

James Discourses 'in the Public Street'*

VIRGINIA WOOLF

... we went and had tea with Henry James today, and Mr and Mrs [George] Prothero,¹ at the golf club; and Henry James fixed me with his staring blank eye – it is like a child's marble – and said 'My dear Virginia, they tell me – they tell me – they tell me – that you – as indeed being your father's daughter nay your grandfather's grandchild – the descendant I may say of a century – of a century – of quill pens and ink – ink – ink pots, yes, yes, yes, they tell me – ahm m m – that you, that you, that you *write* in short.' This went on in the public street, while we all waited, as farmers wait for the hen to lay an egg – do they? – nervous, polite, and now on this foot now on that. I felt like a condemned person, who sees the knife drop and stick and drop again. Never did any woman hate 'writing' as much as I do. But when I am old and famous I shall discourse like Henry James. We had to stop periodically to let him shake himself free of the thing; he made phrases over the bread and butter 'rude and rapid' it was, and told us all the scandal of Rye. 'Mr Jones has eloped, I regret to say, to Tasmania; leaving 12 little Jones, and a possible 13th to Mrs Jones; most regrettable, most unfortunate, and yet not wholly an action to which one has no private key of one's own so to speak.'

* *The Flight of the Mind: The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 1: 1888–1912, ed. Nigel Nicolson (London: Hogarth Press, 1975) p. 306.

NOTE

Virginia Woolf (1882–1941), novelist and essayist. The extract is taken from a letter to Violet Dickinson dated 25 August 1907.

1. See p. 25.