

INTRODUCTION

The Peripatetics



IN HER MEMOIR OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR, the British pacifist and feminist Vera Brittain remembers the period leading up to the outbreak of war as a time of self-regard and absorption in her own private life. Bright, ambitious, and twenty-one, falling in love for the first time and newly admitted to Somerville College, Oxford, she became aware nonetheless that “public affairs” were impinging on private lives in a way that rendered the two inseparable. She records in *Testament of Youth* that this difficult conjuncture of public and private preoccupations called to mind a passage from George Eliot’s novel *Daniel Deronda*, published some four decades earlier: “There comes a terrible moment to many souls when the great movements of the world, the larger destinies of mankind, which have lain aloof in newspapers and other neglected reading, enter like an earthquake into their own lives—when the slow urgency of growing generations turns into the tread of an invading army or the dire clash of civil war.”¹

These lines come at the end of Eliot’s novel, when the solipsistic and blinkered Gwendolen Harleth comes face-to-face with the alienation of a people—in this case European Jews—and their aspirations for a homeland. Eschewing Gwendolen’s role and choosing Eliot’s legacy instead, Brittain was soon to give herself to public service, working as a nurse throughout the war, and becoming involved in political causes, both domestic and international, for the rest of her life. From here she was to face outward, in full, energetic pursuit of a heroic life and in rebellion against the narrative of domestic contentment and romantic love.

Our book argues that the dominant image of Anglo-American women’s writing in the late eighteenth through twentieth centuries

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as a largely domestic literary tradition is itself a resilient fiction or myth, and that Brittain's narrative of going forth to meet "the great movements of the world, the larger destinies of mankind" comes closer to the truth. This domestic myth casts women's writing as inevitably—and conservatively—preoccupied with the mundane and circumscribed aspects of home, personal relationships, sexual mores, marriage, and the taming of refractory men, and it has been perpetuated by a variety of critics, popularizers, nostalgic audiences, and even devotees of those novelists who have inspired the staunchest followings.² Early twenty-first-century Austen audiences, to name one example, revel in her romantic plots, seeming to miss Austen's ironic stance toward the habits and rituals of courtship and matrimony and her dim view of family life in general. We offer a very different account of the history and trajectory of women's writing, one grounded in the notion that its impulses largely ran toward public engagement rather than domestic entanglement.

Readers and critics, especially those of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels, have often tended to focus primarily on female experience of the world as defined and limited by personal relations and the private sphere. Our rereadings and reassessments chart the ways women's fiction takes its heroines, however briefly or impermanently, outside the confines of the domestic into public domains, where they directly confront the social and political obstacles to the well-being of others and to their own personal emancipation. In our most powerful and influential women writers, a critique of domestic life was more common than its celebration, the embracing of public debate and the social questions of the day more frequent than their avoidance. From Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Harriet Jacobs to Virginia Woolf, Willa Cather, and Edith Wharton and then on to Tess Slesinger, Mary McCarthy, Joan Didion, and Nadine Gordimer, women's fictions (as well as poems and essays) faced outward, often chomping at the bit of domestic expectations and cultural constraints, and tackled the subjects of class formation, slavery, warfare, feminism, political economy, labor unrest, democracy, tyranny, globalism, and the clash of cultures. Until

relatively recently excluded from classic or official forms of public life—suffrage, journalism, organized politics—women were nonetheless always active participants in debates about the crucial concerns of civil society.

