

Marketing Across Great Divides: Rebecca West on the Margins of Modernism

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The admirable qualities of literary diversity, independence of opinion, and vital longevity have worked, ironically, to marginalize Rebecca West as a modernist, and indeed as a notable writer in any traditional scheme [1]. Yet, as we reconsider the marketing of modernism, we may find that West's self-promotion as a "harsh" critic of Edwardian and modernist masters has subversive value [2]. In 1911, West began to proclaim what was of creative value in contemporary writing, adapting her own fictional practices to these judgments. On the minus side, even James Joyce could be found "sentimental" or "incompetent." West's lifelong affiliation with women writers, and the challenges she faced as an unmarried mother, temporarily isolated from the literary scene of London, or traveling alone while lecturing in America, enhance West's difference of perspective. After 1923, when she broke with her lover, H. G. Wells, for a decade, West needed to make her living by the pen. She did so, resisting temptation to play upon the Wells relationship for publicity. She adapted to changing markets, investigating her abiding concerns about human nature long after the most famous modernists were dead. Since her own death in 1983, there has been a continuing flow of new material.

West has left a rich archive of writing in numerous genres, some of it arguably modernist in its stream of consciousness form or psychological content. There are thousands of letters that perform their own assessment of the politics and economics of literary production [3]. I will refer repeatedly to *The Strange Necessity*, a volume of essays which West published in 1928, at a time when she had become an independent and highly regarded critic, with her own uses for modernism. *The Strange Necessity* was published by one of the commercial firms best known for taking on daring modern material—Jonathan Cape. West requested that Cape promote the volume as "a technical, highbrow book. . . . reviewable really as a book on psychology" (Letter to Jonathan Cape). At the time, she seems to have been steering toward high modernism.

Lacking a secure place in the favored circles of modernism, West scoured the field. Her experience traverses the groups inhabited by such

figures as Pound, Eliot, Lawrence, Joyce, and Woolf. West knew the promotional value of a supportive network, and told me that she thought the “market was rigged” by people like Eliot (Unpublished interview, October 16, 1981). She succeeded economically only through constant efforts that ranged well outside of what has become known as “high” modernism. This included biographical writing, political journalism, and what is loosely labeled the market for women. Her work appeared predominantly in large circulation, commercial journals, rather than little magazines; American journals were particularly important as sources of income.

My title gives a nod toward Andreas Huyssen’s postmodern scheme of identifying a subset of modernist authors who bridge a great divide between literature and politics, or by extension between high and popular culture. To deal with West, however, we must imagine numerous divides, and ask who has imagined them. Perhaps West is only a more obvious case of the diverse marketing and the blurring of aesthetics with popular culture, or masculine with feminine interests, or America with Europe, engaged in by many modernists. She may lead us into a new understanding of modernism.

Rebecca West, when still Cecily Isabel Fairfield, entered an intellectual arena dominated by Edwardian ideas of social improvement and progress through liberal, democratic action. Her first sponsors were suffragettes such as Mary Gawthorpe, whom she met in Edinburgh as a campaigner for votes for women. This work elicited her earliest political activism—the shouting out of slogans against anti-suffragist candidates at the polls. Her first publication in 1907, at the age of fourteen, was a pro-suffrage letter to the editor of *The Scotsman*. West widened her feminist circle in London to include Dora Marsden and Grace Jardine at the suffragist journal *The Freewoman*, which she helped to resurrect as *The New Freewoman*. This struggling journal provided her first marketing and principal editing experience. Always interested and capable in economics, West suggested a shareholders’ scheme to refloat the journal. She visited numerous publishers endeavoring to secure finances. According to one of her letters, out of loyalty to its original editor, Dora Marsden, West resisted encouragement from one publisher to take over the paper herself—an arrangement which would not have proven profitable anyhow, since he went bankrupt, as she remarks with a sense of justice (Letter to Jane Lidderdale, 29 January 1967). West was given editorial responsibilities and was influential in turning the journal toward literary content. She attempted to close the divide Marsden had made with the Pankhursts, and to alert the increasingly abstract founder to questionable submissions.

