Literary Identification from Charlotte Bronte to Tsitsi Dangarembga

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A new kind of subject—the subject of sexuality—became possible for fictional discourse at the beginning of the twentieth century. This is true in two senses: In one sense, the subject, or topic, of sexual behavior began appearing more openly in English fiction in the last several decades of the nineteenth century (in, for example, the work of Thomas Hardy and some of the “New Women” novelists), and sexual discourse was a significant aspect of the innovation of some Modernist novelists, such as D. H. Lawrence and James Joyce. In another sense, a new subject of narrative appeared, one whose history was defined primarily by his or her relation to this newly significant aspect of selfhood: sexuality. As the examples of Lawrence and Joyce suggest, the subject of sexuality could be a heterosexual one, but its emergence was preceded and accompanied by the increasing exposure, in Freudian psychology and in the sexology of Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis, of same-sex practices and narratives. In Michel Foucault’s well-known formulation, “The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood. . . . The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.” This “personage,” whose birth Foucault dates to 1870, with the publication of “Westphal’s famous article . . . on ‘contrary sexual sensations’” (43), does not enter as protagonist into the novel of formation until some decades into the twentieth century, when the scandal of (hetero)sexual representation has already become familiar. By the end of
the twentieth century, the “coming-out” novel has become a familiar subcategory of the novel of formation.

The coming-out novel is defined not only by the protagonist’s growing realization that, as a sexual subject, she or he does not conform to normative expectations of heterosexual feeling or behavior—that he or she is, in current terms, queer—but also, and equally importantly, by the communication of this realization to some other person (who may, but does not have to, be an object of erotic desire). Each of the three novels discussed in this chapter—Virginia Woolf’s *The Voyage Out* (1915), Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), and Jeanette Winterson’s *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985)—represents a different moment in the representation of such communication: from indirection and inconclusion (as in Woolf’s novel); to loudly announced unspeakability (in Hall’s); to parodic play with traditions of indirection and announcement (in Winterson’s). In any form, some gesture of communication of the subject’s sexual narrative is the crucial “out” of coming-out narrative. The complete phrase, of course, is “coming out of the closet”; and what has most consistently defined a closet as a closet is its doubled relationship to privacy and revelation, the absence of others within the closet and the pressure of their presence just on the other side of the door. “Coming out,” then, places the protagonist in a new ethical relation to some other(s) in the narrative—a relation of making oneself known to the other that allows for the possibility, not previously available, of recognition.¹ An author’s staging of such a moment of communication and recognition may, in turn, trigger an equivalent wish, or even demand, in the relationship between queer reader and potentially queer author: that an author make herself known, as a sexual subject, to her readers. In this relationship too, the wish is, such knowledge may produce recognition; for even if the reader herself remain unknown to an author, her knowledge of the author’s sexuality can make possible the queer reader’s identification, and that identification, indirectly, confers recognition—the affirmation of the self in the other.

In this chapter, I trace the lines of filiation and resistance among three authors who have, with varying degrees of explicitness, portrayed queer sexual subjects, and also the ways in which these authors are cast in or negotiate their roles as queer objects of readerly identification. The three authors are linked by cultural and intertextual relations. Woolf and Hall were prominent contemporaries, recipients of the same literary prize (the Prix Femina Vie Heureuse); Woolf was prepared to testify on Hall’s behalf at the trial for obscenity of *The Well of Loneliness*, though she was caustic about its literary qualities. Woolf’s *Orlando* appeared in the same year as
Hall’s novel, and critics have juxtaposed the two novels to contrast their authors’ relations to Modernism and to the representation of queer sexuality. Finally, Winterson’s polemical essay collection *Art Objects* (1997) emphasizes her identification with Woolf (and indicates her disdain for Hall) as an heir to the Modernist tradition and rejects the significance of shared queer subjectivity.

The word “queer” is applicable to these novels in two linked but not identical senses. The first is the conventional sense of “queer” as “strange, odd, peculiar, or eccentric”; this sense is particularly emphasized by the narrative strategies of *The Voyage Out* and *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. According to a more recent sense, established in the 1980s by both queer activism and queer theory, that which is queer “challenge[s] or deconstruct[s] traditional ideas of sexuality and gender, esp[ecially] the acceptance of heterosexuality as normative and the perception of a rigid dichotomy of male and female traits,” a project of overt importance in both *The Well of Loneliness* and *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. In each case, queerness of form and the representation of queer subjectivity are linked, but not always in straightforward or in the same ways. Virginia Woolf’s concern in *The Voyage Out* to queer, or render eccentric, conventions of readerly identification is in tension with her interest in representing a queer subjectivity; contrarily, in *The Well of Loneliness*, Hall calls upon conventions of identification to normalize the representation of queer subjectivity. *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, I will suggest, pursues both these projects—the queering (eccentricity) of representation, and the representation of the (sexually) queer—simultaneously.

It can be argued that the simultaneity of these two reverberations of “queer” is endemic to Modernist literature itself. Heather Love, for example, suggests that:

*Queer modernism* has an air of inevitability about it. Since the term *queer* is so closely linked to the concept of the margin, the prominence of exile and alienation in even dominant modernism resonates with the outsider glamour of *queer*. In addition, since the classic period of aesthetic modernism coincides with the emergence of modern sexual identities, there is a historical fit between the two terms. . . . But perhaps what makes *queer* and *modernism* such a good fit is that the indeterminacy of *queer* seems to match the indeterminacy, expansiveness, and drift of the literary—particularly the experimental, oblique version most closely associated with modernist textual production. ("Modernism at Night" 745)
Even within the work of a High Modernist such as Woolf, however, queerness of form (“experimental, oblique”) and queerness of content (“the emergence of modern sexual identities”) can operate in tension as well as in tandem, and those tensions are exacerbated in the representation of modern sexual identities in general.

The schematic distinction that I make here, between a queerness of form and one of content, partly corresponds to the twentieth-century division, in English and American literature, between high Modernist aesthetics and more popular or middlebrow forms of realist representation. This bifurcation itself gives rise to, and depends upon, a host of parallel and mutually reinforcing binary oppositions—traditional/experimental, form/content, high/low, aesthetic/political—that define competing forms of literary value. Woolf has often been represented as an exemplar of High Modernist aestheticism, while Hall, contrarily, has been remembered as the author of an aesthetically deficient, formally non-innovative polemic. These distinctions have more recently been contested, as feminist critics have focused on Woolf’s explicitly polemical writings (such as *A Room of One’s Own* and *Three Guineas*), reinterpreting her aesthetic experimentalism within the context of her oppositional politics, while some new readings of *The Well of Loneliness* have resituated it in relationship to Modernist aesthetics. Nevertheless, schematically, the careers of Woolf and Hall might stand for the continuingly uneasy, if not competitive, relationship between two modes of representation—the middlebrow and the highbrow, one for which perception and experience coalesce around a singular and coherent subject, which relies on conventions of readerly identification (as in *The Well of Loneliness*), and one for which subjectivity is fragmentary and mutable, which employs techniques that disrupt identification with a singular subject (as in the work of both Woolf and, to some degree, Winterson).

Within postmodern fictional theory and practice, there is a similar conflict over whether the representation of protagonists with identities peripheral to the Anglo-American canon of the novel of formation—for example, as in *Oranges*, a provincial, working-class, lesbian protagonist—can draw upon conventions of identification, or whether such traditional forms of representation are inherently constraining and misrepresent the insurgency of such protagonists. *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, with a first-person coming-of-age narrative interrupted by interpolated and invented fairytales, performs a bravura oscillation between these two poles. However, Winterson’s fiction has continued to move away from realist conventions of representation, and her writing has become less and less encouraging of readerly identifications—developments that have disturbed some readers
and that suggest the tension between the two continuing projects, for the fictional representation of consciousness, of queering representation and of representing the queer.

VOYAGING OUT OF THE VICTORIAN NOVEL

An unscientific survey (of friends and colleagues) suggests that *The Voyage Out* (1915) is a novel remembered indistinctly and at a long remove, even by readers familiar with Woolf and with women’s novels of formation. Woolf’s first novel seems stuck, somehow, not only in its author’s youth but also its readers’ and protagonist’s. This state of chronological arrest is not the necessary fate of novels of formation—not, for example, of *The Mill on the Floss*, or even of *David Copperfield*, which unlike *The Voyage Out* supplement their protagonists’ juvenile experience with more mature points of focalization. This association of the novel with early reading reiterates the very fear that *The Voyage Out* expresses—a writer’s fear of being left behind, not liberated but trapped by literary tradition, doomed to repeat a recursive narrative structured by Victorian ideologies of gender and sexuality and by the realist narrative practices of combined plenitude (material) and evasion (psychological) that, in Woolf’s view, had ossified around them. *The Voyage Out* expresses, even as it works to overcome, a fear of being unable to plot, or even fully to desire, an escape from a long, late, murmurous adolescence of Victorian culture into a clamorous (and dubious) maturity of Modernism. But the novel’s trajectory, I will argue, is not reducible to the failed outward voyage—ending abruptly in death—of its protagonist, Rachel Vinrace. *The Voyage Out* both is, and is not, Rachel’s story, as it is, and is not, a Victorian novel; it both rehearses and attempts to interrupt readers’ habits of identification with what Gayatri Spivak, speaking of *Jane Eyre*, famously calls “the psychobiography of the militant female subject . . . the mesmerizing focus of the ‘subject-constitution’ of the female individualist” (897). In doing so, like the other novels considered in this chapter, it both solicits and deflects readerly identification; both longs and has little patience for that exchange of recognition; gestures toward, but cannot fully imagine, the readerly relation that might take its place.

*The Voyage Out* at first seems familiar as an heir to the tradition of the narrative of female formation such as those of Brontë and Eliot. Rachel Vinrace is a motherless girl, brought up with Victorian scrupulosity by paternal aunts in the London suburb of Richmond and discovering, on the threshold of adulthood, a modest resistance to the gender constraints
of her milieu. Through the mentorship of her more sophisticated maternal aunt, Helen Ambrose, she is awakened to new possibilities of identification and desire in both the people that she meets and the novels that she reads; she emerges through this process into her own romance narrative as she becomes engaged to a young writer, Terence Hewet, while on holiday with the Ambroses in the fictitious South American village of Santa Marina. At this promising juncture, she develops a feverish illness and dies. This interruption itself is not entirely untypical in the nineteenth-century narrative of formation—death also interrupts the romance plots of Maggie Tulliver and Lucy Snowe, for example. For Woolf, however, I shall argue, this narrative suspension aims more fully to distance the novel both from the identification of *The Voyage Out* with the nineteenth-century novel of female formation and from identification—of reader and author with protagonist—as a convention of the novel of formation. Further, while the death of Rachel and the foreclosure of her romance do not—any more than do the deaths of Maggie Tulliver and M. Paul Emmanuel—enable the ascendancy of a lesbian counter-romance, a shift of narrative attention at the conclusion, to the sexually ambiguous character St. John Hirst, does allow the novel’s elliptical references to and ostentatious silences about sexuality to reverberate with a certain queer intensity.

Critics have frequently observed the strength and ambivalence of Woolf’s connection to her Victorian literary and cultural heritage. The century inhabited by the authors whom Woolf grouped together as the “four great women novelists”—Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Emily Brontë, and George Eliot—offered Woolf her most immediate set of objects of literary identification; but like her actual Victorian parents—her eminent literary father, her beautiful mother—this literary parentage was overwhelming as well as generative. Gillian Beer, for example, observes, “The Victorians are not simply represented in Virginia Woolf. They are internalized, inseparable, as well as held at arm’s length. . . . Woolf did not simply reject the Victorians and their concerns, or renounce them. Instead she persistingly rewrote them” (93–94). Indeed, particular Victorian concerns and repeated literary formulations persist for Woolf throughout her career. In a late memoir, for example, she describes her training in what she calls “the Victorian manner,” which “is useful—it has its beauty, for it is founded upon restraint, sympathy, unselfishness—all civilised qualities. It is helpful in making something seemly and human out of raw odds and ends. But the Victorian manner is perhaps—I am not sure—a disadvantage in writing” (*Moments of Being* [hereafter MB] 129). Woolf’s ambiva-
lence here recalls a moment in The Voyage Out, written a quarter-century before, when Rachel describes her upbringing to Terence Hewet: “Here [her aunts] are at Richmond at this very moment building things up. They’re all wrong, perhaps, but there’s a sort of beauty in it. It’s so unconscious, so modest. And yet they feel things. . . . That was what I felt when I lived with them. It was very real” (246). This persistently divided note in Woolf’s response to a heritage that is “all wrong, perhaps, but [with] a sort of beauty in it” similarly marks her critical writing, in the 1920s, about Victorian women novelists. That response suggests her ambivalence about her own identification, as a reader and writer, with her literary precursors, and about what she represents as the overidentification of many Victorian realist novelists with their characters.

For example, while Woolf credits Eliot’s early novels with evincing “the large mature mind spreading itself with a luxurious sense of freedom in the world of her ‘remotest past’” (Collected Essays [hereafter CE] 1: 199) she finds even in these works “traces of that troubled spirit, that exacting and questioning and baffled presence who was George Eliot herself.” This “presence” infects Eliot’s female protagonists, Woolf argues, so that they “bring out the worst of her, lead her into difficult places, make her self-conscious, didactic, and occasionally vulgar” (201–2). Like critics before and after her, Woolf found Eliot overidentified with her heroines: “Her self-consciousness is always marked when her heroines say what she herself would have said” (202). If Eliot’s “large mature mind” is unfortunately narrowed by the “troubled spirit” that infects her protagonists, Charlotte Brontë’s difficulty is apparently the reverse, as Woolf finds her emotionally compelling but philosophically narrow: “[In reading Jane Eyre] the writer has us by the hand, forces us along her road, makes us see what she sees, never leaves us for a moment or allows us to forget her,” but she “does not attempt to solve the problems of human life; she is even unaware that such problems exist; all her force, and it is the more tremendous for being constricted, goes into the assertion, ‘I love,’ ‘I hate,’ ‘I suffer’” (CE 1: 186, 187). In both cases, what troubles Woolf is the appearance of a marked “I”—not just an author-function, but a wounded, assertive ego—within what ought to be the separate world of the fictional text; the “I” both indicates the author’s identification with her own character and solicits the reader’s.

Woolf’s distrust of such authorial presence and its solicitation of readerly identification is not confined to her discussion of women authors; she finds such self-consciousness also present in male writers, particularly working-class ones such as George Gissing and D. H. Lawrence. Again,
Woolf’s ostensible objection is not that Brontë’s and Eliot’s novels draw attention to matters of gender, or Gissing’s and Lawrence’s to class relations—she understands these structures to be fundamental to both the social and the literary text. The problem, for Woolf, is that such forms of representation may draw attention to the troublesome feelings and experience of an implied author as an extra-textual consciousness, exhibiting the author’s identification with the character and encouraging the reader’s identification with that author. “At the end of [Jane Eyre] we are steeped through and through with the genius, the vehemence, the indignation of Charlotte Brontë. Remarkable faces, figures of strong outline and gnarled feature have flashed upon us in passing; but it is through her eyes that we have seen them. Once she is gone, we seek for them in vain” (Woolf, CE 1: 186). Such a fiction, according to Woolf, is liable to diminishment when the reader is not immediately within the spell of its powerful identifications; furthermore, such identifications paradoxically have the effect of arrogating too much power to the charismatic figure of the author. In “Character in Fiction,” Woolf asserts that readers must “insist that writers shall come down off their plinths and pedestals” (CE 4: 436); as Susan Stanford Friedman points out in her discussion of The Voyage Out as a precursor to Woolf’s Common Reader essays, “Woolf’s ‘common reader’ [. . .] always maintains a certain distance from what is read” (“Pedagogical Scenes” 121). Allowing or encouraging literary identification undermines the possibility of such distance.

Feminist critics, troubled by Woolf’s apparent discomfort with protofeminist indignation and anger, land sometimes in the paradoxical position of working to distance her from her own distance from feminist anger. Jane Marcus, for example, redirects Woolf’s critique of Brontë to make it explicitly feminist rather than ad feminam, asserting that “Woolf’s anger [in her criticism of Brontë] is directed at Haworth parsonage, not at Brontë” (Art and Anger 32). In A Room of One’s Own, it is true, Woolf connects Brontë’s “indignation,” which she considers aesthetically deforming, with her material circumstances, wondering “what might have happened if Charlotte Brontë had possessed say three hundred a year” (73). But it is not precisely the fault of “Haworth parsonage” that Brontë had no independent means, and her straitened emotional and financial circumstances could sometimes provoke Woolf’s sarcasm at what seems to be Brontë’s expense: “Always to be a governess and always in love is a serious limitation in a world which is full, after all, of people who are neither one nor the other” (186). Elsewhere, Marcus asserts that Woolf “will not supply us with characters with whom we may egotistically identify. This
would be weakness on her part, encouragement of self-indulgence on the part of the reader”; and she characterizes this choice as specifically “a feminist attack on the ego as male false consciousness” (“Thinking Back” 9; my emphasis). I am suggesting, contrarily, that Woolf sees both male and female writers, and male and female readers, as subject to the temptations of “egotistic[al] identif[ication].”

