‘Idiotic admonitions and unwanted counsels’: Virginia Woolf’s spat with *Life and Letters*

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Abstract: Reviewing Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* for *Life and Letters*, Peter Quennell draws attention to where he himself is cited in Woolf’s text with reference to an earlier (anonymous) review he wrote for *Life and Letters* on women novelists. He takes the opportunity to identify (by his initials at least) and defend himself. In exploring this heated exchange, a concrete example of the dialogism of Woolf’s text, this paper examines the gender politics of the quarrel and the key rhetorical tropes that both sides engage, arguing that the figurative terms employed in *Life and Letter*’s critique of women’s writing (canine and feline metaphors) were the common cultural currency of anti-feminism and a significant focus for Woolf’s revisionary feminist aesthetics in *A Room of One’s Own* and beyond. Woolf’s spat with *Life and Letters* fuels her further revisionary feminist canine troping. **Part 1** of this paper introduces *Life and Letters*; **Part 2** is on its editor Desmond MacCarthy and Woolf ; **Part 3** its reviewer, Peter Quennell and Woolf.

Part 1: *Life and Letters* : an Introduction

There was a short-lived general literary review called *Life and Letters* published in London and Manchester between November 1923 and August1924, but it is not to be confused with the more successful and enduring *Life and Letters* that was launched in June 1928 by the Hon. Oliver Brett (later 3rd Viscount Esher), and edited by Desmond

MacCarthy, 1928-1934 (MacCarthy relinquished editorship of the *New Statesman* to take this on); Hamish Miles, 1934; R. Ellis Roberts, 1934-1935; Robert Herring and Petrie Townshend, 1935-1936; and Robert Herring alone, 1937-1950. *Life and Letters* absorbed *The London Mercury* in May 1939. Its title variants were: *Life and Letters Today* (Sept. 1935-June 1945), and *Life and Letters and the London Mercury and Bookman* (July 1945-Jan.1946). It is the first phase of *Life and Letters* under the editorship of Woolf's Bloomsbury colleague, Desmond MacCarthy, that is my focus. My paper looks at a sampling of reviews and editorials on women's fiction from the early years of the magazine.

Cyril Connolly later recalled the publication of *Life and Letters* as "the literary event of the late twenties", but his diary for 1928 is less kind, likening it to a literary *Punch* magazine and finding it as "august and readable as any late Victorian arse wiper, and as daring and original as a new kind of barley water." (Cecil 229). David Miller and Richard Price include *Life and Letters* in their (2006) bibliography of little magazines but conclude that it is "not a true little magazine, in that it was published on a commercial footing", but they deem it "a significant literary journal, particularly strong in the early years on Bloomsbury authors, and then, in the 1930s, on the poets of 'the Auden generation'" (Miller and Price 108). The first volume of *Life and Letters* in fact featured several dead writers from the 19th century, publishing posthumously essays by George Santayana and Thomas Hardy and a memoir of Andrew Lang by the still living Max Beerbohm. But thereafter MacCarthy's (often regular) contributors included Virginia Woolf, Clive Bell, Aldous Huxley, Cyril Connolly, Sherwood Anderson, André Maurois,Vernon Lee, Robert Byron, David Cecil, Erich Maria Remarque, Lytton

Strachey, Vita Sackville-West, E.M. Forster, Hope Mirrlees, David Garnett, Dilys Powell, Roy Campbell, Arnold Bennett, Peter Quennell, Bertrand Russell, Robert Graves, Hilaire Belloc, Osbert Sitwell, Edith Wharton. MacCarthy made space for long literary essays and for reports on American and European literature, including crime fiction and thrillers as well as for occasional short fiction and poems. There were regular bibliographies on earlier literature and on key writers, thinkers or movements (eg: Donne; Ibsen, clairvoyance).

MacCarthy's biographers, Hugh and Mirabel Cecil, note the growing reputation of his *Life and Letters* "as an original and entertaining journal stirring public interest", and publishing "brilliant, young" and "avant-garde" writers. They also point up MacCarthy's use of the magazine to mount a "cogent attack on government censorship of books and plays", and his brave championing of Radclyffe Hall's *Well of Loneliness* and D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterly's Lover*, and of his joining Bertrand Russell in condemning censorship at the Congress of the World League for Sexual Reform in London in 1929 (Cecil 226-227). So it may seem a little churlish of me to be talking about the contribution of *Life and Letters* to the common cultural currency of anti-feminism. But, even the Cecils acknowledge that MacCarthy's "pioneering mood did not stay with him" (227), and his defence of Hall couches homosexuality in the terms of pathological aberration and abnormality, dwelling on the "normal instincts in normal people" and "the emotions which the abnormal person recognizes as the noblest he, or she, is capable of feeling".