West also found support from May Sinclair and Violet Hunt in the literary circle Hunt shared with Ford Madox Ford [then Hueffer] at South Lodge [4]. This was a place that bridged Edwardian and modernist generations. Hunt claims to have been “instrumental in procuring” Rebecca West’s story, “Indissoluble Matrimony,” for Wyndham Lewis’s vorticist

journal, *Blast* (Woolf, *The Letters* 216). A blend of Lewis's vorticism, D. H. Lawrence's vitalism, and her own socialist feminism, this story spans several of the great divides of modernism.

In the mid teens, West was marketed as a rare mixture of wit and beauty. A description contained in Hunt's memoirs, *The Flurried Years*, evokes West's early charm. She had come to South Lodge in a pink dress, with a "large, wide-brimmed country-girlish straw hat that hid her splendid liquid eyes . . . quite superiorly, ostentatiously young—the ineffable schoolgirl!" (Hunt 203-204). By 1926, she found West comparable to George Sand, observing, "Sex, in which Tom, Dick and Harry participate and indiscriminately suffer from, should not be allowed to flog our geniuses" (Hunt 205). West reports to Marsden that a *Chicago Evening Post* reviewer has "devoted a leader to a general consideration of my beauty, intelligence and review of *Marriage* (Letter to Marsden, late 1912). That savage review of H. G. Wells's novel would lead her into a relationship with far-reaching personal and professional effects. Her capacity to draw blood also drew interest, and deserves to be seen as a marketing tactic.

Max Beerbohm clearly considered West a clone of George Bernard Shaw, as a grotesquely inaccurate cartoon sent in a letter to Shaw reveals. West had met Shaw early in her London years, when both she and her elder sister, Letitia Fairfield, joined the Fabian Society. Shaw himself averred "Rebecca can handle a pen as brilliantly as ever I could, and much more savagely" [5]. He was persistent in offering career advice, including admonitions about ways that her statements risked libel proceedings. The mature Rebecca West denied his value as a feminist, and indeed as a mentor. A more useful, but more obscure Fabian connection was the political journalist S. K. Ratcliffe. It was he who placed her first novel, *The Return of the Soldier*, with the Century Company, which published it in both serial and book form. This work showed modernist interest in psychology, as it took up the unconscious of a shell-shocked soldier, suffering from amnesia and a denial of his first love. It was also early evidence of West's ability to write on topics of current historical interest.

Another of the Edwardian generation, Robert Blatchford, signed West on to his paper, *The Clarion*, after he read her attack on the anti-suffragist doctor, Sir Almroth Wright. Blatchford admired her breezy style and her wielding of "battle-axe and scalping knife" (*Young Rebecca* 89). *The Clarion* asked 2,000 words a week of her for decent enough pay to "keep body and soul together" (Letter to Marsden, 1912).

H. G. Wells responded to West's review of *Marriage*, which among other things called him "the old maid among novelists," by inviting the plucky young critic to tea. He had his own advice about what West should do with her writing, trying in vain to keep her to real events and a go-ahead plot in her 1922 novel, *The Judge*, for example. Personal complications aside, Wells did instill some valuable habits in West, from the standpoint of marketing. He encouraged her to collect her socialist es-

says into a volume—a suggestion not immediately followed, though *The Strange Necessity* was the first of several volumes of essays. *The Young Rebecca* of 1982 finally recovered some of the essays valued most by Wells. During the Wells years, West shared with him one of the most influential of literary agents, J. B. Pinker. After their break, she employed A. D. Peters in Britain, George Bye in the U. S., and Odette Arnaud in France. Wells may also have encouraged her active correspondence with editors and publishers, and the pattern of employing a literary secretary (though unlike Wells, West could not marry into one). On the other side of the ledger, West's entanglement with Wells saddled her with a son to raise largely on her own, at great emotional cost. Matters grew worse when Anthony West began basing his own career on his parents' reputations and attacking her in the autobiographical novel *Heritage*, in interviews, and in biographical writings on his father.

