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## The Common Reader and Critical Method in Virginia Woolf's Essays

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*ELIZABETH C. MADISON*

Virginia Woolf's fiction has received considerable critical attention in the past five years; at least a half-dozen books have appeared to analyze various aspects of her novels. Yet her essays, comprising an appreciable body of criticism, have been relegated to secondary importance by both her contemporaries and later commentators. Those who write about Mrs. Woolf tend to note in a short chapter, if at all, her critical acumen, her unsystematic critical method, and the sharp contrast between the styles of prose found in the essays and in the novels. Then, after praising the essays with a generally high degree of commendation, they largely ignore them except as they illuminate the philosophy of her own novels and form a rationale for her own fictional innovations. Such an approach can represent only a severely limited assessment of a significant corpus of her writing — four volumes of collected essays. These essays reveal an unusual analytical intellect and critical lucidity responding to a large and diverse body of literature. Certainly they merit further inquiry.

I am concerned here with ascertaining the tenets of Virginia Woolf's critical method rather than with extrapolating from the essays any theories about literature in general, about the specific genres, or about their applicability to her own fiction, although the essays assuredly yield abundant food for thought in these latter categories. But this investigation seeks to examine the essays as criticism, to outline those attitudes and assumptions that underlie Mrs. Woolf's substantial contribution to criticism. And the matter is, perhaps, not so difficult, since she has

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clearly and astutely defined her own approach to criticism — if we use that term in the loose sense to mean writing about literature. For that is what she does in her essays. She postulates three ground rules or definitions for reading and writing about literature, and with consistency and conviction, over a thirty-odd-year period, she follows those principles. Readers may quarrel with her concepts or with her judgments but may not accuse her of acting in bad faith, for her essays demonstrate a strict adherence to both the scope and the limitations she sets for herself.

One must start with her definition of the common reader. She prefaces the first collection of her essays with a quotation from Samuel Johnson: “I rejoice to concur with the common reader; for by the common sense of readers, uncorrupted by literary prejudices, after all the refinements of subtlety and the dogmatism of learning, must be finally decided all claim to poetical honours.”<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf places herself in the category of common reader and goes on to explain that if Dr. Johnson’s statement is true, then perhaps she is justified in recording her responses to books she has read. She is careful to separate herself, as a common reader, from those who are scholars and critics, presumably on the basis of education, which, she implies, gives the scholar and critic systems and criteria by which to categorize, correct, and judge. Denied those, the common reader can construct only what she calls a “rickety and ramshackle” context for the book at hand.

Thus in her definition of the common reader, she seemingly deprecates his qualities: he is “hasty, inaccurate, and superficial,” and “his deficiencies as a critic are too obvious to be pointed out.” Yet as one reads the essays, it becomes apparent that the positive qualities of the common reader, which are barely suggested in the prefatory definition, are the qualities that shape her own essays and give rise to what she considers to be vital critical response. The common reader, she asserts, reads for his own pleasure and is “guided by an instinct to create for himself, out of whatever odds and ends he can come by, some kind of whole — a portrait of a man, a sketch of an age, a theory of the art of writing.” The implications for her own essays are manifold and will be considered in greater detail later in the paper. Clearly, though, the emphasis here is on the reader’s creative involvement in the author’s world and his subsequent derivation from that involvement of “some kind of whole” — an insight into the author’s personality, an apprehension of the historical elements reflected in the literature, or an

awareness of the characteristics of the genre. And in practice, each of the essays concentrates on one of these aspects.

The concept of the common reader forms the philosophical basis for her critical method. Her belief in his function is crucial and not just an excuse to dabble in criticism. Again and again in the essays, she asserts that literature will survive only so long as there exists a healthy society of common readers — readers who are serious enough to risk criticism, in short, an audience. Two characteristic and forthright statements from the essays may serve to document this persuasion. In “The Leaning Tower,” she implores her readers to pick the newest books from the shelves and to “decide which are the lasting, which are the perishing. This is very difficult. Also we must become critics because in the future we are not going to leave writing to be done for us. We are going to add our own experience, to make our own contribution. That is even more difficult. For that too we need to be critics.”<sup>22</sup> And in an even more explicit declaration of this credo, she concludes another essay saying:

We remain readers; we shall not put on the further glory that belongs to those rare beings who are also critics. But still we have our responsibilities as readers and even our importance. The standards we raise and the judgments we pass steal into the air and become part of the atmosphere which writers breathe as they work. An influence is created which tells upon them even if it never finds its way into print. And that influence, if it were well instructed, vigorous and individual and sincere, might be of great value now when criticism is necessarily in abeyance, when books pass in review like the procession of animals in a shooting-gallery, and the critic has only one second in which to load and aim and shoot and may well be pardoned if he mistakes rabbits for tigers, eagles for barndoor fowls, or misses altogether and wastes his shot upon some peaceful cow grazing in a further field. If behind the erratic gunfire of the press the author felt that there was another kind of criticism, the opinion of people reading for the love of reading, slowly and unprofessionally, and judging with great sympathy and yet with great severity, might this not improve the quality of his work? And if by our means books were to become stronger, richer, and more varied, that would be an end worth reaching (vol. 2, pp. 10-11).

From this initial definition, the reader discerns quickly that Virginia Woolf proclaims that hers is an eclectic or relativistic criticism, necessitating an amalgam of biographical and historical, formal, and moral approaches. Her stance is reminiscent of Pater in its rejection of neo-classical concepts of genre and of criticism and in its emphasis upon the interaction between author and reader. Yet, if one must categorize

the method, it remains, fundamentally, impressionistic, anchored firmly to the reader's — the common reader's — reaction to the work.

The second definition that describes her critical method is the most central and the most complex — her criteria for reading a book. She begins the essay entitled “How Should One Read a Book?” with a general statement of counsel: “The only advice, indeed, one person can give another about reading is to take no advice, to follow your own instincts, to use your own reason, to come to your own conclusions” (vol. 2, p. 1). Here again the reader perceives her distrust of “authorities,” her suspicion of systems and theories.

After this prefatory disclaimer, the advice that she does give is two-fold. The first step paraphrases Coleridge's “willing suspension of disbelief”: the reader must give himself over to the author's conviction, must imagine, accept, and understand the author's world.

The second step is to judge the book by comparing it with others that the reader knows. This second step is, she admits, far more difficult than the first, requiring “such imagination, insight, and learning that it is hard to conceive any one mind sufficiently endowed” (vol. 2, p. 9). Still, the common reader must hazard the task, must rely on his own taste and feeling rather than abdicating to the critics, of whom there are only a few of worth and from whom help may be obtained only when the reader comes prepared with his own questions. She reiterates and amplifies her advice in another essay, “How It Strikes a Contemporary”: one is “to respect one's own instincts, to follow them fearlessly and, rather than submit them to the control of any critic or reviewer alike, to check them by reading and reading again the masterpieces of the past” (vol. 2, p. 154).

General and amorphous as these dictates are, they form the matrix of each essay. The emphasis falls now on Virginia Woolf's concept of the author's vision, now on her judgment of that vision, but always both steps receive thoughtful consideration. A closer look at a half-dozen essays will illustrate this duple process in her method.

Initially, attention is given to the author's world. She seeks to recreate the author's temperament and environment in order to clarify and appreciate the forces which shape the point of view. To demonstrate this interest on her part, I have selected three essays dealing with three different periods and three different types of literature. An obvious and often-discussed example is “The Pastons and Chaucer.” Here she begins with the four volumes of letters of the Paston family to

recreate the conditions of their lives — their declining financial position; the smoking, cheerless rooms of their decaying mansion; the drudgery and austerity of their everyday existence — to explain Sir John's affinity for reading Chaucer, who allowed him to escape from the tedium; who ordered the wild, untamed English countryside; who entertained him. The essay typifies her concern for understanding the manifold influences that shape an author's vision and for remarking those features of an author's world that seem to her exceptional, whether viewed by an imaginatively reconstructed contemporary of Chaucer or by a modern reader.

Consideration of an author's personality occupies at times a central position in her critical method as well, for that temperament alters and colors the fictive world. Thus in an essay on George Gissing she again uses letters — this time Gissing's letters — to sketch the details of his impoverished youth and his fascination with facts. These two attributes then form the angle from which she comments, mostly in a negative way, upon his novels. "Gissing," she wrote, "is one of those imperfect novelists through whose books one sees the life of the author faintly covered by the lives of fictitious people" (vol. 1, p. 297). And three paragraphs later she adds:

So, dining off lentils and hearing the men cry paraffin for sale in the streets of Islington, Gissing paid for the publication himself. It was then that he formed the habit of getting up at five in the morning in order to tramp half across London and coach Mr. M. before breakfast. Often enough Mr. M. sent down word that he was already engaged, and then another page was added to the dismal chronicle of life in modern *Grub Street* — we are faced by another of those problems with which literature is sown so thick. The writer has dined upon lentils; he gets up at five; he walks across London; he finds Mr. M. still in bed, whereupon he stands forth as the champion of life as it is, and proclaims that ugliness is truth, truth ugliness, and that is all we need to know. But there are signs that the novel resents such treatment. To use a burning consciousness of one's own misery, of the shackles that cut one's own limbs, to quicken one's sense of life in general, as Dickens did, to shape out of the murk which has surrounded one's childhood some resplendent figure such as Macawber or Mrs. Gamp, is admirable: but to use personal suffering to rivet the reader's sympathy and curiosity upon your private cases is disastrous (vol. 1, p. 298).

In a rather long essay on contemporary literature entitled "The Leaning Tower," she advances a basically sociological theory to explain the tenor of modern English letters, focusing upon the interaction between the artist's sensibility and societal forces. The nineteenth-century writers had both peace and prosperity, she argues. True, there

were wars, but they were remote. Both Scott and Jane Austen lived and wrote through the Napoleonic wars without ever mentioning them. The nineteenth-century authors observed the little corner of reality that they individually knew and transformed that segment of life into literature. "They had leisure; they had security; life was not going to change; they themselves were not going to change. They could look; and look away" (vol. 2, p. 167). Further, she says, most of these authors had two additional advantages — middle-class upbringing and good, expensive educations. Then in 1914 England experienced a terrible upheaval. That generation of writers, very similar in station and in education to their ancestral practitioners and ensconced in the same comfortable tower which housed their predecessors, viewed a very different reality:

When they looked at human life what did they see? Everywhere change; everywhere revolution. In Germany, in Russia, in Italy, in Spain, all the old hedges were being rooted up; all the old towers were being thrown to the ground. Other hedges were being planted; other towers were being raised. There was communism in one country; in another fascism. The whole of civilization, of society, was changing. There was, it is true, neither war nor revolution in England itself. All those writers had time to write many books before 1939. But even in England towers that were built of gold and stucco were no longer steady towers. They were leaning towers (vol. 2, pp. 170-71).

The rest of the essay proceeds from these assumptions. For example, she examines the poetry of Louis MacNeice and explains that she is dissatisfied with it because it is a product of its time. MacNeice and the majority of England's men of letters in the period between 1914 and 1939 can be seen, she says, as trapped upon that leaning tower, reviling the middle-class society that supports them but having nothing to put in its place.

This initial stage in reading a book, entering imaginatively into the author's world, constitutes the cornerstone of her critical method. As the brief survey of the various essays demonstrates, Virginia Woolf considers reading a communication activity. The reader must appreciate the "facts" of the fictive world. This belief accounts for the numerous inclusions in her essays of what her commentators have identified as history, biography, theory, or argument. They are absolutely correct in affirming that hers is not traditional criticism, but miss the mark, it seems to me, by categorizing the essays under these other terms. For that is not her express intent either. The reader who seeks to realize as fully as possible the magnitude of a literary work

increases his understanding by considering the personality and society which produced it. But for Virginia Woolf, these considerations are means, not ends, and are finally of secondary importance. She makes this assumption explicit in her essay on *Robinson Crusoe*. The essay opens with a few sentences about the development of the novel and proceeds to a short history of Defoe's life. Then she concludes the paragraph by hypothesizing that this knowledge of theory and biography may not render any aid to an intelligent, pleasurable reading experience. She proceeds:

For the book itself remains. However we may wind and wriggle, loiter and dally in our approach to books, a lonely battle waits us at the end. There is a piece of business to be transacted between writer and reader before any further dealings are possible, and to be reminded in the middle of this private interview that Defoe sold stockings, had brown hair, and was stood in the pillory is a distraction and a worry. Our first task, and it is often formidable enough, is to master his perspective. Until we know how the novelist orders his world, the ornaments of that world, which the critics press upon us, the adventures of the writer, to which biographers draw attention, are superfluous possessions of which we can make no use (vol. 1, p. 70).