For the new millennium, with its heightened sense of intersecting cultures across the globe and increasing awareness of the multiple struggles of women in far-flung and yet eerily familiar societies, we offer an account of the female literary tradition of the last two centuries that recognizes and evaluates its engagement with public life. The foundational texts of feminist criticism—Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, Mary Ellmann’s *Thinking about Women*, Ellen Moers’s *Literary Women*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic*, and Elaine Showalter’s *A Literature of Their Own*—demonstrated the existence and defined the contours of a distinct and coherent body of female writing with characteristic themes, preoccupations, and tropes. They identified the founding “mothers” and canonical texts of this literary corpus, thus endowing it with the lineage, authority, and historical endurance that are the hallmarks of a vital tradition. Woolf focused on the material circumstances—money, time, and space—that women lacked and sorely needed if they were to produce great writing. Ellmann took aim at the sexual stereotypes that govern cultural attitudes toward the writing of both men and women. Moers offered a gallery of heroines—traveling, loving, performing, educating—and cast her net wide, bringing together multiple centuries and national literatures through dominant themes of women’s writing. Showalter proposed stages in the development of women’s fiction in Britain, from feminine to feminist to female. Gilbert and Gubar posited a nineteenth-century “feminist poetics” with anger and rebellion at its heart.

We undertake to build on the work of these feminist foremothers by insisting on and extending the idea of a distinctly female literary tradition and by zeroing in on strains of public consciousness and ambition and on narrative tensions and exchanges between home and abroad. It is our aim, first of all, to suggest continuities between the themes of what Virginia Woolf called the “golden age” of women’s writing in the nineteenth century and

the fictions of women who wrote in the wake of the political and social emancipations of the modern age. As Vera Brittain's invocation of Eliot's final novel suggests, women writers of the twentieth century maintained a powerful consciousness of this continuity, just as mid-nineteenth-century writers like Eliot, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Sand, Charlotte Brontë, and Harriet Beecher Stowe imagined themselves to be co-conspirators in a common literary project.³ This project, like Brittain's and Eliot's insistence on the individual's widening sphere of curiosity and engagement, was fundamentally both political and activist.

For us, the tropes and themes that most saliently express women writers' impulses toward a role in public life involve travel, sailing forth, escape, adventure, going westward, exodus, dissent, and emigration. But they also include settlement and home, a radical remaking of the domestic, and the discovery of new places of belonging that often bear little resemblance to the home left behind. We find in these women's texts, then, a recurring dialectic of home and abroad, a complicated relationship that changes over these two centuries but nonetheless remains central in the literary expression of women's experience. Home must be rejected but also recreated, sometimes, as in the case of Linda Brent's hiding place in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, in a startlingly counterintuitive form, and sometimes in a radically utopian vein that entails the total abandonment of family and nation, as in Charlotte Gilman's *Herland*, which envisions a matriarchal society, governed by "Over Mothers," in which child-rearing, considered the primary work of the nation, is a public and collective rather than a private and familial undertaking.

The one meaning of home that the "great writers" (as Ellen Moers called them) refused outright was a sheltered and isolated one—home as a retreat from the pressing and controversial matters of the day. For Elizabeth Barrett Browning, this posture of withdrawal and self-cloistering seemed tantamount to giving up the vocation of writing, because for her, the idea of speaking out and authorship were one and the same. When the art critic and memoirist Anna Jameson complained that in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* Harriet Beecher Stowe had taken on too incendiary a subject for

a woman to tackle, Barrett Browning scolded her in heated prose: “Is it possible,” she asked, “that you think a woman has no business with questions like the question of slavery? . . . Then she had better use a pen no more.”⁴ For Barrett Browning and many of her peers, writing was not only equal to activism but also to leaving the domestic realm, what the poet called the “women’s apartment,” contrasting her own Ulysses-like literary venturing forth to the stay-at-home Penelope. Not to write, not to speak out, was to be satisfied with the life of the woman left behind and, even worse, it was a form of slavery.