Also Edwardian in spirit was Maxwell Aitken, Lord Beaverbrook, a Member of Parliament and Minister of War, with holdings in numerous newspapers, the most important being *The Evening Standard*. As a self-made millionaire, he shades over into the category of wealthy industrialist—a subject of fascination in West's writing of the 1930's. Like his friend Wells, Beaverbrook elicited West's passion, as well as her prose. To her frustration they did not have the sustained love affair she expected in late 1923. However, they did have an off and on publishing history which included her suing *The Evening Standard* in 1928, and her suppression of the autobiographical novel *Sunflower* out of fear that he might sue her. Memorable episodes were her coaching him about the misplaced emphasis in a report on her friend Emma Goldman in 1924, and her complaint about his paper's under-reporting cases of exposed Communist agents in 1950. She won herself a set of commissions in 1955 by sharing with him a supposed rumor from Fleet Street that he had taken a great disliking to her and her work. It was a mode of self-promotion that also worked with the BBC.

Though brought into the literary world by members of the Edwardian generation, West distanced herself from them in ways that are comparable to the self-proclamations of other modernists—Joyce's broadside hits at Lady Gregory and George Moore (among others), Wyndham Lewis's BLASTs, or Virginia Woolf's essays, "Modern Fiction" and "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown." West's essay "Uncle Bennett" in *The Strange Necessity* volume dismissed the "Big Four": H. G. Wells, George Bernard Shaw, John Galsworthy, and Arnold Bennett to the category of uncles. They "hung about the houses of our minds" in youth. "Uncle Wells arrived always a little out of breath, with his arms full of parcels, sometimes rather carelessly tied, but always bursting with all manner of attractive gifts that ranged from the little pot of sweet jelly that is 'Mr. Polly,' to the complete meccano set for the mind that is in *The First Men in the Moon*" (*Strange Necessity* 199). Of the four uncles, West had the least use for Bennett, finally deciding that his thinking belonged to a joyless Protestant category: "It hates the elevation of one man above another. Mr.

Bennett can never work happily on a character which is not socially and personally mediocre. It wants to skip all the moments in life that are traditionally splendid and roseate in favour of the moments that are simply pieces of the general texture of life" (*Strange Necessity* 211-12).

However witty her putdowns of the Edwardian uncles and transitional figures may have been, as time went on she drew fire for her harsh judgments. She became concerned that men with firm positions in the literary world would do her harm, and tired of the fray. In 1918, Hugh Walpole had complained about her "public scalping" of him, only to be told that she considered it the "duty of a critic to point out the fallaciousness of the method and vision of a writer who was being swallowed whole by the British public, as you are" (West, Letter to Walpole, 16 July 1918). By 1928 West had second thoughts and attempted to placate Walpole with insights into her critical nature that she had gained in psychoanalysis. At about the same time, West expressed concern to novelist Fannie Hurst about the review of *The Strange Necessity* that Edward Garnett might write: "He is a contemporary of H.G.'s and a failure, and has always been bitterly jealous of H.G. and has always giped at me as the women whom H.G. foisted on the public. I can't tell you the vile lies and sneers of a personal kind the old beast has tormented me with for years" [6].

Arnold Bennett used his regular column in *The Evening Standard* to react to her assault in "Uncle Bennett." His article, "My Brilliant but Bewildering Niece" charged her with "irresponsible silliness," an "acrobatic, disorderly mind," and the inability to work with her gifts. A journalist from the *Standard* published West's supposed reactions to the review, "Rebecca West Hits Back." Not caring for the battle-axe image any longer, West brought a legal action against the paper, complaining that the report was never submitted to her for verification. She charged further that the article was "calculated and intended" to misrepresent her as a "vindictive and silly and impertinent and ill-bred person and an unbalanced and spiteful and uneducated and incompetent writer and literary critic and of no worth or merit in her profession" [7]. The *Standard* had published numerous letters attacking West, based on "Rebecca West Hits Back"—many of them demonstrating anti-feminist backlash. The poet Robert Nichols, for example, advised that "although she can be very acute in a slap-dash way, she is not really at home in letters, for they are not her true medium, which is probably something much more personal—voice, eyes, hands, gesture, all the battery (which she probably despises) of a unique feminine personality, a battery that has power to make temerity acceptable, wit pass for wisdom, and the impetuositities of a gallant incompetence charming" [8]. West could not stand to be trivialized, particularly as a woman. She won her lawsuit against the *Standard*, and publicity that argued her place as a balanced and reasoned critic. Soon after Bennett's death in 1933, West had the last word, publishing a timely monograph for which the public was well prepared by the earlier skirmishing. West might have wished for Bennett's secure

