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Author(s): Kate Flint

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# Reading Uncommonly: Virginia Woolf and the Practice of Reading

KATE FLINT

*University of Oxford*

'Sometimes', wrote Virginia Woolf to Ethel Smyth in 1934, I think heaven must be one continuous unexhausted reading. Its a disembodied trance-like intense rapture that used to seize me as a girl, and comes back now and again down here [at Rodmell], with a violence that lays me low [...] the state of reading consists in the complete elimination of the *ego*; and its the ego that erects itself like another part of the body I dont dare to name.<sup>1</sup>

Woolf presented congress with books as something linked to the pleasures of sexuality, but without the threats and dangers attendant on assertive masculine participation. Like sex, reading should ideally be a reciprocal transaction, she suggested, rather than a process of establishing dominance. Literary stimulation involves a process of give and take, as each reader's expectations work on a text, rather than the text's merely arousing a passive, supine, receptive mind.<sup>2</sup> She hypothesizes, in 'Fishing', that 'the art of writing consists in laying an egg in the reader's mind from which springs the thing itself',<sup>3</sup> but the hatching of this 'thing' involves the active involvement of the reader. Not for her Barthes's version of parturition — that the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author: both partners remain in active play.

In Woolf's descriptions of reading experiences, the cerebral frequently mingles with the tactile, the febrile, even the fetishistic: a combination of pleasures which, she suggests, surpass sexual activity itself. 'The novels which make us live imaginatively', she wrote in 'Phases of Fiction', are those which stimulate 'the whole of the body as well as the mind'.<sup>4</sup> Recalling reading in the library at Talland House, full of the works of Elizabethan explorers, she invested the volumes themselves with a simultaneously tumescent and pregnant quality: 'The books gently swelled neath my hand as I drew it across them in the dark. Travels, histories, memoirs, the fruit of innumerable lives. The dusk was brown with them. Even the hand thus sliding seemed to feel beneath its palm fulness and ripeness', she wrote in her

<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf to Ethel Smyth, 29 July 1934, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, 6 vols (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975–80), v, 319.

<sup>2</sup> For a stimulating discussion about the elements in Woolf's prose style which actively encourage this mode of reading, see Patricia Ondek Laurence, *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), esp. pp. 89–93.

<sup>3</sup> 'Fishing', *Collected Essays*, ed. by Leonard Woolf, 4 vols (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966), II, 301.

<sup>4</sup> 'Phases of Fiction', *Collected Essays*, II, 71.

late essay, 'Reading'.<sup>5</sup> Given her choice of terminology, it is inevitable that Woolf's views on reading should partake of the same ambivalences which haunt her meditations on human relationships, and indeed which demand a continually mobile response from the readers of her own fictions. Reading texts, like knowing people, requires the simultaneous play of closeness and objectivity, the desire to merge with another and the desire to keep oneself separate.

In this essay, I wish to discuss the implications of Woolf's views on reading. I want to show how individualistic they were, pre-empting certain theories about reading processes which have been developed more recently, but in fact going beyond these in the freedom which she was prepared to grant the reader's imagination. Then, I shall indicate briefly how innovatory were her views, both explicit and implicit, concerning women and reading. And finally, I demonstrate that although many of Woolf's responses to the act of reading remained constant throughout her writing career, the 1930s, bringing with them her greater involvement and interest in public politics, also saw a hardening of her attitudes: an increased emphasis on the reader's need for alertness and awareness of the importance of the activity in which they were partaking was coupled with an increased distrust of those who passively took 'culture' as some kind of given, and even a sense of despair at the effectiveness of books at all in the context of the European theatre of war.

