

Introduction

Virginia Woolf:

The Patterns of Ordinary Experience

The familiar is not necessarily the known. (G.W.F. Hegel)¹

Indeed most of life escapes, now I come to think of it: the texture of the ordinary day.
(Virginia Woolf, *D2*, 298)

The ordinary and everyday, as theoretical concepts and subjects of analysis, have received an increasing amount of attention since the 1960s, following the rise of cultural studies. In *Critiques of Everyday Life*, Michael E. Gardiner comments that despite the burgeoning interest in the sphere of everyday life in social science literature, feminism, cultural studies and postmodernism, ‘there have been few concerted attempts to survey, in a systematic and synoptical fashion, the theories that have underpinned such developments’.² Furthermore, Laurie Langbauer argues that, while of central import to the field of cultural studies, the category of the ‘everyday’ remains vague and ill-defined.³ In recent years several studies of everyday life have sought to provide a clearer sense of this category and the ‘theories that have underpinned’ contemporary interest in the field, beyond the writings of the two key figures that have, to date, dominated it: Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau. Gardiner’s *Critiques of Everyday Life* considers concepts of the everyday in the work of a number of twentieth-century artists, social critics and philosophers including the Surrealists, Mikhail Bakhtin, Henri Lefebvre, the Situationist International and Agnes Heller. In his 2002 study *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*, Ben Highmore traces a range of theories of everyday life that respond to the changing conditions and experiences of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century modernity. He finds the everyday to be an important subject of cultural, social and philosophical analysis in the writings of Georg Simmel, the Surrealists, Walter Benjamin and Mass-Observation, as well as Lefebvre and de Certeau.⁴ More recently, Michael Sheringham has developed these histories

¹ G.W.F. Hegel, quoted in Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, vol. 1, trans. John Moore (London: Verso, 1991), 132.

² Michael E. Gardiner, *Critiques of Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 2000), 2–3.

³ Laurie Langbauer, ‘Review: cultural studies and the politics of the everyday’, *Diacritics* 22, no. 1 (1992): 47–65.

⁴ Ben Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002). See also Ben Highmore (ed.), *The Everyday Life Reader* (London: Routledge, 2002).

of the everyday by considering the work of continental philosophers and writers including Maurice Blanchot, Martin Heidegger and Georges Perec, as well as the cultural criticism of Roland Barthes, in addition to the other individuals and movements discussed previously by Gardiner and Highmore.⁵

While the above studies are immensely valuable in extending our understanding of conceptions of the everyday beyond contemporary cultural contexts, two issues become apparent. Firstly, with the exception of Surrealism, recent histories of everyday life have predominantly focused upon significant cultural and social critics and philosophers; literature and art more broadly remain largely untapped areas in contemporary explorations of the everyday.⁶ Secondly, as Langbauer has argued, it is a history from which the experiences and voices of women are conspicuously absent.⁷ This study provides an addition to such histories in that it explores ideas and representations of the ordinary in the work of one of the most important women writers of the twentieth century: Virginia Woolf. Woolf was influential not only as a novelist, but as a perceptive literary, social and cultural critic, philosophical thinker and political essayist. An analysis of the ordinary and everyday forms of experience in Woolf's writings provides insight not only into a key thematic concern of her fiction, but to her broader philosophy and historical milieu. This study proposes that the ordinary is a very important concept in Woolf's fiction and non-fiction, and has developed out of my sense of the need for a detailed analysis of her sophisticated views on the nature of ordinary experience. Examining our engagement with ordinary things and environments, and tracing the shifting patterns of everyday life and experience in early twentieth-century Britain, are themes that recur throughout much of Woolf's fiction and non-fiction. Lefebvre's passing comment in the *Critique of Everyday Life* that Woolf 'uses an acute sensitivity to show the subtle richness of the everyday' is an idea I believe is worthy of detailed analysis.⁸

While the 'everyday' is the term most commonly employed in cultural studies and cultural theory at the present time, Woolf uses the word 'ordinary' with much more frequency, and this is the term I favour throughout this study. Furthermore, while the everyday in cultural studies tends to centre upon the sphere of human activities – particularly patterns of work, leisure and consumption – Woolf's preoccupation with the ordinary signals her keen interest in things (material objects both natural and human-made), in addition to daily experiences and behaviours. Also, the everyday implies a degree of repetition and, potentially, monotony which is not an implicit aspect of the ordinary. Something can be ordinary without being everyday. For example, illness, celebrations and falling in love are a part of ordinary experience and life but are not typically a part of everybody's everyday life. Such

⁵ Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁶ The notable exception to this is Laurie Langbauer's *Novels of Everyday Life: The Series in English Fiction, 1850–1930* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

⁷ Langbauer, 'Review'.

⁸ Lefebvre, *Critique*, 28.

subtle differences between the terms ‘everyday’ and ‘ordinary’ are important ones, and because of this the two are not viewed as synonymous, although they do, of course, overlap in many ways.

Before outlining Woolf’s ideas about ordinary experience, it is important to consider why modernism has been, to date, largely overlooked in contemporary discussions of the everyday in cultural theory, and why it might be a particularly fruitful cultural period for investigating this very subject.

Modernism, Modernity and Everyday Life

The ordinary and everyday in modernism remain relatively unexplored topics. In his discussion of modern art and literature in the first volume of the *Critique of Everyday Life*, Lefebvre finds much of it, including Surrealism, devalues the everyday through attempts to transcend or transform it through the strange, marvellous and weird.⁹ In the past few years a number of articles on modernism and the everyday have been published, several of which focus on the idea of ‘habit’, which constitutes one of the many suggestive ways in which the ordinary and everyday might be approached in modernism.¹⁰ In her doctoral thesis *Modernism and the Ordinary*, which focuses on the work of Woolf, James Joyce, Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens, Liesl M. Olson explores what she argues to be these authors’ shared preoccupation with ‘the habitual, unselfconscious actions of everyday life’. Rather than taking the ordinary and making it strange, as Lefebvre contends of the Surrealists, or transforming it through symbolic, ‘spiritual, psychological or ethical signification’, Olson argues that literary modernism finds the ‘non-transformative power’ of the ordinary to be its most compelling aspect.¹¹ While Olson’s thesis constitutes a very important contribution to the fields of modernist studies and studies in the everyday, her definition of the ordinary as habit is one I find limited in relation to an author such as Woolf, for reasons I will explain in the course of this introduction.

⁹ Lefebvre, *Critique*, see ch. 1, ‘Brief Notes on some Well-Trodden Ground’.

¹⁰ Liesl M. Olson, ‘Virginia Woolf’s “cotton wool of daily life”’, *Journal of Modern Literature* 26, no. 2 (Winter 2002–2003): 42–65; Ella Ophir, ‘Modernist fiction and “the accumulation of unrecorded life”’, *Modernist Cultures* 2, no. 1 (Summer 2006): 6–20 (this is a special issue on modernism and the everyday edited by Scott McCracken); Lisi Schoenbach, “‘Peaceful and exciting’”: habit, shock, and Gertrude Stein’s pragmatic modernism’, *Modernism/modernity* 11, no. 2 (2002): 239–59; Evan Horowitz, ‘Ulysses: mired in the universal’, *Modernism/modernity* 13, no. 1 (2006): 869–87; Harold Schweizer, ‘With sabbath eyes: the particular and the claims of history in Elizabeth Bishop’s “Poem”’, *Journal of Modern Literature* 28, no. 2 (Winter, 2005): 49–60.

¹¹ Liesl M. Olson, ‘Abstract’, in ‘Modernism and the Ordinary: Joyce, Woolf, Stein, Stevens’ (PhD thesis, Columbia University, 2004). Olson’s study is also available as a book: *Modernism and the Ordinary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

While the ‘precise description and evocation of the daily, the diurnal, the stubbornly ordinary’ has recently been noted to be as central to modernism as ‘exalted ... moments of artistic transcendence’, such evocations have been underexplored.¹² The historical tendency to overlook the everyday and ordinary as subjects for modernism may be due, as Olson argues, to the fact that modernism, particularly so-called ‘high modernism’, was traditionally viewed as an elitist movement that celebrated interiority and formal experimentation at the expense of the external and the realm of ordinary social and cultural life.¹³ For example, in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson claims that modernists thought ‘compulsively about the New’, and sought to escape the real, material world in favour of new Utopian ones.¹⁴ In his well-known essay ‘The Ideology of Modernism’, Georg Lukács criticized what he viewed as an ‘attenuation of actuality’ in modernist literature, arguing that material and social reality were obscured by an obsessive subjectivism.¹⁵ A concern with subjective experience and the cult of the new are seen by these critics to be antithetical to the realm of ordinary, material life. This is a view that I will be challenging in the course of my analysis of Woolf’s account of ordinary experience. It is surely inevitable that every cultural period will reflect its particular engagement with, and understanding of, the everyday and a great deal of modernist literature and art reveals a fascination with that very sphere of experience. This, it would seem, is in part due to the fact that the ‘everyday’ and ‘ordinary life’ were undergoing dramatic transformation during the period of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century modernity.