This book shows women writers at their “business,” grappling with the most pressing questions of their day. The history of their imaginative enterprises in a public and geographically extended (and ever-expanding) field spans the surprisingly active, unsettled plots and mobile heroines of the early nineteenth-century novel to women’s fiction written in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. The compass of women’s fiction becomes ever wider as women gain the confidence and material means to enter into previously inaccessible or forbidden domains of experience: politics, warfare, revolution, and nation making. In contemporary works we encounter plots that follow heroines as they explore wider geographical and cultural territories, that experiment with new ways of seeing and living, and that offer new definitions of what it means to have and create a home. In interpreting the female literary tradition through its impulse to face outward, we suggest the ways women’s fiction not only tried to document the lives of women but also sought to displace conventional narratives of inner strife and yearning, and to create, instead, narratives of self-extension, political activism, and spiritual adventure. We regard and characterize writers in this tradition as instinctive and inveterate peripatetics, women seldom at home in the place they were born or that custom has allotted them—women moving, if only imaginatively, from place to place in search of greater freedom and a greater part in directing what Eliot called the “great movements of the world.” The errant Eve of Eden, not stay-at-home Penelope, is the model and pattern for their curious character and creative ambition.

Ours is not an exhaustive study or survey of female peripatetics in their various historical and cultural avatars, but will, rather, engage representative moments, writers, and texts in the interest of suggesting the broad sweep and scope of women's writing and its resolutely public impulses and ambitions. We select and concentrate on issues—emancipation, war, democratic politics—that summoned the most passionate and eloquent responses of women determined to make their views known and their voices count. What we lose in comprehensiveness we hope to gain in altered outlook, especially in determinations of literary prominence. Women writers currently patronized as provincial and minor talents, like Sarah Orne Jewett and May Sinclair, or languishing in relative obscurity, like Tess Slesinger and Iris Origo, or whose literary reputation is often overshadowed by their fateful marriages to literary giants, like Mary McCarthy and Martha Gellhorn, emerge as bold figures in high relief when read against the panorama of women's literature devoted to public themes. Thus, for example, the Mary McCarthy who attracts our attention is not the young woman of shrewd but untethered literary intelligence who found her vocation as a novelist only after her husband, the redoubtable critic Edmund Wilson, locked her in a room until she produced her first work of fiction, but the fearless satirist of the beliefs and manners of America's intellectual and political class. Martha Gellhorn, once separated from the legend of Hemingway, stands on her own as a novelist whose fiction rivals male accounts of the mass dislocations, battles, and soul-sickening discovery of the death camps that made the Second World War so hard and so necessary to write about. It is our contention that these women writers should be ranked among the thinkers and speakers who imaginatively ventured into the public marketplace, where the ideas propelling the greater movements of the world are voiced, debated, modified, embraced, or discredited.

If we think back through intrepid and outspoken figures like McCarthy and Gellhorn, we can see how different even the canonical examples of late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction appear. We would expect the polemical writings of someone like Wollstonecraft to face outward to engage with public concerns, but so,

too, does her travel writing and so, too, do the novels—courtship plots and bildungsromans alike—by Austen, Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot, which have for so long defined the female literary tradition. We focus on narratives of itinerancy, movement, and uprooting, elements that challenge the idea of a circumscribed domestic domain. For so many of these female adventurers, travel itself meant emancipation. Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796), a travel memoir with commentary on prison reform, property rights, and capital punishment, revisits some of the preoccupations of her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), though in a different key. Jane Austen's last novel, *Persuasion*, imagines emancipation along different lines. The novel literally gives us a ship, a vehicle of travel and exploration, as the future home of Anne Elliot. Before she speaks up and asserts her right to be heard and to be happy, Anne seemed fated to be one of the great stay-at-homes of the English novel. The arrival of navy officers on *Persuasion*'s domestic shores not only imports a prospective (and retrospective) suitor for its isolated and languishing heroine but introduces into the English novel itself the possibility of a more mobile existence for women and the chance to confront and address the critical issues of the day—war, class mobility, and the ascendancy of companionate or, as Lionel Trilling characterizes it, intelligent love.⁵