Jane de Gay takes a different tack, acknowledging Woolf’s ambivalence but locating its origin outside Woolf, in paternal(istic) influence: “Three of the female writers who feature prominently in [A Room of One’s Own] had already been discussed at length by [Leslie] Stephen [whose] admiration of Austen for accepting the narrow confines of a woman’s life, and his qualified sympathies for Brontë [ . . . ] and Eliot [ . . . ] can all be seen to have an impact on Woolf’s ambivalent valuation of her female precursors in Room, even as she claims them for a female tradition” (14). But to displace Woolf’s ambivalence in this way is, paradoxically, both to reattach her to the two powerful influences (her father and her female precursors) from which she was working to distance herself, and—by emending her as she emends Brontë and Eliot—to replicate her wish that female precursors might have offered themselves as more appropriate, more liberating objects of authorial identification.

Such myriad temptations of literary identification function as both theme and structure of The Voyage Out. Though this novel has attracted less scholarly attention than her later, more assertively Modernist works, feminist critics in particular have been interested in its representations of reading and its role in Woolf’s development as a critic. Friedman, for example, has described The Voyage Out as a “parable of reading” (117) that works to replace “the kind of female reader of books and people who is most likely to be victimized,” represented by Rachel, with the “resilient, resisting, and dialogic reader [that Woolf] calls ‘the common reader’” (116–17). Gay suggests that the novel marks the transformation of Woolf the reader to Woolf as novelist: “The process of writing The Voyage Out . . . can be seen as a period of transition [for Woolf] from reading books by earlier authors to writing her own” (19). Such readings frequently point to a tension between their own narrative of Woolf’s development as an author and Woolf’s foreclosure of Rachel Vinrace’s development as a protagonist, often characterizing the novel as either about, or enacting, narrative failure. Friedman suggests that the novel is “founded on a basic contradiction [because] it simultaneously narrates a failed Bildung for its protagonist and inscribes a successful Bildung for its author” (“Spatialization” 107); for Geoffrey Castle, it participates in allied femi-
nist and Modernist critiques of the Bildung tradition because it is “quite patently a story of development that features a protagonist who does not develop—at least in the sense implied by classical Bildung” (216–17). Locating a similar tension, my own argument characterizes it in terms of Woolf’s relations of identification with, and disavowal of, the Victorian novel of female formation. Revisiting recognizable but submerged elements of the female-formation plots of Eliot and Charlotte Brontë, Woolf pays homage to, even as she gently critiques, this Victorian heritage. But the brief flowering and the abrupt termination of Rachel as a romantic and a reading subject, like Woolf’s well known later assertion that “killing the Angel in the House is part of the occupation of a woman writer” Death of the Moth [hereafter DM] 238), expresses a more directly murderous fantasy, a symbolic destruction of Woolf’s literary matrilineage.

The Voyage Out engages with this inheritance not only at the levels of plot (in the death of Rachel Vinrace) and representation (in the novel’s many parodically rendered scenes of reading) but also in its narrative syntax, in the hyperbolic profusion of literary allusion that both acknowledges and mocks the seduction of literary identification. As Beverly Schlack observes, in The Voyage Out “even the minor characters . . . are drawn with allusive brushstrokes. Their character is often derived primarily from their expressed literary preferences” (2; emphasis in original).8 Conscious displays of literary allusion by both male and female characters, however, are revealed as largely empty gestures, attempts to invoke an identification with past powers that instead reveal an underlying impotence. This literary past is patriarchally defined but not exclusively masculine. Jane Austen, praised by the pompous Richard Dalloway as “the greatest female writer we possess” because “she does not attempt to write like a man” (Woolf, Voyage Out [hereafter VO] 64), and Sappho, admired by the sexually ambiguous young scholar St. John Hirst, both make sustained appearances. Amid the profusion of literary reference, there are two names of women writers whose absence is as notable as their importance to Woolf: George Eliot and Charlotte Brontë. I will argue below that Eliot and Brontë are the novel’s unacknowledged interlocutors and objects of authorial identification; Woolf revisits and redirects key scenes and themes of Middlemarch, The Mill on the Floss, and Jane Eyre in order to both to challenge the readerly identifications on which these novels draw and to demonstrate her own passage beyond identification with these authors.

Woolf implicitly introduces the thematics of literary identification in the very first scene of The Voyage Out, in which Rachel’s aunt and uncle,
Helen and Ridley Ambrose, stride through London on their way to embark for South America on Rachel’s father’s ship. As they walk, Helen weeps at the thought of parting for many months from her children, while Ridley, a classicist, occupies himself with reciting aloud verses from Macaulay’s *Lays of Ancient Rome*: “Lars Porsena of Clusium / By the nine Gods he swore / . . . That the Great House of Tarquin / Should suffer wrong no more” (Woolf, VO 5). They both display “eccentricity” (3, 4); but juxtaposed with Helen’s maternal grief, Ridley’s delight in this nationalist jingle (like Mr. Ramsay’s recitations of “The Charge of the Light Brigade” in *To the Lighthouse*) has a particularly bathetic quality, especially to the extent that it juxtaposes the wronged “House of Tarquin” and the more prosaically situated family of Helen and Ridley, who are facing not exile, but an extended holiday. As Schlack suggests, “Ridley obviously identifies with Macaulay’s robust, virile imitations of the *Iliad* manner. But an admiration that borders on identification may indicate something of a bully lurking beneath the would-be hero” (8). (Perhaps more of a baby than a bully; later, Helen sees his stride change and guesses that he “was either a Viking or a stricken Nelson” [Woolf, VO 6], like a child at play; and it is Rachel’s father Willoughby whom Helen suspects of “nameless atrocities with regard to his daughter, as indeed she had always suspected him of bullying his wife” [20]). Because one of the wrongs visited upon the “House of Tarquin” is the rape of Lucrece and her subsequent suicide, Ridley’s recitation foreshadows, albeit with exaggeration, Rachel’s incipient sexual experiences, in all of which she experiences or observes some degree of coercion—a kiss forced on her by Richard Dalloway; the disturbing vision of two hotel guests entangled in an embrace (155–56); Rachel’s own engagement to Terence Hewet, and her subsequent, if not precisely resulting, death.

These performances of gendered literary identification suggest the potentially parodic imitation of the kind that, as Judith Butler has influentially argued, reveals the foundationally performative nature of heterosexual roles. But Helen’s gendered performance also reveals the potential limitations of such parody, for her behavior seems less to disrupt gender conventions than to allow her to flourish within them. Ridley and Helen, despite their eccentricity, stake out conventional gender roles, including distinctions between masculine intellect and feminine embodiment, masculine activity and feminine passivity, masculine poet or maker and the female muse or model. While Ridley orates, demonstrating his scholarly knowledge of classical allusion, Helen—“Tall, large-eyed, draped in purple shawls . . . romantic and beautiful” (Woolf, VO 9)—embodies a
classical allusion. She, too, is hardly innocent of self-aggrandizement; her Niobe-like grief over her entirely voluntary departure from her children appears both exaggerated and willful. As Patricia Juliana Smith points out, “Why [Helen’s] presence on this journey takes priority over her maternal duties is [. . .] unclear, and while her grief is ascribed to this separation, little subsequent reference is made to the children or to her concern for them” (130). Commenting on an earlier version of the same scene in her reconstruction of the composition of *The Voyage Out*, Louise DeSalvo calls Helen “an irresponsible and infantile parent” who deludes herself by thinking “that she cannot return to her children [rather] than . . . realizing that she will not because she does not want to” (37). These critics perhaps underestimate the evidence for Helen’s concern about her children; she brightens when asked about them (Woolf, VO 17, 57); is eager for news of them (95); and enjoys thinking about childrearing (12). And since Woolf was childless herself and accustomed to the upper-class child-rearing norms of early-twentieth-century England, we may not be justified in extrapolating her evaluations of maternal behavior and attachment from our contemporary expectations; there is no evidence that any other characters in the novel think that Helen is shirking “maternal duties” or is “irresponsible” or “infantile.” In fact, in her representation of Helen here as elsewhere, Woolf’s narrative attitude seems (designedly) impossible to fix. Sometimes the narrative is focalized through Helen, but sometimes she is represented from a distance; she seems at times incisive and inviting as a character, at others too cool for comfort. The slipperiness, from the opening scene, of the narrative stance and of the character herself, serves immediate notice that the novel will be more intent on dislocating than on encouraging readerly impulses to identification.

Ridley Ambrose’s allusiveness enacts, in minimalist form, what I have been calling literary identification—he projects his self-conception through these scraps of highly stylized textual representation. Certainly his behavior—comforting himself with what are essentially nursery rhymes, identifying with nursery heroes—is childish; nevertheless his authority (to demand, for example, a fully furnished study on board Willoughby Ambrose’s ship; to bestow his company on, or more frequently withhold it from, his womenfolk; to direct the flow of domestic dinner conversation) is never challenged. This pattern in the representation of masculine literary allusion and identification—in which it is revealed as expressing impotence rather than power but nevertheless facilitates male social authority and interconnectedness—prevails throughout the novel. For example, the first shipboard dinner (which immediately follows the opening scene)
is dominated by an exchange between Ridley Ambrose and Mr. Pepper (an amateur scholar and old friend of both Willoughby Vinrace and, as it turns out, Ridley Ambrose):

“You knew Jenkinson, didn’t you, Ambrose?” asked Mr Pepper across the table.

“Jenkinson of Peterhouse?”

“He’s dead,” said Mr. Pepper.

“—Ah, dear!—I knew him—ages ago,” said Ridley. “He was the hero of the punt accident, do you remember? A queer card. Married a young woman out of a tobacconist’s and lived in the Fens—never heard what became of him.”

“Drink—drugs,” said Mr Pepper with sinister conciseness. “He left a commentary. Hopeless muddle, I’m told.” (Woolf, VO 10)

Later, Mr. Pepper observes of a different Jenkinson—this one “of Cats”—that “‘This year he has had the misfortune to lose his wife. . . . There’s an unmarried daughter who keeps house for him, I believe, but it’s never the same, not at his age.’ Both men nodded sagely as they carved their apples” (11). The men’s dismissive references to nameless wives and daughters, as well as their obliviousness to the presence of Rachel, the actual “unmarried [and motherless] daughter” with whom they are sitting, emphasize the casual misogyny of such male bonding. In a later scene, when an Englishwoman remarks coquettishly, “‘You men! where would you be if it weren’t for the women!’” Ridley responds “grimly” “‘Read the Symposium’” (224). But as Ridley’s “grimly” suggests, male homosociality, at least for this older generation, is as much a matter of rivalrous schadenfreude as of erotic attachment or even friendship, and the comic multiplication of Jenkinson, like the rapid-fire exchange of proper names more generally, suggests their fundamental interchangeability. Ridley Ambrose’s identification with the second Jenkinson’s failure—“‘I confess I sympathize,’ said Ridley with a melancholy sigh. ‘I have a weakness for people who can’t begin’” (11)—also emphasizes impotence rather than power. In the narrative structure of male homosociality identified by Eve Sedgwick, the “ruined carcase of a woman” often functions as “just the right lubricant for an adjustment in differentials of power” between men (Between Men 76). The Voyage Out is surprisingly full of female “ruin[s]” and “carcase[s],” from Rachel’s dead mother, to Jenkinson’s dead wife, to the prostitute who is expelled from the tourist hotel in Santa Marina, to Rachel herself at the novel’s end, but for this older generation of men, at least, homosocial power
seems to be waning rather than waxing. In one sense, this is not surprising: The texts that Sedgwick discusses, and thus their reproduction of homosocial structure, are all by men; in her representations of masculine dialogue, Woolf turns the tables by demonstrating the female author's power to mock and to diminish such homosocial exchange.

As instantiated by the novel's eldest male generation—Pepper, Ridley Ambrose, and perhaps the scholar Hughling Elliott, whom they encounter at Santa Marina—the homosocial world of literary allusion is not only moribund but also—perhaps because—disembodied. It seems directed not only to the marginalization of women but also to the suppression of any realized emotional or erotic connection among men. For the younger men in the novel, however, literary allusion carries a charge of both hostility and desire across heterosexual and homosocial relations. Encountering the erotic and intellectual blank slate of Rachel, the novel's male characters are drawn to leave both a textual and a sexual impress on her. Pepper, as we learn, has given her copies of all his scholarly monographs. The conventional politician Richard Dalloway, who has hitched a ride on board the ship with his wife, Clarissa, promises to send Rachel a copy of a work of Edmund Burke. After pondering this question—"'Which shall it be, I wonder?' He noted something in his pocket-book'"—he unexpectedly pounces: "Holding her tight, he kissed her passionately" (Woolf, VO 80). This experience both awakens Rachel's sexual curiosity and also causes her to have nightmares of confinement and pursuit. The young scholar St. John Hirst promises in his turn to send her Gibbon, at the same time demeaning her sexual inexperience: "'I suppose you've led an absurd life until now—you've just walked in a crocodile, I suppose, with your hair down your back" (172). St. John's erotic insecurity and ambiguity (he is represented overtly as misogynist and unattractive to women, implicitly as homosexual) have a similar effect on Rachel to Dalloway's erotic domination, making her weep and "shiver[] with anger and excitement."

Hirst's friend Hewet is the exception; he promises Rachel, "I shan't lend you books" (239), and thus, perhaps inevitably, becomes her sexual object choice. But textual banter also mediates the relationship between Hirst and Hewet, who is deserting his friend and their shared Cambridge environment in his engagement to Rachel. Hewet confesses that he has lost a book of Wordsworth's poems that he has borrowed from Hirst, to which Hirst, after letting him fret for a few moments, responds, "'It is here'" and "point[s] to his breast"; Helen Ambrose remarks to Hewet after this exchange, "'I should think you were always losing things'" (159). On the one hand, Helen seems to mark indirectly the coming loss of Hirst and
Hewet’s exclusive relationship, which will be triangulated by Rachel; on the other, the book is not lost but passes from heart to heart between Hirst and Hewet. For the younger generation literary allusion seems to mediate relations of desire potentially less imbricated with relations of domination than those of the previous, male-dominated generation. In fact, women in *The Voyage Out* share the habit of literary allusion. However, here as in Jamaica Kincaid’s *Lucy*, simply replacing masculine texts and proper names with feminine ones does not in itself dissolve the relations of domination that these literary identifications facilitate. First, the feminine use of literary allusion can be as empty and manipulative as the masculine, a possibility illustrated most conspicuously in the character of Clarissa Dalloway. Clarissa is both submissive to her husband, professing to feel for him “what my mother and women of her generation felt for Christ” (Woolf, VO 53), and at the same time sexually predatory like her husband. As a character she embodies what Luce Irigaray calls the “hom(m)osexual” economy of an apparently heterosexual order, whose “logic is the logic of masculine sameness. This sameness that is proliferated everywhere and on everyone is the sameness of phallic identity. Within this logic women are reduced to the position of a mere semblance of difference” (Grosz 342). Clarissa Dalloway’s seduction borrows the male power-form of literary allusion, revoiced as a kind of charming, inconsequential feminine chatter. She entrances Ridley Ambrose with the assertion that she’d “give ten years of her life to know Greek” and then disappears when he has offered to tutor her. She promises Rachel to “insist on your playing [the piano] to me tomorrow” (Woolf, VO 48) and then interrupts her practice seductively:

She pressed Rachel’s shoulder.
   “Um-m-m—” she went on quoting—
   “Unrest which men miscall delight”—
   “. . . When one’s young and attractive—I’m going to say it!—everything’s at one’s feet.” (60)

Like the male characters, Clarissa seems impelled by erotic impulses toward Rachel channeled through displays of literary superiority. When the Dalloways disembark, Clarissa kisses Rachel and “murmur[s] to her ‘I do like you,’” as she gives her a copy of *Persuasion* (83). But the new narrative of female solidarity and perhaps of lesbian desire that Woolf adumbrates at the end of *A Room of One’s Own*—“sometimes women do like women” (86)—is unlikely to be written by or about Rachel or Clarissa.
The younger woman is the elder’s sexual rival, and the elder fails to protect Rachel from her husband’s sexual exploitation.