position as reviewer for *The Evening Standard*, and Beaverbrook's recognition that she could serve as a better arbiter of literary values.

There are several reasons for placing West among modernists. She admired their writing and tried to work in league with them. But she could not be counted on for absolute devotion that the handmaids of modernism such as Sylvia Beach and Harriet Shaw Weaver offered. She had her own critical authority to proclaim. Often her essays had some overarching purpose, taking her beyond tributes to individual writers, or even modern literature, and into an investigation of human capacities for understanding, as was the case in "The Strange Necessity."

In her first effort for modernist literature, West suggested that the resurrected *New Freewoman* develop a literary side. To assist her efforts, she brought Ezra Pound to the paper. She even promoted his concept of imagism in an introductory article, though without committing the paper to his program. That Pound moved in, changing the journal to *The Egoist*, and marketing his own brand of modernism is well known. Letters to Jane Lidderdale, biographer of *New Freewoman* editor Harriet Shaw Weaver, show West's assessments of Pound's self-promotion. Rewriting the history that has been based on Pound's accounts, she calls him the "cuckoo in the nest" accusing him of "pure murder" of the group who had founded the paper, and noting in passing cases in which he had ignored her recruitment of talent to the journal, claiming them as his own (Letters to Lidderdale, 29 January and 8 March 1967). She suggests that he probably decided it would be easier to attract backers to an established journal, rather than found one anew, and recalls objecting to his dependence upon a patron whose anonymity he preserved.

West resigned from *The New Freewoman* before she was edged out, while she could maintain her loyalty to Dora Marsden, according to her own account. Not surprisingly, Pound was unwilling to admit a rival authority like West to membership in his group. He confided to Margaret Anderson, editor of his American outlet, *The Little Review*, "Rebecca West is a journalist, a clever journalist, but not 'of us.' She belongs to Wells and that lot. Hueffer [Ford] got her into the first BLAST, but she is a journalist and a journalist from the heart" (Pound 100).

This dismissal by generation and genre takes little notice of West's own modernism, and her efforts to define the necessity of literature in the modern era. It also fails to acknowledge a long-term loyalty of Wyndham Lewis to Rebecca West. His memorable sketch of her now draws attention to West in the National Portrait Gallery. Lewis was one old acquaintance who applauded *The Strange Necessity*, though by 1928 West wondered whether his support was of value, since few could understand his writing (Letter to Fairfield). Interestingly, West's papers also contain a piece of fan mail from D. H. Lawrence, written in April, 1929, as if to restore her after the Bennett battles. Lawrence clings to the image of Rebecca West as a woman with a capacity to take scalps (he uses the word "squaw" and other native American tropes throughout),

suggesting that lots are ripe for the taking, and that he is eager to participate himself (Letter to West).

In her most wide-ranging modernist essay, which supplied the title for *The Strange Necessity* collection, West ran afoul of James Joyce's devotees, whom she attacked for unquestioning delight in his classical parallels. She also accused him of playing for stylistic effect—a tactic she gives the surprising label of "sentimental." In an essay titled, "A Point for American Criticism," William Carlos Williams played the hit-man for the group at *transition* magazine who were busily promoting Joyce's latest project, "Work in Progress." Perhaps echoing her own visiting of protestantism on Arnold Bennett, Williams dismissed West as a "scared protestant female," and "narrowly British," when she found Joyce's Homeric frame "incompetent" and applied psychoanalytic reading to the text. He ignored her positive observations about Molly and Leopold Bloom as types, and as players in destructive family cycles. Nor did he note ultimate necessity of the text, argued in an essay with its own experimental merits. Responding to his article, West found Williams hysterical. The terms of Williams' dismissal of West have been sustained by Hugh Kenner's view of modernism, which depicts its British forms as products of a sinking island. In a recent review in the *New York Times Book Review*, Kenner called West a "hysteric," only to be challenged on his competence at psychiatry by Diana Trilling (27).