Undoubtedly, Woolf recognized the lure of books deliberately written to provide escapism from 'the present moment, and its meanness and its sordidity', as she called it in '*The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*'.<sup>6</sup> She was prepared to submit, on occasion, to what she called 'the delight of rubbish-reading',<sup>7</sup> and the particular power and fascination of 'bad' writers who take their inspiration, feverishly and uncritically, from a concentrated version of that kind of imaginative world which is most readily associated with readers of the romance, but indulged in by many more: 'The bad writer seems to possess a predominance of the day-dreaming power, he lives all day long in that region of artificial light where every factory girl becomes a duchess, where, if the truth be told, most people spend a few moments every day revenging themselves upon reality.'<sup>8</sup> Escapist modes of reading are presented by her as more attractive than dry scholasticism, for, ideally pursued as a 'passion', reading is stifled by the deliberate pursuit of knowledge, of 'the desire for learning' — 'to go in pursuit of it, to read on a system, to become a specialist or an authority, is very apt to kill [ . . . ] the more humane passion for pure and disinterested reading', she put it in 'Hours in a Library'.<sup>9</sup> And, on occasion, she emphasizes the value of relinquishing the demands of the

<sup>5</sup> 'Reading', *Collected Essays*, II, 22.

<sup>6</sup> '*The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*', *Collected Essays*, I, 19.

<sup>7</sup> 'How Should One Read a Book?', *Collected Essays*, II, 5.

<sup>8</sup> 'Bad Writers', *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth Press, 1986–), II, 328.

<sup>9</sup> *Essays*, II, 55.

self when reading, and allowing oneself to become absorbed into the incidents, sensations, rhythms of another's being. This 'other', however, is above all the 'other' of the author, rather than of the represented character. Do not go to a book with critical preconceptions, Woolf advised her young listeners in the lecture she delivered to Hayes Court School in 1926 (published in a greatly revised form as the final essay of the second *Common Reader*), 'How Should One Read a Book?': 'Do not dictate to your author; try to become him.'<sup>10</sup>

But escapism, if sometimes necessary, is not enough for long. Woolf wrote of how reading may lead to the growth of a form of social awareness, both synchronic and diachronic. Again, the effect of book as object in its own right, not just as the container for printed words, comes into play here. Merely handling the *Arcadia* puts one in touch with those who have already smoothed the leather binding and turned the pages: 'We like to summon before us the ghosts of those old readers. [...] Each has read differently, with the insight and blindness of his own generation', reminding us: 'Our reading will be equally partial.'<sup>11</sup> A dedicated follower of gossip, Woolf acknowledges the way in which reading can satisfy one's imaginative curiosity about the little details of individual lives, thus functioning as a form of voyeurism (as well as of the more intimate congress I alluded to earlier): she uses the image of the reader as spectator of a house lit up at night, its curtains undrawn.<sup>12</sup> More didactically, Woolf claims that it was not until she read the autobiographical testimonies by working-class women collected together by Margaret Llewellyn Davis for *Life As We Have Known It* (1931) that, as she tells us in the introduction, her sense of sympathy for their hardships and courage shifted from the theoretical, the 'fictitious', to the 'real'.<sup>13</sup> Particularly telling for her were the accounts which these women offered of the part which reading played in their own lives, consuming books at meal times, 'in time stolen from my sleeping hours' (p. 120), propping the poems of Burns against a dish cover to read while cooking, on summer holiday: reading in households where books were not taken for granted, where they could ill be afforded, and when it could be hard to find the time even to go to the public library. The degree to which Woolf was moved by their testimonies leaves open the question of whether Woolf is locating herself within a whole succession of sympathetic transmission, recognizing a mental kinship with other consumers of Dickens and Scott and Shelley, or whether the fact of reading also functions, for her, as a mark of cultural and hence social acceptability.

What comes across clearly, however, is how she recognized in these working-class women two things. First, she finds the physical craving for the

<sup>10</sup> *Collected Essays*, II, 2.

<sup>11</sup> 'The Countess of Pembroke's *Arcadia*', p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> 'How Should One Read a Book?', p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Woolf, 'Introductory Letter', *Life As We Have Known It. By Co-operative Working Women*, ed. by Margaret Llewellyn Davies (London: Hogarth Press, 1931; repr. London: Virago, 1977), p. xxxi.