Helen Ambrose’s motives toward Rachel are more actively benign, and her negotiations with a masculine social order more directed toward independence and self-respect, but she too is complicit with that social order. As we saw at the novel’s opening, for example, she allows and indeed encourages Ridley’s self-dramatizing identification with the role of devoted and unworldly scholar, and compensates with her own (as devoted mother). She is a social pragmatist who encourages Rachel to “take things as they are . . . if you want friendship with men” (Woolf, VO 87). Her pedagogical approach to Rachel is certainly less coercive than that of the other characters who bestow on Rachel texts that reflect only their own identifications and desires, whereas Helen “would have been the first to disclaim any influence, or indeed any belief that influence was within her power” (137). Nevertheless, her reticence proves almost as unhelpful as the others’ aggression.

Within the novel, then, feminine relations routed through textuality are not free of dynamics of erotic and intellectual aggression; a male-oriented web of intertextuality cannot simply be replaced by a female-oriented one. To the extent that moments in The Voyage Out recall and redirect scenes and characters in Middlemarch, The Mill on the Floss, and finally Jane Eyre, Woolf suggests that the same is true for her as an author: Replacing the names of Plato, Gibbon, and Burke with Austen, Eliot, and Brontë as objects of literary identification does not simply liberate Woolf as a novelist, since their legacy—like Helen’s mentorship of Rachel—is an ambiguous one.

The shipboard dinner-party already mentioned revisits, and subtly revises, a similarly placed scene in Middlemarch. If, as other critics have suggested, Ridley Ambrose, with his intellectual distraction and kindly inattention toward his niece, suggests Leslie Stephen as his biographical original, he also recalls a fictional model, another inconsequent male guardian of a naïve young woman—Dorothea Brooke’s uncle, as he appears, for example, at the dinner party at which Dorothea meets Casaubon:

“Sir Humphry Davy?” said Mr Brooke, over the soup, in his easy smiling way, taking up Sir James Chettam’s remark that he was studying Davy’s Agricultural Chemistry. “Well, now, Sir Humphry Davy: I dined with him years ago at Cartwright’s, and Wordsworth was there too—the poet Wordsworth, you know. Now there was something singular. I
was at Cambridge when Wordsworth was there, and I never met him—and I dined with him twenty years afterwards at Cartwright's.” (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 14)

Like the second Jenkinson in *The Voyage Out*, who had “accumulations enough to fill a barn,” Mr Brooke has accumulated “documents” (17); and Mr. Casaubon, to whom Brooke’s musings are addressed, has filled “a formidable range of volumes” with notes (21). Like the dinner in *The Voyage Out*, Eliot’s also comically represents male homosocial exchange as the “accumulation” of empty tokens. Brooke is happily unaware of his own irrelevance (though it will later be underlined by his failure as a parliamentary candidate), but Casaubon, like Ridley Ambrose, seems uneasily conscious of his intellectual sterility: “I live too much with the dead,” he remarks (15).

Ridley Ambrose’s futility is underlined later in *The Voyage Out*, when Rachel finds her uncle sitting in his study in a chair “which became more and more deeply encircled by books, which lay open on the floor, and could only be crossed by a careful process of stepping, so delicate that his visitors generally stopped and addressed him from the outskirts” (Woolf, *VO* 191). “‘You should read Balzac,’” he tells her. “‘Then we come to Wordsworth and Coleridge. Pope, Johnson, Addison, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats. One thing leads to another. . . . But what’s the use of reading if you don’t read Greek?’ . . . He then wanted to know what people did at dances. . . . On bestowing a kiss she was allowed to go.” She leaves “lost in wonder at her uncle, and his books, . . . and his queer, utterly inexplicable, but apparently satisfactory view of life” (192). Again Ridley Ambrose recalls Leslie Stephen, as Woolf describes him, “Slowly he would realise my presence. Rising he would go to the shelves, put the book [she was returning] back and very kindly ask me what had I made of it? Perhaps I was reading Johnson. For some time we would talk and then, feeling soothed, stimulated, full of love for this unworldly, very distinguished, lonely man, I would go down to the drawing room again and hear George [Duckworth]’s patter” (*MB* 136). Again, at the same time, he recalls Brooke’s fictional futilities—“I remember when we were all reading Adam Smith. *There* is a book, now. . . . But some say, history moves in circles” (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 15). “More and more deeply encircled by books”; “One thing leads to another,” “history moves in circles”; these phrases echo too the circular project of Casaubon’s *Key to All Mythologies*, attempting “to show . . . that all the mythical systems or erratic mythical fragments in the world were corruptions of a tradition originally
revealed” (20). At the same time, Ridley’s dismissal of all non-classical literature recalls Dorothea Brooke’s burning desire to learn Greek and Latin, and perhaps even a little Hebrew. That desire, however, is not shared by Rachel. On the one hand, Ridley’s projects and phrases, with their echoes of Casaubon, suggest that all of literary tradition and even history is a gentleman’s club in which Rachel (and Woolf) will never be able to find points of identification; nothing, it seems, will ever lead to them. On the other hand, they suggest that the club is moribund, a regime of power that has outlived its ideas and is now simply going around in circles. Greek is not, perhaps, the coming lingua franca; significantly, at the end of A Room of One’s Own, it is a laboratory, not a library, that Chloe and Olivia share.

Woolf parts company with Eliot in suggesting more emphatically that power, and empowering relations of identification, in fact may now pass to women. In an essay, Woolf suggests that “the Victorian age . . . was the age of the professional man” (qtd. in S. Ellis 12). In her address “Professions for Women,” she seems to believe that, despite the “many phantoms and obstacles” still present, the twentieth century will be the age of the professional woman as well: “The whole position, as I see it—here in this hall surrounded by women practising for the first time in history I know not how many different professions—is one of extraordinary interest and importance” (DM 241, 242). Although a schoolteacher and textbook writer, Miss Allan (whom everyone agrees in admiring), is the only prominent professional woman in The Voyage Out, Woolf frequently highlights a nascent professionalism in Helen and Rachel as well. At the dinner party, both women “being after the fashion of their sex, highly trained in promoting men’s talk without listening to it, [are able to] think—about the education of children, about the use of fog sirens in an opera—without betraying [themselves].” These professional interests—in children’s education on Helen’s part, in music on Rachel’s (she is a talented pianist), recur throughout the novel: Helen briskly dismisses, as from a position of expertise, Clarissa Dalloway’s “idiotic theories about the way to bring up children” (Woolf, VO 88) and observes that “if [girls] were properly educated I don’t see why they shouldn’t be much the same as men” (104); Rachel at the hotel dance is matter-of-fact in her assumption of expertise as she improvises dance music, “sure of her melody [and] mark[ing] the rhythm boldly so as to simplify the way” (185). She asserts to the otherwise intimidating St. John Hirst that she “play[s] the piano very well . . . better, I expect, than anyone in this room” (171); and takes Hewett’s “[walking] stick and [draws] figures in the thin white dust to explain how Bach wrote his fugues” (253). Terence believes that “he liked the impersonality which
[music] produced in her” (339), but in fact he seems unnerved by her lack of attentiveness to him, as he persists in interrupting her practice with a series of needling comments on “Woman.”

Woolf perhaps shares his ambivalence, since for both Rachel and Helen the expression of these interests and skills remains amateur: Helen exercises her own “theories” by taking over Rachel’s education, with mixed results, and Rachel’s most successful public performance occurs when she plays for the dancers at the hotel. Her musical abilities, in the end, come to no greater fruition than Dorothea Brooke’s architectural drawings. Nevertheless, in her emphasis on the capacity of Helen and Rachel for more detached and impersonal forms of investment, Woolf rejects Eliot’s contrasting emphasis on Dorothea’s emotional and self-sacrificing motivations: “All her eagerness for acquirement lay within that full current of sympathetic motive in which her ideas and impulses were habitually swept along. She did not want to deck herself with knowledge—to wear it loose from the nerves and blood that fed her action; and if she had written a book she must have done it as Saint Theresa did, under the command of an authority that constrained her conscience” (Eliot, Middlemarch 70–71). Eliot’s emphasis on self-sacrifice and an orientation toward others as the only ethical justification for feminine “eagerness for acquirement” brings a matrilineal textual legacy only too closely in line with the more directly maternal model of angelic domesticity that Woolf violently rejects.9

Similarly, Woolf differentiates Rachel from Dorothea Brooke in her relationship to patriarchal text itself, especially in its sometimes incongruous transformation from signifier of homosocial exchange to token of heterosexual seduction. Rachel tells Helen, “I’ve got all [Mr. Pepper’s] pamphlets. . . . Little pamphlets. Little yellow books.’ It did not appear that she had read them” (Woolf, VO 15). The narrative hints that the bachelor Pepper might be in love with Rachel: He has, apparently, presented her with these books; he chooses to stay for a time with the Ambroses and Rachel in Santa Marina, despite their efforts to dissuade him; and when he does in fact leave, Helen retains “an uneasy suspicion . . . that William [Pepper] was hiding a wound” (101). Rachel’s disdain for Pepper’s monographs contrasts strongly with Dorothea Brooke’s response to Casaubon’s pamphlets: “They were pamphlets about the Early Church. . . . When [Mr. Brooke] re-entered the library, he found Dorothea seated and already deep in one of the pamphlets which had some marginal manuscript of Mr. Casaubon’s,—taking it in as eagerly as she might have taken in the scent of a fresh bouquet after a dry, hot, dreary walk” (Eliot, Middlemarch 31).
Rachel’s indifference not only distinguishes her from Dorothea but also distinguishes Woolf’s relationship to her protagonist from Eliot’s. Woolf and Eliot both emphasize the lack of education from which their protagonists suffer as women. Rachel’s dilettante education, provided “by kindly doctors and gentle old professors [who] had taught her the rudiments of about ten different branches of knowledge” echoes Dorothea’s acquaintance with “ladies’-school literature” (21) and a “toy-box history of the world adapted to young ladies” (70), but their creators represent their relationships to these limitations quite differently. Despite her lack of education, Dorothea drinks ecclesiastical pamphlets in like water and is capable of “becom[ing] engaged in conversation with Mr Casaubon about the Vaudois clergy” (20), while Rachel, according to Woolf, “would believe practically anything she was told, invent reasons for anything she said” (VO 31). By comparison with Eliot, Woolf takes an amused and detached attitude toward her protagonist, determined not to exalt her above the likely result of the conditions that have formed her. She declines, in doing so, to identify with her heroine or to encourage the reader’s identification with her.

Indeed, Rachel is unusual as the protagonist of a novel of formation—in her initial lack of interest in imaginative literature or capacity to identify with fictional heroines. Unlike the adults around her, with their constant literary allusions and rapt textual pursuits, Rachel displays a disdain for and discomfort with literature that are catholic in reach and comic in effect, encompassing Austen, whom she finds “so like a tight plait”; William Cowper, whose letters are “rather dull” (Woolf, VO 59); and Gibbon, whose prose she describes as “go[ing] round, round, round like a roll of oilcloth” (226), recalling Ridley Ambrose’s futile circles. Even Emily Brontë’s Wuthering Heights, whose “half-savage, and hardy, and free” (126) Romantic anti-heroine might seem to offer the undersocialized Rachel a more appealing object of literary identification, appears only as a volume to be “slid out of the armchair” (59), along with Cowper, so that Clarissa Dalloway—whose living glamour Rachel finds vastly more enticing—can sit down. Again, this representation disrupts conventional links of identification among author, reader, and character in the novel of formation: these authors are all among Woolf’s own favorites, and the reader is not allowed to identify with Rachel as a reading heroine.

In the second half of the book, however, when Rachel moves in with the Ambroses at Santa Marina, she abruptly becomes a more conventional reading heroine. With the well-meaning aim of “show[ing] her
niece . . . how to live, or as she put it, how to be a reasonable person” (Woolf, VO 89), Helen provides a room “in which she could play [piano], read, think, defy the world, a fortress as well as a sanctuary” (136). Helen both offers herself as a potential object of identification, and creates a context in which Rachel can experience literary identifications. But Helen, as I have suggested previously, is herself an ambiguous model, since her own life reveals the difficulty of drawing a line between complicity with and successful negotiation of a male-dominated social world. Geoffrey Castle suggests that “By deciding to mentor Rachel, [Helen] dramatizes the paradoxical position of many female educators at the turn of the century, for she acts both as an intimate friend and as an emissary of the liberal humanist tradition dominated by men” (222). The ambiguities or paradoxes of her position are nicely captured by her ideas about what Rachel should read: “When Mrs. Ambrose would have suggested Defoe, Maupassant, or some spacious chronicle of family life, Rachel chose modern books, books in shiny yellow covers . . . which were tokens in her aunt’s eyes of harsh wrangling and disputes about facts which had no such importance as the moderns claimed for them. But she did not interfere” (Woolf, VO 137). Woolf usually refers to this character as “Helen”; here, she becomes “Mrs. Ambrose,” as though to emphasize her role as an agent of the reproduction of a social norm (“family life”). At the same time, however, her deliberate policy of non-interference suggests a faith in the triumph of a discursive rationality (“Talk was the medicine she trusted to” [137]) whose extension to female subjects (e.g., by John Stuart Mill) was an ideal of Victorian feminism. Similarly, though the proper names she cites here are those of male authors, they are adduced as examples of the genre of domestic realism (“spacious chronicle[s] of family life”) equally if not more associated with women, suggesting that a humanist literary heritage cannot be claimed solely by either men or women.

If Helen Ambrose is an ambiguous model of female formation, Rachel is equally an ambivalent subject. Given everyone’s tendency to treat her as a blank slate on which to project their own identifications and desires, it is not surprising that Rachel resists feminine as well as masculine mentorship, rejecting her aunt’s curriculum for one that she herself devises. Unfortunately, the “shiny yellow covers” of sensational New Woman narratives will prove no more mentally nourishing than Pepper’s scholarly “little yellow pamphlets.” The codes of professional detachment and impersonality that guide Rachel in her piano study fail her here, and she falls with a vengeance into the posture of the reading girl. Her reading includes “Ibsen . . . succeeded by a novel such as Helen detested, whose
purpose was to distribute the guilt for a woman’s fall on the right shoulders.” These narratives are neither “spacious” nor familial: they are narrowly focused on the female subject, with whom Rachel eagerly identifies:

“What I want to know,” she said aloud, “is this: What is the truth? What’s the truth of it all?” She was speaking partly as herself, and partly as the heroine of the play she had just read. The landscape outside, because she had seen nothing but print for the space of two hours, now appeared amazingly solid and clear, but . . . for the moment she herself was the most vivid thing in it—an heroic statue in the middle of the foreground, dominating the view. Ibsen’s plays always left her in that condition. (Woolf, VO 137)

Looking in the wrong place for the “truth,” Rachel instead encounters identification as interpellation; she is “hailed” into the character of the tragic heroine of the courtship plot. In “Character in Fiction,” Woolf urges readers to “insist that writers shall come down off their plinths and pedestals” (CE 4: 436). Rachel’s overidentification of herself with Ibsen’s heroine, reifying both herself and the character as “an heroic statue . . . dominating the view,” associates her with the aggressive, phallic landscape of “plinths and pedestals”; she has surrendered herself to the text rather than entering into dialogue with it. Indeed, everything about her reading, as Woolf describes it, monumentalizes text: “[she read] with the curious literalness of one to whom written sentences are unfamiliar . . . handling words as though they were made of wood, separately of great importance, and possessed of shapes like tables and chairs” (VO 138). Friedman describes Rachel’s “recognition of the materiality of language” as “anticipating Woolf’s later modernism” (“Pedagogical Scenes”110); but less happily, Rachel’s way of reading links her to the post-traumatic madness of another under-educated, over-literal, and doomed Woolfian reader—Septimus Warren Smith in Mrs. Dalloway. Septimus Warren Smith, to whose hearing “the word ‘time’ split its husk; poured its riches over him; and from his lips fell like shells . . . hard, white, imperishable words” (Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway 105), loses his sanity and ultimately his life because he feels driven to fight to “save an England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare’s plays and [his teacher] Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress walking in a square” (Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway 130). Not only Septimus’s reverential reading attitude but also the latent image of a pole in a square echo Rachel’s “heroic statue” and the “plinths and pedestals” that Woolf wishes to banish in “Character
in Fiction.” As Friedman observes, Rachel “could not maintain a critical distance in negotiating the intertextual association between books and life. . . . It is not only the power of ideology that engulfs Rachel, but also her habit of complete identification with what she reads” (“Pedagogical Scenes” 120–21). If the intellectual sparring of the men and chatter of Clarissa empty signifiers of meaning other than the variations of mastery represented by their possession and exchange, Rachel’s identificatory reading here goes to the other extreme: she cannot detach herself enough from the words she reads either to master or to resist their signification.