In his influential study of modernity, *All that is Solid Melts into Air*, Marshall Berman describes the primary condition in the experience of modernity to be that

¹² This point is made by Kevin J.H. Dettmar in his introduction to *A Companion to Modernist Literature and Culture*, eds David Bradshaw and Kevin J.H. Dettmar (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 3.

¹³ See Olson, ‘Modernism and the Ordinary’, ch 1. Since the 1980s, there have been many revisionist formulations of modernism that have challenged earlier critical accounts of ‘high modernism’ and expanded the parameters of the movement considerably. Feminist and postcolonial critics, such as Susan Stanford Friedman, Rachel Bowlby, Gillian Beer and Laura Marcus, have demonstrated that modernism was far from apolitical but intimately engaged with a range of social, cultural and political issues and contexts. Contemporary cultural and historical surveys of modernism such as Bradshaw and Dettmar’s, *A Companion to Modernist Literature and Culture* and Tim Armstrong’s *Modernism: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005) reflect the broad, interdisciplinary scope of the new modernist studies.

¹⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), ix.

¹⁵ Georg Lukács, ‘The ideology of modernism’, (1957) in *20th Century Literary Criticism*, ed. David Lodge (London: Longman, 1972), 474–88; 480.

of constant change.¹⁶ Berman argues that this condition has united humankind during the twentieth century because of modernity's global reach, but also that this unity is a 'paradoxical' one: '[I]t pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish.'¹⁷ It is in the words of Karl Marx that he finds this experience of constant change to be most succinctly expressed:

All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and men at last are forced to face ... the real conditions of their lives and their relations with their fellow men.¹⁸

While, as Berman notes, modernity began in the sixteenth century, individuals are inclined to feel that they are 'the first ones'.¹⁹ Indeed, Woolf's famous dictum in her 1924 paper 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown', 'that in or about December, 1910, human character changed', thereby marking the emergence of a new era, reflects such a feeling (CE1, 320). The change that she observes presented itself as a shift in '[a]ll human relations', the first signs of which she locates in the latter stages of the nineteenth century. When relations between people change – be they between 'masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children' – there is, she writes, an attendant change in all spheres of life: 'religion, conduct, politics, and literature' (CE1, 321). Woolf's claim that the apparent shift in all human relations occurred around 1910, however, echoes Marx who viewed such 'fixed, fast-frozen relations' to have started melting a good deal earlier.²⁰

Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century modernity changed the patterns and nature of daily life in much of Europe and America and these transformations are reflected in the art and literature of the period.²¹ Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane view the radical artistic innovations so integral to modernism to be a product of these significant social and cultural upheavals, which they deemed to be

¹⁶ Change has continued to be the defining feature in contemporary discussions of the experience of modernity. See, for example, Zygmunt Bauman: 'Modernity may be best described as the age marked by constant change', 'Modernity (1993)', in *The Bauman Reader*, ed. Peter Beilharz (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 164.

¹⁷ Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso, 1983), 15.

¹⁸ Karl Marx, quoted in Berman, *All that is Solid*, 21.

¹⁹ Berman, *All that is Solid*, 15.

²⁰ Woolf does comment in her essay on the disputability of this date and its degree of arbitrariness, but it has nevertheless been very influential in various critical attempts to clarify the dates of modernism as an artistic and cultural movement (CE1, 320).

²¹ Western modernity of course impacted on colonized nations in equally profound, if different, ways.

of a 'cataclysmic order'.²² A brief overview will serve to indicate at least some of the major areas of change, several of which I will return to in more detail at later stages of this study.

The urban mass and the city, distinguishing features of modern life and the modern condition, strongly influenced the work of nineteenth-century writers such as Charles Baudelaire and Edgar Allan Poe, and continued to be a source of great interest for social theorists, writers and artists into the early twentieth century. London, which was Woolf's home for most of her life and a continual source of fascination to her as a writer, was the world's biggest city in the early decades of the twentieth century.²³ London was therefore the quintessential space of modernity, making it an exciting place to be, not only for British artists but the many American and other expatriates who moved there.²⁴ Class relations, as Woolf observes in 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown', continued to be redefined, as did gender roles and relations, particularly during the First and Second World Wars. Industry continued to develop and expand and new technologies became more numerous in form and more ubiquitous in nature; automobiles, the radio and the cinema were a particular source of interest to modernists due to their impact on everyday culture and sensory experience. More efficient modes of mass production, advertising and spectacle contributed to ever-expanding commodity cultures which affected people's relationship to objects, as well as notions of art and artistic production, as Walter Benjamin's essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' famously argued.²⁵ Challenges to traditional ideas about the world and human beings, which were initiated by radical thinkers such as Charles Darwin and Marx in the nineteenth century continued into the twentieth century, particularly through the influence of Sigmund Freud.

Perhaps most crucially, however, it was the First World War that rendered daily life for the early twentieth-century individual more fragile and volatile than ever before. Through the implementation of new technologies such as the machine gun and tank, the First World War caused a level of destruction and carnage previously unknown in Western history. As Walter Benjamin describes in 'The Storyteller', '[a] generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents

²² Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, 'The name and nature of modernism', in *Modernism 1890–1930*, eds Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 20.

²³ On this topic see Jean Moorcroft Wilson, *Virginia Woolf's London: A Guide to Bloomsbury and Beyond* (London: Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2000).

²⁴ Malcolm Bradbury, 'London 1890–1920', in *Modernism 1890–1930*, eds Bradbury and McFarlane, 179.

²⁵ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 217–52.

and explosion, was the tiny, fragile human body'.²⁶ Arguably, the fragile status of the everyday became more acute still during, and in the aftermath of, the Second World War. Hence, given the radical changes that impacted upon all areas of life during the first decades of the twentieth century, it seems almost inevitable that the very notions of 'everyday life' and the 'ordinary' would be ones of great interest and also anxiety for modernists. Indeed, as I will show, the very conception of 'ordinary experience' is one Woolf wanted to open up for debate given her historical climate of 'adventure', 'disintegration and renewal', and 'struggle and contradiction'.²⁷

A glance at representative authors of the period indicates the rich field that modernism presents for new historical perspectives on the everyday and ordinary. A detailed engagement with the quotidian and everyday material world forms the basis of James Joyce's epic tale of ordinariness, *Ulysses* (1922). It was, however, an account of the ordinary that Woolf found to be somewhat confronting and base with its focus on bodily processes and often macabre, abject or erotic themes (*E4*, 161–2). Dorothy Richardson's multi-volume *Pilgrimage* (1915–1967) and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927) carefully present the complexity of ordinary experience in the present moment. Much of Gertrude Stein's prose and poetry, from *Tender Buttons* (1914) to *Wars I Have Seen* (1945), centres quite obsessively upon the domestic everyday, carefully tracing its objects, people, rhythms and speech. Vignettes of seemingly unexceptional moments form the basis for short stories by Katherine Mansfield, Woolf and Jean Rhys. In terms of modern poetry, Imagism reflects a preoccupation with the daily in its aspiration towards an objective presentation of the concrete and particular thing through plain language. Likewise, the subject matter of much of T.S. Eliot's poetry expresses a persistent, if somewhat vexed, relationship to the sphere of everyday, urban modernity. For example, in 'Preludes' he describes the coming to a consciousness:

Of faint stale smells of beer
From the sawdust-trampled street
With all its muddy feet that press
To early coffee-stands.²⁸

Like many of her contemporaries, Woolf's writing reflects a fascination with the ordinary and everyday. However, the ordinary not only comprises the subject of much of her fiction and non-fiction; it also informs her implicit philosophy and broader social and political views.

²⁶ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 84.

²⁷ Berman, *All that is Solid*, 15.

