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Review of *Virginia Woolf and the Essay* by Beth
Carole Rosenberg & Jeanne Dubino

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With the publication of *Virginia Woolf and the Essay*, Beth Carole Rosenberg and Jeanne Dubino extend the scholarly conversations about Virginia Woolf's essays initiated by "Jean Guiguet, B.J. Kirkpatrick, Andrew McNeillie, Brenda Silver, and Elizabeth Steele" (ix). The collection opens with Rosenberg and Dubino's "Introduction," then divides into five sections: Woolf and History; Woolf and Literary History; Woolf and Reading; Woolf and Genre; and The Essay and Feminism. The purpose of this collection is simple: it attempts to situate Woolf the essayist on the same critical plane as Woolf the novelist and Woolf the feminist.

Rosenberg and Dubino's excellent "Introduction" surveys four stages of critics' receptions of Woolf's essays. The first stage, 1923-1941, denotes the contemporary reception during which time critics did not engage Woolf's ideas but rather used her texts "as a springboard from which to launch their own opinions" (3). The second stage, 1941-1970, signals "three decades of backlash" when critics either "treated [Woolf's] essays only in the context of her fiction" or engaged her essays on their own terms mostly "to diminish them" (2). The third stage, 1970 to the present, marks the feminist reception that "tended to focus primarily on *A Room of One's Own*, *Three Guineas*, and scattered essays that address the position of women" (2). But the fourth stage, 1992 to the present, designates a more encompassing critical response wherein scholars are beginning "to treat the entire body of Woolf's criticism and not separate out feminism from her critical work as a whole" (2).

In their "Introduction" Rosenberg and Dubino claim that Woolf's essay writing both continues, and resists, the essay tradition. They synthesize Woolf's musings about the essay genre as follows: "For Woolf, the essay is art, not science, with a form different from the novel and poetry. It does have logic, form, structure, though its form is self-reflexive. A self-reflexive artifact, it strives to represent and imitate the process of thought itself. Its own particular form constructs its content while, at the same time, it tries to articulate it. That is, it neither begins with a thesis that it proceeds to demonstrate, nor is it inductive, building to a formulated and concrete conclusion" (13). Rosenberg and Dubino further note that, for Woolf, the essay genre encompasses numerous subcategories: "essayistic criticism, such as "Mr.

Bennett and Mrs. Brown" and "Modern Fiction"; essayistic memoir, such as "A Sketch of the Past"; essayistic travel writing, such as "Street Haunting" and "To Spain"; essayistic biography, such as that of her father Leslie Stephen and her good friend Roger Fry; essayistic fiction, such as "A Talk about Memoirs"; and what one might call fictional essays, like *A Room of One's Own* (13).

The collection's first section, *Woolf and History*, locates Woolf's essays both within historical frameworks and within Woolf scholarship. An appropriate lead, Jeanne Dubino's "Virginia Woolf: From Book Reviewer to Literary Critic, 1904-1918" traces the reviews and criticism that Woolf wrote while trying, and indeed succeeding, to establish herself as a published writer. Eleanor McNees' "Colonizing Virginia Woolf" reviews the reviews of Woolf's work, demonstrating that they often fall into two categories—those that treat Woolf's texts as "beautiful but irrelevant designs" and those that treat them as "didactic political position papers" (55). McNees concludes, quite rightly, by entreating readers to resist both stances, just as Woolf would have done. Theoretically sophisticated but slightly repetitive, Melba Cuddy-Keane's "Virginia Woolf and the Varieties of Historicist Experience" convincingly argues that Woolf's textual practice of historiography is often more revolutionary than her textual claims about history.

The second section, *Woolf and Literary History*, provides four engaging articles examining how different literary periods influence Woolf's thinking and writing. Sally Greene's "Entering Woolf's Renaissance Imaginary" not only sports the best conclusion in the book, but it successfully recovers *The Second Common Reader* from "the benign neglect of the current generation of feminist critics" (81) by demonstrating that Woolf's text evokes both a feminist and a late Renaissance literary subtext. Edward A. Hungerford's "'deeply and consciously affected . . .': Virginia Woolf's Reviews of the Romantic Poets" considers how the "patterns of thought" and "language" (97) of Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, and particularly Wordsworth permeate Woolf's life and writings. Cheryl Mares' "'The Burning Ground of the Present': Woolf and Her Contemporaries" entertainingly examines why Woolf lauds Proust as the preeminent modern novelist and why she berates Joyce and Lawrence, yet Mares furthers an important argument: "what we see as errors in Woolf's judgment of contemporary work prove to be far more interesting and worthy of investigation if we resist the tendency simply to privatize or pathologize them by attributing them to her vanities and jealousies" (132). Michael Kaufmann's "A Modernism of One's Own" contrasts the influences of Woolf and T.S. Eliot in defining and disseminating Modernism, given Woolf's comparatively large reading audience and Eliot's comparatively small one; the article interestingly argues that each author's readership reflects each author's theory of reading, i.e., Woolf's imagining a community of common readers who make meaning and Eliot's longing for a small group of artist-critics who may deign to instruct common readers in the art of proper interpretation.