Rachel’s resistance to her mentors’ advice about reading thus ironically leads her—like Maggie Tulliver—into precisely the old-fashioned courtship plot, with its weight of gender ideology, that she is attempting to avoid. In fact, it is, ominously, while Rachel is reading the novel about “a woman’s fall” that the note of invitation arrives from Terence Hewet to the picnic at which he and Rachel meet. After Rachel and Terence become engaged, notes again serve as messages of gender ideology: Terence admonishes Rachel that he “ought to be writing his book, and you ought to be answering these [notes of congratulation]” (Woolf, VO 344). Terence, despite his best intentions—and his unconventional ambitions for his own novel, which is to be about “Silence . . . the things people don’t say” (249)—seems eager to write Rachel ever more firmly into the conventional romance plot. At the same time Rachel has rebounded from her own immersion in the narratives of that plot, judging the congratulatory notes “sheer nonsense!” along with other texts: “Think of novels and plays and histories—” Perched on the table, she stirred the red and yellow volumes contemptuously” (340). Like Maggie, however, she is unaware that she has already been written—and has read herself—into that fictional plot. Though Rachel dies of a fever, not in a flood, her illness has many associations with drowning, and thus with Maggie’s end; when ill she feels herself in her fever to be in a “deep pool of sticky water, which eventually closed over her head. She saw nothing and heard nothing but a faint booming sound, which was the sound of the sea rolling over her head” (398). In attempting to elude the conventional female plot, she finally, like Maggie, falls into its mise-en-abîme.

As with the earlier juxtaposition of Rachel and Dorothea Brooke that Woolf implicitly makes, here a contrast between Maggie Tulliver’s covertly referenced death and Rachel’s emphasizes Woolf’s distance from the emotional situation of sympathetic identification invoked at Eliot’s conclusion. Maggie’s voyage through the floodwaters is both heroic and revealing “of almost miraculous, divinely protected effort” (Eliot, MoF 654). She goes
to her death with “eyes of intense life looking out from a weary, beaten face” (654), having retained or regained the love of three men, and in the embrace of her brother, the one she has loved the longest. Although this ending thwarts readerly expectation by killing off its protagonist, its presentation works to heighten rather than to disrupt our identification with Maggie, ministering to an inverted wish-fulfillment structure: “They’ll be sorry when I’m gone!” It also, by pairing off Maggie and Tom in death and enabling the future marriage of Lucy and Stephen, multiplies as much as it fractures the conventional romance conclusion. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis suggests, “the flood [in The Mill on the Floss] briefly destroys the oedipal nexus of gender. But when the waters recede, the landscape has not changed all that much” (19). By contrast, in The Voyage Out, Rachel’s death is puzzling, anticlimactic, and forecloses identification. Unlike Maggie’s eyes, Rachel’s exhibit only “a slight look of fatigue or perplexity” as she dies (Woolf, VO 411). The novel continues for another chapter following her death, during which many of the novel’s most sympathetic characters—Terence Hewet, St. John Hirst, the motherly Mrs. Thornbury, the aristocratic Mrs. Flushing—evince sincere grief, but others are concerned with assigning or evading blame. Mr. Flushing, who with his wife organizes the trip up the river that might have led to Rachel’s illness, insists that “She probably ran [other] risks a dozen times a day” (419), and the conventional Arthur Warrington offers an epitaph that puts everyone—particularly women and the native inhabitants—back in their places: “They should have known better. You can’t expect Englishwomen to stand roughing it as the natives do who’ve been acclimatized” (421). As the holiday-makers prepare to leave, many revert to their own concerns: Hirst “without any sense of disloyalty to Terence and Rachel . . . ceased to think about either of them” (436); even the guilt-ridden Mrs. Flushing succumbs to the lure of the final evening’s “wonderful” tropical storm (436). Though beauty as well as banality reasserts itself, the overriding sense at the conclusion is of the dispersion rather than the convergence of human relations.

These returns to and revisions of covertly but specifically referenced scenes and attitudes from Eliot’s narratives of formation reveal Woolf’s negotiations with her own authorial identifications. They contribute to the shaping of The Voyage Out by what DuPlessis calls “writing beyond the ending”—“the invention of strategies [by twentieth-century women writers] that sever the narrative from formerly conventional structures of fiction and consciousness about women” (x). I have suggested above that such strategies, when they occur in conjunction with non-conventional
Representations of sexuality, can themselves be thought of as queer. Now, however, I want to suggest the possibilities for a queer reading of *The Voyage Out* in the second, more current sense. These possibilities are not straightforward, and they are shaped both by Woolf’s resistance to any direct textual representation of sexuality and by her desire to undermine, or at least not to reinforce, conventions of representing subjectivity that would encourage literary identification.

Undertaking a queer reading of *The Voyage Out* illustrates the more general difficulty of reading queer sexuality in Woolf, or of taking her as an object of queer readerly or critical identification. Woolf, as Brenda Silver has demonstrated, has been an iconic twentieth-century figure, in popular as well as in high or academic culture. Silver’s “premise [is] that Virginia Woolf’s elevation to transgressive cultural icon and the contradictory, often vehement, responses provoked by it reside in her location on the borders between high culture and popular culture, art and politics, masculinity and femininity, head and body, intellect and sexuality, heterosexuality and homosexuality, word and picture, beauty and horror” (11). At least since the publication of Nigel Nicholson’s *Portrait of a Marriage* (1973), Woolf has been available in popular culture as a lesbian icon, a representation augmented in the last fifteen or so years by the appearance of Sally Potter’s film adaptation of *Orlando* (1992), Michael Cunningham’s novel *The Hours* (1998), and the film of the same name (2002). At the same time, academic feminist and queer studies of Woolf have emphasized that she “first learned to say ‘we’ as a woman” (J. Marcus, “Thinking Back” 83) and that her “deepest emotional bonds were to women” (Lilienfeld 37); biographical studies such as Karyn Sproles’s *Desiring Women: The Partnership of Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West* have explored her same-sex emotional and erotic bonds. Eileen Barrett observes that “Visitors to the Lesbian and Gay Reading Room of the new [in 1997] San Francisco Public Library will see Virginia Woolf among the names of other famous lovers of their sex inscribed in the ceiling mural. Clearly, Virginia Woolf is one of the twentieth century’s best-known lesbians” (3).

But there is nothing “clear” about Woolf’s status as “one of the twentieth century’s best-known lesbians.” Assertions of the primacy and even exclusivity of Woolf’s same-sex attachments require a degree of selective inference, denying her attachment to and admiration for many structures of heterosexuality, including her own marriage. The diaries as well as the novels offer dithyrambs to married intimacy: “Rather under the weather, I say, I snuggled in to the core of my life, which is this complete comfort
with L[eonard], & there found everything so satisfactory and calm that I revived myself, and got a fresh start; feeling entirely immune. The immense success of our life, is I think, that our treasure is hid away; or rather in such common things that nothing can touch it”; “But my God—how satisfactory after, I think 12 years, to have any human being to whom one can speak as directly as I to L.” (Diaries 3: 30, 49). Naming Woolf as lesbian is an act of construction as much as discovery. Toni McNaron writes of her relation to Woolf as reader and critic, “I, as the lesbian I am, will go on reading Virginia Woolf, as the lesbian she was, for as long as I go on reading at all” (20). Her formulation captures the bi-directionality of readerly identification, the way it creates the objects of identification from which it then takes inspiration. Syntactically, McNaron’s readerly identity (“the lesbian I am”) precedes and at least partly generates a personal writerly identity for Woolf (“as the lesbian”) that inspires McNaron’s own writerly identity.

This difficulty applies to readings of the novels as well as the life. Queer readings of Woolf’s texts are complicated by the fact that her representations of any kind of sexuality are characterized by indirection. In representing sexuality, she uses figures of paralepsis (naming sexual themes as unwritable), prolepsis (projecting a future in which they might become writable) and ellipsis (drawing attention to omissions of sexual themes), as well as metaphor and allusion. It is impossible to determine to what extent Woolf’s indirection in representing sexuality is a result of conscious self-censorship in response to social norms; to what extent it points to a more fully internalized (Victorian) sexual reticence; and to what extent it reflects a more autonomous aesthetic interest in de-emphasizing traditional romantic narrative. Looking back, Woolf rues the “suavity . . . politeness . . . sidelong approach” of her Common Reader articles, for which she “blame[s] . . . my tea-table training” but also suggests that “this surface manner allows one to say a great many things which would be inaudible if one marched straight up and spoke out” (MB 129). This ambivalent summary suggests that Woolf’s “sidelong approach” was simultaneously a burdensome heritage and a generative aspect of her elliptical style, and this combination seems to me to apply to her representation of sexuality as well.

The Voyage Out exemplifies the ways in which this “sidelong approach” poses difficulties for a reading of the novel that attempts either to locate within it a narrative of queer identification or to read any of its major characters as objects of such identification. Critical analyses of The Voyage Out as a proto-lesbian narrative often emphasize either the narra-
tive’s failure or insufficiency or, in more generous readings, its representation of failure or insufficiency. Thus Louise DeSalvo, whose reconstruction of the novel’s composition led to the publication of its earlier incarnation, *Melymbrosia* (1982), concludes that the successive revisions of that work that resulted in *The Voyage Out* demonstrate, particularly in regard to the novel’s representation of sexuality, a “problem of authenticity—the tendency on Woolf’s part to be less overt, less open, and less honest with each successive revision of a novel” (72). For Deborah Hunn, contrarily, the reticence of the novel’s portrayal of potential lesbian subjectivity comments on, rather than instantiates, failure: “Miss Allan senses there is something wrong with Rachel and would like to help, but is constrained by her years of social conditioning. . . . Miss Allan the schoolteacher can’t put Swinburne or Sappho into her text. . . . Without access to this ‘difference of view’ Rachel cannot break free from her entrapment within a story” of conventional heterosexual romance (64).

Patricia Juliana Smith provides the strongest reading of lesbian possibility in *The Voyage Out*, concentrating on the character of Helen Ambrose and her relationship to Rachel. But even her affirmative reading invokes failure, since she suggests that read *without* reference to “a variety of homoerotic possibilities” the novel will “present itself as a hopelessly incoherent—if beautiful—literary failure” (128). Smith interprets Helen Ambrose and Rachel Vinrace as figures who undergo “lesbian panic . . . the disruptive action or reaction that occurs when a character—or, conceivably, an author—is either unable or unwilling to confront or reveal her own lesbianism or lesbian desire” (129); she suggests that Helen Ambrose maintains “a façade of matronly privilege and propriety that allows her hidden inclinations to pass undetected” and that “textual evidence of Helen’s lesbianism . . . is concealed quite literally ‘between the lines’ of *The Voyage Out* by means of tacit allusion or indirect representation” (131). She points also to the “telling . . . silences that surround many of Helen’s conversations, particularly those with the homosexual St. John Hirst” (131); to a scene following Rachel and Terence’s agreement to marry in which Helen falls upon Rachel with “savage and erotic violence” (134); and to Rachel’s “panic-ridden encounters” (140) with two other women characters, Evelyn Murgatroyd and Miss Allan.

Yet ingenious and in many ways persuasive as Smith’s readings are, her attention to Woolf’s ellipses still has the paradoxical effect of silencing Woolf, of implying that the novel that she actually published is best read as a cover for, or incomplete realization of, one that she did not. Since “Helen Ambrose,” for example, has only a “literal,” that is, textual,
existence, and that only within Woolf’s lines, “between [those] lines” is surely the one place that we cannot “literally” find “textual evidence” of “Helen’s lesbianism”—indeed, the only “evidence” for Helen’s lesbianism is subtextual (as a matter of inference) or extra-textual (as the product of a readerly projection of an object of identification). Similarly, while an extensive swirl of coded allusion surrounds St. John Hirst—he is uncomfortable with and often dismissive of women, reads Swinburne and Sappho, responds defensively to a mention of Wilde, and confides in Helen a “history of his life,” that the reader is told involves “matters which are generally only alluded to between men and women when doctors are present, or in the shadow of death” (Woolf, VO 181)—to denominate him “the homosexual” is to transform allusion into assertion, and knowingness into knowledge, in a way that Woolf herself refuses to do. Smith’s declarative interpretive strategies make the narrative more susceptible to a queer readerly identification, but they do so partly by minimizing its formal queerness—by stabilizing the uncertainty, indeterminacy, and ambiguity that form aspects of Woolf’s effort to de-emphasize identification as a fallback reading strategy—even for readers, such as queer readers, for whom such opportunities for identification hardly had the status, in 1915, of outworn conventions.

That is not to say, however, that we cannot feel reverberations of queer subjectivity in *The Voyage Out*. If, as I argue, it strains interpretation to speak declaratively of the sexuality of Helen Ambrose or of St. John Hirst, nevertheless the multidirectional libidinal currents and the emphatic silences, aposiopeses, and queer allusions to which Smith points remain striking. Two brief examples of the ostentatiously elliptical representations of sexuality—both clearly hetero- and implicitly homosexual—that attach to both Helen and Hirst will suffice here. First, in a letter (to a male friend), Helen Ambrose writes: “Until I explained it, [Rachel] did not know how children were born. Her ignorance upon other matters as important’ (here Mrs. Ambrose’s letter may not be quoted) . . . ‘was complete’” (Woolf, VO 105). The suppression of Helen’s dilation to her reader on “other matters” of course recapitulates, for the novel’s reader, the very ignorance that Helen deplores. Similarly, when Hirst, at a dance, confides in Helen “the history of his life” mentioned above, we are told that “even in this ballroom [these matters] had to be discussed in a whisper, lest one of the pouter pigeon ladies or resplendent merchants should overhear them, and proceed to demand that they leave the place. When they had come to an end . . . Hirst rose, exclaiming, ‘So there’s no reason whatever for all this mystery!”’ (181–82). This ironic exclamation—the only direct
speech in the paragraph—underlines the fact that the narrative has reproduced rather than cleared up “all this mystery.” Woolf clearly anticipates an authorial reader who will recognize that the position of “pouter pigeon [lady] or resplendent [merchant]” represents sexual conventionality and is not one with which she or he is being asked to identify; but presumably only some readers—we might think of them as sub-authorial readers (in the sense of a subgenre, or subset)—will identify with the coded aspects of homosexual style represented by Hirst and project that the “mystery” may be related to same-sex desire.¹⁵

Given his ambiguous sexual status and association with the novel’s most elliptical forms of representation, it also seems important that St. John Hirst closes the novel. This final turn completes Woolf’s series of authorial identifications with and revisions of precursor texts, since a bachelor St. John—the missionary St. John Rivers—also concludes Jane Eyre. His epistolary invocation of his own coming death is quoted by Jane: “Amen; even so, come Lord Jesus!” Like the biblical epitaph of Maggie and Tom at the end of The Mill on the Floss, “In their death they were not divided,” Brontë’s conclusion gives the last word to Christianity and thus to an eschatological religious narrative, with its implication of a trajectory beyond the individual life. St. John’s apostrophe is matched in the novel by Jane’s frequent, if cursory, acknowledgments of divine aid. In The Voyage Out, by contrast, unbelief is explicitly asserted. When St. John Hirst attends a church service, he has Swinburne’s Sapphic ode hidden in his Bible—an overt displacement of a marriage-oriented Christian order by a homosocially organized pagan one. Rachel DuPlessis suggests that in coming to approve the love of Rachel and Terence, St. John Hirst “undergoes a gratifying, though amazing, conversion to the possibility of equality between men and women in spiritual love,” and argues that his character sheds a “nimbus from Platonized Christianity [ . . . ] over the love plot” (53). But as a religious referent, St. John Hirst’s name is made ironic by his declared lack of belief (161). Rather, I see nimbus of queerness—the Plato of the Symposium, invoked in the text—rather than Neoplatonism radiating from St. John.

