam, merely goes on. She develops, grows wiser and more complex. *Pilgrimage* confirmed that novels no longer required closure; they could be open-ended. In subverting the traditional plot, Richardson not only rescued her heroine from the inevitable structures of conventional fiction, but also helped carve a fictional space free enough so that the feminine could be expressed.

In *A Literature of Their Own*, Showalter writes about the necessity of demystifying “the legend of Virginia Woolf.” In this view, the careful introspection and lyricism, which for many readers define Woolf’s fiction, have provided a suffocating ideal for subsequent women writers. In “Professions for Women,” Woolf exhorts the woman writer to kill the Angel in the House, that is, to reject the traditional idea of woman. When the Angel guides the pen of a woman writer, she cannot portray reality as she sees it, only as she “ought” to see it (236–38). Showalter astutely observes that just as Jane Austen played the Angel for George Eliot and Charlotte Brontë, Woolf has played the Angel for mid-twentieth-century writers.¹⁷ This iconization of Woolf as quintessential *female* author, together with her reputation as a secondary experimentalist, has clouded a sense of her total achievement. It has allowed, on the one hand, attention

to focus too narrowly on her introspective female protagonists, especially Mrs. Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay, and on the other hand, allowed a dismissal of her more difficult works as interesting exercises but imperfect art.¹⁸

Viewed as a whole, however, her novels may be seen as having opened up narrative possibility for subsequent writers, especially innovative writers, and are in themselves forceful and progressively radical experiments in feminine narrative, which also confront the issues of her world. In each novel she foregrounds what in conventional formats would be muted and invisible. For example, in *Mrs. Dalloway* she looks between the spaces of clock time, expanding the moment, flooding it with the consciousnesses of a small number of characters. She breaks the metronome of time, making room for the ebb and flow of thought and memory, both stretching the moment and conflating the past and the present. *Mrs. Dalloway* also stretches outward to the world—to the effects of social roles, class, colonialism, and World War I. Woolf expresses her intent in her *Diary*: “I want to give life & death, sanity & insanity; I want to criticise the social system, & to show it at work, at its most intense . . .” (2: 248). Though the narrative takes place over the short course of a day, Woolf succeeds in embracing a broad, as well as deep, reality; it is a fiction that includes, not excludes.

On the surface *The Years* (1937) seems Woolf’s most externally focused narrative. Bristling with numerous settings and characters, the novel is encyclopedic, yet web-like rather than linear. It follows members of the Pargiter family and their friends from Victorian times deep into the twentieth century, covering the period from 1880 to 1936, and the various characters, and their progeny and friends, become registers of the development of modern consciousness, as well as of the progress of history. But progress and development are not rendered through the cause-and-effect logic of events and their aftermath, but through reconciliations and ruptures and the confluence and clash of shifting moments and shifting attitudes. Described by Howard Spring, one of its reviewers, as “the very flesh and bones, the blood and marrow of history” (377), *The Years* moves toward no final, essential explanation.¹⁹ Instead, Woolf offers history as meaning deferred, as multiplicity and interplay, an alternative to history as a master narrative of heroes and quests.²⁰

Woolf’s move toward an increasingly abstract or anti novel, which culminates in *The Waves*, begins early and radically with *Jacob’s Room* (1922). Woolf builds this work around a central character Jacob, who is absent. His portrait is drawn from the echoes, imprints, and shadows left in the places he has been and in the memories of the people who knew

him. After Jacob dies as a soldier in World War I, the only palpable evidence that he existed is his room, which he left as if sure he would return.

The Waves (1931), Woolf's daring attempt to do without the props of traditional narrative—particularly distinct characters and plot—is perhaps of all her works the most marked by the semiotic—the rhythmic, disruptive, and ephemeral welling up from the unconscious—in its narrative strategy. Bernard, the name Woolf gives to one of the novel's six voices, describes her narrative method by which unconscious pulsations are unleashed and engender her feminine narrative: "The crystal, the globe of life as one calls it, far from being hard and cold to the touch, has walls of thinnest air. If I press them all will burst" (354). As Woolf pressed the walls of the globe of fiction in *The Waves*, the boundary between inner and outer reality collapsed, giving way to an ensemble of disembodied voices. "What a symphony, with its concord and its discord and its tunes on top and its complicated bass beneath" (354). These voices are incantatory, more like poetic reflections than dialogue. Direct action, dramatic exchange, individual characterization are abandoned, dissolved into voices "running homogeneously in & out, in the rhythm of the waves" (*Diary* 3: 312).

Among the most undervalued of Woolf's works is *Orlando* (1928). Regarded or dismissed as a lighthearted valentine for Vita Sackville-West, the novel is as radical, deep, and imaginative a deviation from novelistic convention as *The Waves*, which it predates—though quite dissimilar. In her other novels, Woolf rejected the "ill-fitting vestments" of traditional forms because she believed neither reality nor women's life rhythms could be contained in them ("Modern Fiction" 105). Her method's purpose was a deeper verisimilitude than could be approximated with older forms.

In *Orlando*, however, she abandons verisimilitude to test the possibilities of antirealism as another means of shattering master narratives—here, the "narratives" of historical time, gender, race, and class. The novel depicts a metamorphic central protagonist who changes sex and is unhampered by the limitation of a human lifespan. After nearly 400 years, Orlando, who begins in the novel as a young man, is a woman in her thirties. This novel presaged a definite direction in the innovative novel, the picaresque and entropic impulse. It is an unusual book, even for Woolf, though experimentalists who follow her—Djuna Barnes and Kathy Acker, for example—make use of the hermaphroditic protagonist, the superficial, cartoon-like depiction of rapidly changing external events, and the violation of temporal and spatial verisimilitude, accommodating difference and otherness through an antirealistic mode.