What the reader sees is not a contradiction of nor a moment of aberration from her usual method but a clear ordering of priorities. The common reader ultimately must come to terms with the work itself. Sensibility and society are mirrored in the work and can help to explain the form it takes, but the author's conviction must shine through, as she contends Defoe's does in *Robinson Crusoe*. She declares the novel a masterpiece, because Defoe has kept consistent with his own sense of perspective. "Thus, Defoe, by reiterating that nothing but a plain earthenware pot stands in the foreground, persuades us to see remote islands and the solitude of the human soul. By believing fixedly in solidity of the pot and its earthiness, he has subdued every other element to his design; he has roped the whole universe into harmony" (vol. 1, pp. 74-75). Jane Austen's novels, so unlike Defoe's, also receive her approbation, because they, too, order the author's world so that her vision of reality communicates with force and emotion. And although she finds a number of faults with Hardy's novels, she ranks him high among writers, because he makes his readers believe in his vision. These three novelists have little in common. Their material and techniques are poles apart, yet all three receive homage, for they all possess the power or conviction to impress upon the reader the truth of their insights.



The second step in her definition of reading and her critical method is comparison. The reader must judge the novel, poem, play, or essay not only on the basis of the author's success in communicating his created world, but also on the basis of the book's success when compared with others of its kind. Such judgment is perforce subjective, rooted in individual taste and emotion. The two steps in the reading process are not readily separable, and her own essays focus more attentively on recreating and analyzing the fictive construct. Yet each essay does offer comparison and judgment. This aspect of her method is apparent in three essays on women novelists, all of whom she admires — Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Jane Austen. In each essay she initially outlines the dominant impressions that emerge from the novels and then evaluates the degree of significance she feels the novels achieve.

The Brontë essay is slight; but Charlotte Brontë is housed in a parsonage on a wild moor, cut off from the wider circle of society which might have provided her with a more generalized, objective view of life. Thus her personality traits appear intensified in her fiction; she is one of those “self centered and self limited writers” who must depend upon her own impressions and emotions (vol. 1, p. 187). Woolf compares *Jane Eyre* to *Jude the Obscure*, because their authors are akin in the force of their personalities, the narrowness of their vision, and the stiff awkwardness of their prose and then contrasts the differences, concluding that “we read Charlotte Brontë not for exquisite observation of character — her characters are vigorous and elementary; not for comedy — hers is grim and crude; not for a philosophic view of life — hers is that of a country parson's daughter, but for her poetry” (vol. 1, pp. 187-88).

As in the Brontë essay, she opens the critique on George Eliot with biographical observations, in this instance personal impressions garnered from various writings of Eliot's contemporaries. From them she sketches the lady — dark, somber, heavy, benevolent, and, again, isolated from society — and goes on to explicate those characteristics as they are reflected in the fiction. “She is no satirist. The movement of her mind was too slow and cumbersome to lend itself to comedy. But she gathers in her large grasp a great bunch of the main elements of human nature and groups them loosely together with a tolerant and wholesome understanding which, as one finds upon re-reading, has not only kept her figures fresh and free, but has given them an unexpected hold upon our laughter and tears” (vol. 1, p. 200). She con-

tinues in the same vein; George Eliot's somberness is the source of her problem, for she has to write about what she does not know well: heroines reared in bucolic settings and heroines moving in middle-class drawing rooms. The result is that readers come to dread her emotional scenes. To illustrate her judgment, Woolf compares George Eliot to Jane Austen:

It is partly that her hold upon dialogue, when it is not dialect, is slack; and partly that she seems to shrink with an elderly dread of fatigue from the effort of emotional concentration. She allows her heroines to talk too much. She has little verbal felicity. She lacks the unerring taste which chooses one sentence and compresses the heart of the scene within that. "Whom are you going to dance with?" asked Mr. Knightly at the Weston's ball. "With you, if you will ask me," said Emma; and she had said enough. Mrs. Casaubon would have talked for an hour and we should have looked out of the window (vol. 1, p. 203).

Quite clearly in this passage she follows her own dictate that necessitates comparison. Yet just as clearly this passage demonstrates her awareness that the common reader's predilections color his judgments, that his evaluation originates in his own taste and instinct.

Virginia Woolf's preference is for Jane Austen, as her essay on that author indicates. It opens, like the earlier two, with impressions of the author — prim, unlovely, frightening, cut off from free access to society. Yet Woolf's judgment of the fiction is almost singularly positive because, she contends, Austen never wrote about what she didn't know, and the balance of her talents conveyed that knowledge with perfection. "Never, even at the emotional age of fifteen, did she round upon herself in shame, obliterate a sarcasm in a spasm of compassion, or blur an outline in a mist of rhapsody. Spasms and rhapsodies, she seems to have said, pointing with her stick, end *there*; and the boundary line is perfectly distinct" (vol. 1, p. 146). One sees here her insistence upon evaluation of the fictive world, but also on the reader's response to that world. What comparison does exist in this essay appears only at the end and is hypothetical. Had Jane Austen lived longer, what novels would we have? Virginia Woolf speculates for a paragraph, concluding that "she would have been the forerunner of Henry James and Proust. . . ." (vol. 1, p. 153).