sustenance of print — ‘they read with the indiscriminate greed of a hungry appetite, that crams itself with toffee and beef and tarts and vinegar and champagne all in one gulp’ (p. xxxvi) — not so much indulgent bingeing, as the self-protective panic of one who does not know where and when their next literary meal may come from. And secondly, she shows how reading leads to argument, to debating on the factory floor, to questioning their living and working conditions and expectations. This ‘Introductory Letter’ is one of Woolf’s most sustained and impassioned pieces of radical writing, and is one which acknowledges, too, that reading may in turn lead to the need to communicate, to write. The voices found in the pages which follow are those which ‘are beginning only now to emerge from silence into half articulate speech’ (p. xxxxi) — which is not to say that Woolf found reading and writing simultaneously compatible in her own life. Her diary entries suggest that during the actual process of composition, her concentration on texts other than her own was weakened. On the other hand, whilst in a preliminary ‘flood of creativeness’, as when, *The Waves* safely out of the way, she started planning *The Pargiters*, she could feel ‘in sublime reading fettle [ . . . ] at the height of my powers in that line [ . . . ] all books become fluid & swell the stream’. She turns into a veritable reading machine: ‘What a joy — what a sense as of a Rolls Royce engine once more purring its 70 miles an hour in my brain.’<sup>14</sup> At other times, of course, the activity of reading, when needing to motor through a certain number of pages in order to complete a review, could, she recognized, be an act of drudgery. One should not assume that to read, for Woolf, always meant to participate in the passion: she knew that, for the professional writer, it could also be a form of labour.

The writing of Margaret Llewellyn Davies’s women, through Woolf’s framing, is presented not just as leading from their reading, but as functioning as a kind of passport to democracy. In the 1920s, in assembling the essays brought together under the heading ‘The Common Reader’, it seems clear that Woolf figures the varied genres which interest her, including essays, biographies, travel works, letters, and journals, as of equal importance. Although her writing is itself permeated with references to, and echoes of, figures of acknowledged literary importance,<sup>15</sup> in compiling these pieces she pays scant attention to the orthodox canon rehearsed by, say, the pompous professor in the short story ‘The Evening Party’ (1918–25), or, Susan Stanford Friedman has plausibly suggested, by a contemporary figure whose literary judgements were growing in authority, T. S. Eliot.<sup>16</sup> The term ‘the common reader’ is adapted from an earlier critic with eclectic tastes, Dr Johnson, whose *Lives of the English Poets* is quoted by Woolf in her short

<sup>14</sup> 5 January 1933, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, 5 vols, ed. by Anne Olivier Bell (London: Hogarth Press, 1977–84), IV, 142.

<sup>15</sup> As Beverley Ann Schlack has amply, and valuably, demonstrated in *Continuing Presences: Virginia Woolf’s Use of Literary Allusion* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press), 1979.

<sup>16</sup> Susan Stanford Friedman, ‘Virginia Woolf’s Pedagogical Scenes of Reading: *The Voyage Out*, *The Common Reader*, and her “Common Readers”’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 38 (1992), 101–25 (p. 119, n. 22).

introductory essay to the *Common Reader* volume, 'the common sense of readers, uncorrupted by literary prejudices'. Her readers are those who are 'worse educated' than 'the critic and the scholar'<sup>17</sup> — she certainly has no time for the viewpoint of Rachel Vinrace's uncle in *The Voyage Out* (1915): 'What's the use of reading if you don't read Greek?'<sup>18</sup> She writes scathingly of those who attempt, jealously, to guard access to knowledge. In a famous scene near the beginning of *A Room of One's Own* (1928) she records approaching a college library in Cambridge:

Here I was actually at the door which leads into the library itself. I must have opened it, for instantly there issued, like a guardian angel barring the way with a flutter of black gown instead of white wings, a deprecating, silvery, kindly gentleman, who regretted in a low voice as he waved me back that ladies are only admitted to the library if accompanied by a Fellow of the College or furnished with a letter of introduction.<sup>19</sup>

Common readers are those who read for their 'own pleasure rather than to impart knowledge or correct the opinions of others'. Their end is to create for themselves, 'out of whatever odds and ends' they 'can come by, some kind of whole — a portrait of a man, a sketch of an age, a theory of the art of writing'.<sup>20</sup>