West cared enough about the handling of modernism to resign as a regular contributor to *The Bookman*, asserting that its "heresy hunting attacks on all modern writers including myself" were intolerable (Letter to Fairfield). She told John Middleton Murry, editor of *Athenaeum*, that she had become "incensed by its humanist humbug" (Letter to Middleton Murry, 1930), meaning the doctrines of Paul Elmer Moore, Irving Babbitt, and what T. S. Eliot had reproduced from them, en route to becoming the authoritative voice of modernism. She suggested that tradition was better served by Proust, Joyce, Lawrence, Virginia Woolf and Aldous Huxley, than by humanism, and that no great gulf exists between romanticism and classicism ("A Last London Letter"). Reviewing Eliot's *Selected Essays* for the *Daily Telegraph* in 1932, she found that Eliot "registers himself as fastidious by crying out against violence, confusion, and the presentation of unanalysed emotion. But he appears unable to distinguish between these vices and vigour, the attempts to find new and valid classifications in place of old ones which have proved invalid, and the pressing of the analysis of emotion to another stage" (Scott 589).

In the late twenties, West had praise for Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and *Orlando*. The former was "an uncompromising piece of feminist propaganda" and showed that Woolf could stand up to an anti-feminist wind that West equated with insecure sexuality in men. Though a "skeptic," and no believer in progress, and a worker with "trifles" (elements that distanced her from the Edwardian in West) the Woolf of *Orlando* was capable of a "genuinely creative spirit," an element we might

infer was absent in Eliot's criticism, and that she found missing in Aldous Huxley's recent writing. Stated generally, "Man" with "more force than sense . . . ceremonially uncovers some dead cat of dangerous myth that has been carried round the town a score of times already" (Scott 596). Woolf appreciated the latter review. She even defended West's novel, *Harriet Hume*, against charges of imitating *Orlando*, posed by Vita Sackville-West in another effort to say that West was not part of a significant modernist group—in this case Bloomsbury. Several elements of *Harriet Hume* invite comparison to Woolf's work—its fantasy element that transcends time and season, the capacity of its central character for telepathy, its rich depiction of place, and even its work with "trifles." The stream of consciousness narrative of "The Strange Necessity" has evoked Woolf to Samuel Hynes, though he prefers not to view her in the Woolf tradition [9]. But letters to her sister and Sylvia Lynd suggest that with *Harriet Hume* she was looking for a light, diverting project after writing *The Judge*, and *Sunflower*.

West did not have the creative advantage of a press of her own, enjoyed by Virginia Woolf, who observed, "I'm the only woman in England free to write what I like. The others must be thinking of series & editors" (*The Diary* 43). Their publishing does connect in significant ways, however. Both varied their genre from criticism to creative work so as to provide relief from their most demanding conceptions. Literary journalism was a useful evil. Stories sold to popular outlets could provide income, or grow into longer works. Woolf and West met at a party given by the former editor of *Vogue*, Dorothy Todd, in May, 1928. Both women wrote for this popular fashion magazine, helping to establish its literary side while procuring needed revenue. West displayed satisfaction that Woolf took Todd and her associate Madge Garland seriously, since she respected that they gave a "firmer foundation" to young writers by asking them to contribute "articles on intelligent subjects at fair prices" (Noble 111). Woolf herself was unaffected by Logan Pearsall Smith's cautions about writing for fashion papers. She said crassly, "What he wants is prestige: what I want, money" (*The Letters* 154). Though she entered fashion territory, she apparently preserved a cultural divide, "Ladies' clothes and aristocrats playing golf don't affect my style" (*ibid.*). Woolf also shared *Time and Tide* and *The Bookman* as outlets for her writing with West.

