AS A NUMBER of critics have noted, in the interwar and postwar period the work of Virginia Woolf became the subject of a backlash among contemporary and subsequent British women writers (Moi 1986; Armstrong 1992). In a move that Elaine Showalter has described using Woolf’s own terms—“[t]o borrow her own murderous imagery, a woman writer must kill the Angel in the House, that phantom of female perfection who stands in the way of freedom. For Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot, the Angel was Jane Austen. For the feminist novelists, it was George Eliot. For mid-twentieth-century novelists, the Angel is Woolf herself” (265)—writers like Dorothy Richardson, Rebecca West, Muriel Spark, Doris Lessing, and Angela Carter turned away from their predecessor, characterizing her work as detached, elitist, and inaccessible. At the same time in France, the work of Colette was suffering a similar fate. In the 1930s and on, French writers like Marguerite Yourcenar, Nathalie Sarraute, Simone de Beauvoir, and Marguerite Duras rejected their maternal foremother as representing and perpetuating the image of a certain France to which

Reading across the Channel: The Reception of Woolf’s and Colette’s Work in England and in France

The French today are slightly confused by how seriously English-speaking readers take Colette, a writer they think of as someone their grandmothers read under a hairdryer. (Edmund White, Le flâneur, 27)

[Woolf] has yet to be adequately welcomed and acclaimed by her feminist daughters in England and America. (Toril Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics, 18)
they felt they did not belong. Colette’s work, they charged, was trivial, bloated, and aimed at an audience of men, not women.3

Adding an interesting twist to these two stories of influence anxiety (rather conventional ones, according to Harold Bloom’s theory of influence), a cross-Channel exchange of sorts appears to have taken place.4 While the French existentialists and new novelists adopted Woolf’s work in place of Colette’s, appreciating among other things the experimental quality of texts such as *The Waves* (Yourcenar, Sarraute) and the breadth of Woolf’s work (Beauvoir, Duras),5 a number of British writers turned from Woolf’s work—despite being encouraged to do precisely the opposite, according to Joyce Carol Oates—to the work of the more down-to-earth, physical, sensual Colette (West, Carter).6

Based largely on anecdotal evidence culled from the letters, memoirs, interviews, and diaries of the later writers—where they describe what they read of the work of their predecessors and how they read it—this chapter traces the terms of this crossing over, characterizing it as in some senses the logical response to the later woman writer’s exclusion from her own national canon. I understand this act of literary expatriation as an effort on the part of the woman writer to mark her difference from a tradition that has undervalued the work of women writers—a movement that resembles in certain respects that explored in chapter 1, where women sought the shelter of a foreign city or country less repressive than their own. That it is in each case Woolf and Colette who are cast in the role of institutional representative, Woolf’s and Showalter’s “Angel in the House,” by their female successors—both are rejected because they are perceived to “belong” and because they represent what the patriarchy wants from a woman writer—comes as a surprise when one considers the degree to which both writers were themselves outsiders. Curiously, this analysis, in highlighting exchange, does not overturn that perception but rather supports it: the later French writers confirm the view that the work of their English predecessor was revolutionary, and the English define that of their French precursor as the same. Thus, whereas Duras argues that Colette’s writing lacks the violence of an effectual feminine writing, West celebrates Colette’s writing precisely for its strength and vigor; and while Richardson condemns Woolf’s “docility,” Yourcenar celebrates her work as revolutionary in terms of both form and content.

Common to the responses of French women writers of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s to Woolf’s work is a sense of awe. Writer and Woolf translator Marguerite Yourcenar (1903–87) demonstrates this in the laudatory introduction to her translation of *The Waves*, a
ballet-like work, she suggests, that communicates an intense human sentiment:

If one stops to consider the scintillating depth of the work of Mrs. Woolf, its weightlessness, its clear density, and the icy pulsations of a style that makes one think again and again of that which is crossing and is being crossed, of light and crystal, one realizes that this so subtly singular woman was born perhaps at the precise minute when a star began to think. (My translation; 5)

In this same preface, Yourcenar writes that Woolf is considered a revolutionary at home and justly so, for her work is profoundly different from that of her predecessors, not only in the sense of technical innovation but in “l’affirmation d’un point de vue sur la vie” (“the affirmation of a perspective on life” [my translation, 7]).

During her lifetime, Yourcenar met both Woolf and Colette, declaring the former a virtuoso and describing the latter as too provincial for her tastes. Like a number of her female contemporaries, Yourcenar developed an attachment to England (and a knowledge of English that facilitated that attachment), one that perhaps informed her admiration for the work of Woolf, which she acquired at an early age. In flight from the war, Yourcenar’s family (under the original name of de Crayencour, the name from which Yourcenar adapted her own) spent time in England, a country she would later describe as “one of those countries in which one is instinctively at ease with oneself” (Savigneau 43). Yourcenar translated Woolf’s The Waves and wove British history into her novel Mémoires d’Hadrien (1951). As an adult, Yourcenar again looked away from France. She lived in Maine and New York, where she lectured in comparative literature at Sarah Lawrence, and lived with her American-born lover, Grace Frick. In 1974, like both Woolf and Colette, Yourcenar was photographed by Gisèle Freund.

Yourcenar was both a young reader of the work of Woolf and Colette and a writer writing contemporaneously. She was twelve years old when Woolf’s first novel, The Voyage Out, appeared in 1915, and in her first fifty years she would have seen the almost yearly publication of Colette’s work. Yourcenar published her first novel, Alexis, in 1929, in the same year that Colette’s Sido and La seconde and Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own appeared. Yourcenar was a close friend and admirer of Natalie Barney, whom she met late in 1951 (only three years prior to Colette’s death in 1954). Perhaps via Barney, Yourcenar met Colette in 1952 while in Paris with Grace Frick (on a visit that included a
ceremony where Yourcenar was awarded the Prix Femina Vacaresco, an interview with Janet Flanner for the *New Yorker*, and dinner with Ernst Junger); however, little information is available regarding this encounter (Savigneau 223, 236).

Yourcenar and Woolf met in London in 1937, when the French writer visited her British counterpart at her home in order to discuss her translation of *The Waves*, which appeared under the title *Les vagues* in the same year. It appears unlikely that Woolf had read any of Yourcenar’s work at this point. Both women cast their fellow writer in (nationally) stereotypical terms. Woolf describes her meeting with Yourcenar in both her diary and a letter to Ethel Smyth, in the latter in somewhat disdainful terms. Reminiscent of her response to photographer Gisèle Freund, Woolf describes Yourcenar as “some intolerable necessary bore” who wasted one of her rare solitary evenings (*Letters* 6: 109). In her diary, Woolf cannot remember the name of her French translator: was it “Madame ou Mlle Youniac(?).” She describes Yourcenar briefly as “a woman I suppose with a past; amorous; intellectual; lives half the year in Athens; is in with Jaloux &c.” She remarks on her red lips, describes her as strenuous and as “a working Fchwoman,” and remembers that she “wore some nice gold leaves on her black dress” (*Diary* 5: 60–61).