Part 2: Virginia Woolf and Desmond MacCarthy

Woolf was both published and reviewed in MacCarthy's *New Statesman* and his *Life and Letters*, but there were notorious frictions between these Bloomsbury colleagues, not least because as "Affable Hawk", in the *New Statesman*, MacCarthy had sided with Arnold Bennett in his estimation of women's natural intellectual inferiority to men. He published Woolf's scathing rebuttal in October 1920 under the heading "The Intellectual Status of Women", which is reprinted Appendix 3 in vol. 2 of her Diary, and which is clearly an antecedent to her feminist manifesto of 1929, *A Room of One's Own*. This earlier exchange perhaps encourages Woolf critics and editors, such as Morag Schiach and S.P. Rosenbaum, to understand her spat a few years later with *Life and Letters* as directly between MacCarthy and Woolf[1] But Peter Quennell, I suggest, was Woolf's adversary here, although MacCarthy might well have used him as a cat's paw. The review that sparks off the spat is anonymous so it is not entirely unreasonable to assume it was penned by MacCarthy, but I will show the author was in fact Quennell.

This brief review is a very successful first novel, *Another Country*. Although not mentioned in the review, the manuscript of this book had won a prize for the best novel

[1] See Morag Schiach (Oxford World's Classics, 1992), note, p.416: "MacCarthy is also the author of the phrase about women 'acknowledging the limitations of their sex', which Woolf addresses in Chapter IV." Rosenbaum, p.xxx: Woolf took the partial quotation from the August 1928, issue of the new periodical *Life and Letters* that her Bloomsbury friend Desmond MacCarthy had started editing and to which she contributed. Woolf had been disagreeing in print with MacCarthy about the capabilities of women since 1920, when she criticized a review of his on some books about women (DII 339-42). That criticism anticipates the arguments of *A Room of One's Own*. MacCarthy's remark in *Life and Letters* comes at the beginning of his review of a young woman's novel. Its autobiographical relevance appears in a further part of the quotation that was omitted by Woolf: "If, like the reporter, you believe that female novelists should only aspire to excellence by courageously acknowledging the limitations of their sex (Jane Austen and, in our own time, Mrs Virginia Woolf have demonstrated how gracefully this gesture can be accomplished) . . ." After the publication of *A Room of One's Own*, in which Woolf used the same elliptical quotation, MacCarthy wrote in *Life and Letters* that he was horrified to find his unhappy sentence used so acidly when it was inspired by a wholehearted admiration of Woolf's work. He went on to praise her again, but still concluded obtusely that we should applaud the way she recognized her limitations. Later, however, he delighted Woolf with his favourable review of her book in the *Sunday Times*.

written by an undergraduate of Oxford, or Cambridge, University. To the competition panel's utter astonishment, its author was a very young woman, Helene Du Coudray, a Russian immigrant, born Helene Heroys in Kiev in 1906, and exiled to England at the age of twelve. After Oxford, she worked as a translator and a biographer. She published three other novels, and a major biography of Metternich. Du Coudray, as an Oxbridge undergraduate and aspiring novelist, is rather like Woolf's fictional Mary Carmichael in *A Room of One's Own*. But she is not named in Woolf's text whereas certain key phrases in the review are cited verbatim and repeated in refrains throughout the book. The most offensive term is "limitations" and Woolf brings out the full sense of gender territoriality implicit in the review, which opens with:

> If, like the reporter, you believe that female novelists should only aspire to excellence by courageously acknowledging the limitations of their sex (Jane Austen and, in our own time, Mrs Virginia Woolf have demonstrated how gracefully this gesture can be accomplished), Miss du Coudray's first novel, *Another Country*, may at the outset prove a little disappointing, since here is a writer definitely bent upon the attainment of masculine standards. But it would need a very bigoted anti-feminist to pretend that her efforts have not been rewarded with an unusual measure of success.

Unlike Austen and Woolf herself, Miss Du Coudray has succeeded in breaching her feminine limitations and writing a convincingly masculine prose, characterised in the apparently manly terms of "sobriety and reticence" and a confidence inspiring "style" which is likened to "some substantial, dark-hued stuff". And although "Miss du Coudray is a very young woman, yet her work is curiously mature" to the reviewer. There is a

Darwinian whiff to this, as if this young woman author has taken an evolutionary step towards literary manhood. And Woolf certainly picks up the scent in *A Room of One's Own*. She praises Austen and Emily Brontë for "alone entirely ignore[ing] the perpetual admonitions of the eternal pedagogue—write this, think that." And she directly cites, with corresponding footnote the *Life and Letters* review:

> They alone were deaf to that persistent voice, now grumbling, now patronising, now domineering, now grieved, now shocked, now angry, now avuncular, that voice which cannot let women alone, but must be at them […] to be refined; dragging even into the criticism of poetry criticism of sex; admonishing them, if they would be good and win, as I suppose, some shiny prize, to keep within certain limits which the gentleman in question thinks suitable- ". . . female novelists should only aspire to excellence by courageously acknowledging the limitations of their sex."[1]