This cursory examination of three essays on women writers demonstrates this stage of Woolf's critical method — her belief that judicious reader response is grounded in comparison and should openly admit as well the reader's own bias. Hers obviously leans toward Jane Austen for that author's objectivity, stress on characterization, satire of man-

ners, and concern for what Mrs. Woolf calls "human values." To argue that these are the goals of her own novels may be perfectly true but seems peripheral to a discussion of her critical method, since she obeys consistently throughout the essays those ground rules that she sets.

One final note concerning the comparison/evaluation process. Virginia Woolf's method partakes, at times conspicuously, of a moral approach to criticism. The reader must estimate the degree to which an author succeeds in imparting his vision of life and then must assess the validity of that perception or insight. The Gissing and Austen essays manifest the range of her assessment. The concept is even more prominent in the essays that are largely theoretical and that generally deal with contemporary literature. She frequently remarks that contemporary literature fails, because it does not capture the impeccable sense of human values we admire in the masterpieces of the past, that modern writers lack the conviction that imparts quality to life and allows them judgment of conduct. Such concern influences her critical stance. In "Modern Fiction" she expresses her disappointment with the modern novel, because it usually leaves her wondering, as she closes it, "Is it worth while? What is the point of it all?" (vol. 2, p. 105). Her insistence that a writer treat of what is enduring is the central issue of two famous essays which broach very different topics, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" and "The Narrow Bridge of Art."

The third definition I offer may not belong properly in a discussion of Virginia Woolf's critical method, but it is crucial to the form that her essays assume and therefore deserves at least passing notice: her definition of the essay, which finds most explicit statement in "The Modern Essay." Again, the reader may take issue with her concepts but would find it difficult to fault her on the practice of her preachments. The essay of excellence, she says, must meet two requirements: it must give pleasure, and it must be well written. She interjects, in the course of the essay, a third element that is inextricably linked with the former two — the writer's sense of conviction or personality. Here, as elsewhere in her criticism, the reader is both fascinated and frustrated with her proclivity for abstraction and generalization. Yet here, as always, she provides brief examples to illustrate and support. The essay gives pleasure because it intensifies life by focusing on a single idea or vision. There can be no room for straying into extraneous or allied topics. Facts must be presented nakedly and welded into that single vision through the writer's conviction. And she obviously takes

to heart this dictum, for her essays inevitably focus on a dominant impression. By way of example, let us look at "The Elizabethan Lumber Room."

She opens the essay with a brief reference to Haklyut's *Collection of Early Voyages, Travels, and Discoveries of the English Nation* to emphasize the spirit of adventure which infused the Elizabethan world as it sent ship after ship to explore uncharted waters, comparing the volumes to a huge Elizabethan lumber room stuffed with various bundles of instruments and strange, new treasures brought back from a voyage to the New World. Then she moves on quickly to comment upon the ramifications of the English explorations and discoveries for Elizabethan literature, such as the fantastic, exotic characters and settings of Elizabethan drama. She proceeds to the effect of the Elizabethan voyages and the Elizabethan lumber room filled with rarities upon the period's prose, arguing that the freewheeling spirit of adventure is mirrored in the extravagance and confusion of the prose. For clarification, she compares a passage from Sidney to one from Montaigne to underscore the turgid, convoluted quality of the English in relation to the supple, exact diction of the French. Yet she concedes, that English spirit also accounts for the "freshness and audacity" that characterized Elizabethan prose (vol. 1, p. 50). Next she turns to Sir Thomas Browne who, she says, unlike the earlier Elizabethans she has discussed, turns inward, to autobiography. She spends two pages of a nine-page essay either quoting or summarizing various observations from his writings to show that everything he writes is colored with his idiosyncrasies. To bring the essay full circle, to wrap up these observations in the wake of the sea voyages, she concludes her remarks on Browne and ends the essay with "Now we are in the presence of sublime imagination; now rambling through one of the finest lumber rooms in the world—a chamber stuffed from floor to ceiling with ivory, old iron, broken pots, urns, unicorns' horn, and magic glasses full of emerald lights and blue mystery" (vol. 1, p. 53). The essay exemplifies her critical tenets with its inclusion of extraliterary influences and its comparison and judgment. Yet, in addition, it demonstrates her requirement that the essay give enjoyment to the reader by providing him with an intensified, narrowed, single vision of life. The scholarly article may educate, qualify, expand, and inform; but the essay must please and soothe as well as stimulate.