Female impatience to secure a future redolent of adventure and needful, healthy change is the motive force animating the more visibly restless heroines, who yearn for the world and experiences beyond the threshold of home. The adventurous young women of these fictions are easily recognized and well remembered, even loved by many readers. Their eagerness for enlarging experience is crystallized in Jane Eyre's reveries of travel from the top of Thornfield Hall and in her almost constantly peripatetic state, and in Lucy Snowe's abrupt departure from England, home, and all that she knows in the early chapters of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*. A slightly different, although complementary, paradigm informs Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, in which the heroine's inquisitiveness leads her to an open engagement with class conflict and the strife of industrial workers, just as Gaskell's first novel,

Mary Barton, emboldened her to enter debates about “political economy” and the exploitation of laborers. Gaskell’s abolitionist colleagues across the Atlantic saw themselves engaged in a related fight—the cause of emancipation—and combined a like-minded Christian belief in the relatedness of all peoples with a militant assault on slavery. George Eliot created a string of heroines who chafe at convention but seem ultimately to succumb to it, who long for escape but are repeatedly brought back and reined in. We see in *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot’s last novel, a form of delayed release.⁶ In taking her narrative literally across the Mediterranean to Palestine, a place that is at once historic and messianic, Eliot, inspired by Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, makes the imaginative leap into uncharted territories in the person of her male protagonist.

By the turn of the twentieth century, women’s growing responsiveness to “the great movements of the world, the larger destinies of mankind,” resulted in a burgeoning of fiction explicitly concerned with the social and moral fate of entire populations displaced by war or fleeing persecution, political upheaval, or centuries of economic penury. These migrations were stressful but also hope-filled ventures into new lands that tested and inevitably transformed traditional notions of nationality, home, and identity. Willa Cather, the moral historian of the American frontier and its settlement, represents the urge to find a new home in foreign and unsettled territories as an urge indigenous to modernity in general, but she also shows how that pioneering spirit can express itself beyond the confines of traditional notions of what women can do. Cather’s early works, *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*, represent the opening of the American frontier as a historic opportunity for women to participate in the geographical expansion and political consolidation of a new nation. But Cather was also aware that the national destiny the pioneer helped manifest was accomplished by the dispossession and sometimes wholesale liquidation of Native Americans, who thought of the land not as a wilderness but as a tribal home. This is the underlying theme and lament of Cather’s *The Professor’s House*, a novel that, despite its staid, academic title, advances the radical notion that home is a spiritual idea that modern life may frustrate more than fulfill. Written at a time when

America, the uncontested victor in a war it entered late but decisively, had secured its place and its future as a leader among nations, *The Professor's House* is a historical fiction that elegizes the vanished Indian cultures of the Southwest and ponders the moral future of an American homeland forged out of conquered and often despoiled native lands.

Tom Outland, Cather's hero in *The Professor's House*, dies in the First World War, a plot development that further complicates Cather's vision of America's manifest destiny as a world presence and power. She, like so many other women writers who imaginatively and often literally ventured into battlegrounds at home and abroad, became more aware and more articulate about the conduct, as well as the political purposes, of war. The literature of women written in and about wartime has been recognized, even honored, but not appreciated for the way it expanded on preoccupations, techniques, and moral stances inherited from the female tradition of writing on public themes. Vera Brittain, May Sinclair, and Rose Macaulay, among others, entered the fray, both as volunteers for service in a war that saw unprecedented participation by women and as witnesses to the painful moral ambiguity of the Great War.

Yet even those who were skeptical that the Great War would, as promised, make the world safe for democracy were sometimes moved beyond their own disillusionment to envision—or simply hope for—a postwar future that would eventually mean more than “so many beautiful old things smashed.”⁷ Thus, even as he coolly dismisses the idea that “we are going to get out of this war what we went in for,” David, the self-described fatalist of Cather's *One of Ours*, cannot help thinking that “something must come of the war. . . . Nothing we expect, but something unforeseen.” “You remember in the old mythology tales,” he asks Claude, the novel's young protagonist who will, like Tom Outland, die in the war, “how, when the sons of the gods were born, the mothers always died in agony? Maybe it's only Semêle I'm thinking of. At any rate, I've sometimes wondered whether the young men of our time had to die young to bring a new idea into the world . . . something Olympian.”⁸