The "shiny prize" may refer to du Coudray's own glittering prize, although the review does not explicitly mention it. Woolf understands the prize to re-establish the "limitations" that the review claims du Coudray has managed to exceed. Although these resonances of Du Coudray are not noticed by critics, Woolf's elision of her own name from the citation she gives in her footnote is discussed. Woolf notes: "If, like the reporter, you believe that female novelists should only aspire to excellence by courageously acknowledging the limitations of their sex (Jane Austen [has] demonstrated how gracefully this gesture can be accomplished)"

Woolf continues in the main body of the text by remarking on the surprising fact that "this sentence was written not in August 1828 but in August 1928". The year 1928 has

already been invoked in Chapter 3 of *A Room of One's Own* where it is noted that the "very words" of Dr Johnson's cruel analogy for women preachers are "used again in this year of grace, 1928, of women who try to write music [by Cecil Gray]. 'Of Mlle. Germaine Tailleferre one can only repeat Dr. Johnson's dictum concerning a woman preacher, transposed into terms of music. "Sir, a woman's composing is like a dog's walking on his hind legs. It is not done well, but you are surprised to find it done at all."' So accurately does history repeat itself." (82-83) And significantly, Woolf concludes the 1928 passage in Chapter 4 by returning to the matter of literature, territoriality, gender and caninicity: "Literature is open to everybody. I refuse to allow you, Beadle though you are, to turn me off the grass. Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind." In a recent article I have been exploring the possibility of reading the opening narrator of *A Room of One's Own* as a dog-woman, and this passage returns us to that opening incident where the canine speaker is chased from the grass.

When we turn to the "limitations" passage in the manuscript version of *A Room of One's Own*, we see that it the attribution is not to *Life and Letters* but to *Art and Life*. This may not be a slip of the pen so much as an attempt to fictionalise the facts or create a composite target. We can also see in the manuscript version further evidence for Rosenbaum's attribution of the review to MacCarthy. In the earlier draft Woolf takes her swipe at *Life and Letters* in the context of her discussion of "Chloe and Olivia" and lesbian erotics in women's fiction: "Chloe's torch could show us a great many things never seen in the light of day before; once she gets it firmly in her hand." This speaks directly to the Radclyffe Hall case and to MacCarthy's editorial in defense of *The Well of*

Loneliness in *Life and Letters*. In the draft, Woolf has the aspiring woman novelist meeting the approval of the "anonymous gentleman in Art & Letters" by writing about shopping, and thereby " '~~courageously~~ aspiring to excellence by courageously acknowledging the limitations of her sex'". The shop "Marshall & Freebodys" is specifically mentioned, perhaps alluding to an advertisement in the magazine, except that there is no such shop, but the name is a composite of existing shops neither of which advertised in *Life and Letters*[2]. Interestingly, she juxtaposes these thoughts on shopping and the limitations of women writers with amused reference to the "Bishop who knew that cats did not go to Heaven".

So, along with the Bishop's cat, the draft conjoins the "Chloe liked Olivia" sequence with the citation of the *Life and Letters* review: "What did she feel about the limitations of her sex? She had done her boating party & her laboratory" (Chloe and Olivia share a laboratory in the final version too). But these elements are dispersed into different chapters in the published version, as Rosenbaum notes.

Part 3: Virginia Woolf and Peter Quennell

When *A Room of One's Own* is reviewed in *Life and Letters*, it is not done so anonymously. Quite unusually, the reviewer's initials appear at the close: "P.Q.". I am assuming that this is Peter Quennell. In signing P.Q. to this review he is also elliptically acknowledging his authorship of the earlier anonymous review of Du Coudray. His citation of Woolf's citation of himself is worth careful consideration:

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[2] See Michael Whitworth's paper, "The Refracted Reader of *The Athenaeum* and *The Adelphi*", in the same panel.

> Happening to glance into the middle of her essay, the reviewer was horrified to see quoted there, amid acid commentary, a sentence, part of an anonymous criticism, which he remembers having contributed last year to the columns of *Life and Letters*. It expressed a belief that 'female novelists should only aspire to excellence by courageously acknowledging the limitations of their sex.' Is it credible, Mrs Woolf exclaims, that this perverse and obscurantist dogma can belong, not to the opinions of 1828, but to opinions still current and, even today, presumptuously emitted? It is an echo of 'that persisent voice, now grumbling, now patronising, now domineering, now grieved, now shocked, now avuncular', whose idiotic admonitions and unwanted counsels keep buzzing in the female novelist's ears. And yet, curiously enough, my unhappy sentence was inspired by a wholehearted admiration of Mrs Woolf!

