As a paradigmatic modernist author, Virginia Woolf is celebrated for the ways her fiction illuminates modern and contemporary life. Woolf scholars have long debated how context – whether historical, cultural, or theoretical – is to be understood in relation to her work, and how her work produces new insights into context. Drawing on an international field of leading and emergent specialists, this collection provides an authoritative resource for contemporary Woolf scholarship that explores the distinct and overlapping dimensions of her writings. Rather than survey existing scholarship, these essays extend Woolf studies in new directions by examining how the author is contextualized today. The collection also highlights connections between Woolf and key cultural, political, and historical issues of the twentieth century such as avant-gardism in music and art; developments in journalism and the publishing industry; political struggles over race, gender, and class; and the bearings of colonialism, empire, and war. A valuable critical touchstone for researchers, the volume will also complement graduate scholarship in English literature, literary theory, context studies, and modernism and postcolonial studies.

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Since the ‘historical turn’ in literary studies, there has been a growing critical and theoretical interest in what is at stake in seeking to historicize modernist texts. This is one of the broader intellectual contexts in which the present undertaking to explore Virginia Woolf ‘in context’ was conceived and still finds itself. Explorations in the historical and material contexts of Woolf’s writing are caught up in the vexed business of accounting for modernism and modernity in history. Yet it is also the case that modern literary theory (whether, for example, formalist, materialist, or psychoanalytical) was forged in modernist enterprises. Modernity and the modern are terms that refer both to historical eras and to certain modes of inhabiting a perpetual present, certain notions of the perpetually new, themselves bound up with commitment to formalism and abstraction, aesthetics and textuality. It has long been understood that history is the nightmare from which modernist writing seeks to awake, and as such modernist writing is reflective, or even symptomatic, of its historical and cultural contexts. At the same time, in making it new, modernist writing proposes a productive and elusive site of change, rupture, or escape from such contexts. As recent contextualizing and historicizing criticism recognizes, such an agenda and such practises require sophisticated methodologies. To historicize and contextualize such aesthetics is no simple matter. Out of this critical practice has emerged a renewed interest in aesthetics (the so-called new aestheticism). Any endeavour to trace the historical and contextual significances for Woolf must begin from a recognition of this bifurcation in her own writing.

On the one hand, Woolf’s texts explore the material and historical foundation of literary production, succinctly captured in her famous analogy of writing as a spider’s web – ‘attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners’. On the other hand, although Woolf understands the webs of fiction to be ‘the work of suffering human beings, and … attached to grossly material things, like health and money and
Preface

the houses we live in’ (AROO 61), her own writing also seeks to break free from all such limitations. This is evident in Woolf’s avowed attempts to create a new language purged of historical concerns and political axe-grinding, and propounded in her much-debated model of androgynous writing: where the writer ‘must lie back’ in an act of self-reflexive creativity in order to allow the writer’s ‘mind’ to ‘celebrate its nuptials in darkness’ (AROO 157). Writing seems, paradoxically and impossibly, to absent itself from all context, retreating, perhaps, to a degree zero of textuality. Skilled readers of Woolf carefully attend, then, to questions of textuality as much as context. Contextualizing Woolf cannot simply be an historical turn. It is simultaneously a writerly act caught up in textual processes. These complex demands on attentive readers and critics of Woolf are reflected in the structure of the present volume, where Part I: Theory and Critical Reception, in parallel with other volumes in the Cambridge series, entails a return to those theoretical and critical contexts in which the critical processes of historicizing and contextualizing represented in Part II: Historical and Cultural Context are always and already placed.

Part I offers re-examinations of significant contextual concerns in relation to the critical reception and theorizing of Woolf’s writings. These essays are not mere surveys of existing scholarship, but interventions in live and current debate. They variously respond to, inter alia, the following questions: What is at stake in debates on Woolf concerning the particular critical or theoretical context under discussion? How far does this particular theory arise from the modernist period and in particular from Woolf’s work? How does this particular set of critical or theoretical concerns affect our understanding of Woolf and Woolf’s writing in a cultural and critical context? (For example, readings of Woolf’s modernist aesthetics as a form of realism attend to cultural and historical referencing quite differently from readings drawing on theories of subjectivity.) Responses here are illuminating in their diverse explorations of how far such theoretically informed readings of Woolf engage with or transcend historical context; or how much they draw on the related theories of Woolf’s own time. In this section we see fascinating new theoretical ground breaking in Woolf studies.

In Part II contributors reassess, or probe for the first time, numerous important contexts – both existing and emergent – for reading Woolf. These contexts range across politics and philosophy, nationality and ethnicity, theories of gender and sexuality, and different artistic forms and literary genres. It is not merely a matter of offering an historical account of particular historical or cultural contexts, but of examining how we might
read and understand Woolf’s writing in relation to such contexts; and of reflecting on why such a context-informed approach has become of interest to us now. Here, the questions offered as prompts include: How does Woolf’s writing interpenetrate with each context, whether geographical, historical, cultural, material, or conceptual? How does attention to context affect received wisdom on Woolf and orthodox readings of her work? Responses are rich in the fascinating particularities of new contextual information and disclose penetrating insights into Woolf’s writing practice.

We began this venture into *Virginia Woolf in Context* by asking our contributors to reflect on two overarching questions: What are the significant issues that scholars should be alert to in approaching (each) context? And what is at stake in debates concerning (each) context? Reading across this collection, we are struck by the fantastic diversity of practice and approach to these questions and to the many others they have generated. We find ourselves overwhelmed by the sheer intellectual virtuosity and creativity that our contributors have brought to the unending processes of reading and re-reading both Woolf in context and context in Woolf.

NOTE

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Abbreviations

In cases where specific editions are not given in the list below, each individual chapter will indicate the edition being used in an endnote to the first citation from that text.

AROO  A Room of One's Own
BA     Between the Acts
F      Flush: A Biography
JR     Jacob's Room
MD     Mrs Dalloway
ND     Night and Day
O      Orlando: A Biography
Abbreviations

TG  Three Guineas
TL  To the Lighthouse
VO  The Voyage Out
W   The Waves
Y   The Years