I. THE COLLECTIVE SUBLIME

Writing, for Virginia Woolf, was a revolutionary act. Her alienation from British patriarchal culture and its capitalist and imperialist forms and values, was so intense that she was filled with terror and determination as she wrote. A guerrilla fighter in a Victorian skirt, she trembled with fear as she prepared her attacks, her raids on the enemy. She was so hostile to the patriarchy and felt that her anger was so present in all her efforts that no evidence of literary 'success' was assurance enough of acceptance, and she collapsed after sending her books to the printer. She always feared she would be found out, that the punishment of the fathers for daring to trespass on their territory was 'instant dismemberment by wild horses', as she told Ethel Smyth. The violence of men's imagined retaliation was in direct proportion to the violence of her hatred for their values. Like Kafka she felt that writing was a conspiracy against the state, an act of aggression against the powerful, the wilful breaking of a treaty of silence the oppressed had made with their masters to ensure survival. Language and culture belonged to them; to wrest it from them was an act requiring the utmost courage and daring. If language was the private property of the patriarchs, to 'trespass' on it was an act of usurpation. To see herself as untying the Mother Tongue, freeing language from bondage to the fathers and returning it to women and the working classes, was also to cause herself acute anxiety about what they
would do when they found out. By writing she committed a crime against the fathers, and she expected, like her beloved Antigone, to be buried alive for it. As Antigone's defiance of Creon was not simply that of the individual against the state, or a woman against men, but the assertion of old matriarchal forms against a new male legalistic and revengeful culture, so Virginia Woolf's rebellion sought not only the overthrow of male culture but also a return to the oppressed of their rightful heritage and the historical conditions in which to enjoy it. No wonder she was afraid.

When she published 'A Society', in which she dared to suggest that a sisterhood of philosophical inquiry might be as necessary to women as male secret societies or brotherhoods to men, Desmond MacCarthy, as 'Affable Hawk', showed his claws. She never reprinted the sketch, in which her characters decided that a way must be found for men to bear children to occupy themselves in a useful way and to prevent them from obstructing women's progress towards intellectual freedom. She answered him,

Can he point to a single one of the great geniuses of history who has sprung from a people stinted of education and held in subjection, as for example the Irish or the Jews? It seems to me indisputable that the conditions which make it possible for a Shakespeare to exist are that he shall have had predecessors in his art, shall make one of a group where art is freely discussed and practised, and shall himself have the utmost freedom of action and experience. Perhaps in Lesbos, but never since, have these conditions been the lot of women.²

Virginia Woolf's position as 'daughter of an educated man', a self-styled 'outsider' in British society, may be likened to the position of the Jewish intellectual in Weimar Germany.³ While the Holocaust provides historical evidence that Kafka and Walter Benjamin were not neurotic in their perception of the hatred of the Germans, British male violence against women took less murderous forms. Nevertheless, Woolf's feelings about women's oppression match those of her German Jewish contemporaries. Even as they felt that as Jews they were administering the intellectual property of a people who