So far, so self-reflexive. P.Q. elliptically outs himself as Woolf's, albeit misunderstood, adversary, and in the process outs her by making clear that she herself was originally directly named and praised by him in the offending sentence. When he expands on his use of the "unfortunate" word "limitations", P.Q. returns to figures of animality, clearly picking up on both the canine and feline (remember for example the manx cat) subtexts in *A Room of One's Own*, when he compares women novelists to panthers and domestic cats: "True, they cannot construct sewing-machines, nor have they the skill to invent new systems of metaphysics. But their sight is sharper, their sense of smell more exquisite, their movements are considerably more graceful than yours or mine. In fact, they, too, have their limitations; but one does not think of them as inferiors. And it is characteristic of their instinctive wisdom and unfathomable dignity that never, never do they attempt to

walk upon their hind-legs. Such, alas, is the spectacle afforded by the huge majority of women novelists." Dr Johnson's misogynist dancing dog figure has turned pussy cat here.

P.Q. now warms to his territorial argument and takes us to the zoo to pursue it. In attempting to be like men, women writers "are oblivious of fields, just as broad and, in their way, just as fruitful, which lie directly within the frontiers of their own sphere. Imagine, for example, the beautiful clouded snow-leopard at the Zoo sitting down to write a novel, which treated not of the ennui of cage-life, the confused recollection of jungle loves and wars, but of the life and fireside economy of Herbert Smith, its bottle-nosed keeper! Perhaps it would attempt to see itself through its keeper's eyes, its theme leopards as seen by keepers; eventually, it would grow quite incapable of seeing itself – at least dispassionately, and become, under its rippling, moony pelt, not a leopard at all but an inferior Herbert Smith." Herbert Smith, it transpires, is an established London legal firm, and the name therefore lends a frisson of impending or threatened litigation[3]. Pressing his feline metaphor P.Q. characterises "certain contemporary female novelists" as "those infinitely 'tamed and shabby tigers' who have learned to ring dinner-bells and scrape together alphabets with talons which, if they had been put to their proper use, could have laid bare the reader's heart in a single devastating flash." Moving on to Woolf herself, he describes *her* first novel, *The Voyage Out*, as "still half-emergent from the chrysalis" – implicitly, therefore, unlike Du Coudray's. *The Voyage Out* is also evidence that "Woman's grasp of situation and character – human character viewed from the outside – is notoriously less comprehensive than man's". It is only with "the charm of *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*" that Mrs Woolf "has recognized her limitations; thus they need never occur to us except as an incentive to applause".

[3] I am very grateful to conference delegate, John Wood, for this information.

Ironically, it was Woolf who got Peter Quennell the job as reviewer for MacCarthy on the *New Statesman* and then *Life and Letters*. On 6 May 1926, during the General Strike, she records in her diary that "Quennel, the poet, came; a lean boy, nervous, plaintive, rather pretty; on the look out for work, & come to tap the Wolves – who are said, I suppose to be an authority on that subject. We suggested Desmond's job. After an hour of this he left". He was to enter into further literary dialogue with Woolf as the respondent to her "Letter to a Young Poet" in the Hogarth Letters series (1932). Her letter was addressed to John Lehman but perhaps she has her scrap with P.Q. in mind when she remarks that "The more you begin to take yourself seriously as a leader or as a follower, as a modern or as a conservative, then you become a self-conscious, biting, and scratching little animal whose work is not of the slightest value or importance to anybody". Interestingly Quennell, in his "Letter to Mrs Woolf" writes contritely of the young male poet he represents as "chained by the leg like a cockatoo", a far squawk from MacCarthy's predatory "Affable Hawk"; and he openly cedes formerly masculine poetic territory to Woolf herself: "The poet has been deprived of his mappin terrace. Steadily, during a long course of years, it has been split up and given away to the other arts. You, yourself, as a distinguished modern novelist, one who excels in the semi-poetic method, have received a large slice of his ancient domain./ Time was when he roamed the entire zoo."

Woolf records her considerable dismay at the prospect of Quennell's Letter. It will take a visit to the archives in Texas to discover what precisely are the "*nine words omitted*" of her presumably venomous epithet for him in her letter to Lehman of July 1932: "Now it is pouring, and the Vicars wife is dead, and I must see, in spite of the bells tolling and the

trees dripping if I can defend myself (I'm rather annoyed by the way that we've succumbed to [*nine words omitted*] Quennel: but Leonard thought we must have him if anyone: I'd much rather be answered and torn up and thrown in the waste paper basket by you or [Cecil] Day Lewis: but it cant be helped.)" Elsewhere she writes of the "knives" in Quennell's brain (L5 206), and of his "clever agile thin blooded mind" (D5 14) and refers to him as an "exiguous worm" (L5 206). Intriguingly, Woolf records in her Diary in Oct 1935 a visit to Quennell's friend, Elizabeth Bowen after which "I have a dull heavy hot mop inside my brain next day & am a prey to every flea, ant [*sic*] gnat (as for example that I let P. Quennel misrepresent me & never answered him)." (D4 347). But was it only his Hogarth Letter that "rankled"?