As publishers, the Woolfs employed Rebecca West, inviting her submission for a Hogarth series of imaginary letters. West never felt that the Woolfs understood her submission, "A Letter to a Grandfather," which she proposed to Virginia as a visionary piece, but afterwards described to Leonard as better suited to poetry. She added two paragraphs in response to his queries, and was grateful for the commission. This did not, however, give West an entry into Bloomsbury, whose membership she

found aloof. She was hurt by descriptions of herself in Woolf's diaries and letters, such as this one written to Vanessa Bell:

She is a cross between a charwoman and a gipsy, but as tenacious as a terrier, with flashing eyes, very shabby, rather dirty nails, immense vitality, bad taste, suspicion of intellectuals, and great intelligence . . . They say she is a hardened liar, but I rather liked her. (*The Letters* 501)

West made the excuse that her poor grooming represented a time of ill health and great overwork. Woolf was fascinated with West physically, in ways that I do not think West ever appreciated. In the mid 1930's, by which time West had married and taken up a stylish London flat, the Woolfs came to dinner. Woolf thought of West as a hardened professional with celebrity qualities: "impersonal, breezy, yes, go ahead, facing life, eating dinner at the Savoy, meeting millionaires, women & men of the worldly . . . living on appearances, as the Apostles would say . . ." (*The Diary* 326).

Thus Woolf finds another way of distancing West from modernism, invoking the categories of the celebrity and the professional. The latter was a questionable divide, blurred by Woolf herself in evoking "Professions for Women."

By the late twenties, West had in mind the profitability of short stories—a form *Harriet* merely outgrew. The late 1920's and 1930's saw significant production in that genre, works which she published primarily in American periodicals. Some have identified them as products for the women's market (see Fromm). A set of four of these were published by Cape in 1935 as *The Harsh Voice*, and more became readily accessible with the 1992 publication of *The Only Poet*. *The Harsh Voice* won the praise of Virginia Woolf, and one story was selected for production by the BBC. Jonathan Cape expressed the willingness to advertise this collection more lavishly if West would keep up a regular production of short story volumes. While these stories sometimes depict the lives of the wealthy, they are not the type of fare we have come to expect from women's magazines from the 1930's onward. They and her novel *The Thinking Reed* offer a critique of the male industrialist from the point of view of the woman he has largely commodified. They have affinities to F. Scott Fitzgerald's studies of the destructive qualities of the rich and famous, though his stories are not attached to a women's market. They deal openly with the Wall Street Crash—an unusual topic in women's fiction.

West's first offer to write for a women's audience came in 1912 from the Women's Page of *The Daily Herald*. As she noted to Dora Marsden, "They are tired of baby clothes, they say and want 'New-Gospel' talks to women. I fear this means trials for sedition, so I may not long be free" (Letter to Marsden, June 1912). She wrote about women in unusual

places, as is shown in a series that ran in *The New Republic* in 1919, "The World's Worst Failure." These profiles of female types were an unusual feature for a predominantly political journal, but also evidence of West's capacity to merge the domestic with the political, not only drawing normally divided audiences, but merging them in the appeal of her writing. Alfred Knopf asked if he could bring out a longer series of "Worst Failures." She said he would have to be patient. "Understand that it is to contain the ultimate wisdom about feminism, and that I was not naturally endowed with wisdom. I have had to acquire it slowly, by fletcherising my experience" [10].