²⁸ T.S. Eliot, 'Preludes', II, in *T.S. Eliot: Collected Poems 1909–1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), 23.

Virginia Woolf and Ordinary Life

Woolf's preoccupation with the ordinary can be found in one of her most well-known essays, 'Modern Fiction' (1925), a revised version of the 1919 essay 'Modern Novels'. In 'Modern Fiction' she appeals to the reader to '[e]xamine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day' and to reflect upon 'life' (E4, 160). Through this act of reflection, Woolf hopes to alert her reader to the possibility that the conventional requirements of the novel in the past, such as 'plot', a 'love interest', 'comedy' or 'tragedy' are, in their present style, 'ill-fitting vestments' within which to capture 'life' (E4, 160). Her critique in 'Modern Fiction' is specifically aimed at the Edwardian novelists Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy and H.G. Wells, whom she collectively refers to as 'materialists'. They are 'materialists' in the sense that they focus their attention upon 'unimportant things' – the enumeration of irrelevant facts – which do not illuminate a character's experience: '[Mr Bennett's] characters live abundantly, even unexpectedly, but it remains to ask how do they live, and what do they live for?' (E4, 159). In this and other essays composed during the 1920s, Woolf argues that these novelists fail to capture 'life' because they 'spend immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring' (E4, 159).²⁹ The word 'trivial' refers to that which 'may be met with anywhere; common, commonplace, ordinary, everyday, familiar, trite'. It denotes something 'of small account, little esteemed, paltry', 'inconsiderable, unimportant, slight'.³⁰ But given her interest in recording the patterns of 'an ordinary mind on an ordinary day', one that is evident in her novels *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927), as well as throughout her many volumes of diaries, Woolf cannot be calling for a repudiation of the commonplace or 'small' in literature; indeed, she states later in 'Modern Fiction' that we cannot 'take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small', citing Joyce's prose as a case in point (E4, 161). There is a sense that what she finds problematic in the novels of Bennett and Galsworthy is their superficial account of human experience. She also draws to our attention the words 'ordinary', 'trivial' and 'small' in relation to notions of truth, fiction and endurance in her essay so that we might reconsider their meanings and relations.

'Modern Fiction' not only reveals Woolf's opinions about the aims and scope of the modern novel and how she thinks it will differ from novels in the past, but also asks the reader to reflect upon the very idea of 'ordinary' experience. The word 'ordinary' is derived from the Latin *ordinarius*, which means 'regular, orderly, customary, usual'.³¹ To talk, as Woolf does in her essay, about ordinary minds and ordinary experience suggests ideas of familiarity, routine, custom and habit. In his essay 'The myth of everyday life: Toward a heterology of the

²⁹ See also 'Life and the novelist', CE2, 131–6.

³⁰ 'Trivial', *Oxford English Dictionary*, <http://dictionary.oed.com>.

³¹ 'Ordinary', etymology, *Oxford English Dictionary*, <http://dictionary.oed.com>.

ordinary', Barry Sandywell notes the close historical association between ideas of the ordinary and the everyday.³² Ordinary life is often associated with mundane, daily activities such as eating, bathing and travelling to work – the 'Monday or Tuesday' of ordinary life to which Woolf alludes in 'Modern Fiction' (*E4*, 160). Sandywell is critical of approaches to everyday life that have suppressed the materiality, contingency and historicity of human experience and he explores how the ordinary has been 'systematically denigrated' in the very act of being theorized as everyday life.³³ Similarly, Woolf encourages us to reconsider and re-examine ordinary life afresh so as to recover it from the misrepresentation she argues it has received by certain Edwardian novelists. Indeed, recovering ordinary life is not contingent upon the extolling of custom but a release from it: 'But sometimes, more and more often as time goes by, we suspect a momentary doubt, a spasm of rebellion, as the pages fill themselves in the customary way. Is life like this? Must novels be like this?' (*E4*, 160).

In *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture*, Rita Felski discusses how the everyday, like the ordinary, is an idea that is both 'self-evident' yet 'puzzling'.³⁴ While observing that everyday life is generally equated with the 'essential, taken-for-granted continuum of mundane activities', she observes that it is also 'strangely elusive' and 'resists our understanding' when it is 'subject to critical scrutiny'.³⁵ The elusiveness of the everyday – its 'veiled' character and resistance to both our understanding and representation – is one of the problems Lefebvre seeks to address in his multi-volume critique of everyday life. 'Where', he asks, 'is [the everyday] to be found' and how are we to 'reveal' it to itself and ourselves, without transforming it in the process of that analysis and representation?³⁶ In his Marxist assessment of the status of everyday life in modern Western society, Lefebvre sees the cover that obscures the everyday to be that of 'modernity', which he argues has transformed the nature of everyday life and our relationship to it. Alienated from the cyclical rhythms, diverse objects and styles that defined the pre-modern everyday, in the twentieth century the everyday exists merely as repetition, rationalized uniformity and monotony.³⁷ For Lefebvre,

³² Barry Sandywell, 'The myth of everyday life: Toward a heterology of the ordinary', *Cultural Studies* 18, no. 2–3 (March/May 2004): 160–80; 162. Volume 18, no. 2–3 of *Cultural Studies* is a special issue called 'Rethinking Everyday Life: And Then Nothing Turns Itself Inside Out'.

³³ Sandywell, 'Myth', 160.

³⁴ Rita Felski, *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 77.

³⁵ Felski, *Doing Time*, 77–8.

³⁶ Lefebvre, *Critique*, 31. See also 'The Everyday and Everydayness', *Yale French Studies* 73 (1987): 7–11.

³⁷ Lefebvre, 'The Everyday and Everydayness', 10. These issues are discussed at length in his 'Foreword' to the second edition of volume 1 of the *Critique*, but permeate every volume of the *Critique*.

there is a sense in which everyday life is 'residual', comprised of that which is 'left over' from 'all distinct, superior, specialized, structured activities'. However, he also argues that the everyday must be conceived of as a totality and is 'profoundly related to *all* activities', being their 'meeting place' and 'common ground'.³⁸

Feminist critics working in the field of cultural studies have been quick to challenge negative attitudes towards the everyday that define it as residual or monotonous.³⁹ Similarly, in 'Modern Fiction', Woolf makes it clear that her conception of the contents of an ordinary mind and the trajectory of an ordinary day are not in the least dull or self-evident, but complex and far more exciting than conventional attitudes to the daily suggest. She argues that a new literary form is required to represent an ordinary day at the present time:

Look within and life, it seems, is very far from being 'like this'. Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there; so that, if a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style ... Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible? We are not pleading merely for courage and sincerity; we are suggesting that the proper stuff of fiction is a little other than custom would have us believe it. (*E4*, 160–161)

Traditionally this passage has been viewed as an expression of Woolf's disavowal of material reality and her privileging of states of aesthetic reverie over more mundane states of consciousness. John Fletcher and Malcolm Bradbury, for example, understand this passage from 'Modern Fiction' to reveal Woolf's view of consciousness as an 'unconditioned state of high reverie and awareness analogous to the condition of the artist'. They go on to argue that, for Woolf, the modern novel 'desubstantiates the material world and puts it in its just place; it transcends the vulgar limitations and simplicities of realism, so as to serve a higher realism'.⁴⁰ Rather than promoting an aestheticist withdrawal from ordinary life, as Fletcher

³⁸ Lefebvre, *Critique*, 97.

³⁹ Felski, *Doing Time*, 80.

⁴⁰ John Fletcher and Malcolm Bradbury, 'The introverted novel', in *Modernism 1890–1930*, eds Bradbury and McFarlane, 408.

and Bradbury suggest, we might also interpret this passage to offer a reassessment of our conception of it.