Like St. John Rivers, Hirst gestures toward a narrative larger than that of the development of the self. In his case, however, it is in the direction not of the divine apotheosis of that individual but rather of the dissolution of individuality and humanity into a kind of post-impressionist aesthetic patterning. Unlike St. John Rivers, St. John Hirst is represented not by assertion but in listening repose as the novel’s characters recede from him in time and space:
All these voices [of the hotel guests] sounded gratefully in St. John’s ears as he lay half-asleep, and yet vividly conscious of everything around him. Across his eyes passed a procession of objects, black and indistinct, the figures of people picking up their books, their cards, their balls of wool, their work-baskets, and passing him one after another on their way to bed. (Woolf, VO 437)

This ending recalls the novel’s beginning, in which Helen and Ridley Ambrose “strode,” tall and eccentrically dressed, among “small, agitated figures . . . decorated with fountain pens, and burdened with dispatch-boxes” (3). There, the emphasis was on the way in which the Ambroses stood out among these less distinct characters; at the end, however, the characters who stood out in the narrative as “heroic statues” have been dislodged, and with them both avenues of readerly identification and some of Woolf’s authorial identifications with previous narratives. The dispersion of consciousness, the presence of others, strike Hirst not distractingly but “gratefully.” An evocative queerness—of both structure and characters—remains. Judith Halberstam posits the existence of “alternative temporalities” created by queer subjects: “Queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely birth, marriage, reproduction, and death” (Queer Time 2). The Voyage Out at least partly imagines “alternative temporalities” for its characters not by eluding but by scrambling the representation of these “paradigmatic markers of life.” The tensions visible in this effort—between singular and labile consciousness, between encouragement and dispersal of the reader’s identifications, between the symmetries of the heterosexual romance plot and the disruptive pull of queer figures and desires—will continue to structure Woolf’s fiction.

WHO’S AFRAID OF STEPHEN GORDON?

In 1928, Virginia Woolf and Radclyffe Hall both published their fifth novels—Woolf’s Orlando and Radclyffe Hall’s The Well of Loneliness. At the time, the two authors’ statures were for many purposes comparable: Hall’s novel Adam’s Breed (1926) received the 1927 James Tait Black prize as well as the Prix Femina Vie Heureuse—a double honor that she shared only with E. M. Forster—and Woolf won the Femina the following year for To the Lighthouse. Woolf undertook to testify on behalf of The Well at
its trial for obscenity. (In the event, the judge disallowed testimony about the novel’s literary merit; however, Woolf’s willingness to appear contrasts with the evasions of other supposedly supportive authors, including George Bernard Shaw, Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy, and Havelock Ellis [see Cline 254–56].) Although Woolf’s response to The Well was publicly supportive, she was privately caustic—“The dulness of the book is such that any indecency may lurk there—one simply can’t keep one’s eyes on the page” (Letters 3: 556) is one typical remark. Like her reservations about the “indecency” of Joyce’s Ulysses, her attitude here suggests a resistance to two shared features of Hall’s and Joyce’s otherwise quite different projects—relatively direct representation of sexuality (“indecency”) and a more or less legibly polemical motivation. On my reading, these reservations indicate disavowal, a sign of Woolf’s own ambivalent relationship to the representation of sexual experience and to the polemical possibilities of art.16

Because of these areas of overlap and difference between Orlando and The Well—their shared cultural moment, gender-bending protagonists, and wholly (Hall) or partly (Woolf) lesbian-identified authors on the one hand, and radical differences in execution and reception, on the other—critics have often paired them to analyze their differing relationships to Modernism and to representations of queer sexuality.17 Here, however, I juxtapose The Well not with Orlando but with The Voyage Out. These two novels represent Woolf’s and Hall’s clearest engagements with the novel of formation and its subtending aesthetics of identification. Woolf, as I have argued, challenges the aesthetics of identification in The Voyage Out by subjecting the objects of her own authorial identifications to gentle mockery and revision and by beginning to dislodge the protagonist of the narrative of formation from her central position as the object of readerly identification. The Voyage Out queers the narrative of female formation; at the same time, it intimates the possibility of queer subjects of such a narrative.

The Well, by contrast, seems much less interested in challenging the inherited forms of domestic realism and the narrative of formation. Indeed, its long opening sentence—“Not very far from Upton-on-Severn—between it, in fact, and the Malvern Hills—stands the country seat of the Gordons of Bramley; well-timbered, well-cottaged, well-fenced and well-watered, having, in this latter respect, a stream that forks in exactly the right position to feed two large lakes in the grounds” (Hall 11)—could hardly declare more firmly the narrator’s nostalgia for agrarian country-house society and the narratives (Helen Ambrose’s “spacious chronicle
Chapter Four

of family life”) it sponsors. Yet Stephen Gordon’s trajectory propels her firmly out this milieu and into a future defined by exile. Similarly, if the novel’s plotting depends upon the conventions of the heterosexual romance, its climax, in which Stephen engineers her own romantic rejection and embraces the task of narrating queer subjectivity, makes clear Hall’s belief that she and her heroine were plotting an alternative fictional trajectory. Hall’s relationship to both the topographical and the relational landscapes of the traditional novel, while often nostalgic, also conveys a clear sense of their insufficiency and the necessity for their passing. In *The Well of Loneliness*, Hall calls openly upon an aesthetics and ethics of identification to ground a new narrative of the formation of the explicitly queer subject. The novel combines conventional narrative forms and newly recognized subjects; it appeals to the reader at once on the allotropic, or other-oriented, basis of sympathy, and the auto-tropic, or self-referring, basis of identification. That this combination of techniques and motives has continued to produced widespread discomfort in readers (Woolf called it “that Well of all that’s stagnant and lukewarm and neither one thing nor the other” [qtd. in Cline 255]) should not blind us to the boldness of Hall’s effort to create a narrative of formation in which a queer subject would be at the center.

Hall, unlike Woolf, had no reservations about the polemic possibilities of art. In a lecture she asserted that “If propaganda is to be the theme of a novel, then the novel should always be written for a cause in which the author has implicit belief, for a cause which he feels in his very soul has need of someone to rise up and defend it” (qtd. in Souhami 279–80). She intended *The Well* to serve such a cause:

I wished to offer my name and my literary reputation in support of the cause of the inverted. . . . I felt . . . that no one was better qualified to write the subject in fiction than an experienced novelist like myself who was actually one of the people about whom she was writing and was thus in a position to understand their spiritual, mental, and physical reactions, their joys and their sorrows, and above all their unceasing battle against a frequently cruel and nearly always thoughtless and ignorant world. (Qtd. in Souhami 157–58)

But the awkward pronoun shifts, as Hall vacillates between a third-person and a first-person stance in relation to her material, highlight the ambivalence inherent in even such an apparently forthright identification of author with subject. Tension appears between Hall the “experienced
nivist,” who serves less as a representative than as an observer of “the people about whom she was writing” and “their . . . reactions, their joys and their sorrows . . . their unceasing battle” (emphasis added); and the Hall who is “actually one of the” inverted, who represents these joys, sorrows, and battle from experience. This tension also marks the distinction between a narrative that will attempt to foster sympathy with its subject, and one that will attempt directly to represent the consciousness of its subject, inviting the reader’s identification.

The former approach is familiar as what is sometimes called “sympathetic identification,” and even more than the novel’s Edwardian country-house values it accounts for its old fashioned tone, because sympathetic identification is most closely associated with the nineteenth-century novel of social reform. Its appeal is modeled in The Well in Stephen Gordon’s sympathetic identification with a fox (Hall 126), when on a hunt after her father’s death she imagines that

The hounds were behind her instead of ahead, that the flushed, bright-eyed people were hunting her down. . . . The whole world was hunting her down with hatred . . . the world against one insignificant creature who had nowhere to turn for pity or protection. . . . Then Stephen saw something just ahead, and it moved. . . . A crawling, bedraggled streak of red fur . . . with the desperate eyes of the hopeless pursued, bright with terror . . . and the thought came to Stephen: “It’s looking for God Who made it.” (126)

After this moment of fellow-feeling, which requires the recognition not of shared identities or characteristics but of shared experience (she feels hounded by society), Stephen never hunts again. Stephen is not in fact vulpine, bedraggled, or immediately pursued; but as Suzanne Keen observes in a discussion of “readers’ empathy,” “Novels and stories featuring animals . . . provoke empathetic reactions of readers who report ready identification with nonhuman figures. This suggests that character identification and empathy felt for fictional characters requires certain traits (such as a name, a recognizable situation, and at least implicit feelings) but dispenses with other requirements associated with realistic representation” (68). This scene models and, ideally, evokes in its reader a kind of identification that is less narrative or developmental than immediate and emotional.

In both its emotional impact and its didactic intent this scene recalls one of the most famous nineteenth-century novels of reform, Uncle Tom’s Cabin:
[Eliza] caught [up] her child, and sprang down the steps towards [the Ohio River]. The trader caught a full glimpse of her just as she was disappearing down the bank; and throwing himself from his horse . . . he was after her like a hound after a deer . . . Nerved with strength such as God gives only to the desperate, with one wild cry and flying leap, she vaulted sheer over the turbid current by the shore, on to the raft of ice beyond. (Stowe 65)

As Elizabeth Barnes writes, the narrative of Eliza’s flight in Uncle Tom’s Cabin offers “a glimpse of the methodological crux of sentimental fiction, where acts of sympathetic identification are performed for, in order to be reproduced in, the sympathetic reader” (94–95). In both scenes, the desperation, the invocation of God and the representation of pursuit through the metaphor of the hunted animal are the rhetorical means through which the helplessness of the human subject, and the appropriate human response to such helplessness, are conveyed. But as Barnes also suggests, this performance has limitations as a means of generating sympathy, since “sympathy is made contingent upon similarity: that is, upon one’s ability to perceive others as related to oneself” (92). It is not clear that most heterosexual readers of The Well of Loneliness were prepared, at its moment of publication, to take such a view of the “invert”: even Woolf and E. M. Forster asserted (one must hope with tongue in cheek), in a letter to the Nation and Athenaeum, that the novel’s topic “enters personally into very few lives, and is uninteresting or repellent to the majority” (qtd. in Cline 250). And Hall has a further difficulty: while she obviously hopes to draw on such perceptions of similarity, she is equally and perhaps more interested in asserting the difference and the distinctive consciousness of her protagonist. (Eliza, by contrast, is not the protagonist of Uncle Tom’s Cabin; our access to her consciousness is relatively limited; and what it displays is sanctioned feminine attitudes such as sexual modesty and maternal devotion.) The primary problem of her narrative is not to attain a particular material or political end (such as manumission) but to answer, on her own behalf and that of other “inverts,” her questions about herself as a subject.

In fact, as suggested by Doan and Prosser’s summary of the novel’s reception, The Well has indeed been received more consistently as a narrative of formation and an object of identification than as the intervention in public discourse and mover of sympathy that Hall also intended.
In the intervening years [between its publication and the first paperback printing in the early 1950s] . . . *The Well of Loneliness* was of course read. But . . . it was read mostly by private readers in England and America. . . . *The Well of Loneliness* seems removed . . . from the critical and cultural stage upon which it entered to a realm of private identity, and sometimes medical identity discourse. . . . *The Well of Loneliness* was read for identificatory, often conflicting identificatory, purposes. (15)

Because of Hall’s emphasis on the tragedy, isolation, and shame of the “invert,” however, readerly identification with Stephen Gordon has always been strongly mixed with repulsion, among both academic and popular readers. The novelist Donna Allegra, despite being “a black girl, Brooklyn-born and raised,” nevertheless “saw [herself] reflected on those pages where Stephen Gordon lived” (71). For Allegra, an identification with Stephen Gordon seems relatively unthreatening, perhaps because overt differences in race, class, and nationality separate her from the fictional Stephen. A more typical response, however, is recorded by another novelist, Jane Rule, who remembers that at fifteen she “was badly frightened” by her identification with Stephen Gordon, which seemed to suggest that “I was a freak, a genetic monster, a member of a third sex, who would eventually call myself by a masculine name . . . , wear a necktie, and live in the exile of some European ghetto” (Doan and Prosser 78). And from Woolf forward, readers have responded with gestures of disavowal to the style as well as the content of Hall’s representation: Terry Castle, for example, who calls *The Well* “that much-maligned yet still fiercely compelling fiction” (7), characterizes Hall’s style as “hieratic, overwrought, full of melodramatic, dismal pomp” (51), a judgment whose own excess perhaps illustrates the novel’s capacity for rhetorical contamination. As Love observes, “while critics have sought to disavow the legacy of *The Well*, they have not, finally, been able to let Stephen go. Rather, the vehemence of critics’ rejection of her is a testimony to the shame and repulsion she continues to inspire in lesbian readers” (*Feeling Backward* 102)—and, as Love also makes clear, the nearness and fascination of those responses. Critics who wish to claim value for the novel, Love argues, do so by “assimilat[ing] Stephen’s narrative to a later, happier narrative of gendered existence.” While Love insists that “Stephen is beyond the reach of such redemptive narratives” (119), these attempts, such as Judith Halberstam
and Jay Prosser’s readings of Stephen Gordon’s “inversion” as an early representation of transgender identities, seem to me compelling and suggestive of the power of readerly identification to continue to transform the fictions that invite it.

Stephen Gordon thus presents an object of literary identification both unusually repellent and surprisingly protean across the history of the novel’s reception. Hall herself is ambivalent about her identification with the variety of Victorian and Edwardian narrative and psychological schemata available to her in construction Stephen as a subject, and her negotiation of and with these discourses makes visible the seams of her construction of Stephen Gordon’s identity from sexological, biblical, and literary texts. The very awkwardness of this construction—Hall’s vacillations among models for, and rhetorical representations of, the identity of the “invert”—has made different Stephen Gordons both objectionable and available to successive, and differently situated, generations of readers and critics. Thus although Hall’s project of defining and asserting her protagonist’s queer subjectivity may seem opposed to Woolf’s aim, in *The Voyage Out*, of undermining such unitary representations of subjectivity, *The Well of Loneliness* leaves us not so far from where *The Voyage Out* does, with a recognition that identifications may ground but cannot fix—either stabilize or mend—identities.

From the beginning, Hall underlines the connection between the conventional nonnarratability of queer sexual identity and its subject’s experience of ontological lack. The combination of Stephen’s biological feminine gender, her masculine social expression, and her romantic and sexual desire for women initially renders her both unspeakable and illegible, to herself as well as to others. “I’m nothing,” Stephen reflects, “—yes I am, I’m Stephen—but that’s being nothing” (Hall 70). The labels applied to Stephen as she grows into adolescence—“queer,” “freak,” “unnatural”—paradoxically emphasize her unnameability: “Could Mrs. Antrim have ignored Stephen Gordon’s existence, she would almost certainly have done so. . . . What she called Stephen’s ‘queerness’ aroused her suspicion—she was never quite clear as to what she suspected, but felt sure that it must be something outlandish” (91). Similarly, Stephen’s mother, Lady Anna, on discovering Stephen’s first affair with a woman, Angela Crossby, declares, “This thing that you are is a sin against creation” (200). Like all of Stephen’s antagonists, she can or will name her only by a vicious circularity that refers to Stephen only to defer her indefinitely. The sexually experienced Angela Crossby uses a similar circumlocution—“‘Can I help it if you’re—what you obviously are?’” (149)—with the difference that
her negation of Stephen’s being depends on flaunting rather than refusing unspeakable knowledge. Even Stephen’s loving and scholarly father cannot resist framing his child as unspeakable and ontologically absent. Sir Philip researches his daughter’s condition in “a slim volume recently acquired. . . . The author was a German, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, and reading, Sir Philip’s eyes would grow puzzled; then groping for a pencil he would make little notes all along the immaculate margins” (26). But Sir Philip, “a coward because of his pity” (106), chooses to keep from Stephen the knowledge and vocabulary that this text introduce. When he suffers a fatal accident, his deathbed attempt to enlighten his wife only reinforces the representation of Stephen as a discursive nonentity: “Anna—it’s Stephen—listen. . . . It’s—Stephen—our child—she’s, she’s—it’s Stephen—not like—” (118). Stephen remains, in Sir Philip’s last words, undefined: not “like,” but unlike, an “it” whose lack of identity is indicated by the presence of a copula without the predicate it demands. As Love observes, Stephen’s “loneliness in the novel is not primarily a question of epistemology but one of ontology. It afflicts Stephen’s being; it is deeply inscribed in her body. . . . Hall understands loneliness as a state of desolation, a deeply felt psychic and corporeal state of abandonment, refusal, and loss” (“Spoiled Identity” 499). The reader who recognizes in Stephen shared attributes is thus asked to identify with this terrifying state of non-identity, of “being nothing.”