Yourcenar, for her part, found Woolf pale and melancholic: “[S]he seemed very threatened, very fragile,” Yourcenar tells Matthieu Galey, in a collection of interviews entitled *Les yeux ouverts* (*With Open Eyes*) (162). She notes that “nothing remains ‘in that pale face of a young Fate barely aged but delicately lined with thought and weariness’ but a mouth that seemed never to have known how to smile, eyes filled with sadness” (my translation; quoted in Nathan, *Virginia Woolf par lui-même* 47). Yourcenar spent two hours with Woolf talking over the meaning of several phrases from *The Waves*. Yourcenar explains to Galey that she wished to ask Woolf how she wanted her to translate her book (*Cliche* 324). Woolf’s rather flippant response, “Faites ce que vous voulez” (“do as you like”), opens the way for Yourcenar to produce a translation that “appears as much as possible to have been written in the language into which it is being translated,” according to Cliche (235), an effect Yourcenar desired for translation of her own work: “‘The ideal of the translator,’ as she will describe it later to her Italian translator in a letter in 1962, is to give ‘the impression that the work has been composed in the language into which one is translating it’” (my translation; quoted in Cliche 325).

Critical discussion of Yourcenar’s translation of *The Waves* indeed suggests that she tried to bring Woolf home—a move perhaps entirely
appropriate for the work of a Francophile like Woolf, who, as Yourcenar points out in her preface to the translation, boasted of her French ancestry with a certain pride (5). Yourcenar, according to one critic, “seeks to create for the target audience a new poem that returns to the literary system of the reader” (my translation and my emphasis; Shields 322). When compared with the later translation by Cécile Wajsbrot (1993), Yourcenar’s translation of The Waves is judged by critic Vivianne Forrester as too French: “elle françise la langue anglaise” (“she frenchifies the English”). Yourcenar, Forrester asserts, makes of Woolf’s English parc (park or estate) a French garden (quoted in Shields 313–14). Yourcenar does not translate; she “rewrites,” according to Michel Cusin, who is preparing a third translation of The Waves for a Woolf Pléiade edition (quoted in Renaudin and Toczyski 23). Wajsbrot, on the other hand, who eliminated adjectives, pronouns, and the multiple repetitions integral to Woolf’s novel and declined to translate many culturally specific terms (for example, buns, bow windows), produces a translation inaccessible to the French reader, according to Forrester.

In the few references Yourcenar makes to Colette, one notes a respectful distance (one that contrasts with the excessive praise offered Woolf). On her admission to the Académie française in 1980, the first woman to receive the honor, Yourcenar makes reference to her excluded predecessors, “with whom,” Yourcenar says, she wrote. Their work, she says, “surrounded” and “accompanied” her own body of work. In the course of the speech, in a rather defiant gesture, Yourcenar sarcastically suggests to her audience that perhaps the professionalization of women’s writing in the mid-nineteenth century was too recent a development to interest the Académie française. She names Colette among “the invisible troupe of women who should perhaps have received this honor very much sooner” (my translation; quoted in Savigneau 418). Her survey of the reasons why these women were invisible and excluded, heavy with irony, points to their status as outsiders: Mme de Staël nationally and culturally, George Sand sexually and in terms of class, and Colette institutionally.

Mme de Staël would have been ineligible as a result of her Swiss parentage and her marriage to a Swede: she was happy to be one of the greatest minds of her century. George Sand would have been a scandal due to the turbulence of her life, as a result of the very generosity of her emotions that made her a so admirably womanly woman; the person more than the writer got ahead of her time. Colette herself thought that a woman should not visit a man to solicit
his vote, and I cannot think otherwise, not having done it myself. (My translation; quoted in Savigneau 418)\textsuperscript{15}

This reference perhaps provides a key to Yourcenar’s look to England for inspiration. Yourcenar refuses, as did Colette before her, to pander in order to be accepted into the mainstream. Thus, just as Colette wrote on the margins of the tradition to which she was heir, so Yourcenar did the same, ironically rejecting Colette as she emulated her, casting her as to some degree part and parcel of that tradition.

Yourcenar’s rejection of Colette on the basis of her tie to France and French tradition can be seen in another reference made by the later writer with regard to a recording of Colette reading her own \textit{Gigi Chéri}, which Yourcenar received from her friend Florence Codman in 1956, following Colette’s death in 1954.\textsuperscript{16} The two women, according to Codman, had spoken frequently and at length about Colette. Yourcenar’s response to the gift of the recording reveals a certain reverence toward her literary predecessor coupled with a degree of condescension:

Thank you for \textit{Gigi Chéri} [Gigi Darling], which we listened to this morning. [ . . . ] One can follow her entire life by way of the contours of her voice: the rich and fulsome tones of Burgundy, the street-urchin element from Willy, the literary element, and also, if I might be so bold, the concierge-and-fortuneteller-adorred-by-the-little-local-ladies element. For she was all of this. She was incredibly representative of a certain France between 1900 and 1946 with her spicy, vernacular flavor, her affectations (for there are some), her personal notion of the good life, and her code of what is proper and improper, as complicated as ancient China. A France that, deep down, I am not sure I like. (Quoted in Savigneau 240)

While Yourcenar recognizes the complexity of Colette’s œuvre, she is ambivalent about the legacy of her predecessor. Yourcenar’s association of Colette with “a certain France” of the first half of the twentieth century—a France for which she had little affection—and her somewhat disdainful remarks about Colette’s provincialism (“the fulsome tones of Burgundy,” “the concierge-and-fortuneteller-adorred-by-the-little-local-ladies element”), her class, and her ambiguous moral code anticipate the responses of many of her female contemporaries.

Like Yourcenar, Nathalie Sarraute (1900–99) allied herself with her English rather than her French foremother. While Woolf plays a prominent role in Sarraute’s recounting of literary influences, Colette does
not figure there. Again, like Yourcenar, Sarraute was an outsider of sorts. Born in Russia of Russian Jewish parents who had met while studying in Geneva and who eventually divorced, Sarraute spent much of her childhood shuttling between France and Russia. And like Yourcenar, she lived in Britain for a short period in 1920–21, when she studied for an undergraduate degree in history at Oxford University.

A New Novelist, Sarraute sought stylistic direction from the stylistically innovative Woolf. Sarraute makes many references to Woolf in her writing about writing. At first, Woolf’s example, along with that of Proust and Joyce, intimidated her. After reading Proust, Joyce, and Woolf in the early 1920s, realizing that the nature of the novel had completely changed and finding she had nothing to write about, she remained silent. Indeed, Sarraute did not begin writing until 1932, at the age of thirty-two. Her first book, *Tropismes*, appeared in 1939 (just two years before Woolf’s death).

It was a time when the novel seemed to be dead—at least the traditional novel. Max Jacob and Valéry were both saying so. As for me, after reading Proust and Joyce, which I did between 1922 and 1924, and then reading Virginia Woolf, I felt that it was no longer possible to write as people had done previously and so, since I couldn’t find anything to write about, I didn’t write. (Quoted in Brée 138)¹⁷

Character, she believed, had changed, and one could no longer look to “Tolstoy or Balzac” for guidance (Brée 142).

In her essay “Conversations et Sous-Conversations” (in *L’ère du soupçon* [1956]), which she later describes explicitly as “a defense of psychology” (Brée 141), Sarraute opens with another reference to the work of Woolf, this time affirming her debt to the earlier writer. Ironically mimicking the voices of those who “want to read as if the works of Proust, Woolf etc. don’t exist,” she condemns psychology in favor of behaviorism, suggesting (in a tongue-in-cheek fashion) that Woolf’s comments regarding the advent of Modernism and its subversion of a more traditional narrative form are naïve.¹⁸ Affirming her interest in Woolf’s formulations about writing, Sarraute again mentions Woolf, along with Proust and Henry James, when asked whether she thinks that a writer can reliably talk about his or her own work. While she initially asserts that the work should suffice in and of itself and that there is nothing to add, she goes on to concede that, with some distance, a writer might be brought to consider why he or she has chosen a particular route
and how his or her work relates to other works, past and present, as had done Woolf, Proust, and James.19

The elliptical nature of Sarraute’s *Usage de la parole* (a late text) and her conception of characters as voices rather than as people with a gender both manifest Woolf’s influence. Echoing Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own*, Sarraute asserts that “[a]ny good writer is androgynous, he or she has to be, so as to be able to write equally about men and women” (quoted in Barbour 272).20

Unlike Yourcenar, Sarraute does not make explicit reference to Colette in her work. Sarraute’s association with the contemporary French literary scene and with figures such as Jean-Paul Sartre and André Gide—both of whom read Colette’s work—would most likely have brought her into contact with Colette. Her association with the new novelists/antinovelists (to borrow Sartre’s term for his own *Portrait d’un inconnu*), however, might have led her to look away from traditional narrative forms, which were conventionally (and somewhat erroneously) associated with Colette, and toward the more experimental work of the Modernists.