For Woolf, ordinary life is not a given, 'like this', or explained by our customary attitudes. As for Sandywell, Woolf finds that the 'shape' and prominent features of the ordinary day change over time and are historically contingent: 'the accent falls differently from of old.' Rather than it being a commonplace and uncontested phenomenon, Woolf argues that the pattern of everyday life is mysterious and, at the present time, 'uncircumscribed', yet to be 'conveyed' by the novelist. When she looks 'within' at the life of the mind on an 'ordinary day', she observes that it is not only scored by 'trivial' impressions but 'fantastic', 'evanescent' and striking ones. Rather than privileging heightened states of consciousness at the expense of more commonplace impressions, as Fletcher and Bradbury argue, Woolf is fundamentally concerned with their interconnection and coexistence in everyday experience. As Michael Gardiner argues:

Although everyday life can display routinized, static and unreflexive characteristics, it is also capable of a surprising dynamism and moments of penetrating insight and boundless creativity. The everyday is, as Maffesoli puts it, 'polydimensional': fluid, ambivalent and labile.⁴¹

Similarly, through her fiction, Woolf attempts to convey the 'polydimensional' nature of ordinary experience. She realizes that when the author attempts to 'trace the pattern' of the mind by recording the 'atoms' which fall upon it, those myriad impressions may at first appear 'disconnected and incoherent'. However, the novelist's task, in her view, is to uncover a pattern to those various impressions. The novelist must not oversimplify ordinary experience but give form to its complex nature. While acknowledging the heterogeneity of everyday experience, Woolf recognizes the importance of finding order or 'pattern'; the meaning central to the etymology of 'ordinary' (*E4*, 161).

Echoing Lefebvre, Felski argues that while much modern literature reflects a fascination with the ordinary and a desire to 'redeem the everyday by rescuing it from its opacity' (an idea suggested in 'Modern Fiction' through Woolf's metaphor of modern life as akin to a 'luminous halo'), such a detailed attention to the ordinary ultimately transcends and transforms the very dailiness it seeks to recuperate.⁴² But does attending to the details of an ordinary object, experience or activity necessarily undermine its everydayness? Is 'everyday' consciousness grounded upon a 'casual inattentiveness' to one's environment and experience?⁴³ Is there a universal everyday, and a common consciousness of it? In his assessment of the nineteenth-century sociologist Georg Simmel's 'sociological microscopy', Ben Highmore argues that aesthetic approaches to the everyday that render it as

⁴¹ Gardiner, *Critiques of Everyday Life*, 6.

⁴² Felski, *Doing Time*, 90.

⁴³ Felski, *Doing Time*, 90.

‘vivid’ do not necessarily undermine its everydayness in the process.⁴⁴ Likewise, in drawing attention to the ordinary, Woolf seeks to alert her readers to its overlooked potential, not to make it strange or to transcend it. As ‘Modern Fiction’ makes clear, she challenges the assumption that ordinary life is restricted to the habitual and unreflective aspects of experience, the ‘casual inattentiveness’ that, for Felski, ‘defines the everyday experience of everyday life’.⁴⁵ On the contrary, ordinary experience during Woolf’s lifetime was often marked by a keen awareness and a sense of ‘adventure’, not the condition of alienation and apathy described by Lefebvre and reflected in other areas of modernism, such as T.S. Eliot’s poetry.⁴⁶ Clarissa Dalloway’s ‘lark’ and ‘plunge’ into the streets of London to buy flowers one June morning in 1923 is one example of Woolf’s sense of the vividness and excitement that can attend the ordinary (*MD*, 1). The responsiveness to ordinary things and environments described in ‘Modern Fiction’, and made evident in Woolf’s diaries and fiction, was a product of the dynamic and changing nature of daily life during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A more extreme account of the modern subject’s hypersensitivity can be found in Georg Simmel’s psychology of the metropolitan individual, which he argued was ‘neurasthenic’ and indifferent by turns. Such sensitivity is akin to the condition of sensory ‘shock’ that Walter Benjamin viewed to be integral to the experience of modernity.⁴⁷

Woolf sees the challenge that confronts the novelist and the modern subject to be the way in which they negotiate the various sorts of impressions and experiences that comprise an ordinary day and the view of the world that they entail. In *To the Lighthouse*, the artist Lily Briscoe expresses her desire to be able to maintain a dual and paradoxical perception of ordinary things that sees them as at once familiar and known, yet miraculous:

One wanted, she thought, dipping her brush deliberately, to be on a level with ordinary experience, to feel simply that’s a chair, that’s a table, and yet at the same time, It’s a miracle, it’s an ecstasy. The problem might be solved after all. (*TL*, 272)

As Mark Hussey observes, Lily ‘reveals the ecstasy of the ordinary’ and *To the Lighthouse* expresses what he describes as the ‘excessive richness of ordinary

⁴⁴ Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*, 39.

⁴⁵ Felski, *Doing Time*, 90.

⁴⁶ Berman, *All that is Solid*, 15.

⁴⁷ Benjamin’s idea of ‘shock’ is discussed in his essay ‘On some motifs in Baudelaire’ in *Illuminations*. I will return to this topic in Chapter 4. Georg Simmel viewed the constantly changing internal and external stimuli experienced in the urban environment to lead to either a condition of hypersensitivity (which Simmel sometimes diagnoses as ‘neurasthenic’) or indifference. For a discussion of Simmel’s theory of the everyday and modernity see Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*, ch. 3.

experience'.⁴⁸ Lily's desire for a dual mode of apprehending the world, as familiar and ordinary, yet also extraordinary and ecstatic, informs much of Woolf's thought and writing. While these two ways of experiencing ordinary life can come into conflict with one another, I will examine how Woolf tries to place them in a positive, dialectical relationship. Woolf's sense that the ordinary is a site that can be not only mundane and familiar but also extraordinary marks a departure from traditional conceptions of the everyday in the social sciences, and coincides with the tradition of everyday life theory that Michael Gardiner traces in *Critiques of Everyday Life*:

Whereas for mainstream interpretive approaches the everyday is the realm of the ordinary, the alternative pursued here is to treat it as a domain that is potentially *extraordinary*. The ordinary can become extraordinary not by eclipsing the everyday ... but by fully appropriating and activating the possibilities that lie hidden, and typically repressed, within it.⁴⁹

It is this process of returning to the ordinary, and moving beyond customary perceptions and formulations of it in order to realize its richness and, in the twentieth century, constant evolution, that I will trace in Woolf's writing. Through examining her representations of a subject's engagement with ordinary objects (such as a table or a flower), common experiences (such as illness) and new cultural experiences (such as travelling in a motor car), I propose that Woolf challenges a view of everyday life as simply the habitual and mundane. Rather than restricting my analysis of Woolf's treatment of the ordinary and everyday to contemporary theoretical frameworks, I will focus upon how her account of ordinary experience responds to, and is informed by, the philosophy she read, as well as the cultural and social contexts of her time. In doing so, I will locate her exploration of these issues in relation to alternative histories of the everyday to those that have dominated recent books on the subject. By interrogating the positivist and common-sense epistemologies that dominated much eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British philosophy, Woolf, I will argue, promotes an engagement with the everyday that apprehends it as at once familiar and unknown, mundane yet potentially extraordinary, an approach that is in the tradition of Romantics such as William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. I will explore how this dual nature of the ordinary enables it to provide continuity and form to experience in a practical sense, but also allows it to be the source of personal value and meaning. In addition to being a site of personal meaning, the ordinary, I argue, informs Woolf's broader political and ethical views.

⁴⁸ Mark Hussey, "'For nothing is simply one thing": knowing the world in *To the Lighthouse*', in *Approaches to Teaching Woolf's To the Lighthouse*, eds Beth Rigel Daugherty and Mary Beth Pringle (New York: Modern Language Association, 2001), 41–6; 46; 44.

⁴⁹ Gardiner, *Critiques of Everyday Life*, 6.

Other Woolf scholars have recently drawn attention to Woolf's commitment to, and engagement with, everyday life and ordinary things in her fiction. For example, Gillian Beer argues that Woolf valued the ordinary and refused to 'set thinking apart from ordinary experience'. She observes how Woolf situated contemporary intellectual debates in relation to ordinary experience and presented them in such a way as to make them accessible to the 'common reader'.⁵⁰ In 'Virginia Woolf's "cotton wool of daily life"', Olson discusses the importance of habit and unselfconscious moments and activities to Woolf's modernism, particularly the role that trivial gestures and habitual behaviours assume in Woolf's concept of character and inter-personal relations in such novels as *Mrs. Dalloway*.⁵¹ In exploring the role of the everyday in her view of history, Melba Cuddy-Keane discusses Woolf's rejection of dominant historical paradigms that view history as linear, political and monumental, and her preference for microhistory and the history of the everyday.⁵² The diverse ways these critics approach the ordinary in Woolf's writing points to both its subtle treatment by her and its complex and variable status as a concept at the present time.