It is, indeed, hard to tell where, for Woolf, intelligent reading stops and day-dreaming, or the exercise of the imagination, takes over. This is what characterizes Mrs Swithin's reading of history in *Between the Acts* (1941). She stretches

for her favourite reading — an Outline of History — and had spent the hours between three and five thinking of rhododendron forests in Piccadilly; when the entire continent, not then, she understood, divided by a channel, was all one; populated, she understood, by elephant-bodied, seal-necked, heaving, surging, slowly writhing, and, she supposed, barking monsters; the iguanodon, the mammoth, and the mastodon; from whom presumably, she thought, jerking the window open, we descend.<sup>21</sup>

The exaggerated repetition of words relating to her own processes of cogitation emphasize quite how readily she strays from the neat linearity of the historical 'outline'. And it is in the licence that they bestow on the reader that 'bad' books may come into their own, particularly those that ostensibly relate to a world of fact. Constance Hill's biography of Mary Russell Mitford neither enlarges the mind nor purifies the heart — still the standard critical criteria, Woolf notes, for worthwhile works — but it has the not inconsiderable merit of licensing mendacity. 'One cannot believe what Miss Hill says about Miss Mitford, and thus one is free to invent Miss Mitford for oneself.'<sup>22</sup> It is here, in the exercise of imagination and invention, that one

<sup>17</sup> 'The Common Reader', *Essays*, iv, 19.

<sup>18</sup> *The Voyage Out* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p. 120.

<sup>19</sup> *A Room of One's Own* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> 'The Common Reader', p. 19.

<sup>21</sup> *Between the Acts* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 10.

<sup>22</sup> 'The Wrong Way of Reading', *Essays*, iii, 218.

sees the reader's identity unmistakably constructing itself, setting itself forward as the necessary counterpart of the author. Woolf shows how the activity of reading may function as a kind of mental springboard, the reader being led to create as well as to assimilate. 'To read a novel is a difficult and complex art. You must be capable not only of great fineness of perception, but of great boldness of imagination.'<sup>23</sup> To some extent, Woolf's views are proleptic of later theories of reading: of what Wolfgang Iser, building, indeed, on Woolf's comments concerning Jane Austen's prose, terms

a whole dynamic process: the written text imposes certain limits on its unwritten implications in order to prevent these from becoming too blurred and hazy, but at the same time these implications, worked out by the reader's imagination, set the given situation against a background which endows it with far greater significance than it might have seemed to possess on its own.<sup>24</sup>

Her ideas are close, too, to Walter Ong's explanation of how the ostensibly 'closed' novel is brought to life in limitless individual contexts, each encounter between reader and book producing its own unique synthesis.<sup>25</sup> But these theoretical models, compared with Woolf's understanding of the potential of reading, are hermetically, and hermeneutically, sealed. For Woolf, unlike Iser, reading does not just involve the fulfilment of conditions that have already been structured in the texts; creativity does not stop with mental re-creation of characters or settings, but the reader may carry the atmosphere of a book, its distinguishing marks of vision, into his or her comprehension of the world outside their window, something figured, in the passage just quoted from *Between the Acts*, by Mrs Swithin's literal opening of a window, and by the effort she has in returning herself to the everyday world when, a few moments later, the threshold of her imaginary world is physically breached: 'It took herself five seconds in actual time, in mind time ever so much longer, to separate Grace herself, with blue china on a tray, from the leather-covered grunting monster who was about, as the door opened, to demolish a whole tree in the green steaming undergrowth of the primeval forest' (p. 11).

As I have presented them thus far, Woolf's observations about reading dovetail neatly with her familiar remarks about the operations of the writer's imagination when left to range freely over a subject, moving away from the surface with its 'hard separate facts', as she put it in 'The Mark on the Wall' (1917).<sup>26</sup> She herself emphasized the ideal inseparability of reading and writing as processes in 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown':

<sup>23</sup> 'How Should One Read a Book?', p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> 'The reading process: a phenomenological approach', in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. by David Lodge (London and New York: Longman, 1988), pp. 212–27 (p. 213) (first publ. in *New Literary History*, 3 (1972), 279–99).

<sup>25</sup> Walter Ong, 'Writing is a Technology that Restructures Thought', *The Written Word: Literacy in Transition* (Wolfson College Lectures 1985), ed. by G. Baumann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 31.

<sup>26</sup> 'The Mark on the Wall', in *Selected Short Stories*, ed. by Sandra Kemp (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 55.