Quennell makes no reference, in his autobiography, to the *Life and Letters* spat with Woolf. But in his compelling and quite detailed account of his reviewing work for MacCarthy at the *New Statesman* and *Life and Letters*, he emphasises the "remarkable degree of licence" MacCarthy gave his young male recruits, who he says "suffered from very little censorship. While Cyril [Connolly] was gaily disembowelling Galsworthy, Walpole, Arnold Bennett and other celebrated twentieth-century novelists, I lashed around at the contemporary poets. Sacheverell Sitwell and Robert Graves were writers I always enjoyed discussing; but a brace of popular versifiers, Gerald Gould and the literary civil servant Humbert Wolfe, became my favourite Aunt-Sallys." Quennell goes into considerable detail about the novelists he reviewed (Hemingway and Lawrence for example), but says nothing much about Woolf. He gives a cold shoulder to Bloomsbury in calling its arch enemy, Wyndham Lewis, "a critic of near-genius" and in his boast of "manag[ing] to see through the flimsy fabric of [Lytton] Strachey's Elizabethan opus."

He continues: “One is apt to forget how rich the period was; and much of its activity revolved around Virginia Woolf and her group of life-long friends. Hanging on the fringe of the literary world, I was not myself attached to Bloomsbury, either by birth or by election.” But he was befriended and helped by “a pair of distinguished Bloomsburian figures, the art critic Clive Bell and the translator Arthur Waley”. He recalls his “anxious life” of “journalizing” in the period 1928-1930 for MacCarthy’s *New Statesman* and *Life & Letters*, including one review which offended Harold Acton enough to send “*Judas* P. Quennell” a three page letter of “virulent abuse”: “I was assured by my correspondent, a thoroughly craven, mean and snobbish spirit.” There follows a self-pitying passage which Quennell seems to offer up by way of apology or excuse, in which he describes his failing marriage during this period and his declining health and eventual appendectomy. His only solace, it transpires was his daily walk in Kensington Gardens accompanied by “a Bedlington terrier – the gift of a good-natured lady, the mother of my Oxford friend, John Sutro, who said she thought I needed more exercise” This is an opportunity for an aside on eugenics and misogyny: “Bedlingtons, though not very clever dogs, since over-breeding has diminished the size of their skulls and systematically squeezed out their brains, possess a cursive stream-lined elegance, and will clear the lowest shin-rail in a wonderfully high-arched leap. I enjoyed these walks […] Only as I returned home [to his wife …] did melancholy now and then swoop down.”

Meanwhile, Quennell’s adversary, Mrs Woolf, was at this very time sharpening her claws to begin work on her most overtly canine novel, *Flush*. Reading the canine and feline discourse of misogyny in the literary reviews of *Life and Letters*, it is little wonder that she came to write a novel about a dog!

1. In the case of *The Well of Loneliness* the passion described is abnormal; it is the story of a woman who falls in love with another woman. That there is a very small percentage of human beings of both sexes whose love-life is centred on members of their own sex is a fact about human nature which is well known; why should it not be generally known? […] Is there not […] a possibility that such a book may be of service, helping [readers] to recognize traits in themselves and in others, and so know more surely where they are? Again, if it is true that these abnormal tendencies are mixed, as in the case of normal instincts in normal people, with the emotions which the abnormal person recognizes as the noblest he, or she, is capable of feeling, ought not their fellow human beings to know this? **MacCarthy, "Literary Taboos",** ***Life and Letters*** **1.5 (1928), 341**

2. *Another Country, by H. du Coudray. (Philip Allan. 7s. 6d.)*
If, like the reporter, you believe that female novelists should only aspire to excellence by courageously acknowledging the limitations of their sex (Jane Austen and, in our own time, Mrs Virginia Woolf have demonstrated how gracefully this gesture can be accomplished), Miss du Coudray's first novel, *Another Country*, may at the outset prove a little disappointing, since here is a writer definitely bent upon the attainment of masculine standards. But it would need a very bigoted anti-feminist to pretend that her efforts have not been rewarded with an unusual measure of success. Plainly written, in a rather unemphatic, colourless prose, her book establishes a gradual hold on your interest. She reaps the advantages of sobriety and reticence. Her style, like some substantial, dark-hued stuff, inspires confidence, and is incidentally well-suited to the story she has to tell, and her persuasive account of the tawdry Russian colony in Malta, a fifth-rate English castaway, the solid, patient Russian girl, their pathetic entanglement and bigamous marriage. *Another Country* deserves better than to be dubbed 'a remarkable first novel' and straightway thrust aside; the phrase reeks of discouragement. It deserves to be bought, not borrowed or pilfered, and read consecutively with attention. Miss du Coudray is a very young woman, yet her work is curiously mature. The impression of maturity does not suffer from an occasionally ingenuous cast of the narrative. **Anon. reviewer, "Readers' Reports",** ***Life and Letters*** **1.3 (1928), 221-222**