Thus far I have argued that while advocating a return to small things and daily experience, Woolf's modernism reveals that the ordinary cannot be adequately captured through such notions as habit, custom and common sense. Other states of being constitute a part of the ordinary whilst simultaneously challenging its basic assumptions and routines. In her unfinished memoir, 'A Sketch of the Past', which she began writing in April 1939, Woolf outlines two phases that she believes are integral to daily life: 'being' and 'non-being'. These two phases of daily life involve contrasting attitudes to the world that are central to her view of ordinary experience and important to the conceptual framework of this study.

Woolf uses the phrase 'non-being' to refer to those parts of the day that are 'not lived consciously' – the things we do, say and see habitually: 'A great part of every day is not lived consciously. One walks, eats, sees things, deals with what has to be done; the broken vacuum cleaner; ordering dinner ... cooking dinner; bookbinding.' 'Every day', Woolf suggests, 'includes much more non-being than being' and for her 'non-being' is not altogether desirable: 'When it is a bad day the proportion of non-being is much larger' (*MB*, 70). She likens it to a 'nondescript cotton wool' that surrounds much of daily life, an image that suggests comfort and safety but also homogeneity and formlessness. It is the 'cotton wool' of habit and routine that Olson argues is central to Woolf's modernism, and it clearly recalls those definitions in cultural studies that equate the everyday with the undifferentiated and unnoticed parts of experience. 'Non-being' therefore

⁵⁰ Gillian Beer, *Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 2–4.

⁵¹ Olson, 'Virginia Woolf's "cotton wool of daily life"'.
⁵² Melba Cuddy-Keane, 'Virginia Woolf and the varieties of historicist experience', *Virginia Woolf and the Essay*, eds Beth Carole Rosenberg and Jeanne Dubino (New York: St Martin's Press, 1997), 59–77; 65.

refers to a form of perception and a mode of being; the phases of life that are lived automatically and inattentively. Such a state of being renders one blind to the particular and the commonplace, as the world is experienced as an undistinguished mass of stuff, like cotton wool.

Woolf's 'cotton wool of daily life' (*MB*, 72) anticipates Jean-Paul Sartre's notion of the 'viscous', when unconscious physical reality loses its particularity and existential meaning, a condition the protagonist of his novel *La Nausée* (*Nausea*, 1938) finds disturbing and alienating.⁵³ The world experienced as 'cotton wool' can provoke feelings of boredom and complacency as well as comfort, but can also threaten an existential condition of alienation and absurdity, one that is felt by Rhoda in *The Waves*:

All palpable forms of life have failed me. Unless I can stretch and touch something hard, I shall be blown down the eternal corridors for ever. What, then, can I touch? What brick, what stone? and so draw myself across the enormous gulf into my body safely? (*W*, 120)

While routine in the form of habitual gestures and actions determines much of who we are and the lives that we lead, and forms a very important aspect of Woolf's modernism, Woolf herself believes that to live life inattentively in an attitude directed by habit is not desirable. Although she values form and pattern to life, which are sometimes presented as the products of customary and habitual behaviour, she does not condone living life habitually, in the sense of being inattentive or uncritical.

In contrast to non-being, Woolf also refers in 'A Sketch of the Past' to the various moments of 'being' that punctuate the cotton wool of daily life. In the critical literature, 'moments of being' are generally treated as one kind of experience. They have been described as 'heightened' experiences and compared to the epiphany and various kinds of mystical experience.⁵⁴ I will discuss the more

⁵³ In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre distinguishes between the in-itself, meaning consciousness, and the for-itself, which refers to unconscious physical reality. When the for-itself loses its existential solidity and meaning Sartre calls it 'viscous', the world seen as a mass of indistinguishable matter. Sartre's antihero in *Nausea*, Roquentin, is repeatedly faced with this experience of the viscous. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (London: Routledge, 1996), 73–9; *Nausea*, trans. Robert Baldick (London: Penguin, 1965), 182–92.

⁵⁴ Olson describes moments of being as 'heightened' experiences and views them to involve a devaluation of ordinary life, 'Virginia Woolf's "cotton wool of daily life"', 42–3. Morris Beja discusses Woolf's moments of being as a version of the epiphany, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel* (London: Peter Owen, 1971), ch. 4. For a discussion of the Woolfian moment as a form of mystical experience see Stephanie Paulsell, 'Writing and mystical experience in Marguerite d'Oingt and Virginia Woolf', *Comparative Literature* 44, no. 3 (1992): 249–67; Julie Kane, 'Varieties of mystical experience in the writings of Virginia Woolf', *Twentieth Century Literature* 41, no. 4 (1995): 328–49; Val Gough, "'That razor

dramatic and heightened moments of being in this memoir and their relationship to the ordinary world in Chapter 5. It is important to stress here that in ‘A Sketch of the Past’ moments of being are not all dramatic or mystical experiences. After defining non-being, Woolf goes on to describe the moments of ‘being’ in the previous day in April 1939:

Yesterday for example, Tuesday the 18th of April, was [as] it happened a good day; above average in ‘being’. It was fine; I enjoyed writing these first pages I walked over Mount Misery and along the river; and saw that the tide was out, the country, which I notice very closely always, was coloured and shaded as I like ... I also read Chaucer with pleasure. (*MB*, 70)

‘Being’ refers here to the moments in our daily lives that are lived attentively, and this state of perception accentuates Woolf’s pleasure in everyday activities like walking in the country and reading a book. Thus, being and non-being refer to two daily but contrasting ways of perceiving and experiencing the world.

In addition to being and non-being, a variety of attitudes and relationships to the ordinary recur in Woolf’s writing and are examined in the chapters that follow, including common sense, factualism, utility, rationalism, curiosity, wonder and imagination. These discussions are situated in relation to the philosophical and intellectual contexts that informed her writing, such as British empiricism, Romanticism and Platonism, as well as the social and cultural contexts of her time. Not only will the nature of these different attitudes to the everyday be considered in detail, but also what Woolf presents as their social effects and ethical consequences – effects that are often revealed through her spatial poetics.

Common Experience

An account of the everyday and ordinary experience relies on certain assumptions as to what is normal and common to experience. Observing that the everyday is homogenized in some contemporary theoretical formulations, Langbauer argues that enforcing ‘one particular definition of the everyday on everyone’ is a strategy of dominance.⁵⁵ Technologies of power and hegemony present themselves as important issues in Woolf’s exploration of ordinary experience. In *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), she discusses women’s historical position as social and cultural outsiders from dominant institutions and cultural formations in patriarchal society. Reflecting upon her anger at being barred from entering an Oxbridge library,

edge of balance”: Virginia Woolf and mysticism’, *Woolf Studies Annual* 5 (1999): 57–77; Val Gough, ‘With some irony in her interrogation: Woolf’s ironic mysticism’, *Virginia Woolf and the Arts: Selected Papers from the Sixth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf*, eds Diane F. Gillespie and Leslie K. Hankins (New York: Pace University Press, 1997), 85–90.

⁵⁵ Langbauer, *Novels of Everyday Life*, 4.

this literal presentation of denied access is made representative in the essay of women's historical exclusion from a range of public domains, from publishing to university and politics, and their lack of legal identity or equal rights until the twentieth century. Woolf emphasizes the significant material effects of social and cultural marginality; in this instance, how women's poverty and lack of financial independence impacted upon their capacity to write. Woolf's self-proclaimed status as outsider made her sensitive to other forms of social or cultural difference and marginality, but she also tried to perceive the positive potential integral to being an outsider: 'I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in' (*AROO*, 21).

Several characters in Woolf's fiction are outsiders and unable to accept, or be accepted within, hegemonic forms of the ordinary. Louis in *The Waves* feels himself to be an outsider because of his Australian origins. This places him in an ambivalent relation to ordinary life in London, a situation that recalls the representations of the ordinary in the work of the American poet on whom his character was based – T.S. Eliot:

Here is the central rhythm; here the common mainspring. I watch it expand, contract; and then expand again. Yet I am not included ... I, who desire above all things to be taken to the arms with love, am alien, external. I, who would wish to feel close over me the protective waves of the ordinary, catch with the tail of my eye some far horizon; am aware of hats bobbing up and down in perpetual disorder. (*W*, 70)

As with contemporary theories of the everyday, assumptions about ordinary experience often privilege some modes of experience as more 'normal' than others. As critics have observed, usually with reference to the presentation of multiple perspectives in her fiction, Woolf resists the view that ordinary experience is an uncontested site and forces her readers to question their assumptions about experiential normality.⁵⁶ In Chapter 3, I will discuss common illness as a case in point, as an experience which is integral to ordinary life but one which is often presented as an aberrant deviation from the normal sphere of health. Woolf often links normative models of experience to discourses and systems of power, such as the rhetoric of 'proportion' espoused by the rationalist physician Sir William Bradshaw to the shell-shocked soldier Septimus Warren Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Septimus' condition, despite its commonness in Europe following the First World War, is dismissed by doctors as either fantasy – as in the case of Dr Holmes, who tells him 'There was nothing whatever the matter' (*MD*, 79) – or self-indulgence, as by Sir William Bradshaw: "We all have our moments of depression," said Sir

⁵⁶ One of the first critics to discuss Woolf's perspectivism from a philosophical perspective was Avrom Fleishman. He considers this issue in relation to the epistemology of the British Idealist, J.E. McTaggart: 'Woolf and McTaggart', *ELH* 36 (1969): 719–38.