The third section, *Woolf and Reading*, opens with Beth Rigel Daugherty's thought-provoking "Readin', Writin', and Revisin': Virginia Woolf's 'How Should One Read a Book?'" which claims, first, that Woolf's acts of revision were influenced by her always-under-revision concept of the common reader and, second, that Woolf's common reader ultimately "challenges us to reconsider how we teach readin', writin', and revisin'" (170). Karen Schiff's "Moments of Reading and Woolf's Literary Criticism" aptly argues that Woolf's "critical writings explore her fascination with reading even more than they expose her opinions about specific books" (178), specifying that the "point of reading [for Woolf] is analogous [thought not identical with] a moment of being" (188). Anne E. Fernald's "Pleasure and Belief in 'Phases of Fiction'" maintains that in "Phases in Fiction" Woolf delineates a "theory of the novel based on the pleasure of reading" (193). Juxtaposing Woolf's theory with Lionel Trilling's and Roland Barthes's, Fernald's article demonstrates how the tension between use and pleasure in Woolf's texts leads to questions of belief; ultimately, the article concludes that Woolf's theory "extends the pleasure of reading into the pleasure of judgment, almost imperceptibly bridging the gap between reading and criticism" (210).

The fourth section, *Woolf and Genre*, entertains topics unusual in Woolf scholarship. Sally A. Jacobsen's informative "Four Stages in Woolf's Idea of Comedy" resists the temptation to develop a "coherent theory of comedy" (215) for Woolf but does explore Woolf's ideas about comedy "in the context of theories of comedy [she] had read and of ideas about art that surrounded her in Bloomsbury" (216). George M. Johnson's "A Haunted House: Ghostly Presences in Woolf's Essays and Early Fiction" argues that Woolf "severely misrepresents the fiction of her immediate predecessors" (235), the Edwardians; the article then traces Woolf's "assimilation of supernatural imagery" to study its origins and its impact on her work, finally asserting that Woolf assimilated this imagery both "'to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit' (*CR* 1:213) of life and to avoid becoming mired in the materialist conventions of *some* of the work of *some* of her immediate predecessors" (251).

The final section, *Woolf and Feminism*, performs a postmodern reversal of an old feminist adage by offering the impersonal as the political. Lisa Low's "Refusing to Hit Back: Virginia Woolf and the Impersonality Question" is a reading of Woolf's texts that desires to rescue Woolf from identity politics feminists by claiming that "Woolf uses impersonality to undermine historical divisions between male and female writing, connecting personal writing to both sexes, and to advocate impersonal writing—not for its authoritarian potential, as Eliot might, but because it is empathic and democratic" (259). Although the binary opposition between postmodern and identity feminists may be more blurred today than this article allows, it does offer an intriguing look at how Woolf politicized one of Modernism's central tenets. Catherine Sandbach-Dalhström's "'Que scais-je?': Virginia

Woolf and the Essay as Feminist Critique” argues similarly that Woolf practiced her feminism textually via the essay, a genre that aided her voyage of discovery by affording her the textual space in which to assume two impersonal voices: “the skeptical outsider who questions the masculine bias of the culture of the past” (277) and the skeptical insider [my term] who “valoriz[es]...the feminine...through an evocation of the carnival spirit” (286). Yet according to Sandbach-Dalhström, neither voice may adopt “a final or conclusive position. For to do so...would inevitably and paradoxically be to introduce a new system of conventional wisdom” (289).

Perhaps the question begged by postmodernism is the question that Woolf proffers throughout her essays. Life and art are never simply questions of free play versus fixed truths; rather, they are always already questions of the water *and* the bowl, always already questions of the moment. In this particular moment, *Virginia Woolf and the Essay* is a welcome addition to Woolf scholarship.

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