



# The Labors of Modernism Domesticity, Servants and Authorship in Modernist Fiction

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*he Labors of Modernism*  
*Domesticity, Servants and Authorship in Modernist Fiction*

Mary Wilson

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The experimental works that have been labelled « modernist » were produced at a time of major social, political and technical changes. The technological innovations of the Victorian era were accompanied by a concomitant desire for renewing inherited values and renegotiating social constructs such as identity, class, and authority. In the aftermath of a century that had been witness to dramatic changes, whose result on the political level was a growing fracture between conservatism and liberal values, writers felt the need to incorporate the feelings these changes had triggered off into narratives that gradually were stripped of the customary pattern of coherent narratives. These technological innovations, the most symbolic of all being the advent of the « motor-car », affected all aspects of life, prompting the artistic shift that soon revolutionised representation, so that it was not long before Woolf was to proclaim that « human character » itself had changed (Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown). More particularly, the technological advances that happened with the industrial revolutions gradually reduced the traditional activities performed by the workforce, especially in the house, where servants were soon made redundant. Houses became equipped with electricity, heating systems, and other appliances that dramatically changed the type of work that needed to be done. Symmetrically in fiction, servants and other domestic employees receded in the background to take on a new significance. Servants and domestics have subsequently featured in great works, from *The Remains of the Day* by Ishiguro to *Gosford Park*, and *Downton Abbey*, but very often they are reduced to mere tokens of a nostalgic feeling for the past. According to Mary Wilson, the literary representation of servants offers an insight into the modernist understanding of class, race, gender and power in general. Noting the socio-historical fact that servants gradually disappeared « on or about » the modernist era, Mary Wilson seeks to uncover how the representation of the traditional character of the servant evolved, and to what extent it can illuminate, explain or challenge our views on modernist aesthetics. Mary Wilson's monograph is divided into four, relatively independent sections that deal with the works of Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, Jean Rhys and Nella Larsen. The choice of these four authors goes unexplained, despite the obvious questions it raises: a transatlantic approach to a question that is mainly social (servants and domesticity) needs elaborating, because otherwise it looks as if the context (or in literary terms the epi/ co/ peritext) did not differ across the board, and as if the modes of representations did not depend on the context of their production and the surrounding discourses something which the beginning of Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, to take but one example, negates. In addition, the four writers that are chosen vary in the quality of their works, but also the variety of it and the influence of their reception up to the modern day. In view of the instability of the definition of « modernism », a label that is still being contested, a corpus of four writers whose inclusion in the modernist canon could well be debated should have been explained. However, Mary Wilson manages to argue in favour of a reconsideration of class and

gender in modernist criticism. Her work is well-written, concise and clear, and her analyses of the texts very often sharp. The present review will look more precisely at the first chapter of the book, inasmuch as it establishes a certain number of elements that will then be developed, applied or prolonged in the following chapter.

Mary Wilson's introduction starts with Woolf's comments on the necessity for the modern novel to include servants into the framework of the narrative, instead of leaving them out as background creatures. Rightfully so, Wilson points out that class has not been given sufficient attention in recent criticism on modernism. She thus embarks upon a new thematic reading of background characters in order to re-evaluate the role played by the working class and its subsequent relation of power with the upper class, to which most writers then belonged. One may want to underline that the function and significance of servants in drama could be the object of further analysis because it is the one place in literature where they have had more than a supporting role to play. Wilson's presentation of both the place of servants in the literature of the beginning of the 20th century, and the function they played in modernism and its criticism is erudite, well-informed and points towards interesting themes and questions that have been overlooked so far. The introduction looks at Woolf's attack of Patmore's *The Angel in the House* (1854), which enables Wilson to develop an argument based on the multiple meanings of the word domestic: this is the starting-point of the period's re-appraisal of domestic work (*i.e.* the kind of work servants did) and domesticity (the gender roles in the home and the balance of power, or lack thereof which gender relations uncover, generate and reflect). Wilson then underlines the following paradox: in her feminist essays, Woolf questions domesticity and the relation of powers it is the home to. Yet, on the other hand, it is through domesticity and the writing of domestic life that she sets herself free: Domesticity, writes Wilson, has been the means through which women have been authorized, have been granted power[3]. Thanks to an assessment of the connotations of the term, Wilson shows how domesticity was associated with traditional values, so that most modernist writers decided to focus on other aspects (social, political and emotional) and were not consciously aware of the understanding of class these characters would cause. One may wonder if by associating domesticity to womanhood, the author is not reproducing a common cliché and duplicating a ready-made association that should rather be challenged. Indeed, the conflation of femininity and domesticity leads to the rehearsal of arguments that uniformly see women as agents of rebellion against established, fixed and consequently powerful identities. If we agree that women are seen as agents resisting the dominant discourses, the logical conclusion is a reversal of traditional ideas on gender theory by which women become powerful in the bravery of their engagement against patriarchy. The work of Marta Caminero-Santangelo on women and madness shows how these too easy associations may reduce women to silence and how they should be distrusted (1).

The introduction reveals that Wilson's argument will follow in the footsteps of contemporary criticism. Servants are understood as agents challenging traditional values and conceptions of identity. Yet, it is unclear whether this argument is based only on the four authors works, or on a broader scale. Fragmentation and uncertainty are foregrounded: the introduction seems to promote the image of servants as more positive than more traditional characters that symbolically represent fixity and normalcy. It also offers developments on Woolf based on her biography or on M. Cunningham's version of Woolf in *The Hours*, as if both had the same authoritative value. Wilson does not, however, discuss Woolf's ambivalent feelings towards her own servants throughout her life. What strikes the reader here is the conflation between historical facts, precise references and the disregard for the function of representation and fiction in working these facts into the fabric of a text.