William' (*MD*, 86). In Chapters 1 to 3, I examine Woolf's treatment of cultural assumptions about normal experience, and their social and ethical implications.

Another important way in which Woolf's approach to ordinary experience is suggestive, which I will examine in Chapters 1 and 2, is her treatment of common sense – what might also be termed the 'natural attitude'. Throughout the history of philosophy there has always been an assumed connection between common sense and ordinary life. Common sense traditionally includes our unreflective assumptions about the world: for example, the belief that there is a world of solid objects that continue to exist even when one is not looking at them. It is such a common-sense belief that the philosopher Mr Ramsay investigates in *To the Lighthouse*. His son, Andrew, views his father's philosophy to centre upon these kinds of epistemological questions: 'Think of a kitchen table ... when you're not there' (*TL*, 33). While common sense has a close relationship to ordinary life, esoteric thought and metaphysical speculation have historically been viewed as departures from ordinary life and violations to it. In introducing the theme of common sense as it relates to Woolf's conception of ordinary experience, I will draw upon two examples that will elucidate how her view of common sense and the natural attitude differ from the philosophers she read who expressed a commitment to the philosophical value of common sense; the eighteenth-century Scottish empiricist David Hume and the twentieth-century Cambridge philosopher G.E. Moore. In Chapters 1 and 2, I will return to these thinkers in my analysis of Woolf's representations of a character's perception of everyday objects and the epistemological status of common-sense facts.

Hume's Philosophy of Common Life

Hume is an important figure in Woolf's thought and fiction. This influence came to her through her father, Leslie Stephen, who was a keen supporter of the Scottish Enlightenment, particularly Hume's philosophy, which he discusses at length in his *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (1876).⁵⁷ Woolf seems to

⁵⁷ Beer, *Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground*, ch. 2; Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, 3rd edn, 2 vols (London: John Murray, 1927), vol. 1. Volume one contains his assessment of Hume's philosophy. As is now established knowledge in Woolf scholarship, she was familiar with eighteenth- to twentieth-century British philosophy through her father, who wrote books on the history of British philosophy, and her Bloomsbury friends, many of whom studied philosophy at Cambridge. For a discussion of this background see Ann Banfield, *The Phantom Table: Woolf, Fry, Russell and the Epistemology of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); J.K. Johnstone, *The Bloomsbury Group. A Study of E.M. Forster, Lytton Strachey, Virginia Woolf, and their Circle* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1954); Andrew McNeillie, 'Bloomsbury', in *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, eds Sue Roe and Susan Sellers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1–27; S.P. Rosenbaum, *Victorian Bloomsbury. The Early Literary History of the Bloomsbury Group* (London: Macmillan, 1987), vol. 1.

have been interested in her father's philosophical preoccupations, as she read the works of some of the people he discusses in his *History*, such as Hume and George Berkeley.⁵⁸ She often consulted her father's philosophical studies and literary criticism in order to develop her own ideas. For example, in 'A Sketch of the Past' she explains how she read her father's books to get 'a critical grasp on him': 'I always read *Hours in a Library* by way of filling out my ideas, say of Coleridge, if I'm reading Coleridge; and always find something to fill out; to correct; to stiffen my fluid vision' (*MB*, 115).⁵⁹ Woolf refers to 'Hume's Essays' in her 1920 diary in the hope that reading Hume may 'purge' her of the propensity to write in images (*D2*, 56). 'Hume's essays' most likely refers to his *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*, an 1809 edition of which was in the Woolfs' library.⁶⁰

Hume's valuing of common sense and 'common life' is linked to his rejection of metaphysics. In his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), he discusses what he believes should be the proper limits of philosophical enquiry. Critical of speculative or 'abstruse' philosophy, due to its lack of application in everyday 'business and action', he maintains that philosophy should limit itself to an analysis of experience, 'the operations of the mind'.⁶¹ Tracing our 'mental geography' and assessing the 'common sense of mankind' keeps the philosopher within the domain of what is immediately accessible to him, and safely distant from the pitfalls of speculative enquiry.⁶² Rather than rejecting the popular or lay view of the world as a barrier to understanding or as an illusion, as would the

⁵⁸ She refers to Berkeley in several entries dating from April and May of her 1920 diary; *D2*, 24 April 1920, 33; 11 May 1920, 36. The particular text is not mentioned but it is most likely *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*. A 1734 reprint of the 1713 edition was in the Woolfs' library. My references to the contents of the Woolfs' library come from 'The library of Leonard and Virginia Woolf: a short title catalogue', compiled and edited by Julie King and Laila Miletic-Vejzovic, intro. Diane F. Gillespie (Pullman, WA: WSU Press, 2003). Available at: www.wsulibs.wsu.edu/holland/masc/OnlineBooks/Woolflibraryonline.htm.

⁵⁹ On the intellectual relationship between Woolf and her father see Banfield, 'Introduction', in *The Phantom Table*; Beth Rigel Daugherty, 'Learning Virginia Woolf: of Leslie, libraries, and letters', *Virginia Woolf and Communities. Selected Papers from the Eighth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf*, eds Laura Davis and Jeanette McVicker (New York: Pace University Press, 1999), 10–17.

⁶⁰ This two-volume edition includes his *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, *A Dissertation on the Passions* and *The Natural History of Religion*. David Hume, *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*, 2 vols (Edinburgh: James Clarke, 1809).

⁶¹ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, in *The Philosophical Works*, vol. 4, *Essays Moral, Political and Literary 2*, eds Thomas Hill Green and Thomas Hodge Grose (Aalen: Scientia Verlag, 1964), sec. 1, p. 4; p. 10.

⁶² Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, in *The Philosophical Works*, sec. 1, p. 10; p. 5. For his most sustained critique of metaphysics in the *Enquiry* see part 12, 'Of the academical or sceptical philosophy'.

philosophical sceptic, Hume views our common-sense beliefs about the world as a necessary constituent of our thinking about experience. Hence, habit and custom, principles that provide form and stability to everyday experience, are crucial concepts in Hume's account of human understanding in his *A Treatise of Human Nature* and the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*: 'Custom, then, is the great guide of human life. It is that principle alone, which renders our experience useful to us, and makes us expect, for the future, a similar train of events with those which have appeared in the past.'⁶³

According to Donald W. Livingston in his book *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life*, the popular thesis about the world is not subject to 'empirical test' but is, for Hume, an 'a priori framework for interpreting experience', much in the same way that the categories of space and time are for Kant in *The Critique of Pure Reason*: '[P]hilosophy may form abstract principles and ideals to criticize any judgment in common life; what it cannot do, on pain of total skepticism [*sic*], is throw into question the whole order.'⁶⁴ Denying the existence of a private and public world for the benefits of philosophical theory is pointless if the philosopher must continue to operate in the world on a day-to-day basis in accordance with the common-sense view. '[F]alse philosophy', which seeks to be autonomous from the 'received beliefs, customs, and prejudices of common life' ultimately 'alienates the philosopher from the world of common life in which he must live and move and have his being and *through* which he must think about the real'.⁶⁵ Like Hume, Woolf believes that philosophy must embrace ordinary life, and Chapter 1 will examine this process of alienation as it is experienced by Mr Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*. Whereas 'false philosophy' seeks to be autonomous from the unreflective assumptions of common life, 'true philosophy', Hume states in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 'approaches nearer to the sentiments of the vulgar' (i.e. popular or lay).⁶⁶

Common life for Hume does not only refer to a positivist realm of common-sense fact, but is also a space of passion, prejudice and tradition.⁶⁷ However, in his *Enquiry*, certain states are deemed more instructive to an account of common life than others, and it is in this respect that Hume's analysis of common experience differs from that of Woolf. While Hume promotes an academic philosophy that is durable and useful, and proffers ideas that were very radical and original, his conception of what he refers to as 'common life' privileges the customary and familiar:

⁶³ Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, in *The Philosophical Works*, sec. 5, p. 39.

