Like all critical projects, this one has had a complex evolution curious to retrace, and one likely to yield surprising reflections on its author, as though it were an unwitting autobiography. I've often wondered why I should have become so attached to "Eliot-and-Woolf," and sometimes smiled as their initials vied with each other on the page like competing corporations, GE and VW. In the chapters that follow I acknowledge the ways my own role is situated within the horizons of this study (without pretending that it is possible to confess everything). I am aware that my historically and biographically grounded approach shares features of these authors' skeptical traditionalism. To continue to speak in terms intelligible to the arbiters of an English "great tradition" may appear to betray what Woolf calls "the difference of view," but for both Eliot and Woolf this strategy gained ground for subtle but radical dissent, while at the same time it won them their canonization. How the strategy worked lies at the core of my inquiry. In effect Eliot and Woolf are palace spies, consorting with patriarchal traditions to expose their flaws.

A few words about the terms of my discussion may be in order here. If I have, or would like to have, much in common with these two very different authors, I do not subscribe to their traditional feminism, with its longing for an essential, self-sacrificial womanhood (Eliot, and more often Woolf, can also see beyond essentialism to the historical construction of gender). In other words, I regard gender distinctions as treacherous conveniences for discussion rather than as reliable descriptions of different human beings. Thus I speak of the private sphere of domesticity, the focus of Eliot’s and Woolf’s historical narratives, as being associated with women (middle-class English
women), and refer to the "feminine heroism" that is prescribed for women in English writings at this time, without assuming that Eliot, Woolf, or any other woman will cherish domestic privacy or self-sacrifice—or that men are incapable of espousing obscurity and selflessness. I focus on how Eliot, Woolf, and some of their contemporaries defined womanhood as a selfless mission, and how this definition is played out in the works that led readers to call Eliot and Woolf great. If, as I proceed, I appear to take canonical standards for granted, I invite the reader to put every use of the word "great" in quotation marks and to note that I read the crowning of "genius" as a process rather than as a miracle.

As I look back to the origins of this project—"the make-believe of a beginning," as Eliot puts it in Daniel Deronda—I recall that I started out convinced of Eliot's greatness and wisdom, and not so comfortable with Woolf. As I got to know Eliot, meaning that as I read biographies, her letters and essays, and feminist critiques of her views on womanhood and her treatment of heroines, I fell out of love with my vision of Marian Evans Lewes/"George Eliot." (Perhaps I have been unable to resist Woolf's disenchanting vision of a pompous, headachy woman of genius in a horrible cultural predicament.) Yet the textual George Eliot that I recreate as I read the writings published during her lifetime—a creature distinct from that rather depressing Victorian woman—still convinces me of greatness and wisdom, but not the naive concept of greatness I had once bought along with the "great tradition," and not primarily the wisdom that speaks in direct narrative commentary. I am still awed and moved by the paragraphs, the metaphors, the bitter and hopeful shapes the Eliot books find in the social embers... But it is too Victorian to catalog what one loves in an author, and one no longer worships authors but instead the writing that forever beckons to be read. To paraphrase a mother who had employed Charlotte Brontë as governess, rebuking a too-affectionate child: "Love the author, my dear!"

Almost the opposite change to that in my view of Eliot has occurred in my outlook on Woolf. I approached Woolf with a slight prejudice against modernism as I had been taught it. That is, I was aware of preferring Victorians because they were willing to tackle ideological conflicts right out there on the page, and I thought Woolf eschewed all that to tinker with the sentence (wonderfully, of course; there was a time when I practiced writing Woolfian sentences). Modernists were formalists and elitist experimenters, rejecting the story line and the arduous (GE keyword!) effort of belief, dazzled by fashionable uncer-
tainties that I thought I had outgrown. It was the Woolf of *A Room of One's Own* that I was attracted to—and here you could say she is closest to the Victorian sage. I never loved Virginia Stephen Woolf as I once loved Marian Evans Lewes/"George Eliot." I was actually embarrassed by the biographical celebrity; I was not going to write a book on her lesbianism and suicide. What I have found in working on this project is a textual creature, Woolf, whom I would go to the ends of the earth for; she can write me any way she likes. And to my surprise, I have evinced a thoroughly common emotion for the biographical woman, the voice of the letters and diaries; I might be any old Woolf fan, though still desiring texts, not a real woman (the written woman of course fictionalizes the one who lived). Perhaps my sweetest revenge for the passion Woolf’s writing inflicts on me is to redesign her as a new George Eliot.

It is not that I must transfer my loyalties or choose between these authors, but that much of the best in each of them (to me) is that which corresponds with the other, in every sense. Aligning two authors, with all their differences, and placing them in relation to a gender ideology and historical vision that evolves from the earlier writer’s age may reveal my unregenerate desire to derive origins and to arrive at consensus. I recognize some such desire as a habit of my mind, one that must derive from my father’s milk and my mother’s word. I try to resist monolithic derivations or blinding agreement, making the best of this rewarding mental tropism (one shared by Eliot and Woolf) by watching it at work.

Of course I did not begin this project intending to be so personal, either toward myself or toward the authors considered. I first chose Eliot and Woolf because they were historians of a sort; I wanted eminent Victorian and modern novelists who also wrote essays, who were accepted as authorities on tradition and culture; they were great writers who happened to be female. My continuing encounter with feminist criticism and theory in these intervening years has dispelled such a dream of objective greatness and fostered a much more exciting project, in which the problem of “being personal” can be discussed (though I will focus on this problem for the women authors, not myself). I recall an inspiring course with Margaret Doody on the historical novel, which began the transformation, and dialogue with feminist theory groups and with students at Princeton and the University of Virginia, which urged me to go further. Sharon Davie and the Women’s Studies community, and Kathleen M. Balutansky, Nancy Essig, and the editorial board of “Feminist Issues,” a series at the
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all, we have managed both spheres, the home and careers, together, and to him and to our children I owe my happiness.

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