3. Only Jane Austen did it and Emily Brontë. It is another feather, perhaps the finest, in their caps. They wrote as women write, not as men write. Of all the thousand women who wrote novels then, they alone entirely ignored the perpetual admonitions of the eternal pedagogue—write this, think that. They alone were deaf to that persistent voice, now grumbling, now patronising, now domineering, now grieved, now shocked, now angry, now avuncular, that voice which cannot let women alone, but must be at them, like some too conscientious governess, adjuring them, like Sir Egerton Brydges, to be refined; dragging even into the criticism of poetry criticism of sex; admonishing them, if they would be good and win, as I suppose, some shiny prize, to keep within certain limits which the gentleman in question thinks suitable- ". . . female novelists should only aspire to excellence by courageously acknowledging the limitations of their sex."[1] That puts the matter in a nutshell, and when I tell you, rather to your surprise, that this sentence was written not in August 1828 but in August 1928, you will agree, I think, that however delightful it is to us now, it represents a vast body of opinion—I am not going to stir

those old pools; I take only what chance has floated to my feet—that was far more vigorous and far more vocal a century ago. It would have needed a very stalwart young woman in 1828 to disregard all those snubs and chidings and promises of prizes. One must have been something of a firebrand to say to oneself, Oh, but they can't buy literature too. Literature is open to everybody. I refuse to allow you, Beadle though you are, to turn me off the grass. Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind.

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[1] "If, like the reporter, you believe that female novelists should only aspire to excellence by courageously acknowledging the limitations of their sex (Jane Austen [has] demonstrated how gracefully this gesture can be accomplished . . .)" –*Life and Letters*, August 1928 **Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929), 113**

4. Chloe's torch could show us a great many things never seen in the light of day before; once she gets it firmly in her hand.
[…] Still the hierarchy of what is important & what is not important persists, I thought, If she describes Marshall & Freebodys she will be approved by the anonymous gentleman in Art & Letters. She will be "~~courageously~~ aspiring to excellence by courageously acknowledging the limitations of her sex"; from which I infer that the description of a shop is not a ~~difficult~~ proper to engage the attention of the other sex.

Which is not right, I said to myself~~;~~ laughing at the thought ~~that~~ of the Bishop who knew that cats did not go to Heaven. The Bishop ~~I said~~ would ~~be able were he in the flesh to say it is better to~~ (When Why there had been no good description of a womens shop. with its flashy stuffs & [trumpery & its smells?]; & the) say it is not right to go to shops. He would say it is better to play golf. It is better to shoot pheasants than to buy clothes. & I wondered <She will have to go in there, & describe all that>

And so they will tell this young novelist that she must not describe a woman's shop for the subject is unimportant. The emotions ~~<felt by> roused by it are~~ trivial, they But will say -- but I was doing them an injustice, I ~~suddenly~~ for ~~the~~ was there not a review somewhere an article somewhere among the litter -- somebody who said, < -> ~~oh~~ here it was "female novelists should only aspire to excellence (certainly life that goes on -) by courageously acknowledging the limitations of their sex" - ~~there seems~~ to be ~~which ever~~ way it is a ~~great deal It looks then as if she ought to Perhaps then she ought to do nothing else. Between~~ (& her own vanities & again) ~~the Bishop & the reviewer what is a female novelist aspiring to excellence to do? To go in, or~~ to the shop or to stay out of the shop? If the ought they to describe shops, or ought they not to describe shops? The Bishop says dont; the [also?] ~~But I differ~~ why was not the the reviewer not more precise? Why did he not tell us as in common kindness he might, these are your limitations. (& between the two we have to plunge & risk it) They are perfectly obvious to me; May one describe a shop? or may one not describe a shop? The only way out is to pretend that there is nothing easier ~~nothing more simple & limited pretty & first rate, light and airy, graceful & conciliatory. Then~~ What are the limitations of the aspiring female novelist I demanded; & was then driven to [~~turn~~?] read my book. (But are shops easy to describe? But a pox on all [these questions?]) What did she feel about the limitations of her sex? She had done her boating party & her laboratory; She had looked up many more facts than she needed; she had broken the back of the old sequences so completely that one could not guess what

was going to happen next. ~~And~~ But what appeared to be the conclusion of the whole affair was a this <then-> She left them sitting there & went into into the garden. ~~without quoting the whole passage I cannot of course~~ There they all were sitting talking - all sorts of people: all sorts of people against a large window of some sort, She opened it. ~~The~~ It was an extraordinary effect, (as an aspiring female novelist) The mens noses, the womens shoulders, seen suddenly like that With an embroidery [of this sky?] Then there were vast spaces without a star: darkness itself. I saw what her endeavour was We were to feel they have their relation to this to <us.> ~~We were to feel the magnitude of things Exist~~ in themselves. We were to feel something very tremendous about the immensity of the soul.