The first chapter focuses on *Cooks at the Threshold : Domestic Disturbances and Modernist Rewritings in the Writing of Virginia Woolf*. Woolf is the author that dominates the introduction and quite logically she features again in the first chapter which seeks to re-examine the place and function of the domestic as character, mainly based on its situation on the margins of the Dalloways, or the Ramsays, bourgeois household. Wilson notes that many a servant in Woolf's fiction stands at the threshold, both of domestic and fictional spaces. Woolf's interest in domesticity, the fluidity of her writing, her capacity to create characters that happily move from the centre to the margin, and back again, constitute one of the major interests in this chapter. These narrative techniques work on a par with Woolf's understanding of servants and domestics according to Wilson. Wilson's argument aims at deconstructing the critics' notion that Woolf's treatment of domesticity cannot be trusted because she herself was a master, rather than a servant, as were most her readers. The exclusion of the working class both from her readership, the circulation of her works and her everyday experience tend to discredit her representation of them according to an argument that Wilson effectively disputes. Thereby, Wilson gives the cook and other servants a place that they have been refused.

Wilson then tries to untangle the contradictions in the works of Woolf, especially through the example of *Mrs Dalloway*, in order to show how Woolf's interest in the servants at this time had as much to do with nostalgia as with modern ideas. The servant is thus an instrument in the representation of consciousness by featuring in the thought processes of the gentility, but Woolf refuses to go as far as to allow the servants a conscience of their own. She also uses them as an instrument to show the emancipation of other women, like Clarissa who is permitted outside the house. Wilson's developments on the novel are often enlightening and very accurate. They are easy to follow and quite convincing. At the end of a detailed argument, she concludes on Woolf's narrative technique acquiring attributes of servant labor, especially in the gradual use of parentheses and brackets that reveal the authorial labour that is hers. The strategic use of punctuation creates divides on the page by which the British author forces the reader to recognise some passages as being inside and others as out. She thus develops the binary of inside and outside, inviting us to re-think their difference(s). The sentences both evoke the separations of the door with which the novel opens, while simultaneously demanding we transgress that boundary in order to continue reading. The author uses the ideal position of the Victorian servant labouring in the background to comment upon the actions and thoughts of the characters. Woolf is thus a strong writer of the unconscious effects that such side-kicks and supporting actors played in shaping modernity.

The second chapter already suggests a crossing of boundaries that should have been explained more, that between British and American modernisms, and between British and American understandings of class and domesticity. The direct link between both chapters is the notion of a « threshold », the space that has been identified as the locus of « servants » in the previous chapter. It is through this notion that the author problematises the links between architecture, race and writing. However, what is striking here is the unfortunate change in method: if the chapter on Woolf was based on narratology and a close reading of the texts, this chapter is mainly based on the comparison between fiction and autobiographical writings. This raises the question of establishing historical facts, truthfulness and assumption, and ultimately makes the arguments less convincing than in the previous chapter. « Service, if not servants, seems to become central to Stein's developing modernist approach », claims Wilson in a chapter that seems informed by political, rather than literary, theory

In the third chapter focusing on Nella Larsen's novel *Passing*, Mary Wilson continues to explore the relation between servants, race and identity, leaving out the analysis of the writing process for a more thematic approach. Interestingly enough, she admits to having chosen passages that would easily have gone unnoticed or been neglected for being mere examples of the naturalism of the works, but she does not seem to question the symmetry her chapters suggest between the complexity and elaboration of Woolf's works and those of Larsen's. Indeed, the discussion here becomes almost entirely post-colonial and gender-based, and in so doing requires that this theory be historicised. She thus shows how the various servants try to control the home, to make it a place for the self to flourish while hitting the snag of the impossibility to define the self and the home. In so doing, the question of the servant as submissive and secondary, its relation to the question of home recedes in favour of the divide/crossing between white and black, again a question that can hardly go without contextualising. This is not to say that Mary Wilson does not situate her analysis within the context of Larsen's production, but that within the economy of the book this does not seem to form a coherent enough piece. The chapter concludes on a more ethical question, related to responsibility but fails to question it at the level of writing.

The fourth and last chapter, entitled « Women in the Attic : Domestic Servants, Imperial Paranoia, and Modernist Domesticity in *Wide Sargasso Sea* », deals with Rhys's version of domesticity and service. Here again we are transported into another context, another reality, with the situation in the Caribbean. The novel indeed sees a surge of the number of servants: there are at least thirteen named servants in the Caribbean and three more in England in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, notes Mary Wilson. A lot more feature in the fabric of the text but are not sufficiently developed to have names. Narrator Antoinette's identity is constructed in relation to her domestics and the representation of servants in her husband's discourse. Unlike Brontë's characters, these servants are not in the attic, cut off from the masters they cater to, but in the master's spaces. This reinforces the sense of displacement and the notions of border crossing. The moments when Antoinette or her husband visits other people's houses are rare, which means each single space is endowed with multiple meanings. The world of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is structured and determined by servants; all seem to feel the dependence such a system engenders, to varying degrees of resentment, anger, and fear. Mary Wilson interestingly connects Rhys's hesitation for or resistance to the promotion of servants as agents of a rebellion against the increasing power of the working class. This enables her to underline a similar identity confusion in modernist studies which « have a servant problem of their own ». In the end, Mary Wilson usefully tries to show how domestics and their labour are out of place in the social narratives of modernity and how literature helps build a stronger vision of what their role was, their function might have represented from a political perspective. However, reduced to their characters, the novels sometimes become objects of a cultural exploration that neglects the function and structure of writing itself.

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(1) Marie Cainero-Santangelo, *The Madwoman Can't Speak*, Cornell UP, 1998.