After her father’s death, however, Stephen’s narrative approaches a more familiar pattern in which objects of literary identification open possibilities of self-construction. Entering her father’s library after his death and on the eve of her own exile from Morton, Stephen discovers Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis* and her father’s Bible. Like the works encountered by earlier protagonists—*The Birds of Antarctica*, in Jane Eyre’s uncle’s library; *The Imitation of Christ*, which comes to Maggie Tul-liver through Bob Jakin, and *Corinne*, given to her by Philip Wakem; the Ibsen drama by which Rachel is entranced—these works come through patriarchal (in her case literally paternal) channels; unlike those others, however, *Psychopathia Sexualis* and the Bible cannot easily be understood, in the form in which Stephen initially encounters them, as representing or encouraging opposition to or withdrawal from oppressive social regimes. Rather, they impose themselves upon Stephen with scientistic authority, in the forms of taxonomy and case history.

As she slipped the key into the lock [of the bookcase], the action seemed curiously automatic. . . . Then she noticed that on a shelf near
the bottom was a row of books standing behind the others; the next moment she had one of these in her hand, and was looking at the name of the author: Krafft-Ebing—she had never heard of that author before. All the same she opened the battered old book, then she looked more closely, for there on its margins were notes in her father’s small, scholarly hand and she saw that her own name appeared in those notes. (Hall 204)

The result of Stephen’s “curiously automatic” actions, this discovery of text, represented as a discovery of Stephen by text, recalls Louis Althusser’s conception of interpellation, of being “hailed” by ideologies functioning on behalf of the state to reproduce “good” subjects who will work “by themselves”—that is, without the need for state repression or coercion.

_Psychopathia Sexualis_ might seem on its face to suggest that Stephen Gordon is, on the contrary, a “bad subject,” one of those who “on occasion provoke the intervention of one of the detachments of the (repressive) State apparatus” (181). A physician and psychologist frequently offering expert medical testimony in law cases, Krafft-Ebing represents both the hegemonic power of the ideological State and the coercive power of the repressive State. (Althusser points out that “the ‘Law’ belongs both to the [Repressive] State Apparatus and the system of the ISAs” [143n9]). In _Psychopathia Sexualis_, Krafft-Ebing draws on these experiences to produce a taxonomy of “deviant” sexual practices, a compilation of hundreds of cases of tabooed behavior including fetishism of various kinds, sadism and masochism, coprophilia and necrophilia, as well as a range of forms of “inversion.” The individual cases are numbered and related pseudonymously; their context is pathological or criminal; and Krafft-Ebing himself generally equates the behavior he describes with physical and social deviance. His project in this sense seems to contribute to the nineteenth-century development of “technologies” of sexuality and the pathologization of sexual behavior that, as many critics have argued, contributed to the criminalization and persecution of homosexuality.

At the same time, however, the negative authority of taxonomy is undermined by other aspects of Krafft-Ebing’s project. The variety and narrative detail of his examples work against this taxonomic and prescriptive organization. In his introduction, Krafft-Ebing claims that his subjects are deviant because they controvert “the hidden laws of nature which are enforced by a mighty, irresistible impulse” (23). But his own taxonomic enterprise itself undermines the assertion that these “laws” are irresistible. First, there is the sheer number and detail of his cases—some five hundred
overt challenges to “the hidden laws of nature.” Second, the narrative form that he adopts—the case study—undermines the purely classificatory impulse of taxonomy. Thomas Laqueur claims that the case study arises in the eighteenth century as one of a number of discourses that form what he calls “the humanitarian narrative.” The aim of “humanitarian narrative” is to shape the “unprecedented quantities of fact, of minute observations, about people who had before been beneath notice” (177) into links of cause and effect that would provoke readers to compassion with, and action on behalf of, suffering others. This aim also belongs, as Laqueur notes, to the form of the novel.23 Such narratives put into play readerly impulses of sympathy and identification that can counter the estranging direction of categorization.

One of the cases in *Psychopathia Sexualis* that most reveals the features of such a “humanitarian narrative” is also the example of female homosexuality that most closely resembles Stephen’s situation, in the protagonist’s aristocratic status, her masculine identification, and her desire for women—the narrative of the pseudonymous Sandor. A wealthy, masculine, cross-dressing “authoress,” Sandor enters into a fraudulent marriage with an apparently heterosexual woman, which she maintains for a year before being discovered. Krafft-Ebing devotes to Sandor an unusually extended and sympathetic treatment.24 A tragic romance in miniature, Sandor’s story compels Krafft-Ebing’s admiration, and through him the reader’s as well. He emphasizes her erudition and transcribes her words:

[Sandor’s] writings betray a wonderfully wide range of reading in classics of all languages, in citations from poets and prose writers of all lands. . . . This writing ends with the apostrophe: “Gentlemen, you learned in the law, psychologists and pathologists, do me justice! Love led me to take the step I took; all my deeds were conditioned by it. God put it in my heart. . . .

Only God is just. How beautifully does Victor Hugo describe this in his *Légendes du Siècle!* How sad do Mendelssohn’s words sound to me: ‘Nightly in dreams I see thee’! (Krafft-Ebing 360–61)

The voice of Sandor, as Krafft-Ebing transcribes it, brings into his text a note of literary, rather than medical, authority. Sandor’s words challenge the codifications of the taxonomy in which they are embedded by celebrating the emotional plenitude of Romantic representation.

As Jay Prosser points out, however, Krafft-Ebing’s analysis of Sandor is taken not from direct interaction but from a written autobiography, leav-
ing Krafft-Ebing in the role of “an unintended (or at least unspecified) reader” (146), and Stephen Gordon and ourselves as even more distant from intention or specification. Thus Krafft-Ebing does not make audible here an authentic voice of “inverted” identity, piercing through an obscuring medium of text, but rather continues a textual transmission. The complete scene of Stephen’s reading is a scene of the reading of reading of reading: the reader reads Stephen’s reading of her father’s reading of Krafft-Ebing. For readers who know, or seek out, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, this chain might extend to include Krafft-Ebing’s reading of Sandor, who reads Hugo and Mendelssohn. For these readers, the abyss will pause, if it does not end, with Hugo and Mendelssohn—that is, with the authority of literary voice—which is also the authority that Hall’s novel assumes.

The revelation of Stephen’s identity is thus a narrative revelation, but its authority hovers uneasily between two narrative forms: the scientific, which represents the empirical; and the fictional, which represents the affective. To these registers Hall proceeds to add that of theological discourse, which represents the absolute. Stephen is now sought out by the Bible: “Before she knew what she was doing, she had found her father’s old, well-worn Bible. There she stood demanding a sign from heaven. . . . The Bible fell open near the beginning. She read ‘And the Lord set a mark upon Cain’” (Hall 204). Like *Psychopathia Sexualis*, the Bible marks and classifies Stephen—not with scientific enumeration but by heavenly branding. This time, however, the moment of dispossession is clearly also a moment of genesis for Stephen, who can now predicate her own identity upon a textual identification, however unpromising (“I am like Cain”).

And just as the history of Sandor extends Krafft-Ebing’s narrative into potentially more generative plots, so too do biblical references multiply beyond, and temper, the apparent absolutism of Cain’s curse. Stephen’s governess and companion, Miss Puddleton—whose nickname, Puddle, suggests a fluidity that counters patriarchal rigidity—briskly announces Stephen’s literary vocation: “Just because you are what you are, you may actually find that you’ve got an advantage. You may write with a curious double insight—write both men and women from a personal knowledge” (205). Puddle’s circumlocution once again casts Stephen as the unspeakable subject. But her “you are what you are” (with its echo of Jehovah’s “I am that I am”) casts its tautology not as lack or but as doubling—a super-sufficiency that, like Stephen herself, will transcend the binary structure of gender. “Where you go, I go, Stephen,” Puddle further declares (205). With this echo of Ruth’s words to Naomi, she demonstrates the power of revision, countering a biblical story of fratricide and patriarchal punish-
ment with an equally canonical but redemptive story of female solidarity that turns exile into quest.\(^{26}\)

Sonja Ruehl argues that Hall’s engagement with sexology creates a Foucauldian “reverse discourse” that undermines its hegemonic power because “Hall claimed the right to speak about inversion on the grounds that she herself was an invert, not an expert” (174). Reversal, however, seems to me too thoroughgoing a characterization of Hall’s negotiations with expert discourses; as I suggested above, in writing *The Well* she claims that right on the grounds of being herself not only an “invert” but also a novelist—that is, a literary expert. The trajectory for both Hall and Stephen Gordon is toward the authority not only of experience but perhaps even more important of literary discourse. As Puddle announces Stephen’s early vocation as a writer, later, after she has achieved popular success as a novelist, the “learned and gentle Jew” Adolphe Blanc (modeled on the sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld) confers on her the role of spokesperson: “The doctors cannot make the ignorant think, cannot hope to bring home the sufferings of millions; only one of ourselves can someday do that” (Hall 390). Though Stephen responds to this exhortation with skeptical silence, she embraces her duty at the end of the novel, becoming “possessed” by the voices of her fellow inverts: “And now there was only one voice, one demand; her own voice into which those millions had entered” (437). As spokesperson Stephen is not just self-elected but anointed, and in both cases, it is her expertise as an author that gives meaning to her personal experience.

*The Well* in its last third thus becomes a narrative of artistic as well as sexual formation. In contrast to *The Voyage Out*, in which plots of artistic education (Rachel’s piano-playing, Terence’s novel) remain largely unnarrated and unfinished, in *The Well* Hall narrates Stephen’s pursuit and achievement of literary success, as well as her disillusionment with that success and her decision to acknowledge her community with other “inverts” and write the novel that will speak for their experience. (This plot surely owes something to *Aurora Leigh*’s similar equation of popular recognition and cosmopolitan decadence and the protagonist’s insistence on art as a mode of social intervention, as well as to Hall’s own authorial experience.) Because this decision is linked to Stephen’s choice to resign her partner, Mary, to the waiting arms of the heterosexual male who can give her marriage, children, and respectability, this ending has provoked some of the greatest readerly resistance to the novel. One anonymous reader remarks that “the ending of the novel dismayed me so that I rewrote it” (qtd. in O’Rourke 119). Jane Rule calls Hall a “canny
propagandist in plotting an unhappy ending,” but objects that Hall did not allow Stephen “the great blessing of [her] own life, the faithful love” of two women (Doan and Prosser 82).  

Julie Abraham adduces The Well in arguing that novels conventionally referred to as “lesbian novels” reproduce the formula of the heterosexual romance plot (xix). The Well, she suggests, does challenge this formula to a limited degree, since it “concludes with a wedding, but it is the marriage of Stephen’s lover Mary, which disrupts the novel’s central relationship but leaves one lesbian [i.e. Stephen] committed to her deviance” (13). This concession, however, understates the challenge that Hall poses, since the novel does not in fact conclude with a wedding: although we may assume that Mary and Martin marry, we do not see or hear of their marriage. It seems likely that if Mary had stayed, her needs for attention and protection would have hampered Stephen in her work. In fact, Stephen, like Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus and Lawrence’s Paul Morel, finds her triumph in turning away from, not taking her place within, the domestic plot. The space left by the departure of the love object is instead filled by the voices of the subjects with whom Stephen, after years of keeping her distance, is brought to acknowledge her identification. “They possessed her,” Hall writes, “Her barren womb became fruitful[. . . . ] In their madness to become articulate through her, they were tearing her to pieces, getting her under. They were everywhere now, cutting off her retreat; neither bolts nor bars would avail to save her. The walls fell down and crumbled before them[. . . . ] And now there was only one voice, one demand; her own voice into which those millions had entered” (437). This is represented as a painful process, certainly, but perhaps not more so than any birth, and it offers a genuine, and genuinely queer, alternative to the closure of the marriage plot. As Stephen conceives a novel under the same impulses that produced the novel of which she herself is the protagonist, Hall suggests that literary identification can be transformative, that the unnamable subject can become the narrated subject, and that the narrated subject in turn can seize control of narrative, providing new opportunities for literary identification. In her invocation of a future of narrative to which Stephen belongs, Hall anticipates Woolf’s conclusion to A Room of One’s Own (1929): “The opportunity will come [for the woman writer] and the dead poet who was Shakespeare’s sister will put on the body which she has so often laid down. Drawing her life from the lives of the unknown who were her forerunners, as her brothers did before her, she will be born” (118). The new woman writer of Woolf’s utopia remains a fictional conception, “drawing
her life” from a phantasmatic literary source. In The Well, Hall specifies this conception and assertively queers it. Despite the significant differences in the aesthetic and political investments of their authors, these conclusions share an orientation toward a narrative future that both emerges from, and transforms, the narrative past.

**BOOKS BOUGHT OUT OF BOOKS**

I was in a bookshop recently when a young woman approached me.

She told me she was writing an essay on my work and that of Radclyffe Hall. Could I help?

“Yes,” I said. “Our work has nothing in common.”

“I thought you were a lesbian,” she said. (Winterson, *Art Objects* 103)

What woman writer writing now can pass by *A Room of One’s Own* (1929)?

But for me, when I read my copy signed in purple ink, there is an extra power. Here she is and here she was, of private ancestors, the most complete. (131)

In “The Psychometry of Books,” a meditation on her interest in collecting first editions, Winterson writes, “When I had no books and had to learn everything I needed off by heart, and when I had to hide what books I had, I promised myself a library filled with the best editions I could afford. I have it now. Books bought out of books” (*Art Objects* [hereafter *AO*] 131). On the one hand the notion of “books bought out of books” seems refreshingly frank in its recognition of the book as a material object subject to relations of productions and consumption that structure relations between author and reader: Winterson can buy books to read because we buy from her (she sells to us) the books she writes. Winterson’s formulation cheerfully emphasizes her mastery (over books and readers) in these material relations: “I have it now.” On the other hand, the assertion of these material relations elides—by the resonant absence of a single letter—an equally commanding but perhaps less easily mastered relationship: books *brought* out of books, the identifications that bind books to the traditions from which they emerge and in which they take their place. The essays in *Art Objects* work to assert both the author’s mastery over, and her place within, the literary landscape of twentieth-century fiction. As they do so, the authorial name “Virginia Woolf” functions repeatedly as a
metonym for Winterson’s idea of literary value and proper author–reader relations; “Radclyffe Hall,” invoked more briefly, is the disavowed other in both of these realms.

Winterson has claimed Virginia Woolf as not only a “private ancestor” but also a quite public one. Winterson is, with Margaret Reynolds, a series editor of a Vintage paperback edition of Woolf’s novels. The structures and themes of the picaresque, time-travel, and gender-bending that run through most of her own fiction, including Sexing the Cherry (1989), The Passion (1997), and The PowerBook (2000), echo the Woolf of Orlando. More generally, Winterson’s interest in experimental novelistic forms that de-emphasize traditional plot development and decenter the protagonist, while retaining a focus on the effects of gender and sexuality, also connect her to Woolf. Art Objects, which functions as an aesthetic credo, not only pays tribute to Woolf in its content, with two essays that celebrate Woolf novels (Orlando and The Waves), but also embodies that tribute in addressing questions—about the relationship between authors and readers and the contemporary significance of aesthetic value—addressed by Woolf in her aesthetic manifestos. The title of the collection’s concluding essay—“A Work of My Own”—suggests the directness of Winterson’s identification with her precursor.

Art Objects embraces as ancestor not only Woolf but also the Modernist movement of which it takes her to be the representative; the collection includes essays on Roger Fry and Gertrude Stein, references to Joyce and T. S. Eliot, and celebrations of one aspect of Modernist aesthetics: “The Modernists were trying to return to an idea of art as a conscious place . . . a place outside of both rhetoric and cliché . . . . Poetry, poetic fiction is not an artificial language (or at least when it is, it ceases to be poetry), but it is a heightened language” (Winterson, AO 37). In other words, as Lyn Pykett has suggested, “Art Objects is, in large part, Winterson’s attempt to situate herself in relation to the tradition of Modernism and to affirm her commitment to Modernism as a project of continuing relevance.” This attempt, however, reveals the partiality—in both senses of the word—of Winterson’s conception of Modernist practice: “Winterson fetishizes language in the way in which some of the (male) Modernist poets did. . . . Winterson’s reification of language is closely linked to her implicit acceptance of the Arnoldian vision (mediated through T. S. Eliot) of poetry as the religion of the future” (57). Thus although Winterson pays tribute to the Woolf who “fought for her work and fought for her sex” (Winterson, AO 62), she is hostile to the feminist scholarship beginning in the last third of the twentieth century.
that displaced an earlier view of Woolf as primarily an idiosyncratic High Modernist aesthete with a politically engaged and personally suffering Woolf. Winterson objects that 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” (AO 70). The reference to Radclyffe Hall begins an essay (“The Semiotics of Sex”) that also attacks what Winterson views as the biographical fallacy, in this case queer readings of queer literature: “When I read Adrienne Rich or Oscar Wilde . . . the fact of their homosexuality should not be uppermost. I am not reading their work to get at their private lives, I am reading their work because I need the depth-charge it carries” (AO 109). The sharp distinctions that Winterson draws here lead to some dubious implications: that poetry cannot be impelled by thinking or by feminism; that the “depth-charge” of a work of literature can never be ignited, for reader or writer, by the spark of sexuality. But the stakes of the distinctions are clear enough: Winterson disclaims and disdains writerly motivations and reader responses based on identification in favor of a High Modernist and New Critical conception of the work as an autonomous achievement.