<I dont think it occurred to her that sex had much to do with it.> **Woolf, Monks House MS, *Women & Fiction*, 120-122**

5. Happening to glance into the middle of her essay, the reviewer was horrified to see quoted there, amid acid commentary, a sentence, part of an anonymous criticism, which he remembers having contributed last year to the columns of *Life and Letters*. It expressed a belief that 'female novelists should only aspire to excellence by courageously acknowledging the limitations of their sex.' Is it credible, Mrs Woolf exclaims, that this perverse and obscurantist dogma can belong, not to the opinions of 1828, but to opinions still current and, even today, presumptuously emitted? It is an echo of 'that persisent voice, now grumbling, now patronising, now domineering, now grieved, now shocked, now avuncular', whose idiotic admonitions and unwanted counsels keep buzzing in the female novelist's ears. And yet, curiously enough, my unhappy sentence was inspired by a wholehearted admiration of Mrs Woolf!

The word 'limitations' was, no doubt, unfortunate. Every discussion, which rages over the aesthetic accomplishments of the female sex, goes to pieces on the same issue; the disputants can never make up their minds, whether woman's former disadvantageous position was the result of man's age-long tyranny or whether with equal chances, an extremely sturdy physical constitution and an immemorial tradition of matriarchal government, women have nor merely slipped back on to the level which they appreciate most. At all events, let us eliminate from the argument terms suggestive of 'superiority' or 'inferiority'. In so far as they can agree to remain different, men and women are likely to effect harmonious combinations. One adores the supple agility of the panther; one reveres the inviolable dignity of the domestic cat. True, they cannot construct sewing-machines, nor have they the skill to invent new systems of metaphysics. But their sight is sharper, their sense of smell more exquisite, their movements are considerably more graceful than yours or mine. In fact, they, too, have their limitations; but one does not think of them as inferiors. And it is characteristic of their instinctive wisdom and unfathomable dignity that never, never do they attempt to walk upon their hind-legs.

Such, alas, is the spectacle afforded by the huge majority of women novelists. They aspire to masculine standards and, more often than not, make their criterion some individual man. Usually, their guiding star is unworthy of sustained pursuit; they are oblivious of fields, just as broad and, in their way, just as fruitful, which lie directly within the frontiers of their own sphere. Imagine, for example, the beautiful clouded snow-leopard at the Zoo sitting down to write a novel, which treated not of the ennui of cage-life, the confused recollection of jungle loves and wars, but of the life and fireside

economy of Herbert Smith, its bottle-nosed keeper! Perhaps it would attempt to see itself through its keeper's eyes, its theme leopards as seen by keepers; eventually, it would grow quite incapable of seeing itself – at least dispassionately, and become, under its rippling, moony pelt, not a leopard at all but an inferior Herbert Smith.

[…] Supposing [Jane Welsh Carlyle's] novels *had* been written, I feel sure they would have provided a convenient stepping-stone from Jane Austen to Virginia Woolf. Their wisdom would have been 'limited' but exquisite. We should have read them without any of the embarrassment which is provoked by a reading of certain contemporary female novelists- those infinitely 'tamed and shabby tigers' who have learned to ring dinner-bells and scrape together alphabets with talons which, if they had been put to their proper use, could have laid bare the reader's heart in a single devastating flash.

Thus the tendency of Mrs Woolf's novels seems to be away from man-made forms, towards a mode sufficiently elastic to include the various treasures of an acute feminine sensibility. *The Voyage Out*, first published in 1915, is still half-emergent from the chrysalis. Woman's grasp of situation and character – human character viewed from the outside – is notoriously less comprehensive than man's […]

Helen, of *The Voyage Out*, was the protype of the calm maternal heroines, through the medium of whose sensibility Mrs Woolf would be content henceforward to see her special world. From that specialized manner of observation rises the charm of *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*; it is like a net cast into the seething waters of experience, artfully cobbled and woven from innumerable shreds and scraps of reverie which might be expected to cross the mind of an intelligent and clever woman. Mrs Woolf divagates – but airily and casually – as only writers perfectly sure of their objective can afford to do without becoming diffuse. She has recognized her limitations; thus they need never occur to us except as an incentive to applause.
P.Q., "New Novels", *Life and Letters* 3 (Jul-Dec 1929), 551-554, 555

6. [6 May 1926] Quennel, the poet, came; a lean boy, nervous, plaintive, rather pretty; on the look out for work, & come to tap the Wolves – who are said, I suppose to be an authority on that subject. We suggested Desmond's job. After an hour of this he left **(*Diary* 3 79)**