While Simone de Beauvoir (1908–86) gives more time to the work of her French predecessor than do Yourcenar and Sarraute—she refers to Colette, whose first novels she began reading as a teenager on the sidewalk outside a Paris bookstore (Thurman xiii), more than twenty times in her landmark work *Le deuxième sexe* (*The Second Sex*), published in 1949 (the same year in which Colette published her last works, among them her memoir *Le fanal bleu*)—she, too, seems to identify more closely with Woolf in terms of style, and in terms of her writer’s gift.21 In a *Paris Review* interview, Beauvoir articulates the distinction that she believes exists between the two writers, echoing Yourcenar in her characterizing of the work of Colette as limited and provincial and in opposition to the breadth and timelessness of Woolf’s work:

> Virginia Woolf is one of the woman writers who have interested me most. Have you seen any photos of her? An extraordinarily lonely face . . . in a way, she interests me more than Colette. Colette is, after all, very involved in her little love affairs, in household matters, laundry, pets. *Virginia Woolf is much broader.* (My emphasis; quoted in *Women Writers at Work* 143)

However, in other comments with regard to Woolf’s work in the same interview, Beauvoir betrays the allegiance that ties her to her compatriot, that is, Colette’s familiarity, her Frenchness, and the down-to-earth
quality of her work. While she finds Woolf’s diaries “fascinating,” they are at the same time “too literary,” “foreign” to Beauvoir. She feels Woolf herself is “too concerned with whether she’ll be published, with what people will say about her” (143). She celebrates Orlando and Mrs Dalloway, but she is not so keen on the more experimental The Waves. Of A Room of One’s Own (perhaps Woolf’s most grounded work and obviously Beauvoir’s favorite), Beauvoir says: “it hits the nail on the head. She explains very well why women can’t write” (143).

In The Second Sex Beauvoir confirms her appreciation of the craftsman in Colette, asserting that:

It is not only because of her gifts and her temperament alone that Colette became a great writer; her pen has often been her means of support, and she has had to have from it the same good work that an artisan expects from his tools. Between Claudine and Naissance du jour the amateur became a professional, and that transition brilliantly demonstrates the benefits of a severe period of training. (784)

While many women in 1949, according to Beauvoir, “regard[ed] themselves as given,” believing “that their merits derive[d] from an immanent grace,” Colette realized that “worth [could] be acquired by conquest” (784).

Beauvoir encountered Colette for the first time in 1948 in the company of Jean-Paul Sartre. Also present were the writer and artist Jean Cocteau and actress and director Simone Berriau. Sartre had first met Colette at the home of Berriau in 1945 (Thurman 472) and had given her a copy of his La nausée with the following dedication, which pegs Colette in a sense as a writer of autobiography: “To Colette so similar to her books that I love so much with the admiration and if I may be so bold the friendship of J.-P. Sartre” (my translation).22

Beauvoir describes this meeting with Colette in La force des choses. Despite Colette’s cold reception, Beauvoir is happy “just to contemplate Colette”:

I had been told that she was not very cordial toward [younger] women and she received me coldly. “Do you like animals?” “No,” I say. She looks me over with an Olympian eye. I didn’t care. I hadn’t been counting on any real contact between us. It was enough for me just to contemplate her. Arthritic, wild-haired, violently made-up, age gave her sharp face and her blue eyes an electric brilliance: between her collection of paperweights and the gardens framed by
her windows, she appeared, paralyzed and sovereign, like a formidable Mother-Goddess. When we dined with her and Cocteau at Simone Berriau’s, Sartre had the impression of facing a “sacred monster.” She [Colette] had made the effort to come, in large part out of curiosity to see [Sartre], and knowing that for him she was the principal attraction of the evening . . . The Burgundian fullness of her voice didn’t blunt the acuity of her words. Her speech flowed from a natural source, and . . . Cocteau’s brilliance seemed contrived in comparison. (Quoted in Thurman 484–85)23

Beauvoir was not always so kind about Colette, especially when writing to Sartre. In 1935, after badly sunburning her ankles, she writes to Sartre: “So I spent Monday afternoon rubbing myself with ointments and reading Colette’s Sido, which is pretty awful” (Letters to Sartre 6). Several years later, in 1937, Beauvoir recounts to Sartre a “delightful dream” she had “about Maurice Chevalier [who later starred in the film version of Colette’s Gigi in 1958], who was simultaneously Colette and very surprised by this: ‘Isn’t she a woman?’ he was saying” (Letters to Sartre 8).24

In 1948, in a letter to American writer Nelson Algren early in their seventeen-year-long relationship, Beauvoir again describes her dinner with Colette, this time honoring her as “the only great woman writer in France.” Her laudatory remarks (which contradict those she makes to Sartre) betray a somewhat condescending view of Colette’s work in France and perhaps suggest more about Beauvoir’s version of herself as a French woman and writer that she would like to convey to her new American lover than about Colette. Her comments offer an interesting rendering of Colette’s biography.

I think you heard of Colette: she is the only great woman writer in France, a really great writer. She was once the most beautiful woman. She danced in music-halls, slept with a lot of men, wrote pornographic novels and then good novels. She loved country, flowers, beasts, and making love, and then she loved too the most sophisticated life; she slept with woman [sic] too. She was fond of food and wine—well, she loved all good things, and she spoke beautifully about them. Now she is seventy-five and still the most fascinating eyes and a nice triangular cat face; she is very fat, impotent, a little deaf, but she can tell stories and smile and laugh in such a way nobody would think of looking at younger, finer women. She spoke the whole evening with Cocteau about the neighbourhood where they live, the Palais-
Royal, which is one of the best places in Paris indeed. They described
the life of the old whores who live there, the little shops, the little
cafés, the people in them with such humanity and such humour that
we listened, really fascinated. I hope I shall see her again. I was in love
with her, through her books, when I was a girl, so it meant something
to me to see her. It’s strange an old woman when she has lived so
much, so feverishly, so freely, when she knows so much and does not
care for anything more because now everything is over for her. (*A
Transatlantic Love Affair* 181)

Beauvoir refers to Colette’s life and work in *Le deuxième sexe* more
than she does any other female author. In her discussion of sexual initi-
ation, she makes reference to Colette’s *Le blé en herbe* (435–36); when
addressing love, marriage, and abortion, she mentions *Gribiche* (546);
lesbianism, *Ces plaisirs* (the earlier title of *Le pur et l’impur*) (465); les-
bianism and its analogies with the mother-daughter bond, *Les vrilles de
la vigne* (465); and masochism, *Mes apprentissages* (447). Beauvoir
notes the particularity of Colette’s relationship with and depiction of her
mother, Sido: “Rare indeed,” she suggests, “are the instances when the
mother’s authority is as comprehending and discreet as in the case of
that ‘Sido’ whom Colette has lovingly depicted” (331). For Beauvoir,
Colette’s characters are progressive, rare examples of women and girls
who explode stereotypes, such as Vinca, the protagonist of *Le blé en
herbe*, Léa in *Chéri*, and Renée Néré in *La vagabonde*. She refers to the
fact that it is Vinca’s young lover, Phil, not Vinca herself, who feels he
has been taken after they first make love:

Colette’s Vinca, in *Blé en herbe*, on the day after a rather rough deflo-
ration, displays a calmness that surprises her friend Phil: the point is
that she did not feel that she was being ‘taken’; on the contrary she
felt pride in ridding herself of her virginity, she experienced no over-
whelming bewilderment; truth to tell, Phil was wrong in being aston-
ished, for his sweetheart had not really come to know the male. Clau-
dine was farther from being unscathed after a mere dance with
Renaud. (435–36)

Despite Vinca’s early rebellion, Beauvoir suggests that Colette predicts
that once Vinca has become a woman, she will conform more closely to
stereotypes of the good, passive wife (408).

In contrast, when Beauvoir chooses examples of girls and women
from Woolf’s work, it is to illustrate the restraints imposed on women
and the tempered nature of their epiphanies:

The moments that women regard as revelations are those in which they discover their accord with a static and self-sufficient reality: those luminous moments of happiness which Virginia Woolf (in *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*) and Katherine Mansfield (throughout her work) bestow upon their heroines by way of supreme recompense. The joy that lies in the free surge of liberty is reserved for man; that which woman knows is a quiet sense of smiling plenitude. (690)

Beauvoir quotes two passages from Woolf’s *The Waves*. In the first, young Jinny revels in her emergent sexuality: “‘I now begin to unfurl, in this scent, in this radiance, as a fern when its curled leaves unfurl . . . I feel a thousand capacities spring up in me’” (410); in the second, anxious to become a woman, Jinny embraces a future that is oppressive and restrictive: “‘He will stand under the cedar tree. To his one word I shall answer my one word. What has formed in me I shall give him. I shall have children; I shall have maids in aprons [. . .] I shall be like my mother, silent in a blue apron locking up the cupboards’” (411). Beauvoir uses Woolf to contrast the greater freedom enjoyed by women in France with that accorded to their English counterparts: “In England, Virginia Woolf remarks (in *A Room of One’s Own*), women writers have always aroused hostility. In France, things were somewhat more favorable, because of the alliance between the social and the intellectual life, but, in general, opinion was hostile to ‘bluestockings’” (120). Again, returning to what seems to be her favorite of Woolf’s works, Beauvoir also cites Woolf’s famous comments in *A Room of One’s Own* with regard to the limits placed on an imaginary sister of Shakespeare compared to the liberty enjoyed by her brother.25

Beauvoir returns once again to *A Room of One’s Own* in 1966 in a presentation given in Japan, entitled “La femme et la création,” calling it “un très joli petit livre” (“a very nice little book”). Beauvoir uses Woolf’s work to support her own views on social class and the importance of engagement. In *A Room of One’s Own*, according to Beauvoir, Woolf had asked herself why, in terms of literature, works by English women were so rare and generally of secondary quality. “The room,” says Beauvoir, “is at the same time real and symbolic. In order to be able to write, in order to be able to accomplish something, one must first of all belong” (my translation; 458–59).26 She outlines Woolf’s contemplation of Shakespeare’s sister’s fate—“She would have stayed at home,
she would have done the cooking, the sewing” (my translation; 459), and she mentions her own attempts to make a similar argument (to provide a translation of sorts) in *Le deuxième sexe*: “I tried myself in *The Second Sex* a similar analysis using Van Gogh. I tried to show that a daughter born in the place of Van Gogh would not have had the opportunities he had” (459). She is, she says, completely in agreement with Woolf, that “si doué que soit un être au départ, si ses dons ne peuvent pas être exploités par suite de sa condition sociale, par suite des circonstances qui l’entourent, ces dons resteront stériles” (“as gifted as a being might be in the beginning, if her gifts cannot be exploited as a result of her social condition, as a result of the circumstances that surround her, her gifts will remain sterile”) or as Stendhal, who Beauvoir (facetiously?) suggests is a great feminist, put it: “tout génie qui nait femme est perdu pour l’humanité” (459) (“all genius that is born woman is lost for humanity”).

Marguerite Duras (1914–96), whose major success as a writer postdated Colette—her first novel, *Les impudents*, was published in 1943, her award-winning autobiographical novel *L’Amant* appeared in 1984, and her last work, *C’est tout*, was published in 1995—echoes Yourcenar and Beauvoir in her criticism of Colette’s work. In a 1975 interview Duras mentions Colette when talking about what she calls “feminine literature”: “an organic, translated writing . . . translated from blackness, from darkness.” “Women have been in darkness for centuries. They don’t know themselves” (Marks and Courtivron 174), writes Duras, echoing Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*. Some women, she suggests, “write as they think they should write—to imitate men and make a place for themselves in literature.” Colette, she goes on to say, “wrote like a little girl [. . . ] So she wrote ‘feminine literature’ as men wanted it” (Marks and Courtivron 174). This, Duras contends, is not really feminine literature at all—it is the man’s view of what feminine literature should be. Colette’s work lacked the violence that Duras believed feminine literature required.

I think ‘feminine literature’ is a violent, direct literature and that, to judge it, we must not—and this is the main point I want to make—start all over again, take off from a theoretical platform. The other day you were telling me, “Yes, but women can also be ideologues, philosophers, poets, etc., etc.” Of course. Of course. But why go over that? That should go without saying. We should be saying the opposite: can men forget everything and join women? . . . (Marks and Courtivron 174)
Despite Duras’s disavowal of the influence of her predecessor and the distinction she makes between her own form of feminine writing and that of Colette’s, Hélène Cixous, in her oft-cited essay “Le rire de la méduse,” pairs writings of Duras with those of Colette and Jean Genet precisely in terms of what she terms their “inscriptions of femininity.” In France these three writers alone wrote in the feminine, according to Cixous. “The Anglo-Saxon countries,” she adds in parentheses, perhaps in reference to Woolf, “have shown resources of distinctly greater consequence” (Marks and Courtivron 248–49, n. 3).

Although Duras does not name Woolf among her influences—her list of all male writers, Michelet, Saint-Just, Stendhal, curiously resembles that of Colette in La maison de Claudine, with the exception of Balzac—critics frequently tie the two together:

One can’t talk anymore about influence, but of intertextuality, or, why not, culture. Marguerite Duras “writes with” since no writer advances in undiscovered territory [. . .] Very far from her, Balzac, very close, Virginia Woolf or Louise Labé, evoked in L’amant de la Chine du nord. (My translation)

Duras is cited as having claimed Virginia Woolf and Emily Dickinson as sisters to her protagonist Emily L. of the novel of the same name. In a story about women and madness, Emily L. is a poet whose husband, named the Captain, destroys the poem she most covets. Like Woolf’s Isa Oliver of her last novel Between the Acts, who disguises her notebook as an account book (Between the Acts 15), Emily L. writes poetry in secret. Again, like Between the Acts, Emily L. is a layered text, framed by a second narrative.

Thus, Duras’s dissatisfaction with Colette and her turn to Woolf echo that of Yourcenar, Sarraute, and Beauvoir. Looking for something bigger and broader than the narrow realm of what they perceived to be Colette’s provincial, domestic fiction, they embraced Woolf’s work, celebrating her version of feminism and what they saw as the more progressive nature of her writing. Considering themselves outsiders—and one notes Yourcenar’s address to the Académie française, the violence of Duras’s writing—the French women writers looked away from France for their female influences.