Winterson’s High Modernist “poet” Woolf is, of course, as partial a construct as Jane Marcus’s radical polemicist, “an ‘outsider,’ a feminist, socialist, artist, and worker” (Art and Ardor 121); both are retrospectively reshaped, as much as discovered, as objects of identification by their readers’ own authorial investments. What animates this otherwise dated debate, in Winterson’s case, is the provocative tension between the value that she assigns to an aesthetic of rigorous impersonality on the one hand, and on the other the representation of her own imaginative identification with those values, which is expressed in consistently personal and even libidinal language that blurs the very boundaries between “private lives” and the “depth-charge” of the work that she insists upon. Thus Art Objects concludes with the assertion that

The true writer will have to build up her readership from among those who still want to read and who want more than the glories of the past nicely reproduced. I have been able to build up a readership, largely through a young, student population, who want my books on their courses and by their beds. Reading is sexy[. . . . ] Judge the work not the writer seems to be what a new generation is prepared to do. It is for a new generation that I write. (192)
On their face, these closing words echo those of *A Room of One’s Own*, quoted by Winterson at some length at the end of her previous chapter: “Drawing her life from the lives of the unknown who were her forerunners, as her brothers did before her, she will be born[. . . . ] I maintain that she would come if we worked for her, and that so to work, even in poverty and obscurity, is worth while” (qtd. in *AO* 163–64). (They also, less directly, recall George Eliot’s late-life desire to attract young readers, to which Rosemarie Bodenheimer calls attention: In relations with young worshipers such as Alexander Main, “she had achieved, she thought, what she most wanted: to become for young readers one of the most powerful voices in books which had fertilized and sustained her own lonely youth” [242]).

The ramifications of this deliberate echo of Woolf are complex. First, as Pykett points out, such an assertive authorial identification is “a high-risk strategy since it will inevitably lead most readers to unfavourable comparisons. Winterson’s cheeky brio does not easily match up to the breadth of reading and deeply meditated sense of history that runs through the writings of Woolf and Eliot” (59). In addition to raising some hackles, Winterson appears to have overlooked the irony inherent in repudiating a literary practice that reproduces “the glories of the past” while celebrating the past glories of Modernism. Indeed, Modernism remains for Winterson not so much a past as an alternative contemporary moment: “I believe that had it not been for the disastrous effect on European culture of two World Wars, what we call Modernism might have proved only the start of a period in history as genuinely new” (*AO* 191). In this alternative universe, Victorian literature is still Oedipal progenitor to be slain: “The novel form is finished. That does not mean we should give up reading nineteenth-century novels, we should read them avidly and often. What we must do is give up writing them” (191). This elision of the current moment in which Winterson writes allows her to bracket the entire terrain of postmodern (a word that appears nowhere in *Art Objects*) experimentalist fiction. As Pykett observes, “By insisting so firmly on a particular version of Modernism from which she claims descent, Winterson erases a great deal of the history of writing since the period of high Modernism, and obscures the extent to which her own writings have been shaped by this ‘after history’” (59), notably, in Pykett’s view, by the work of Angela Carter. To some degree like Woolf, Winterson’s diachronic identification with precursors enables her to disavow or ignore synchronic relations with her peers, so that her own position appears to be unique.
More important, Winterson’s homage does not simply reproduce but rather redirects Woolf’s temper and tempo. In her conclusion, Woolf emphasizes sober, collective labor and avoids suggesting that her own authorship might already herald, if not instantiate, the arrival of the future she invokes. Radclyffe Hall’s conclusion, which I have suggested anticipates Woolf’s in its semi-mystical invocation of future authorship, also emphasizes labor, though agonized and individual rather than self-denying and collective. Winterson, like Hall, emphasizes the individual rather than the collective, the first-person singular over the first-person plural or third person of Woolf’s passage, but her focus, unlike that of Woolf or Hall, is on erotics rather than labor, pleasure rather than suffering. The juxtaposition of “my books” with “[readers’] beds” and the assertion that “reading is sexy” overtly inserts erotic desire in the relationship between author and reader. Also unlike either precursor, Winterson moves frankly from the projection of a future “she” who “will have to build up her readership from those who still want to read” to her present success in doing so. Shakespeare’s sister, the passage suggests, has now arrived. Here as elsewhere, Winterson’s style signals assertion where Woolf’s performs judiciousness and self-confidence where Woolf’s hangs back. In Winterson’s revision of Woolf, the “suavity . . . politeness . . . and sidelong approach” (Woolf, MB 129) that Woolf both distrusted and remained attached to in her own writing have been triumphantly vanquished. Where Woolf emphasized the need for the “common reader” to dislodge writers from their “plinths and pedestals,” in Winterson’s conclusion, readers remain the indirect object of the authorial subject’s assertion: “It is for a new generation that I write” (AO 192).

Despite Winterson’s deprecation of her contemporary context, then, the version of Woolf that emerges from Winterson’s authorial identification seems to have been infiltrated by—or updated according to—some of its postmodern values: she is brasher, sexier, more visibly self-promoting. But if on the one hand Winterson seems stylistically postmodern in relation to Woolf, on the other hand, she can often seem atavistically attached to a Victorian intellectual heritage. Art Objects has its share of sententious pronouncement, particularly about the sacralization of art: “Against this golden calf in the wilderness where all come to buy and sell, the honest currency of art offers quite a different rate of exchange. The artist does not turn time into money, the artist turns time into energy, time into intensity, time into vision” (139). Winterson dismisses George Eliot in a phrase—“It is no use looking for the new George Eliot, and if she were to appear, what a ghastly creature she would be” (AO 177)—but her didactic mode can
read like a caricature of Eliot’s sage persona. The temper of “Imagination and Reality,” the essay in which the discussion of the “honest currency of art” appears, is unironically close to that of Eliot’s essay on “Debasing the Moral Currency”: “The art of spoiling is within reach of the dullest faculty: the coarsest clown with a hammer in his hand might chip the nose off every statue and bust in the Vatican, and stand grinning at the effect of his work” [Selected Essays 438]). When deployed in Winterson’s novels, however, this archaizing mode takes the livelier form of paradox and revisionism—“Very often history is a means of denying the past” (Oranges 93); “That walls should fall is the consequence of blowing your own trumpet” (112); “My mother had painted the white roses red and now she claimed they grew that way” (136)—reminiscent less of Eliot’s moral pronouncements than of the glittering reversals of Oscar Wilde’s dramas: “Really, if the lower orders don’t set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them? They seem, as a class, to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility” (The Importance of Being Earnest I.i). Like each of these precursors, Winterson negotiates between conceptions of aesthetic representation as on the one hand autonomous of social conditions and on the other a medium of social critique, and between poles of social or cultural outsider and insider status.

Winterson’s overt identification with Woolf, then, both minimizes her revisions of Woolf and downplays pre-Modernist filiations, e.g. the mid-Victorian didacticism represented by Eliot; the late-Victorian decadence of Wilde; even the more polemic Woolf of Three Guineas. The two quotations from Art Objects that begin this section juxtapose her claiming of Woolf with another disavowal, of identification with Radclyffe Hall as a lesbian author. Winterson rejects the imputed personal identity of an author as a criterion for readerly identification—part of her general emphasis on formal and literary over biographical or political affiliations. But like her identification with Woolf, Winterson’s disavowal of Hall belies some complexities. First, Winterson and Hall are not without commonalities. Both (like Woolf) write novels of formation in which they inherit but also strain against and modify the genre’s realist conventions. Both draw on the imagery and philosophy of non-mainstream religious traditions: Hall was both a Catholic convert and a member of the Society for Psychical Research; Winterson was raised in the Pentecostal Christianity so memorably represented in Oranges. Hall’s next novel after The Well of Loneliness, The Master of the House (1932), is a long allegorical tale whose protagonist, a Provençal carpenter named Christophe Bénédit, is a latter-day embodiment of Christ. Winterson’s work, as Jago Morri-
son has argued, has steadily deepened its own concern with a “post-Christian” spirituality: “the subversive exploration of sexuality and the erotic, so celebrated in her early work, has been comprehensively subordinated to an interest in love, framed in the terms of the agapeic tradition” (176). Most important, like both *The Voyage Out* and *The Well of Loneliness*, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* redirects the plot and structure of the novel of formation away from both the conventions of classic realism and the centrality of the heterosexual subject. Winterson’s interlocutor, cited at the beginning of this section, may have phrased her query naively, but a comparison of *The Well* and *Oranges* depends not only on the sexuality of their authors but also on the sexual politics and literary innovation of their works. Just as Radclyffe Hall in the 1920s radically intervened in fictional traditions by representing the development of a defiantly, tragically queer protagonist, so Winterson in the 1980s radically intervened by presenting an insouciantly, wittily queer one. Like both *The Voyage Out* and *The Well of Loneliness*, *Oranges* plots new styles and directions for the novel of female formation.

Writing in the last decades of the twentieth century, however, Winterson faces accumulated challenges in refreshing or redirecting conventional motifs of the novel of formation. In creating a protagonist who resists, however inchoately, aspects of socialization into a heterosexual norm, Winterson like Woolf is wary of familiar motifs such as literary identification (the bookish protagonist’s identification with earlier literary heroines) and of relying entirely on the developmental and rationalist assumptions of realist fictional narration. She makes her protagonist, Jeanette, a skewed and skeptical reader and disrupts the realist trajectory of her narrative with interpolated fairy-tales whose events and characters parallel, but do not mirror, those in Jeanette’s life, offering the gender reversals, apothegms, and transformations that become even more central in Winterson’s later, less realist novels. And like Woolf and Hall, Winterson both calls upon and challenges the conventions of readerly identification. For example, she gives the protagonist of *Oranges* her own first name and much of her own biographical location, inviting readerly identification with the character and/as author, but the interpolated tales, whose narrative voice cannot quite be identified with that of the novel’s Jeanette, seem designed to disrupt those relations.

The young Jeanette is a version of the reading-girl protagonist, like Maggie Tulliver, whose subjectivity emerges in and through her connection to other narratives. From the beginning (also like Maggie) she misinterprets and redirects the normatively innocent materials of sanctioned (by
church and school) childhood tales. Like Hall, Winterson draws on and rewrites biblical narrative, but in the spirit of establishing her protagonist’s creativity rather than her martyrdom. Jeanette creates a feltboard narrative of the biblical Daniel being swallowed by rather than escaping the lions (Oranges 12–13); chooses for a sampler project the un-reassuring biblical text “The Summer Is Ended and We Are Not Yet Saved” (39); and gives the other children in her class nightmares by telling them about “the horrors of the demon and the fate of the damned” (43). Undeterred by the disapproval of her teachers, Mrs. Virtue and Mrs. Vole, she continues her efforts to please with “[a model of] Street Car Named Desire out of pipe-cleaners, an embroidered cushion cover of Bette Davis in Now Voyager, an oregami [sic] William Tell with real apple, and best of all, a potato sculpture of Henry Ford outside the Chrysler building in New York” (48). Winterson presents Jeanette’s slant but revealing vision as the result not of a plan of resistance but of an originality that seems partly natural (later, Jeanette compares herself to an icon of untutored genius, William Blake) and partly encouraged by the eccentric nurture of her fanatically Evangelical mother, who teaches her to read from the Book of Deuteronomy, leaving her unfamiliar with “horsies, bunnies, and little ducks” but unusually informed about “pelicans, rock badgers, sloths, and bats. This tendency toward the exotic has brought me many problems, just as it did for William Blake” (42). It is the mystically inclined Elsie Norris who introduces Jeanette to Blake, along with Goblin Market and Yeats. Elsie is also fond of Swinburne; notably, in the heterogeneous stew of Jeanette’s cultural references, queer-inflected artifacts or proper names (Streetcar Named Desire, Bette Davis, Swinburne, Goblin Market) appear, unmarked, alongside others that have more masculine, nationalist (William Tell) or commercial (Henry Ford) connotations, as well as alongside those that seem to emphasize projects of not only aesthetic but also spiritual transcendence of mundane identities (Blake, Yeats). At the same time, however, Blake and Yeats can be and have been equally recruited for projections of national identity; and the examples drawn from popular culture (Streetcar, Bette Davis, Henry Ford) suggest the influence of American commercial culture. What appears in one light to be Jeanette’s individuality, her resistance to interpellation by narrow communal norms, in another exposes her to the hazard of interpellation by hegemonic forces of whose nature and origin she remains ignorant.

There are several forms of doubleness and ambivalence at work here. First, the strong stylistic realism of Jeanette’s narrative—its detailed first-person representation of the child’s perception of prosaic events—continu-
ally flickers with flashes of more fantastic narrative modes, indicated for example by the ostentatiously allegorical names Winterson gives Jeanette’s teachers, the novel’s Old Testament chapter titles, and the different forms of non-realist aesthetics signaled by proper names such as Blake, Yeats, and Bette Davis. This penetration of the narrative’s realism, and its accompanying aesthetic of identification, by non-realist genres gathers steam at the end of Exodus (the novel’s second chapter) with the first of a series of myth- or fairy-tale inspired interpolations. Second, as I have suggested above, Jeanette’s own objects of identification can signal either resistance or interpellation. Third, this ambiguity also characterizes Jeanette’s strong initial identification with her own mother. “I had been brought in to join [my mother] in a tag match against the Rest of the World” (Oranges 3), Jeanette observes; and initially Jeanette’s nonconformist vision and heterogeneity of interests seem to be tolerated and even encouraged by her mother and the alternative motherly, or grandmotherly, figure Elsie Norris. Jeanette’s characterization of her mother’s combative attitude—“She had never heard of mixed feelings. There were friends and there were enemies” (3)—applies equally well to Jeanette’s own narrating voice in Oranges (and to Winterson’s throughout her writings). But as so many twentieth-century novels of female formation suggest (including The Well, The Voyage Out, and Jamaica Kincaid’s Lucy), the female protagonist’s early, productive identification with maternal figures is inevitably circumscribed by the interpellation of those figures within dominant gender ideologies. One of the earliest maternal betrayals that Jeanette experiences revolves around a familiar object of literary identification—Jane Eyre. Brontë’s novel is Jeanette’s “mother’s favorite non-Bible book,” which in reading aloud to her daughter she alters, so that at the end Jane marries St John Rivers. Later, Jeanette, “literate and curious . . . decided to read [Jane Eyre] for myself. . . . I found out, that dreadful day in a back corner of the library, that Jane doesn’t marry St. John at all, that she goes back to Mr. Rochester. It was like the day I discovered my adoption papers while searching for a pack of playing cards. I have never since played cards, and I have never since read Jane Eyre” (74–75).

The library, as I have previously suggested, is a conventional location of revelation for the protagonists of novels of formation, underscoring the literary roots of that formation: it is, for example, where Dorothea Brooke, disabused of the romance of imagining herself one of Milton’s daughters, throws herself into Will Ladislaw’s arms; Stephen Gordon discovers her story in the sexological literature her father has concealed; and Jamaica Kincaid’s Lucy finds that “a tongue has no taste” as she hides in
the stacks and French-kisses a boy named Tanner. The betrayal that Jeanette discovers in the library in *Oranges* is also associated with sexuality, since it is the recuperation of Jane and Rochester’s initially illegitimate passion that Jeanette’s mother suppresses. The maternal betrayal revealed here is dual: Jeanette has been abandoned by her biological mother, presumably as a result of the stigma of unmarried motherhood, and she will be abandoned (first publicly castigated and finally kicked out of the house) by her adoptive mother when her lesbian sexuality becomes apparent:

> My mother stood up and said . . . that women had specific circumstances for their ministry, that the Sunday School was one of them, the Sisterhood another, but the message belonged to the men. Until this moment my life had still made some kind of sense. Now it was making no sense at all. . . . She ended by saying that having taken on a man’s world in other ways I had flouted God’s law and tried to do it sexually. This was no spontaneous speech. She and the pastor had talked about it already. It was her weakness for the ministry that had done it. . . . (*Oranges* 133–34)

With her reading lessons in Deuteronomy and her encouragement of Jeanette’s preaching, her mother inadvertently teaches her to challenge authority, and she supports her as long as that authority is feminized (in Jeanette’s elementary school) and unthreatening to the more absolute and ultimately patriarchal authority of her church and of the heterosexual norm. In first altering the end of *Jane Eyre* to favor the Christian mission, however, and then parroting the pastoral line on women’s role in the ministry, Jeanette’s mother reveals that her apparent independence was always limited by complicity with a masculine power structure whose values are fundamentally conservative. Although the more sympathetic Elsie Norris tries to intervene, she dies soon after. Her abandonment of Jeanette is, of course, unwitting, but there is a trace of more active culpability in her continued desire to believe in the church’s good intentions. Both Jeanette’s mother, in her complicity with masculinist norms, and Elsie Norris, as an alternative mother-figure whose good will cannot forestall the application of those norms, echo the role of Helen Ambrose in Rachel Vinrace’s life.