Perhaps because she was associated with the beautiful, often theatrical people who inhabited her short fiction, West was pursued by the American press as a celebrity, the emblem of the independent, accomplished woman as she visited the United States on lecture tours in the mid 1920's. She was rumored to be attached to a variety of men, including Charlie Chaplin, publisher George Doran, and *Vanity Fair* illustrator Ralph Barton. Her letters to Fannie Hurst may have been designed to alternately feed and stifle the rumor mills. She complained, for example, that a New York City boat tour was spoiled by reporters: ". . . it gave me time to be crawled over—to be eaten alive by ship reporters, one of whom asked me pointblank if my going to England had anything to do with the fact that George Doran was over there! My God what am I to do?" (Letter to Hurst). A movie executive who expressed interest in a film script comparable to one of her stories republished in *The Only Poet*, "The Magician of Pell Street," actually threatened her life. West reported to her sister that he had become obsessed with her photograph, but felt threatened by her sexually. He forced his way into her New York hotel room and attempted to strangle her. It looked at times as if fame could prove fatal.

West's letters suggest that she placed herself on familiar terms with numerous publishers, editors, and reviewers who could be expected to have an impact on her literary production. She developed a style that inserted familiar and domestic references into business correspondence. She could be personally mischievous and worldly wise by turns. She wrote as an intimate to Beaverbrook, Cape, theater critic Alexander Woolcott, and many others. Her intimate correspondence with novelist Sylvia Lynd had the advantage of putting her in touch with Robert Lynd, then an influential critic and literary editor of the *Daily News*.

An important strategy of her agents in marketing Rebecca West was to win her regular columns in large circulation journals and newspapers. West was signed up for a weekly review at the *Daily Telegraph* and in late life was a regular with *The Sunday Telegraph*. When the BBC came along with offers in 1928, West responded to topics on order. In America, she became a regular contributor of reviews to the *Herald Tribune*, and of political essays to the *New Yorker*. The rumored-about Doran handled her highly profitable series, "I Said to Me" in one of the Hearst papers, *The New York American*. She eventually withdrew, as she had from *The Bookman* and *The New Freewoman*, on principle. The *American*

failed to run or pay for several articles that violated either their politics or their sense of libel. Amalgamated Press editor Snoad checked in regularly with her agents, proposing articles for *Woman's Home Companion*. These included such topics as "Things I ought not to have done," "Are You a Happy Woman," and "Men and Women who Matter." He also published numerous short stories, including ones later entered into *The Harsh Voice*.

West wrote quickly, and could time her projects to meet a market. She responded to World War I with *The Return of the Soldier*, articles on women war workers, and *War Nurse*—a 1930 serial based on an American woman's war account. She produced it, unsigned, as a novel in the American mode. Her studies of Henry James and Arnold Bennett were published soon after their deaths. An elegy to D. H. Lawrence was timely, but as she took pains to point out to John Middleton Murry, it was not done for her own profit. Among her timely political writings were essays on the rise of fascism, reports on the Nuremberg trials, and her infamous delving into McCarthyism. She and the British Council were convinced that her study of Yugoslavia had much to contribute to the understanding of the Nazis, and to British influence in the Balkans. She sacrificed one publication—a satire on the Allies installation of Tito in post-war Yugoslavia—in the interest of government policy [11]. It is hard to say whether West's timely political work was entirely separate from her modernism, or whether we have neglected evidence indicating that modernists could and did vacillate into political concerns.

West maintained a loose affiliation with women writers throughout her career, marking this in her publishing relations by preserving the option to write for *Time and Tide* even after accepting the exclusive agreement to publish essays in Britain with the *Daily Telegraph*. The most recent major episode in West's publishing history is the extensive commitment made to her writing by Virago Press, including major novels, previously uncollected essays, and manuscripts left at the time of her death. West told me that she would have liked to do more to advance the careers of specific women writers, but that her weekly review columns did not give her sufficient control over what she reviewed. The reviewing arrangements were not always ideal either, as she was sometimes given several books to review with only 36 hours before her deadline.