⁶⁴ Donald W. Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 22; 3.

⁶⁵ Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life*, 3; 32.

⁶⁶ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, quoted in Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life*, 22.

⁶⁷ Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life*, 31.

The *imagination* of man is naturally sublime, delighted with whatever is remote and extraordinary, and running, without controul [*sic*] into the most distant parts of space and time in order to avoid the objects, which custom has rendered too familiar to it. A correct *Judgment* observes a contrary method, and avoiding all distant and high enquiries, confines itself to common life, and to such subjects as fall under daily practice and experience; leaving the more sublime topics to the embellishment of poets and orators, or to the arts of priests and politicians.⁶⁸

Hume wants to keep ‘sublime topics’ and the operations of a vivid ‘imagination’ separate from ‘common life’, and sees them to fall outside the realm of ‘daily practice and experience’. As Woolf’s concept of non-being suggests, mental habit and custom impose certain limits upon experience and account for only a portion of everyday life. There are also innumerable ‘moments of being’ which punctuate the ‘cotton wool of daily life’ (*MB*, 72). Imaginative and creative engagements with the world are integral to a broader understanding of it and a means to reflect critically upon our habitual attitudes. ‘[S]ublime topics’ and ‘extraordinary’ experiences are not, in Woolf’s view, ‘distant’ or ‘remote’ from everyday life but integral to it. Chapter 4 demonstrates how motoring through the countryside, an increasingly common recreational pursuit for the British middle classes from the 1920s, becomes the source for just such an extraordinary encounter with nature’s beauty in one Woolf essay. In contrast to Hume then, for Woolf the experiential realms of the extraordinary and ordinary are both a part of common life and are intimately related in a number of complex ways. As she comments in ‘Phases of Fiction’, the material world comes to the fore when our habitual attitude is suspended:

By cutting off the responses which are called out in the actual life, the novelist frees us to take delight, as we do when ill or travelling, in things in themselves. We can see the strangeness of them only when habit has ceased to immerse us in them, and we stand outside watching what has no power over us one way or the other. Then we see the mind at work; we are amused by its power to make patterns; by its power to bring out relations in things and disparities which are covered over when we are acting by habit or driven on by the ordinary impulses. (*CE2*, 82)

Two other significant differences between Hume’s account of common life and Woolf’s presentation of ordinary experience can be observed. Firstly, Hume views ‘common life’, the experiential space of ordinary people, as a largely unreflective and thereby epistemologically unproblematic space. The layperson is not preoccupied with the traumas of the sceptical metaphysician who finds himself

⁶⁸ Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, Philosophical Works*, sec. 12, pt. 3, p. 133.

alienated from the ordinary world by doubting its objective reality.⁶⁹ Woolf does not see ordinary life or the everyday as unreflective realms of experience in the way that Hume and some other theorists of the everyday do. While Hume wants to develop a philosophy that supports the epistemological value of our ordinary beliefs, he does not view the ‘vulgar’, the masses, as inclined to engage in reflective thought of a philosophical kind in everyday life. Although this attitude may well be a consequence of Hume’s historical context, rather than intellectual prejudice, for Woolf the lives of ordinary people in the early twentieth century are marked by experiential complexity. She does not, as Gillian Beer states, ‘set thinking apart from ordinary experience’.⁷⁰ Secondly, for Woolf, the natural or common-sense attitude is not always reflective of the values and attitudes of ordinary people in the way it is traditionally assumed to be in philosophy. As my discussion in the following chapter of her early shorter fiction will show, Woolf associates common sense and normative ideas about the world with patriarchy and political propaganda, and interrogates the origins of our so-called common sense, customary or natural attitudes. While I have noted here some differences between Woolf’s and Hume’s views of common life and its philosophical investigation, suggestive consonances appear elsewhere, such as their respective accounts of the mind-body relation, and also ethics, the latter of which I discuss in Chapter 7.

G.E. Moore’s Defence of Common Sense

While some scholars, such as S.P. Rosenbaum, have argued for the influence of G.E. Moore’s realism on Woolf’s thought, other critics, such as Mark Hussey, find little correspondence between their respective ideas about reality: ‘The Moorean universe, endorsed by such as [Bertrand] Russell and [John Maynard] Keynes, is continually questioned by the novels.’⁷¹ While I think that Woolf was interested in and engaged with Moore’s ideas, evidenced by the fact that she read his *Principia Ethica* (1903), there is little in common between his explicit and her implicit philosophy. Moore’s essay ‘A Defence of Common Sense’ (1925) highlights the differences between their respective attitudes to ordinary experience.⁷²

⁶⁹ Livingston, *Hume’s Philosophy of Common Life*, ch. 1.

⁷⁰ Beer, *Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground*, 2–4.

⁷¹ Mark Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World: The Philosophy of Virginia Woolf’s Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1986), 99; S.P. Rosenbaum, ‘The philosophical realism of Virginia Woolf’, in *English Literature and British Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971).

⁷² Woolf first read Moore’s ethical treatise *Principia Ethica* in 1908 and I will return to his account of colour perception in relation to Woolf’s sketch ‘Blue & Green’ in Chapter 2; for Woolf’s comments on Moore’s *Principia Ethica* see Woolf’s *Letters*, vol. 1, letters 435, 438, 444; pp. 352–3; 357; 364. In these letters she expresses some difficulty with his ideas and his abstruse style.

G.E. Moore, whose intellectual dialogues with Woolf will be the topic of Chapter 2, was a Cambridge philosopher who developed close intellectual and personal ties with the Bloomsbury Group, many male members of which studied philosophy at Cambridge, such as Desmond MacCarthy, Leonard Woolf and Lytton Strachey.⁷³ At the turn of the twentieth century, Moore's common-sense realism effectively overturned the Hegelian idealism currently in vogue under the influence of J.E. McTaggart, and Moore and Bertrand Russell became very influential figures in British epistemology, logic and ethics.⁷⁴ Moore's 'A Defence of Common Sense' sets out a number of propositions about himself and other human beings that he argues are 'truisms' which he knows to be true of himself and most other people. The sorts of 'truisms' he argues for are very basic, such as the objective existence of his mind, his body, other bodies and the world. For example, he 'knows' that since his body was born it has been 'either in contact with or not far from the surface of the earth' and that in addition to his body, there have been 'large numbers of other living human bodies' of a similar kind. He knows that he has 'thought of imaginary things ... had dreams ... [and] feelings of many different kinds'.⁷⁵ He then goes on to show, much as Hume did before him, the difficulty that any sceptic will face when they try to refute such kinds of common-sense knowledge.

Like Hume, who viewed scepticism to be philosophically and morally dangerous, Moore's philosophy seeks to valorize our common-sense beliefs about the world, and argues from the natural attitude. He views idealism to be, like Hume's 'false philosophy', non-intuitive and violent upon our everyday beliefs. While the problem of scepticism is central to the philosophical projects of Hume and Moore, I do not think it is an issue that Woolf takes quite so seriously. The presence, the vivid reality of the external world, explodes with great force and energy throughout her writing and was a constant influence upon her, as she comments in her diary in 1928: 'The look of things has a great power over me. Even now, I have to watch the rooks beating up against the wind, which is high' (D3, 191).

⁷³ For a discussion of Moore's influence on Bloomsbury philosophy see Johnstone, *The Bloomsbury Group* and McNeillie, 'Bloomsbury', in *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, eds Roe and Sellers, 1–27.

⁷⁴ In a letter to Ethyl Smyth in 1936, Woolf expressed her interest in what she described as McTaggart's 'mystic Hegelianism'; see Woolf's *Letters*, vol. 6, letter 3098 to Ethyl Smyth, 16 January 1936, 5–6. She is likely referring to his *Philosophical Studies*, which was published in 1934. Woolf tended to be drawn to the more idealist and literary philosophers she read, such as Plato, Walter Pater, Coleridge, Wordsworth and McTaggart, as opposed to the rational-empiricist and analytic style of philosophy espoused by her father and contemporaries such as Moore and Russell (see note 72 on her response to reading Moore above).