In your modesty you seem to consider that writers are of different blood and bone from yourselves; that they know more of Mrs. Brown than you do. Never was there a more fatal mistake. It is this division between reader and writer, this humility on your part, these professional airs and graces on ours, that corrupt and emasculate the books which should be the healthy offspring of a close and equal alliance between us.<sup>27</sup>

Once again, Woolf's sexualization of the activity of reading is apparent — if voiced with an atypical eugenicist robustness — and this brings one back to the fact that more is at stake, when it comes to Woolf's pronouncements on reading, than the opportunity, once again, to emphasize the importance of submitting to the 'flight of the mind'. In the next part of this essay, I want to argue that Woolf's ideas, placed in the context of her time, come as a bold contribution to debates about women and reading, and that, despite the familiarity today of some of her formulations, she was making a potentially radical intervention to these debates. In doing so, she came greatly to complicate the issue of what it meant to read as a woman, to give birth to meaning. Although she does not directly address the question of gender difference in relation to reading, her repetitive equation of masculine literary practices and sensibilities with a highly developed, perhaps highly defensive, degree of self-consciousness (and also with the pursuit of scholarship for its own sake) does not make this a distorted extrapolation. In stressing the value of abandoning oneself to the demands which a piece of writing makes, dissolving and expanding one's identity in response to textual strategies, Woolf was reclaiming the right for women to read in this way, and not be condemned for it.<sup>28</sup>

It had long been assumed, in the Renaissance, in the eighteenth century, in the Victorian period, that a young woman is particularly vulnerable to this fluid process which consists of simultaneously abandoning and reshaping one's sense of identity through reading. Once again, this assumption, sometimes explicitly, sometimes tacitly, reinforced the connections between the activity of reading, and the process of learning about sexual feelings. Woolf dramatizes this most obviously in *The Voyage Out*, in her portrayal of Rachel Vinrace who, at twenty-four, is still to all intents and purposes a young girl, an epitome of the 'innocence' extolled by less enlightened Victorians. Having been brought up by two aunts in Richmond who have done their best to keep her 'pure', she comprehends very little of adult human behaviour, particularly of sexually charged relationships. She tries to compensate for this through reading: 'She groped for knowledge in old books, and found it in repulsive chunks' (p. 30). Another aunt, Helen, takes Rachel abroad with her, and, determined to educate her more fully about adult life, encourages her to read more widely as part of the process. Helen is

<sup>27</sup> *Collected Essays*, 1, 336.

<sup>28</sup> The full context for this debate can be found in Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader, 1837–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933); the following three paragraphs are in part an adaptation of my argument there.

fascinated to observe how Rachel starts to identify herself with textual figures, blurring the lines of identity. The girl works her way through Ibsen, her body registering his effect upon her:

Far from looking bored or absent-minded, her eyes were concentrated almost sternly upon the page, and from her breathing, which was slow but repressed, it could be seen that her whole body was constrained by the working of her mind. At last she shut the book sharply, lay back, and drew a deep breath, expressive of the wonder which always marks the transition from the imaginary world to the real world.

'What I want to know,' she said aloud, 'is this: What is the truth? What's the truth of it all?' She was speaking partly as herself, and partly as the heroine of the play she had just read.

Although, by contrast to the world of the book, the landscape outside looks very solid and clear,

for the moment she herself was the most vivid thing in it — an heroic statue in the middle of the foreground, dominating the view. Ibsen's plays always left her in that condition. She acted them for days at a time, greatly to Helen's amusement; and then it would be Meredith's turn and she became Diana of the Crossways. But Helen was aware that it was not all acting, and that some sort of change was taking place in the human being. (pp. 121–22)

None the less, this self-forming, self-extending reading has its limitations. For when Rachel begins to find live men interesting, she finds the experience perplexing, and 'none of the books she read, from *Wuthering Heights* to *Man and Superman*, and the plays of Ibsen, suggested from their analysis of love that what their heroines felt was what she was feeling now' (p. 226). It is suggested, of course, that the reader herself will recognize 'what she was feeling now', but Woolf positions us as being somewhat more self-aware than Rachel. The novel certainly assumes that one can become absorbed by fiction, or excited by other types of writing: the 'vivid', 'beautiful' language of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*

seemed to drive roads back to the very beginning of the world, on either side of which the populations of all times and countries stood in avenues, and by passing down them all knowledge would be hers, and the book of the world turned back to the very first page. Such was her excitement at the possibilities of knowledge now opening before her that she ceased to read. (p. 174)