7. The more you begin to take yourself seriously as a leader or as a follower, as a modern or as a conservative, then you become a self-conscious, biting, and scratching little animal whose work is not of the slightest value or importance to anybody **Woolf, *A Letter to a Young Poet* (1932)**

8. [The poet] cannot choose the pedestal from which he writes. He is hoisted up there, chained by the leg like a cockatoo. […] The poet has been deprived of his mappin terrace. Steadily, during a long course of years, it has been split up and given away to the other arts. You, yourself, as a distinguished modern novelist, one who excels in the semi-poetic method, have received a large slice of his ancient domain.
Time was when he roamed the entire zoo. **Quennell, *A Letter to Mrs Virginia Woolf* (1932), 6-7**

9. [July 1932] Now it is pouring, and the Vicars wife is dead, and I must see, in spite of the bells tolling and the trees dripping if I can defend myself (I'm rather annoyed by the way that we've succumbed to [*nine words omitted*] Quennel: but Leonard thought we must have him if anyone: I'd much rather be answered and torn up and thrown in the waste paper basket by you or [Cecil] Day Lewis: but it cant be helped.) **(*Letters* 5 82)**

10. Desmond MacCarthy, in those days, was the literary editor of the *New Statesman*; the contributors he enlisted were customarily young men; and, because he valued and sympathised with youth, he allowed them a remarkable degree of licence. […]
Both Cyril Connolly and I were among the youthful reviewers whose work he published in *New Statesman* […] On the whole, Desmond MacCarthy's recruits suffered from very little censorship. While Cyril [Connolly] was gaily disembowelling Galsworthy, Walpole, Arnold Bennett and other celebrated twentieth-century novelists, I lashed around at the contemporary poets. Sacheverell Sitwell and Robert Graves were writers I always enjoyed discussing; but a brace of popular versifiers, Gerald Gould and the literary civil servant Humbert Wolfe, became my favourite Aunt-Sallys. […] Reviewing verse, luckily, was not my sole employment; and, now and then, I received a literary biography, a critical essay or a current work of fiction. At that period stimulating new books were particularly numerous. *The Great Gatsby*, *Mrs Dalloway* and Eliot's *Poems* had already come out in 1925; in 1926 we had *The Plumed Serpent* and *The Sun Also Rises* […]; in 1927 *Men Without Women* and two remarkable works by Wyndham Lewis, a critic of near-genius, *Time and Western Man* and *The Lion and the Fox*; in 1928, *The Childermas*, *Point Counter Point*, Evelyn Waugh's first novel, *Decline and Fall* and Lytton Strachey's *Elizabeth and Essex*; in 1929, Henry Green's *Living*, Ivy Compton-Burnett's *Brothers and Sisters* and Hemingway's *Farewell to Arms*. Among these I am glad to remember that I reviewed and applauded Hemingway's earlier novel, which, I think, remains his masterpiece, and that I managed to see through the flimsy fabric of Strachey's Elizabethan opus. One is apt to forget how rich the period was; and much of its activity revolved around Virginia Woolf and her group of life-long friends. Hanging on the fringe of the literary world, I was not myself attached to Bloomsbury, either by birth or by election. But a pair of distinguished Bloomsburian figures, the art critic Clive Bell and the translator Arthur Waley, occupied an important place in my existence.
[…]Meanwhile, I continued [1928-1930] journalizing, both for the *New Statesman*, where Desmond MacCarthy had at length resigned his editorship, and for Life & Letters, the recently founded periodical over which he now presided. It was an anxious life.
[…] Another old friend had suddenly developed into a fierce antagonist. […] 'Got a person here called Judas P. Quennell?' [the postman] demanded loudly from the street. I agreed that that was my own surname, if not the Christian name to which I answered;

and, once I had descended, he handed me an envelope that contained two or three pages of virulent abuse. The writer was Harold Acton. I was not accused, I learned, of any personal misdeeds. My offence consisted in having published a review of a biography of William Beckford that included some derogatory references to the great man's private character. It revealed, I was assured by my correspondent, a thoroughly craven, mean and snobbish spirit.

[…] Kensington Gardens lay a minute's walk from our flat; and I would go there many afternoons. My usual companion was a Bedlington terrier – the gift of a good-natured lady, the mother of my Oxford friend, John Sutro, who said she thought I needed more exercise; Bedlingtons, though not very clever dogs, since over-breeding has diminished the size of their skulls and systematically squeezed out their brains, possess a cursive stream-lined elegance, and will clear the lowest shin-rail in a wonderfully high-arched leap. I enjoyed these walks […] Only as I returned home […] did melancholy now and then swoop down. […] Towards the end of 1929 I regularly felt ill

Quennell, *The Marble Foot* (1976), 152-169

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