Meanwhile, in England writers like Rebecca West, Antonia White, Dorothy Richardson, A. S. Byatt, Margaret Drabble, and Angela Carter were looking the other way. They sought an alternative to the elitist
patriarchal structures of which they believed Woolf was an anomalous, but nevertheless a well-established, support. In contrast to their French contemporaries, many English women writers felt that Woolf failed to speak for them. Common to the British writers’ responses to Woolf’s work is a sense that something is missing, something is absent from her work. In Colette’s work, by contrast, the English writers found the force and substance lacking in Woolf’s. They found the strength usually yoked to the body, yoked to the mind, to paraphrase West.

Like Yourcenar, West met both Woolf and Colette. West and Woolf moved in similar social circles and met on numerous occasions. In 1922, prior to meeting West, Woolf described her novel *The Judge* in disparaging terms: “[I]t bursts, like an over stuffed sausage,” asserts Woolf. “She pours it all in; and one is covered with flying particles” (*Letters* 2: 548). In a letter to Vanessa Bell in May 1928, Woolf describes a first meeting with West in more positive terms:

Rebecca was much the most interesting, though as hard as nails, very distrustful, and no beauty. She is a cross between a charwoman and a gipsy, but as tenacious as a terrier, with flashing eyes, very shabby, rather dirty nails, immense vitality, bad taste, suspicion of intellectuals, and great intelligence. She gave me the true history of Isadora Duncan’s life—(I sent you the life, by the way, which is rather valuable, as libraries are banning it). Rebecca has knocked about with all the mongrels of Europe. She talks openly of her son [Anthony], who has got consumption: They say she is a hardened liar—but I rather liked her. (*Letters* 3: 501)

Several years later, in December 1932, Woolf wrote of West in her diary: “oh yes a very clever woman, rather rubbed about the thorax: with a good supply of worldly talk: & much go & humour; a silky careening society voice” (*Diary* 4: 131–32). On another occasion, in 1933, Woolf describes tea with West and Ethel Smyth as “a screaming howling party.” She portrays “Old Ethel” meandering, deaf, as “so violent” but “shrewd,” and she compares West, “although she is tenacious and masterful and very good company,” to “an arboreal animal grasping a tree, and showing all her teeth, as if another animal were about to seize her young” (*Letters* 5: 259). Her later comments about West were not so flattering. In 1939, in a letter to Vita, Woolf calls West “preposterous and fat”; she “[dillydallies] with the world and the flesh” and “she’s too distorted one foot on sea and one on land,” suggests Woolf, citing an ancestor of Vita Sackville-West (*Letters* 6: 351).
West’s view of Woolf is similarly mixed. Like Beauvoir, West distinguished between Woolf’s texts, praising some and dismissing others. In 1929 she praises the recently published *A Room* (in which West herself, incidentally, gets two mentions) in her essay “Virginia Woolf and Autumn” (included in *Ending in Earnest*). In this essay West portrays Woolf as a “genius,” and she calls *A Room* “an uncompromising piece of feminist propaganda: I think the ablest yet written” (211). “She proves her case,” which West understands to be a defense of women “from the accusation of inferiority that is laid against them on the grounds that they have failed to be geniuses,” “in passages that in their perfect, rounded form, and in the warm yet restrained colour of their imagery, remind one of the great chrysanthemums seen these days in the florists’ window” (211).35

In 1972, in Joan Russel Noble’s *Recollections*, and in 1981, in a *Paris Review* interview (the latter significantly conducted after the publication of Woolf’s collected letters and diaries in the late 1970s), West criticizes works like *The Waves* and *The Common Reader*. In Noble’s collection, West begins by marking her distance from Woolf. She and Woolf, she suggests, were “no more than acquaintances,” and “[t]he Bloomsbury Group did not like me, and,” she adds, “I did not like them” (89). West describes Woolf as possessing “a phantom-like quality”: “Though she sat opposite one, the impression left was as hard to recall as if she were one of those ghosts who are only seen as they turn the corner of the passage” (89). While West admires Woolf’s originality—*Orlando*, she contends, is an exquisite book, although ruined, she asserts, by the addition of “those terrible photographs” of Vita/Virginia, Orlando, and Sasha (93)—she is skeptical about whether Woolf’s work merits the approval it has received: “*The Waves,*” she opines, “is Pre-Raphaelite kitsch and should be forgotten. *A Room of One’s Own* is on the right side and is a good piece of craftsmanship, but it is hardly worth teaching it in schools, and indeed I think too much is made of *The Common Reader*” (92).36 She continues these comments in the later of the two interviews, telling Marina Warner:

> It’s an absurd error to put modern English literature in the curriculum. You should read contemporary literature for pleasure or not read it at all. You shouldn’t be taught to monkey with it. It’s ghastly to think of all the little girls who are taught to read *To the Lighthouse*. It’s not really substantial food for the young because there’s such a strong feeling that Woolf was doing a set piece and it didn’t really matter very much. She was putting on an act. Shakespeare didn’t put on an
act. But *Orlando* is a lovely original splash, a beautiful piece of fancy.

(Quoted in *Women Writers at Work* 93)

West goes on to criticize the Bloomsbury group as a whole. She says that Leonard Woolf had “a tiresome mind” and describes Vanessa Bell’s paintings as “awful muddy decorations.” She also hates, she adds, Duncan Grant’s artwork. West describes the reaction of her butler to a scene at dinner when the Bloomsbury group were discussing, in a “terribly subtle” way, a scene from Faulkner where a cob of corn is used in the course of a rape. The pretentiousness of the group is highlighted by the reaction of the butler, who runs to find Faulkner’s work, understanding that it must be “saucy” (Quoted in *Women Writers at Work* 93–94). West closes the discussion of Woolf and Bloomsbury by conceding that “Virginia Woolf’s criticism was much better than criticism others were writing then” (94). And in a gesture that suggests an effort to take back Woolf, West writes: “It is odd how the French writers who think they are carrying on her method simply show they do not read English very well. She did not catalogue, as the nouvelle vague does, she, I repeat it, perceived” (93).

West was, on the other hand, an admirer of Colette. In *Ending in Earnest* she describes her first sight of Colette, standing on the platform of the St. Raphael train station in Paris. The imposing French writer, who assumed the “stance of a Spanish fighting bull,” had a face that “suggested the muzzle of a very fierce animal,” according to West, and eyes “prolonged by blue lines till the proportion they bore to the rest of her features was queerly non-human” (180). Colette’s strength of character, she goes on to suggest, is unmatched. She even leaves Radclyffe Hall, to whom West was, according to Cline, a “literary mentor-friend” (Cline 29), in the dust:

> In thirty years she has been putting into infallible artistic form her gross, wise, limited, eternal view about life, at times leaving [*Radclyffe Hall’s*] *The Well of Loneliness* beaten at the post, at times producing little candid pearls of innocence, since these too are aspects of the universe. It is one of the peculiar virtues of the French race that it can take the kind of sturdy long-lived strength which in other countries remains dedicated to the body and yoke it to the service of the mind.