But acknowledgement of the lure of absorption is linked in this novel with a recognition (which the reader is expected to share) that one should couple it with an awareness of the process which is taking place.<sup>29</sup>

The dangers of over-identification, frequently with a romantic heroine who is favoured on the final page with a happy marriage, or with the protagonist in alarmingly sensationalist plots, was constantly cautioned against in the nineteenth century, from Ruskin's often-repeated warning that 'the best romance becomes dangerous if, by its excitement, it renders the ordinary course of life uninteresting, and increases the morbid thirst for

<sup>29</sup> For a full and stimulating discussion of the part which reading plays in *The Voyage Out*, see Friedman.

useless acquaintance with scenes in which we shall never be called upon to act',<sup>30</sup> to George Gissing's Rhoda Nunn, complaining that one of her pupils had run off with a man: 'This Miss Royston — when she rushed off to perdition, ten to one she had in mind some idiot heroine of a book.'<sup>31</sup> It might fairly be pointed out that Woolf herself expressed little deep sympathy with the type of identificatory reading being criticized here: 'We long sometimes', she wrote in 'The Narrow Bridge of Art', 'to escape from the incessant, the remorseless analysis of falling into love and falling out of love, of what Tom feels for Judith and Judith does or does not altogether feel for Tom. We long for some more impersonal relationship. We long for ideas, for dreams, for imaginations, for poetry.'<sup>32</sup> Yet even if she urges readers to go beyond the lure of romantic narrative, the emphasis which she places on fostering a dispersed subjectivity through reading is in contradistinction to her immediate feminist predecessors.

Writers of New Woman fiction in the 1890s, and of suffragette novels, did not entirely shun the importance of emotions (though anger is more in evidence than compassion) nor of using the imagination. Their preferred form of narration, the *Bildungsroman*, was one which encouraged sympathetic identification on the reader's part, with the reader's growth in knowledge being made to parallel that of the protagonist, yet with a happy ending rarely in sight. One can find echoes of this format in *The Voyage Out*. But here the similarity stops, since the emphasis in their fictions falls not on stretching the imagination, but rather on the importance of politically useful reading, whether John Stuart Mill or Herbert Spencer or *The Vote*. In relation both to named texts, and to training woman's thought more widely, these novels encourage an interrogative manner of reading, developing one's rational powers in relation to the printed word, and in relation to society more generally. They set out, often explicitly, to challenge the notion that women 'naturally' were drawn to identificatory, emotionally driven modes of reading due to their innate maternal capacities for sympathy towards others, as many nineteenth-century commentators argued. Reading, for Woolf's feminist predecessors, could provide inspiration, but predominantly they valued it for offering a route to social knowledge, rather than an escape from social realities. As Woolf was to do, they understood reading's power to break through the constricting, isolating bounds in which an individual could feel herself trapped, but the effect of this power was usually perceived in relatively straightforward terms, as establishing and strengthening the reader's sense of shared identity with the struggle and aspirations of other women.

<sup>30</sup> *Sesame and Lilies* (1865), in *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols (1903–12), xviii, 129.

<sup>31</sup> *The Odd Women* (1893) (London: Virago, 1980), p. 58.

<sup>32</sup> 'The Narrow Bridge of Art', *Collected Essays*, II, 225.