Jeanette’s mother understands the importance of narrative identifications and wishes to control her daughter’s: she not only rewrites texts (*Jane Eyre*) and renarrates her own experience (of leadership as a church-woman) to comply with patriarchal norms; she is also capable entirely of obliterating narratives that do not suit her. When Jeanette asks about
“a yellowy picture of a pretty woman holding a cat,” on a page devoted to “Old Flames” in her mother’s photograph album, her mother quickly dismisses the woman as the sister of a male suitor, and “next time we looked, it had gone” (Oranges 36). More violently, the occasion of the initial discovery of Jeanette’s affair with Melanie, she burns “all the letters, all the cards, all the jottings of my own” in the backyard. Book-burning as symbolic of the mother’s attempt to disrupt her daughter’s intellectual emergence (almost always associated with her sexual emergence) is something of a trope in women’s novels of formation—for example, as I have discussed above, a similar event appears in Jamaica Kincaid’s novels and autobiographical writings. Such obliterating opposition both signals the continued necessity for, and justifies, the Woolfian project of “killing the Angel in the House [as] part of the occupation of a woman writer” (DM 238). These betrayals loosen the hold of Jeanette’s own identification with her mother.

Like Woolf and Woolf’s female protagonists, and like Jamaica Kincaid’s Lucy, Jeanette finds that slaying the maternal phantom is difficult. At the novel’s end Jeanette still feels that her mother has “tied a thread around my button, to tug when she pleased” (Oranges 176). However, as Jeanette’s dismissal of her mother as a “spiritual whore” suggests, her struggle against the dominance of convention is more vigorous and sustained than that of her forbears. Like Rachel Vinrace, Jeanette falls ill and has hallucinations, but unlike Rachel, she recovers. Jeanette also refutes Stephen Gordon’s notorious moments of physical self-loathing: “She hated her body with its muscular shoulders, its small compact breasts, and its slender flanks of an athlete. All her life she must drag this body of hers like a monstrous fetter imposed on her spirit. . . . She longed to maim it, for it made her feel cruel” (Hall 186–87). Jeanette’s appearance and self-presentation, by contrast, do not seem to be factors in her own image of herself or in others’ responses to her. Indeed, although Jeanette notices that Melanie’s “eyes were a lovely grey, like the cat Next Door” (Oranges 80) and comments when they make love on “her marvelous bones and the triangle of muscle in her stomach” (103), standards of or emphasis on conventions of beauty seem largely absent from her world and not associated with desire. (By contrast, Stephen Gordon’s Angela is a very conventional beauty, with “amazingly blonde” hair, “very white” skin, and “eyes of rather an unusual blue that almost seemed to be tinted with purple” [Hall 131]). Jeanette’s sole moment of disgust with her own appearance occurs when her mother hustles her into an “enormous . . . bright pink” mackintosh, which makes her feel “trapped” and “sick” (Oranges 79, 80).
Peggy Bailey notes the symbolism of Jeanette’s mother “encas[ing]” her pubescent daughter in a garment of a color traditionally associated with femininity: “The image of Jeanette immobilized in her bright pink mac is the novel’s final symbol, before serious conflict erupts, of the misfit she has become in Mother’s world” (71). However, the mackintosh is so intrinsically repellent—not just pink but “bright pink,” “enormous,” plastic, and dragged out from “behind a pile of cardboard boxes that had SURPLUS written on the side, like branded sheep” (Oranges 79)—and obviously external to Jeanette that her dislike of it seems indicative of self-respect rather than self-loathing. Similarly, although Jeanette is crushed when Melanie takes up with a man, her response upon being patronizingly “forgiven” by him—“There was only one thing I could do; mustering all my spit, I did it” (124)—reverses Hall’s themes of martyrdom. (In The Well, Stephen’s beloved, Angela, betrays her to her husband in order to cover up her affair with another man; in Hall’s novel The Master of the House, the Christ-like, pacifist hero is spat upon by soldiers who then crucify him.) Following Melanie, Jeanette engages in a lighthearted affair with a young woman named Katy whom she meets on the beach, as if responding to the objection made to The Well by Diana Souhami, one of Hall’s biographers: “Radclyffe Hall was too troubled a person to write an untroubled book, but she might have acknowledged the privilege, seductions, freedom and fun that graced her daily life” (173). Like Stephen, Jeanette sustains real losses—her mother, her first love, her home, and a cultural context (for Stephen, country life; for Jeanette, the church) that has defined her—but she never represents herself as in any essential way a “troubled person.” Her self-representation rather echoes the matter-of-fact tone of Woolf’s declaration at the end of A Room of One’s Own that “sometimes women do like women” (86); itself an echo of Rachel and Helen’s mutual recognition that “we like each other” (Woolf, VO 91).

At the same time, however, like Rachel’s and Stephen Gordon’s, Jeanette’s erotic presence remains relatively disembodied and elliptical in Winterson’s representation. In representing Jeanette’s first sexual encounter, with Melanie, Winterson avoids directly physical imagery and concludes with a biblical reference:

She stroked my head for a long time, and then we hugged and it felt like drowning. Then I was frightened but couldn’t stop. There was something crawling in my belly. I had an octopus inside me.

And it was evening and it was morning; another day. (Oranges 88–89)
Here, Winterson echoes the creation story of Genesis; Hall, too, famously encapsulates her protagonist’s first sexual consummation with a biblical reference: “That night they were not divided” (the reference also used by Eliot as the epitaph for Maggie and Tom Tulliver). Winterson’s reference is both more ironic than Hall’s—Jeanette has been leading Melanie in Bible study, and they feel, misguidedly, secure in the “family” (89) of their church—and more grandiose: Where David’s words are spoken in mourning for one patriarch and his son (Saul and Jonathan), Jeanette’s refers to the creation of an entire new world. Later, Jeanette describes her first sexual encounter with Katy with a paralepsis reminiscent of Woolf’s teasing in *The Voyage Out*: “We stopped talking about it quickly because the dialogue was getting too embarrassing” (123). Like Woolf’s evasions, Winterson’s draws attention to our textual conventions for representing sex and raises the question of to whom, exactly, embarrassment over such representation belongs—to the author? characters? reader? In any case, the relative disembodiment with which Winterson represents sexuality in this novel suggests that, to return to Woolf’s words, “marching up” to the direct representation of sex retains the threat of making “inaudible” a text’s other voices.

Equally sotto voce in *Oranges* is its narrative of artistic formation. Like *The Voyage Out*, *Oranges* sketches a covert and unfinished plot of intellectual development, rather than the narrative of the protagonist’s journey to triumph as a novelist that we find in *The Well*. The reader can deduce at the end of the novel that Jeanette has won a place at a university, though the word never appears. In the final section of the novel (“Ruth”), Winterson’s fairy-tale interpolations follow two characters: a female wanderer—headed for “a beautiful city, a long way off” whose denizens “didn’t sow or toil they thought about the world” (*Oranges* 131)—whose name, Winnet Stonejar, is an almost-anagram (four letters short) of Winterson’s own; and a sad Arthurian knight, Sir Perceval, who is mourning the loss of Arthur and his self-chosen exile from the world of the Round Table. These mythical characters, with their quests and their losses, both reference and replace a more realist set of narratives that readers may mentally supply, of the young man (or occasionally woman) from the provinces making his or her way to the university cities: Hardy’s Jude Fawley, Lawrence’s Paul Morel and Ursula Brangwen, Philip Larkin’s John Kemp (like Winterson a Lancastrian), Frederic Raphael’s Adam Morris. Just as “Winnet Stonejar” is almost, but not quite, an anagram for Jeanette Winterson, and Sir Perceval is almost, but not quite, an avatar of the novel’s Jeanette (being male, and mourning the loss of the homosocial
masculinity of the Round Table, while Jeanette is female, and mourns the loss of her woman-dominated church), so this final section of the novel maintains a slant relation to the aesthetics of identification that characterize these classic narratives of intellectual formation: It knows that they’re there, it knows that its readers know, but it will not cast Jeanette, or allow us to identify with her, as simply the protagonist of such a narrative.\footnote{34}

It is perhaps partly the existence of this imposing literary lineage that accounts for the coyness of the novel’s plot of intellectual formation; like the coming-out plot, the \textit{kunstler} plot’s freshness is imperiled by the lurking presence of convention if not cliché, pathos if not bathos. Winterson avoids these perils not only through the use of metaphor and innuendo but also by allowing the novel to end with an acknowledgment that old longings still exist for its protagonist, that the beginning of a new life offers no simple conclusion to the old one. At the end of \textit{Sons and Lovers}, Paul Morel walks “toward the city’s gold phosphorescence” away from his recently dead mother: “His fists were shut, his mouth set fast. He would not take that direction, to the darkness, to follow her. He walked towards the faintly humming, glowing town, quickly” (Lawrence 464). The closed fists and mouth suggest both the difficulty and the decisiveness of the protagonist’s rejection of his maternal identification. \textit{Oranges}, however, ends not with Jeanette’s departure from home, but with her return to it, and to a mother still very much alive. She comes home on a train from a mysterious city “with a copy of \textit{Middlemarch} under [her] pullover” (\textit{Oranges} 162). In addition to offering another clue that Jeanette has entered a world of scholarship and of female intellectual ambition, the conjunction of \textit{Middlemarch} and rail travel perhaps makes a sardonic nod to one of the most conventionally feminine characters in \textit{To the Lighthouse}, Minta Doyle, who “had left the third volume of \textit{Middlemarch} in the train and . . . never knew what happened in the end” (148).\footnote{35}

The mother, in this case, has the last word. It is Jeanette’s mother, not Jeanette herself, who has become an author at the end of the novel. She has written “a long piece on devilry” for the “\textit{Band of Hope} review” (\textit{Oranges} 165) and has taken up shortwave radio broadcasting. The novel ends with the opening sentence of her broadcast: “This is Kindly Light calling Manchester, come in Manchester, this is Kindly Light” (176). The line is ironic, because neither Jeanette’s mother nor the “light” of her Christianity have proven “kindly” to Jeanette, and it is poignant because the invitation—“come in”—is one that she has not extended to her own daughter, who has “come out” and been thrown out. At the same time, however, these powerful effects of the mother’s utterance call attention to the creative
hand behind them of both “Jeanette,” the narrator, and Jeanette Winter-
son, the author: It is in her power to confer on her mother the power of
the last word. The ending thus ambiguously suggests both reconciliation
and continued tension, relations of identification and disavowal—between
Jeanette and her mother; between the vivid intimacies of her former life
(“If God is your emotional role model,” she observes, “very few human
relationships will match up to it” [170]) and the uncertain gains of her
present one (“I knew a woman in another place. Perhaps she would save
me. But what if she were asleep?”); between fiction and autobiography,
between language as creation and language as entrapment (“[My mother]
had begun a self-help kit for the spiritually disturbed. . . . I was glad she
had a hobby, but not pleased that my particular sins were listed in the self-
help kit” [174]). Even so undomestic a house-angel as Jeanette’s mother
seems, for the fascinated daughter, very hard to kill.

Like many novels of formation (including The Voyage Out and The
Well of Loneliness), first novels, and first-person novels, Oranges Are Not
the Only Fruit was received as autobiographical, and has many traits of
autobiographical fiction—its protagonist shares not only a first name but
many verifiable biographical characteristics with its author. In an essay in
Art Objects, Winterson roundly rejects such autobiographical readings:

Like Orlando and Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, The Autobiogra-
phy of Alice B. Toklas is fiction masquerading as a memoir. It seems
that if you tell people that what they are reading is “real,” they will
believe you, even when they are being trailed in the wake of a highly
experimental odyssey. I have never understood how anyone can read
the Deuteronomy chapter of Oranges and not catch on to my game. . . .
Like Stein, I prefer myself as a character in my own fiction, and like
Stein and Woolf, what concerns me is language. . . . The most important
thing about Oranges is not its wit nor its warmth, but its new way with
words. (AO 53)

The “Deuteronomy” chapter of Oranges signals Winterson’s “game” not
only because of its topic, which is the malleability of history (“History
should be a hammock for swinging and a game for playing, the way cats
play” [93]), but also because it is one of the novel’s extra-narrative inter-
polations, outside of, though commenting on, its plot; not narrating “real”
events; written in a voice that is not identified as that of “Jeanette.” Inter-
rupting the trajectory of the first-person narrative, these interpolations,
which seem to represent the novel’s “experimental odyssey,” also function
to interrupt readerly identification with the “Jeanette” voice and narrative. Yet they don’t fundamentally disrupt; they may pause the narrative, but they do not alter it. A reader can follow Jeanette’s story from beginning to end without reading these chapters or sections, and not suffer any loss of sense. Indeed, most critical readings of the novel (my own included) implicitly do just that, interpreting the novel as a realist narrative of formation in the same way we would without these sections, seeing them as complementing rather than diverting the first-person trajectory.  

In “The Semiotics of Sex,” Winterson asserts that “Art must resist autobiography if it hopes to cross boundaries of class, culture . . . and . . . sexuality” (AO 106; ellipses in original), and her election of stylistically and sexually elliptical Woolf as a favored precursor over stylistically and sexually explicit Hall functions as a rejection of textual strategies that favor, over those that discourage, identifications, even queer ones. If readers tend to focus on the first-person immediacy of Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit and to minimize the boundaries between narrator and author, however, that may be less a sign of readerly credulity or disrespect than a response to the tension between Winterson’s own preference for “[her]self as a character in her own fiction,” which pulls in the direction of queer identificatory reading, and her interest in uses of language apart from novelistic character or plot. In Oranges the realist-autobiographical and the experimentalist-fantastic trajectories proceed in parallel rather than directly engaging or transforming each other. In her later novels, Winterson works more directly to disrupt readerly identification—creating protagonists who are not completely describable in human terms and who have fantastic relations to time and space. At the same time, a strongly marked first-person voice (assertive, epigrammatic, irreverent) and a concern with distinctively human relations of desire remain consistent throughout her work and continue to invite readings from a position of identification.

“You see you kind of belong to us,” a reader and acquaintance, Rachel Sharp, wrote to Woolf on the publication of her biography of Roger Fry, taking polite issue with her inclusion of a scatological account of sadistic corporal punishment during the subject’s schooldays, “and what you do matters enormously” (qtd. in Daugherty 4). The intimate claim of reader on author, based on the projection of an ethical, emotional stance that seems to unite them, is magnified by narratives that address readers implicitly or directly on the basis of a shared and minoritized subjectivity, such as queer subjectivity. But, as Winterson’s essays make particularly clear, this relationship between readers and authors involves struggle as much as collaboration. Art Objects asserts Winterson’s control: over those
authors and genres with which she will be identified (not Hall but Woolf and Stein, not autobiography but fiction); over the desire of readers who “want my books on their courses and by their beds” but must not want to “collude in the misreading of art as sexuality” (105). Yet the essays themselves reveal the paradoxical nature of such an authorial fantasy of power, for Winterson exerts over Woolf the power of definition that she resists having brought to bear on her own authorial persona: not the polemical Woolf, but the poetic Woolf; not the Woolf of the diaries but the Woolf of the novels; not the Woolf of *The Voyage Out* but the Woolf of *The Waves*; not shared sexual, but shared textual, orientations. Two of the essays in *Art Objects* are about Winterson as a collector (of modern art and of first editions), possessed by her art objects—“Book collecting is an obsession, an occupation, a disease, an addiction, a fascination, an absurdity, a fate” (119)—but also asserting possession. Woolf, Hall, and Winterson grapple with the question of how to mobilize literary identification to expand possibilities for the representation of subjectivity, including queer subjectivity, while resisting those aspects of literary identification—in their work and in its reception—that constrain them generically or personally. To some degree, these struggles over identification and appropriation are shared by all of the authors in this study—they are not peculiar to postmodernity or to narratives of identity, but rather endemic to the conventions of realist representation, and the novel of formation, in which reciprocal relations between the self and other are always what is at stake.