Over the years, West built a strong case for the destructive pressures on women writers of her era. A 1917 letter to Sylvia Lynd states her suspicion that "there is something in the art of literature unsuited to women," and as evidence lists four female colleagues who have nervous breakdowns, and a fifth who is having an operation [12]. West went to the aid of one of her closest novelist friends, G. B. Stern when Stern suffered from a mental breakdown in 1927. In return, she got sound advice about delaying publication of *Sunflower*, and reassurance about her productivity. West treated Emma Goldman to a celebrity dinner when she arrived in London in 1924, hoping to launch her on a new career, following her return from Russia. She tried to stifle damaging reports

about Dorothy Thompson's son in the *Evening Standard*. West did not have an exalted sense of her own beauty, and acknowledged the strains of being a woman writer on many sides. Seated among her female literary colleagues at a 1929 banquet, she observed, "Our nearest equivalent in charm was, perhaps a group of factory chimneys in a northern draw or an assembly of Fords at a parking place" (*Ending in Earnest* 70). West looked back on the late twenties as an overworked time, and in later imaging of herself seemed to be looking for sympathy, as the subject of numerous attacks and betrayals. She had undergone psychoanalysis in 1927. By the 1950's, West envied Woolf and others for leaving the scene while still at the height of modernism. She opined:

If one is a woman writer there are certain things one must do—first not be too good; second, die young, what an edge Katherine Mansfield has on all of us, third, commit suicide like Virginia Woolf, to go on writing and writing well just can't be forgiven. (Letter to Arling)

Perhaps she will be more than forgiven, as we reassess the costs of interpreting modernism in the limited ways we have to date.

Notes

- 1 Samuel Hynes is one of many critics to note that "Dame Rebecca's work has not fused in the minds of critics, and she has no secure literary status—the interstices between her books . . . are too wide." "In Communion with Reality," *The Essential Rebecca West* (New York: Viking Press, 1983), xviii.
- 2 I choose the word "harsh" because West used it in a leading article in the first issue of *The New Republic*, which she titled "The Duty of Harsh Criticism" (Nov. 7, 1914), 18-20. This found fault with men of letters who "throw up platitudinous inaugural addresses like wormcasts . . . and chew once more the more masticated portions of history; and every line they write perpetuates the pompous tradition of eighteenth century 'book English' and dissociates more thoroughly the ideas of history and originality of thought." This essay takes on Shaw and Wells at its conclusion. A consistent view is that "only through art can we cultivate annoyance with inessentials, powerful and exasperated reactions against ugliness, a ravenous appetite for beauty; and these are the guardians of the soul."
- 3 I am currently editing *The Selected Letters of Rebecca West*, to be published by Macmillan.
- 4 Virginia Woolf brought West together with another senior suffragette, her own beloved Dame Ethel Smyth. Even Woolf found herself drawn into an Edwardian-style discussion of ideas which covered "religion,

- sex, literature and other problems, violently in a roar, to catch Ethel's ear, for three hours." Virginia Woolf *The Letters*, 261.
- 5 See Plate 9 in Rebecca West, *The Young Rebecca*, ed. Jane Marcus (London: Virago, 1982). Marcus includes Beerbohm's letter. Subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text, abbreviated *Young Rebecca*. Quotations may be taken either from Marcus's introductory essays or West's original articles.
 - 6 Rebecca West letter to Fannie Hurst [1928?], Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin. As a marketer of a much edited D. H. Lawrence, Garnett's great divide from modernism bears considerable study.
 - 7 "Fairfield vs. the Evening Standard" [legal document] 4.
 - 8 *Ibid.* 7.
 - 9 For my own extensive comparisons of Woolf and West, see, "The Strange Necessity of Rebecca West," *Women Reading Women's Writing*, ed. Sue Roe (Brighton: Harvester, 1987), 265-86.
 - 10 Rebecca West letter to Alfred Knopf, 2 June 1917, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin. West's agents' files also contain bids from Blanche Knopf for a series of novels from West.
 - 11 In the introduction to *The Only Poet*, Antonia Till reports that, after consultation with a government official, West agreed to withhold from publication the story, "Madam Sara's Magic Crystal," now published for the first time in *The Only Poet*, ed. Antonia Till (London: Virago, 1992), 167-78.
 - 12 Rebecca West letter to Sylvia Lynd, 10 October 1917, University of Tulsa. G. B. Stern, Sheila Kaye Smith, Clemence Dane and Olive Wadsley are listed as victims of nervous breakdowns. F. Tennyson Jesse is to have the operation.

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