(181)

In the same *Paris Review* interview in which she had harsh words for Woolf and the Bloomsbury group, West praises Colette’s skills as a
writer while questioning a number of her personal traits, particularly her lack of engagement with contemporary politics:

I think she was repetitive and I hate all her knowing nudges about men, but I think she was a good writer on the whole and she was very good on landscape. She did a wonderful book called Trio [author’s note: does she mean Duo?]. She was really more egotistical than you could possibly imagine, and she was outside a lot of experiences in a most curious way. I was taken to see her in Paris with a man who was a judge at Nuremberg. She didn’t pick it up at all. (Quoted in Women Writers at Work 82)37

A similar response to Woolf’s and Colette’s work is that of Antonia White (1899–1980, born Eirene Botting), a counterpoint to Yourcenar as the translator of a number of Colette’s works into English, including the Claudines (Claudine at School in 1956, Claudine in Paris in 1958, and Claudine Married in 196038), Bella-Vista, and La chatte. White’s translation credits also include Maupassant’s A Woman’s Life, Voltaire’s The History of Charles XII: King of Sweden, and Georges Simenon’s The Glass Cage. Like Yourcenar, White also wrote: her first novel, Frost in May, the story of Nanda, a new pupil at a Catholic girls’ high school, appeared in 1933 and is often compared to Colette’s Claudine à l’école. Woolf appears to have read Frost in May; however, her response to it is unclear. She wrote to Quentin Bell in late 1933: “The one I admired [. . . ] is Ordinary Families; the other [book], Night in May no Frost she calls it [21 words omitted]. She is a friend of Logan’s, a Chelsea pensioner, and I daresay worthless; but the erudite say she’s full of suppressed ardour, virtue and it’s her own story. So let me have it back” (Letters 5: 213–14). It is unclear whether the latter sentence applies to White.

Unlike Yourcenar, who sat down with Woolf to discuss her translation of The Waves, White never met Colette; her translations postdate the author’s death in 1954. The Colette whom White met via her translations, however, often exasperated her: “I really don’t think ANY woman was as much in love with herself as Colette . . . She is so overwhelming! I am worn out having to live in her personality, translating her! I love her . . . but I need a rest from her” (in a letter to Emily Coleman, quoted in Dunn 379).

White looked abroad for her literary models. She admires American writers: “Eudora Welty, Martha Gelhorn [who, incidentally, married Bertrand de Jouvenel, Colette’s stepson-turned-lover], and of course
Djuna [Barnes].” However, it is with the French that she allies herself: “I belong to the French line and there I’m well outdistanced . . . Mauriac, Colette, Julien Green” (White 282). While among the ancients White says “she [feels] a minnow,” she is not threatened by her English contemporaries: “there are very few,” she thinks, “who are definitely ‘better’” (282).

White’s biographer, Jane Dunn, tells us that Woolf (two decades older than White) was “the hero-writer of Antonia’s youth” (70). Indeed, White wrote a fan letter to Woolf. In 1939, at the age of forty, however, as White reads Jacob’s Room, she views Woolf in a more critical way, describing it as lacking structure, leaving her as a reader empty and dissatisfied:

It exasperated yet charmed me. Here was an attempt to relate day and night. She [Woolf] lays her little strands side by side instead of working them into a pattern. But perhaps it is because there is no solid structure underneath that it leaves me with this curious empty and dissatisfied feeling. In the last book it is beaten out so thin that it is threadbare. Life may be entirely meaningless and yet I feel that in art you must impose a form on it. The most beautiful reproduction of sounds and colours and atmospheres is somehow unsatisfactory . . . (White 164)

This is a sentiment that was echoed by White’s and Woolf’s contemporary, Dorothy Richardson (1873–1957), whose work and whose use of stream of consciousness narrative is frequently compared with Woolf’s. When asked to review The Years in 1937, Richardson refused, stating in a letter that Woolf’s writing “does not deeply move me” (330). Richardson appears to have resented what she perceived as Woolf’s snobbery and the elitism of the Bloomsbury group, issues that also bothered West.39 When reading Woolf’s last novel, Between the Acts, she has a sense that there is something missing from Woolf’s prose. Woolf’s “heritage” and her “upbringing in academic circles,” Richardson suggests in a letter to fellow writer Bryher, are detrimental to her work:

What upset me, I think, in V. Woolf is a sort of, I mean the kind of disillusionment that somewhere in each book approaches paralysis. In the essays too, it is there, overshadowing each statement. Movement ceases of mind & spirit. Less than usual in this book [Between the Acts], which in certain directions, particularly in the significant matter of what people draw from just being together, reveals the ripening
of a perception that in *The Voyage Out* has not begun to dawn. One side of the trouble, of what at any rate so troubles those who enor-

mously admire & yet deprecate her work, is, I believe, her docility, due perhaps to an upbringing in academic circles, to certain kinds of
generalizations. The closing page of this book reveals her reciting a lesson from an extremely dubious text-book. She obviously doesn’t
herself believe it adequate, but has nothing, given her own so very
specialist angle of vision, to substitute. All her avenues have the brief perspective of the good Pagan, so that her adorable, wonder-working
talents show, in the end, like peacocks in a prison. Peacocks is the
word. Because sometimes they strut & strike attitudes. But always
with drooping wings. Still, in this book, she was escaping the burden
of her heritage. (Richardson 424)

She goes on to describe *Between the Acts* in a second letter to Bryher as “poetry moaning in a vacuum. Patronage, too, always, rather than vital
concentration. Life seen, from a balcony, through a lorgnette. Nerves &
brain, these only, operative . . .” (425). Woolf reviewed the fourth of
Richardson’s *Pilgrimage* sequence for the *Times Literary Supplement* in
1919 and the seventh for the *Nation & Athenaeum* in 1923. She
refused to review several others. In her diary in 1920, Woolf wrote that
both Richardson and Joyce “were ruined by the damned ‘egotistical
self’” (quoted in Hussey 229). In the *Nation* review she attributed to
Richardson the invention of “a sentence which we might call the psy-
chological sentence of the feminine gender” (quoted in Hussey 229).

This anti-Woolf sentiment, largely based on her class status, carried
over to another generation of writers that includes Doris Lessing
(1919–), Margaret Drabble (1939–), A. S. Byatt (1936–), and Angela
Carter (1940–92). When Lessing mentions Woolf she does so in terms
of her own and Woolf’s inclusion and exclusion as a writer. While Less-
ing admires Woolf, according to Woolf and Lessing scholar Dorothy
Brewster, she “feels that Virginia Woolf’s experience must have been
too limited, ‘because there’s always a point in her novels when I think
“Fine, but look at what you’ve left out”’” (quoted in Brewster 158).41
Lessing explains in an interview that growing up away from England—
she was raised by English parents in southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe)—broadened her own experience and enabled her to see things a
little differently: “I’m extremely lucky. Both my parents were quite
excessively British. I have that as absolute bedrock. But I also have the
other eye because I was brought up outside England” (quoted in
Blume).42 In the same interview, Lessing cites Woolf’s comments
about the restrictions imposed on such writers as Charlotte Brontë in comparison to her Russian contemporary, Tolstoy. Lessing considers her own work to be more closely allied with the Russian novel than with the English, although, as Brewster points out, many English and American novelists, Woolf among them, were themselves influenced by Russian literature. When asked directly, Lessing scoffs at the suggestion that either Woolf or Colette “influenced” her work. However, she writes that she enjoys the physicality of Colette’s work (personal correspondence).