The desire to bring forth a new idea into the world, something epochal, if not Olympian, takes concrete form and specific

direction in novels by women appalled by the moral and economic deterioration of the postwar world and exasperated with stalled initiatives for democratic reform. The great and remarkably patient Victorian novelists wrote of political and industrial unrest with an equanimity that itself seemed a solution to the festering resentment and latent violence that threatened to rend communities, and even the nation, apart. But their successors were less willing to write narratives featuring stalwart heroines, brave struggles, and sanguine outcomes. They wrote with often shocking candor about sexually liberated women who had casual affairs, made terrible marriages, and had abortions, even as they worked to bring about a revolution they didn't really believe in and sometimes may not have wanted.

Nor did these women writers behave themselves, even when writing about those who shared their political views about what should and needed to be done. This was especially apparent during the 1930s and '40s, when an energized democratic Left was under pressure to conform to the dictates of socialist realism mandating an idealized depiction of the working classes, a blanket indictment of the bourgeoisie, and an uncritical embrace of collectivist ideology, especially in its Soviet form. Tess Slesinger and Mary McCarthy defied the orthodoxies of socialist realism by writing personal narratives about contemporary life and refusing to pretend that gender was not as important as class in determining who has and wields power. They helped consolidate a tradition formally dedicated to a clear-eyed, often pitiless realism, sparing readers none of the shameful particulars of the disintegrating social and economic scene. But it was also a tradition as concerned with envisioning new social forms as in denouncing the old democratic alliances. The titles of Grace Paley's short story collections—*Enormous Changes at the Last Minute* and *Later the Same Day*—are witty reminders of the tenacity of this tradition, hardy enough to survive transplantation in the ethnic ghettos of midcentury New York. We call these keen-eyed political visionaries the Exaltadas, after Margaret Fuller's vision of a new breed of principled, self-sufficient women whose devotion to truth would herald, and indeed beget, a new world order. The most politically aware and active of the peripatetics whose

work and legacy we celebrate in these pages, they attest to a talent, disciplined into a vocation, for political prophecy that is at once utopian and pragmatic, self-dependent and disinterested.

This dream of a new world persists with surprising tenacity in the work of contemporary writers, whom we discuss in chapter 6 as the “multinationals.” These women complicate the already fraught equation between home and world, self and country. They come from diverse cultures and often contending traditions, but they share a common aspiration: to open up routes into territories where the rival claims of the new and the old country, the new habits and old ways, the new and the “native” self might be equitably resolved. In their fictional universes emigration is sometimes forced and sometimes sought, and it often produces painful dislocation and cultural estrangement. But, surprisingly at times, their narratives move beyond national identity and division to imagine spiritual and political possibilities that transcend geographical boundaries and rigid definitions of self. Writers like Nadine Gordimer, Anita and Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Edwidge Danticat contemplate a new relationship between home and abroad, and imagine the possibility of living “in between.” These contemporary women writers show, in radically different ways, styles, and forms, how the female tradition has continued to address modern social, political, and ideological realities. They expose the inequities and prejudices of non-Western cultures, especially with regard to the treatment of women, but in so doing, they also reveal the distortions and liabilities of our own and point to the unfinished business of women’s quest for emancipation across the globe.

At Home in the World acknowledges and champions this public-spirited tradition of female writing as an epic undertaking in need of greater acknowledgment and fuller assessment. Our title is meant to conjure the image of those dauntless women writers who ventured across the threshold that leads from home into the public thoroughfares of thought and action where history is made, the world reformed and reimagined. The peripatetics whose work and tradition we chronicle in these pages are determinedly and inventively moving toward a promised land—for so many called it that—where they hope to feel, at last, at home in the great world.