⁷⁵ G.E. Moore, 'A defence of common sense', in *Philosophical Papers* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1959), 32–59; 33–4.

While in her fiction, Woolf interrogates the nature of reality and presents it as something complex and by no means entirely accessible to human understanding, I do not believe that she doubted the independent existence of the external world or our capacity to know it in some manner through sense perception. By contrast, the sorts of truisms that Moore is seeking to establish are ones that respond to the problem of scepticism. Woolf's analysis of ordinary experience and common-sense belief is based upon a different set of questions and problems. Rather than attempting to show that other bodies exist, as Moore does in his essay, she asks whether we can truly talk about common experiences of the body if there is not even an adequate language for pain. This question is pursued in Chapter 3. When we talk about seeing a patch of 'blue' or 'green', she asks if we can assume that these words represent the same experience for everyone, and whether single words like 'blue' and 'red' can capture the complex cluster of experiences to which they refer. These issues are explored in Chapter 2. To what extent did the new forms of technology that were progressively becoming an integral part of Western modernity's everyday life during Woolf's lifetime alter perception, understanding and human relationships? For Woolf, an account of common experience has to be more sophisticated than Moore's, as we daily assume and rely upon a body of shared knowledge and experience far broader than the simple examples for which he argues in his 'A Defence of Common Sense'.

One further issue relating to ideas about the ordinary and common that needs to be addressed in this introduction is class. The word 'common' clearly entails class connotations. While the term refers to that which is shared and public, it also refers to people who are not distinguished by 'rank or dignity'.⁷⁶ As Michael Whitworth observes in his discussion of lower social groups in Britain in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, class is not as much of a focal issue in Woolf's writing as it is for some of her contemporaries, such as E.M. Forster and James Joyce. This is perhaps due to the fact that Woolf seemed reluctant to speak on behalf of those whose lives she had little direct experience or first-hand knowledge of (such as the lower classes or people of other races or ethnicities). However, Whitworth, as do I, sees her interest in 'eccentrics and outsiders' to reflect her concern for people who are marginalized for various reasons, or who defy easy social categorization.⁷⁷ Thus, while class is not a primary focus of this study, various issues relating to ideas of difference and social power are addressed throughout. Furthermore, in discussing Woolf's exploration of the ordinary and recognizing it as a central concern in her writing, and by analysing the literary strategies by which she relocates the debates of philosophers in the context of everyday life in a form that is accessible to the common reader, this study develops upon claims by other Woolf critics, including Melba Cuddy-Keane, Gillian Beer and Kate Flint, that

⁷⁶ 'Common', *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1961), 12 vols, vol. 2, 690.

⁷⁷ Michael Whitworth, *Virginia Woolf: Authors in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 56.

Woolf's writing is not alienating or elitist or restricted to the realm of the internal and private.⁷⁸ Instead, she presents to the reader her sense of 'an ordinary mind on an ordinary day' in the hope that as a community of readers we might establish a clearer understanding of that complex topography of experience that she calls in 'The Leaning Tower' the 'common ground' (CE2, 180–81).

Approaching Ordinary Experience

Through examining texts from her early shorter fiction, essays, autobiographical writings and novels, with a focus on a number of shorter and less-discussed works, this study approaches questions about the ordinary in Woolf's oeuvre in three ways. Part 1, 'Quotidian Things', examines Woolf's representations in her early shorter fiction and *To the Lighthouse* of a subject's perception of everyday objects; both material things, like a table or flower, and properties of objects, such as colour. I consider her interrogation in these texts of common sense, positivist, instrumental and habitual approaches to the everyday, in the context of her reading of British empiricists such as Hume and Stephen, Victorian positivism, and the common-sense philosophy of G.E. Moore. Part 2, 'Rethinking Ordinary Experience', turns to modes of experience that Woolf argues are common but that have the potential to challenge normative understandings of ourselves and the world, such as physical pain and illness, the impact of technology on everyday life and experience, and the presence of moments of being in daily life. This section of the study focuses upon daily or common experiences that challenge or disrupt the cotton wool of non-being, and how the subject negotiates these moments of experiential conflict or paradox in relation to existing patterns of everyday life and thought. Part 3, 'The Ordinary, Being, Ethics', turns to the recurring motif of a numinous 'pattern' in Woolf's writing and its relationship to the everyday, material and social world. Developing upon ideas of community integral to Woolf's philosophy of a pattern, the final chapter demonstrates how the ordinary takes on ethical significance in Woolf's oeuvre, particularly in terms of her account of our relationship to, and sense of responsibility for, the other.

Although Woolf views philosophy to be an essential part of much literature, she criticises art that is a vehicle for philosophical dogmatism (CE1, 230). She states this belief in her diary in October 1932 whilst reflecting on the 'system' that she believed is expressed throughout D.H. Lawrence's letters:

I dont [*sic*] want 'a philosophy' in the least; I dont [*sic*] believe in other people's reading of riddles ... I mean its [*sic*] so barren; so easy; giving advice on a system. The moral is, if you want to help, never systematise – not till you're 70:

⁷⁸ Melba Cuddy-Keane, *Virginia Woolf, the Intellectual, and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Kate Flint, 'Reading uncommonly: Virginia Woolf and the practice of reading', *The Yearbook of English Studies* 26 (1996): 187–98.

& have been supple & sympathetic & creative and & tried out all your nerves and scopes ... Art is being rid of all preaching: things in themselves: the sentence in itself beautiful ... L[awrence]. would only say what proved something ... Hence his attraction for those who want to be fitted; which I dont [*sic*] (D4, 126)

While resisting theories and systematic philosophies, Woolf's writing self-consciously engages with many philosophical issues and questions. As Gillian Beer observes: 'She picked up lightly the thoroughgoing arguments of historians, physicists, astronomers, philosophers, politicians, and the stray talk of passers-by. That lightness is not superficial. Rather, it "lets the light through". Her glance has a wide arc.'⁷⁹ While I consider Woolf's treatment of several philosophical and theoretical questions as they inform her account of ordinary experience, I do not propose that she sets forth a systematic philosophy as such. However, her refusal of system does not come at the expense of the depth, subtlety or suggestiveness of her ideas, nor are those ideas haphazardly examined. If Woolf rejects philosophical 'system' building in literature, 'pattern-making' may be a more apt phrase to describe the philosophical work that infuses so much of her writing.

Woolf's love of intellectual enquiry in part accounts for her life-long interest in Greek philosophy, which valued the process of pursuing knowledge as much as the truths obtained. Beginning her studies in Greek and Latin at the age of 15, Woolf later became an admirer of Plato's dialogues and she returned to Greek literature and philosophy throughout her life.⁸⁰ As she states in her essay 'On Not Knowing Greek', concurring with the Socratic method in Plato's dialogues: '[W]hat matters is not so much the end we reach as our manner of reaching it' (E4, 46). As such, dialectical enquiry and flexible, supple forms of thought that engage and involve the reader are, as Melba Cuddy-Keane has argued, key features of Woolf's philosophical method.⁸¹ Such dialectical forms are employed in her examination of everyday objects in the short stories 'The Mark on the Wall', 'Solid Objects' and 'Kew Gardens', the texts where this enquiry now turns.

⁷⁹ Beer, *Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground*, 4.

⁸⁰ In 1897, at 15 years of age, she began attending classes on Greek at King's College under the tutorage of Dr Warr, and later, Latin and Greek under the tutorage of Clara Pater, Walter Pater's sister. In 1902, she started private lessons in Greek with Janet Case, from which time she started to read some of Plato's dialogues, such as the *Symposium*, more systematically. Her notes on the *Phaedrus*, *Protagoras*, *Euthyphro* and *Symposium* are preserved, and Emily Dalgarno argues that there are strong indications that Woolf also read the *Republic*; see Dalgarno, *Virginia Woolf and the Visible World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 41–3.

⁸¹ For example, Melba Cuddy-Keane discusses Woolf's resistance to dogmatic 'pugnacious' prose in Woolf's essay 'Middlebrow' and her preference for 'elastic, pluralistic prose that challenges the reader to think'; Melba Cuddy-Keane, 'Brow-beating, wool-gathering, and the brain of the common reader', *Virginia Woolf Out of Bounds: Selected Papers from the Tenth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf*, eds Jessica Berman and Jane Goldman (New York: Pace University Press, 2001), 58–66; 62.