A. S. Byatt (1936–), author of Possession (1990) and Angels and Insects (1992), suggests that she writes to some degree “against” Woolf. In the introduction to an early novel, The Shadow of the Sun (1964), Byatt says that she struggled with “the form of the novel” for which she could find no satisfactory model. While she found “Elizabeth Bowen, Rosamund Lehmann, Forster [and] Woolf” “too suffused with ‘sensibility,’” the alternative, “the joky social comedy of [Kingsley] Amis and [John] Wain,” was even less satisfactory. She looked to France for stylistic influence—she cites French novelist Françoise Sagan’s Bonjour tristesse, a novel she describes as “against sensibility”—and found in the work of Marcel Proust and Iris Murdoch “a kind of toughness [combined with] a sensuous awareness” that suited her. Byatt cites as her influences “Proust [ . . . ] Balzac, Dickens, Eliot, Thomas Mann and James, Iris Murdoch, Ford Maddox Ford, and Willa Cather [ . . . ] Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky” (quoted in Kelly 2).

In a 1972 Ms. article, entitled “How Not to Be Afraid of Virginia Woolf,” Margaret Drabble (1939–), author of many novels and short stories, including her first novel, A Summer Bird Cage, in 1964, explains the vicissitudes of her own relationship with Woolf and her work. At first resistant to Woolf, whom she believed to be “a ‘difficult’ writer overfond of technique, self-important about her use of stream of consciousness, a somewhat disdainful creator of a literary avant garde,” “an elitist,” writing “for a minority about a minority,” “a dull dilettante,” “out of date,” and “out of touch” (68), Drabble’s attitude changed when she stumbled upon A Room of One’s Own. Here Drabble found a work that spoke to her own condition. In Woolf’s other essays and polemic works, she also found “a good fighter, a brave speaker, and a loyal addresser of envelopes” (70). On turning to the novels, Drabble describes her initial disappointment. What did Mrs Ramsay of To the Lighthouse and Mrs Flanders of Jacob’s Room have to do with “the brave new world of liberation,” she asks? However, she also softens to the novels, appreciating them for “the living detail and variety of life” contained
therein (70). Woolf’s influence, Drabble contends, is pervasive; her style has changed the form of the novel:

Seascapes, holidays, dinner parties. A trivial domestic world, maybe, unworthy of the pen of a militant. It was for these preoccupations that she was rejected by succeeding generations. But there is hardly a writer who has not been affected by her. Her fluid sentence structure, her poetic prose, her perception of the slightest connection, her lack of interest in a heavy conventional narrative, her passion for the inconsequential psychological detail—all these things have gone into the novel and remained there. (My emphasis; 72)

Perhaps the most forthright of this group of more recent writers is Angela Carter, who attacked Woolf for her elitism and embraced Colette for her break from tradition. Carter published her first novel, *Shadow Dance*, in 1966 and her last, *Wise Children*, in 1991. She also translated the fairy stories of Charles Perrault. When asked by critic Elaine Jordan about feminist attacks on her work—Jordan ties the two writers together in terms of their perceived lack of feminist credentials—Carter responds by explaining that her story “The Bloody Chamber” (the title story of the collection of the same name and a Bluebeard rewrite) is “a homage to Colette”: “I wanted a lush fin-de-siècle decor for the story, and a style that . . . utilizes the heightened diction of the novelette, to half seduce the reader into this wicked, glamorous, fatal world” (quoted in Jordan, “The Dangerous Edge” 197).

Confirming further Colette’s presence to Carter’s work, Carter has Colette appear briefly as a character in her novel *Nights at the Circus* (1989). While in Paris, Carter’s protagonist Fevvers dines with Colette and Willy. She coaches the former while the latter feeds her:

On that European tour of [Fevvers’s], Parisians shot themselves in droves for her sake; not just Lautrec but all the post-impressionists vied to paint her; Willy gave her supper and she gave Colette some good advice. Alfred Jarry proposed marriage. (11)

An appropriate choice of visitor, Colette, like Fevvers, embodies “all the éclat of a new era about to take off”(11).48

Carter writes at length about Colette’s life and work in a review of Michèle Sarde’s biography of Colette, *Colette: Libre et entravée.* Highlighting the life of Colette over her work, Carter says that she admires Colette first and foremost for her tenacity: “Magnificently,” writes
Carter of Colette, “she did not know her place” (Shaking a Leg 525). Colette lived at the limit: according to Carter, her life “was as picaresque as a woman’s may be without putting herself in a state of hazard” (520). Her (single) name and her renown, writes Carter, attest to her uniqueness: “Colette is one of the few, possibly the only, well-known woman writer of modern times who is universally referred to simply by her surname, tout court. Woolf hasn’t made it, even after all these years, Rhys without the Jean is incognito, Nin without the Anaïs looks like a typo. Colette, Madame Colette, remains in this as much else, unique” (519).

For Carter, Colette is a mystery, a constant contradiction. Echoing the title of Sarde’s biography, Carter contends that “not one but two writers are growing within Colette”—Colette, author of _La vagabonde_, creator of Renée Néré, who says no to marriage and remains free; and Colette, writer/journalist for _Le matin_ who marries its editor, Henri de Jouvenel (521). Despite the impressive breadth of Colette’s provincial culinary expertise—“she knew a receipt for everything, whether it was for furniture polish, vinegar, orange-wine or quince-water, for cooking truffles or preserving linen and materials” (524)—Carter questions the authenticity of Colette’s “paysanne” persona; she believes this quintessential French provincialism was as manufactured as British cookbook writer (and frequent butt of Carter’s jokes about elitism) Elizabeth David’s book on French country cooking and as much intended for publication. This capacity for dissimulation is a quality that Carter admires in Colette: “The passionate integrity of Colette’s narcissism,” Carter contends, “rendered her indestructible” (524).

Carter describes Colette’s work as “a peculiar kind of strip tease”: “Colette never tells you about herself,” writes Carter, “[i]nstead she describes herself” (522). According to Carter, the autobiographical nature of Colette’s work is underscored when Robert Phelps, author of _Earthly Paradise_, an autobiography taken from the writings of her lifetime, is able to write a “perfectly coherent biography” of Colette by merely assembling extracts from her work (522). Carter notes the objective subjectivity of Colette’s work: “The apparent objectivity of her prose is a device to seal these people in her own narrative subjectivity.” She describes Colette’s prose as “narcissistic”—we admire Sido, but also the narrator’s love for her (523).

Celebrating Colette’s feminism, Carter suggests that while Beauvoir’s memoirs are almost entirely about Sartre, even though she is conspicuously absent from his, Colette, by comparison, “simply did not believe that women were the second sex” (525). Colette, she goes on, celebrated the status quo of femininity, its physical glamour and its
capacity to subvert and withstand the boredom of patriarchy. Here again Carter distinguishes between different Colettes. She prefers Colette’s earlier “fictions,” such as the Claudine novels. They are “more interesting” than the autobiographical work, which she describes as “obsessive gush” (524). The Chéri novels, Carter contends, are about the power politics of love (527). This makes her an ambivalent ally to the women’s movement. “She is like certain shop stewards,” suggests Carter, “who devote so much time to getting up management’s nose that they lose sight of the great goals of socialism” (526). Carter concludes by affirming that Colette’s contribution lay outside the realm of the literary: “Apart from the Chéri novels and one or two others, [Colette’s] achievement as a whole was extraordinary though not in a literary sense; she forged a career out of the kind of self-obsession which is supposed, in a woman, to lead only to tears before bed-time, in a man to lead to the peaks” (528).