Perhaps more than any other modernist fiction writer, Woolf was a

brilliant theorist. Woolf's most prophetic and far-reaching proposal for a new fiction is in *A Room of One's Own* (1929). Here she creates Mary Carmichael, an imaginary woman writer who tampers with the expected sequence of narratives by "breaking" it. Carmichael, Woolf's alter ego, "set to work to catch those unrecorded gestures, those unsaid or half-said words, which form themselves, no more palpably than the shadows of moths on the ceiling, when women are alone, unlit by the capricious and colored light of the other sex" (88). To break the sequence is to rupture conventional structures of meaning by which the patriarchy reigns in order to give presence and voice to what was denied and repressed.

The implications of breaking the sequence extend to nearly all of experimental fiction. Djuna Barnes, for instance, breaks chronology by condensing and expanding time erratically. Time moves very rapidly in the first four chapters of *Nightwood* and then comes to a sudden halt in the monologues that follow. More recently, Kathy Acker's feminist punk narratives not only break narrative sequence, but violate all sense of fictional decorum, taking Woolf's idea to an extreme. Acker's *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula by the Black Tarantula* (1975) is a self-reflexive collage of plagiarized material, original fiction, pornography, and autobiography—there is no central conflict, no traditional protagonist, only a metamorphosing first-person voice. The line of development from *Orlando* and Mary Carmichael to the work of Acker seems clear. Thus, although the *legend* of Virginia Woolf may represent a suffocating ideal, the real Woolf provided instruction and strategies for feminine narrative.

Writers are still catching up to some of the innovations of Gertrude Stein, and her practices often seem anticipatory when a new literary development comes into view. Stein's focus on the "wordness" of words; her emphasis on sound, rhythm, and repetition as bearing the weight of progression and meaning; the absence in her work of linearity, conventional syntax, and climactic development; and the fusion in some works of lyric and prose are qualities that mark her prophesying aesthetics. Her writing exemplified and prefigured the ways in which the delegitimation of the paternal fictions could be expressed in literature—through necessary and radical ruptures in language and narrative. As Catharine R. Stimpson has astutely noted, her writing means the "very discovery of difference" (4). Indeed, the new writing movements (such as Language Poetry or *écriture féminine*) that center on language as the means of achieving revolutionary or at least new modes of discourse frequently employ Steinian techniques.²¹ Some of the terms of *écriture féminine* were anticipated by Stein's theories of composition—that narratives be written in a prolonged or continuous present (*What Are Masterpieces* 16–17); that paragraphs and punctuation be relinquished for a sense of whole-

ness; and that texts should have “evenness,” everything in them have the same value (“The Gradual Making” 257–58). Although, unlike Woolf and Richardson, she does not cast her theories in terms of gender, the literature she proposed—compositions countering hierarchy, countering *telos*, and freeing words of their associations—describes “writing the feminine,” as well as writing that subverts patriarchal discourse.²²

Like Woolf’s *The Waves*, with which it has few surface resemblances, Stein’s work is marked by the semiotic. In Kristeva’s words, “The semiotic is articulated by flow and marks . . . energy transfers, the cutting up of the corporeal and social continuum as well as that of signifying material” (*Revolution* 40). *Tender Buttons* embodies such articulation by presenting (not representing) impressionistic renderings of isolated objects—a seltzer bottle, a cut of roast beef, an umbrella. Stein summons up a petticoat, for instance, with “A light white, a disgrace, an ink spot, a rosy charm” (*Selected Writings* 471), constructing a linguistic collage that does not describe as much as it creates a charged impression—like an abstract piece of sculpture. “A cool red rose and a pink cut pink, a collapse and a sold hole, a little less hot” (472) is a collection of color and texture. By force of habit, a reader could impose a storyline on these words. (Fresh cut roses are attractively displayed in a florist’s shop. Someone purchases them late in the day, when the roses have begun to wilt. If the purchaser looks carefully, the rose petals are bent backwards, exposing a hole in the center of each flower.) Stein distrusted the imperiousness in the tendency to impose narratives: “The narrative in itself is not what is in your mind but what is in somebody else’s” (*What Are Masterpieces* 102). She designed her syntax so that a reader would be compelled to experience the raw image evoked by her verbal composition before attempting to construct a linear narrative for it. Since the interplay of colors, temperatures, actions, and sounds in her image makes a more dynamic and concentrated linguistic structure than any possible imposed narrative, the narrative, once constructed, has no more force than an explanatory footnote, no more legitimacy than a forgery.

The recent phenomenon of Language Poetry also evokes Stein in its emphasis on composition, the privileging of words, exploded syntax, sound arrangements, and “rhythmic recurrence” (Perloff 18). For example, the style of language poet Charles Bernstein in “The Sheds of Our Webs” suggests the style of Stein in works like *Tender Buttons* and *Geography and Plays*, not least—as Marjorie Perloff suggests—in the impression of poetry being put through a “Cuisinart” (16). Compare Bernstein’s “Floating on completely vested time, a lacrima / To which abandon skirts another answer / Or part of but not returned” to Stein’s, “A peal is that mountain which makes a ring and is ringing. / There is no