The question of writing well is certainly more nebulous. The essay, she contends, lends itself to striking use of language, especially meta-

phor. The danger is slipping into mere ornament. The essayist, through simple but highly polished language, must convey his impression in prose that is "exact, truthful, and imaginative" in order to give pleasure to the reader (vol. 2, p. 49).

The essays bear witness to Virginia Woolf's belief in writing well. The passages cited throughout this paper testify to the facility, the incantatory power, of her prose. Metaphor abounds. Consider the titles of essays: "The Leaning Tower," "The Elizabethan Lumber Room," "The Patron and the Crocus," "The Narrow Bridge of Art." In each of these essays she explains the nature of the analogy she is employing and then makes that analogy the focus of the analysis of the literary question at hand. More frequently, metaphors are used, often in an elliptical fashion, to illuminate certain theories she is applying. In an essay called "On Rereading Novels" she remarks the current trend for new editions of Victorian novels. "It speaks very well for the Georgians. It is still more to the credit of the Victorians. In spite of the mischief makers, the grandchildren, it seems, get along very well with the grandparents; and the sight of their concord points inevitably to the later breach between the generations. . . . The Georgians, it seems, are in the odd predicament of turning for solace and guidance not to their parents, who are alive, but to their grandparents, who are dead" (vol. 2, p. 127). Or she will play with a series of allied images to illustrate her thought. She opens her essay on Addison by recounting the extravagant praise accorded him by Lord Macaulay:

The article upon Addison is, indeed, one of the most vigorous of the famous essays. Florid, and at the same time extremely solid, the phrases seem to build up a monument, at once square and lavishly festooned with ornament, which should serve Addison for shelter so long as one stone of Westminster Abbey stand upon another. . . .

Examined separately, such flourishes of ornament look grotesque enough, but in their place — such is the power of design — they are part of the decoration; they complete the monument. Whether Addison or another is interred within, it is a very fine tomb (vol. 1, pp. 85-86).

Then she begins her own analysis of Addison's essays by insisting that the reader turn to the writings themselves: "It seems so often scarcely worth while to go through the cherishing and humanizing process which is necessary to get into touch with a writer of the second class who may, after all, have little to give us. The earth is crusted over them; their features are obliterated, and perhaps it is not a head of the best period that we rub clean in the end, but only the chip of an old pot" (vol. 1, p. 87). The examination continues, first isolating

those aspects of the man and the writing that she finds flawed and then the positive qualities, finally to find in his favor. "Two hundred years have passed; the plate is worn smooth; the pattern almost rubbed out; but the metal is pure silver" (vol. 1, p. 94).

Enough about this third definition in relation to Virginia Woolf's criticism. While her notion of the essay does not bear directly upon the salient principles of her critical method, it does shed light upon the shape that her essays assume and explains in part why she distinguishes her written critiques from formal criticism or scholarship. She perceives herself not as a critic or scholar but as a common reader, writing not scholarly articles but essays for a lay audience.

These three definitions, elucidated in her clear and vibrant prose, are adhered to with conviction throughout her career. Hers is a criticism of a distinct sort, catholic rather than specialized, impressionistic, partaking now of one approach, now of another, using whatever "odds and ends" she deems pertinent. But perhaps such modest aims can be, after all, admired. For while distinguishing her essays, quite properly, from those oriented toward research, she extends free license to the common reader to trespass on the hallowed grounds of criticism, to enter an author's world, to reconstruct the forces which give impetus to that world, to compare and judge that creation, and to communicate the findings of that intercourse in as lucid and stimulating prose as possible. Measured against more traditional and formalized concepts, her criticism may indeed evoke puzzled and ambiguous responses. Evaluated in terms of her own definitions, her critical method engenders respect for its honesty, perceptivity, and unflinching fidelity to clear standards.

#### Notes

1. Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1925), p. 1. Subsequent quotations from her definition of the common reader are from this brief preface.

2. Virginia Woolf, *Collected Essays*, vol. 1, ed. Leonard Woolf (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1966), p. 81. Subsequent references are to the four-volume *Collected Essays* published between 1966 and 1967 and will appear in the text as volume and page numbers.