Carter found Woolf somewhat less inspiring. Comments like this one, made in response to an article on bread (and specifically on British food writer Elizabeth David’s book on bread), demonstrate the nature of Carter’s problems with Woolf:

Virginia Woolf? Yes. Although otherwise an indifferent cook, Virginia could knock you up a lovely cottage loaf. You bet. This strikes me as just the sort of pretentious frivolous and dilettantish thing a Bloomsbury would be good at—knowing how to do one, just one, fatuously complicated kitchen thing and doing that one thing well enough to put the cook’s nose out of joint. “I will come into the kitchen, Louie,” she said to this young employee of hers, “and show you how to do it.” (Shaking a Leg 95)

Despite this hostility to Woolf the woman, Carter admired Woolf’s work. However, like Beauvoir and others, she distinguished between the accessible Woolf (for Carter, Orlando) and the inaccessible Woolf. The picaresque nature of many of Carter’s characters, such as the gender-bending Eve of A Passion for New Eve and the flamboyant and elusive circus performer Fevvers of Nights at the Circus, highlight Carter’s debt to the Woolf of Orlando.

Thus the French rejection of Colette is matched by the English rejection of Woolf. Many of the same criticisms are leveled at the foremother by her successor in both cases: she does not speak for women; her work is out of date; she represents the old order, not the new. In this way, in each case the foremother represents a kind of Woolfian “Angel
in the House,” as Elaine Showalter suggests (1 n. 1), who embodies convention and submission to a set of values unacceptable to the later writer. But the reader from abroad sees things differently. As do Colette’s French successors, Woolf’s English successors celebrate the foreign voice. Geographically, socially, and politically freer, the foreign writer is less clearly defined as one thing or another, less predictable, and more mysterious than one’s own foremother. The particulars of her life, her class, her friends, and her affiliation with one group of writers as opposed to another hold less importance. Considered an insider at home, she remains an outsider for those reading from abroad.

In conclusion, I want to look at two recent works that initially complicate but ultimately confirm the pattern explored here. Jeanette Winterson’s celebration of Woolf (along with Gertrude Stein) as a major influence on her work in her *Art [Objects]: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* and Julia Kristeva’s honoring of Colette in her recent third volume of *Le génie féminin* suggest an effort to celebrate the literary foremother on her own ground, Woolf in English, Colette in French.52 However, Kristeva’s acknowledgment of her status as an outsider—she is Bulgarian born—and Winterson’s insistence that Woolf’s work, her words, be understood independently from Woolf the woman suggest a stepping away from rather than an addressing of the issues raised by the other writers included in this study.

Winterson (1961–), author of the semi-autobiographical *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, The Passion,* and *Sexing the Cherry,* is unequivocal about her debt to Woolf, once going so far as to declare herself Woolf’s natural heir on a late show television special in Britain.53 In her *Art [Objects],* a series of essays about writing, Winterson explains in detail the relationship of her work with that of Woolf. In contrast to West, Richardson, and Carter, Winterson looks exclusively to the work and contends that readers are unconcerned with the ways in which a writer’s life and a writer’s work intersect (27). She dismisses speculation about Woolf’s life and its relationship to her art as “bulldust,” instead insisting that “the only honest undistorted focus is her work” (63).54

There has been so much concentration on Woolf as a feminist and as a thinker, that the unique power of her language has still not been given the close critical attention it deserves. When Woolf is read and taught, she needs to be read and taught as a poet; she is not a writer who uses words for things, for her, words are things, incantatory, substantial. In her fiction, her polemic is successful because it is subordinated to the right of spells. (70)
Woolf’s strength, according to Winterson, is her way with words: “Unlike many novelists, then and now, she loved words. That is she was devoted to words, faithful to words, romantically attached to words, desirous of words. She was territory and words occupied her” (75).

A work of art is abundant, spills out, gets drunk, sits up with you all night and forgets to close the curtains, dries your tears, is your friend, offers you a disguise, a difference, a pose. Cut and cut through it and there is still a diamond at the core. Skim the top and it is rich. The inexhaustible energy of art is transfusion for a worn-out world. When I read Virginia Woolf she is to my spirit, waterfall and wine. (65)

Allying her own method with that of Woolf and Gertrude Stein, Winterson asserts that all we can be sure of about a writer who emerges from her own work is her fictionality: “Like Stein, I prefer myself as a character in my own fiction, and like Stein and Woolf, what concerns me is language” (53). She adds: “Like Orlando and [her own] Oranges are Not the Only Fruit, [Stein’s] The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas is a fiction masquerading as a memoir”—rather than memoir masquerading as fiction (53). Winterson’s comments recall Colette’s epigraph to La naissance du jour, drawn from the text itself: “Imagine-t-on, à me lire, que je fais mon portrait? Patience, c’est seulement mon modèle” (53) (“Do you imagine when reading me that I am portraying myself? Be patient, it’s only my model”). In this way, Winterson sets aside some of the issues that turned Carter, Richardson, and West away from Woolf. Nationality, class, sexuality, and engagement or lack thereof cease to have a bearing on the work of art.

Kristeva makes no such claim with regard to Colette and her work. While she celebrates Colette’s love of words and explores in detail her “new alphabet,” which, she argues, transcends her presence as a woman of the century, she insists that this alphabet is infused with her French bourguignon accent, her peasant’s earthiness. Her life and her work, according to Kristeva, are “indissociables,” although they are at once “subtilement distinctes” (Le génie féminin 19) (“[they] cannot be separated, but are subtly distinct the one from the other”). The two flow inextricably together in her work:

Colette found a language to name a strange osmosis between her sensations, her desires and her anxieties, between these “pleasures that one flippantly calls physical” and the infinity of the world—the rustling of flowers, the undulations of animals, sublime apparitions, contagious
monsters. This language transcends her presence as a woman in the century—vagabond or submissive, free, cruel, or sympathetic. Her style mixes her earthly roots and her burgundy accent while soothing them in an alchemy that remains still a mystery to us. She herself calls it “a new alphabet.” What alphabet? (My translation)56

Colette represents for Kristeva “un legs très précieux de la tradition, tout particulièrement de la tradition française” (Le génie féminin 19) (“a very precious legacy of tradition, very particularly a French tradition”). However, reading against the assessments of Yourcenar and Duras, and perhaps suggesting a new era of Colette criticism, Kristeva asserts that Colette cannot be reduced to her Frenchness. Indeed, Colette struggled, Kristeva argues, against any such efforts to define her as one thing or another, a fact confirmed by Carter’s assessment of Colette. Her discomfort with the term “writer” was not simply, according to Kristeva, false modesty but arose from the sense that she had that “langue savoureuse l’univers pour le refaire” (“her language/her tongue savoured the universe in order to remake it” (Le génie féminin 16). Her incursions into the world of French literature, her efforts to impose a sensuality there did not take the familiar forms of a triumphal eroticism or a more conventional painful modesty, according to Kristeva. “Provocative, scandalous as a result of her daring customs and behavior, this lovable woman refuses to be pigeonholed as a militant of any kind and preaches no single transgression” (my translation).57 This ambiguity, a reaction against the status quo, in a form that does not fall into any neat category, Kristeva suggests, accounts for French reactions to her work.58

Is Colette, asks Kristeva, for export only, echoing the statements of Edmund White that head up this chapter? “Fallait-il être l’étrangère que je suis pour se laisser fasciner par sa sorcellerie, qui ne serait donc pas seulement française, mais, peut-être, sait-on jamais, universelle?” (17) (“Is it only foreigners, like myself, who are fascinated by her magic, which may not be uniquely French, but, perhaps, who knows, universal?”).59 Does Winterson’s Art [Objects] mark a change in the critical reception of Woolf’s work by women writers at home? While both Kristeva’s and Winterson’s writings do suggest a change in the tide in terms of the conception of Woolf and Colette among writers of fiction in both England and France, a tradition of exchange persists.