Something more complex, however, was seen by Woolf: the fact that reading potentially leads both to the dissolution of identity, and to the building up of confidence in one's own individuality. More importantly, perhaps, for a woman, it can form the site of one's own claim to authority. It is in this context that Woolf emphasized the deliberate uncertainty in the mark of interrogation at the end of the title of her early essay and talk: 'How Should One Read a Book?'. For this is a subject on which no one should attempt to be prescriptive: to do so is to infringe upon the liberties of an individual. 'After all, what laws can be laid down about books? [...] To admit authorities, however heavily furred and gowned, into our libraries and let them tell us how to read, what to read, what value to place upon what we read, is to destroy the spirit of freedom which is the breath of those sanctuaries [...] nothing can be more fatal than to be guided by the preference of others in a matter so personal' (p. 1). In many ways, Woolf's ideas here prefigure the influential suggestions made by Judith Fetterley in *The Resisting Reader*. 'Consciousness', Fetterley writes,

is power. To create a new understanding of our literature is to make possible a new effect of that literature on us. And to make possible a new effect is in turn to provide the conditions for changing the culture that the literature reflects. To expose and question that complex of ideas and mythologies about women and men which exist in our society and are confirmed in our literature is to make the system of power embodied in the literature open not only to discussion but even to change [...]. It must be entered into from a point of view which questions its values and assumptions and which has its investment in making available to consciousness precisely that which the literature wishes to keep hidden.<sup>33</sup>

The emphasis on the reader's autonomy is still present in one of Woolf's last essays, 'The Reader', when the pregnant promise in those Elizabethan library books can be seen to be connected with the birth of the reader which, according to Woolf, took place at the end of this period: 'Now the reader is completely in being. He can pause; he can ponder; he can compare; he can draw back from the page and see behind it a man sitting alone in the centre of a labyrinth of words in a college room thinking of suicide. He can read directly what is on the page, or, drawing aside, can read what is not written'.<sup>34</sup> This ability to 'read what is not written' both allows the imagination to range, and demands an unveiling of embedded, naturalized assumptions: it is an act both of personal liberation and of political comprehension. It combines the visionary and the analytical.

In the passage from 'The Reader' from which I just quoted, Woolf continues her description of the creative reader by commenting that 'we live in a world where nothing is concluded'. Written in 1940, these words point

<sup>33</sup> 'On the Politics of Literature', *The Resisting Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), repr. in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. by Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), pp. 492–501 (p. 497).

<sup>34</sup> "'Anon" and "The Reader": Virginia Woolf's Last Essays', ed., with an introduction and commentary, by Brenda R. Silver, *Twentieth Century Literature*, 25 (1979), 356–441 (p. 429).

not just to the fecund powers possessed by the literary consumer, but away from the society of Hakluyt and Sir Thomas Browne to a Europe menaced by Nazism, Fascism, and the threat of war, and to the interpretive uncertainties of Woolf's final novel, *Between the Acts*. Against the backcloth of a countryside which (according, at least, to Giles's vision) at any moment would be raked into furrows by the guns which bristle across Europe, 'planes splinter Bolney Minster into smithereens and blast the Folly' (p. 42), Mrs Swithin's vision of history seems part escapism, part evocation of a cyclical version of history filled with the threat of reversion to the primitive. Books offer no solutions, no key. Back in 1929, when she wrote *A Room of One's Own* against the backdrop of Fascism's growth in Italy, Woolf glumly, 'in that restless mood in which one takes books out and puts them back again without looking at them', 'began to envisage an age to come of pure, of self-assertive virility, such as the letters of professors [...] seem to forebode, and the rulers of Italy have already brought into being. For one can hardly fail to be impressed in Rome by the sense of unmitigated masculinity; and whatever the value of unmitigated masculinity upon the state, one may question the effect of it upon the art of poetry' (p. 101). The mingling of author and reader, the imagery of sexual congress which she employs to suggest the process of implantation, gestation, and birth which brings literary meaning into being, is disallowed by the unyielding masculinity of the Fascist ethos. But then, can literature itself offer anything against the onward march of oppressive political forces? In *Between the Acts*, Isa mutters 'The moor is dark beneath the moon' as she stands in front of the library bookshelves, a line which echoes back to Woolf's use of the same words of Shelley's in *The Waves* and in 'The Evening Party'. But the phrase brings no consolation, merely an image of desolation. Isa

ran her eyes along the books. 'The mirror of the soul' books were. *The Faerie Queene* and Kinglake's *Crimea*; Keats and the *Kreutzer Sonata*. There they were, reflecting. What? What remedy was there for her at her age — the age of the century, thirty-nine — in books! Book-shy she was, like the rest of her generation; and gun-shy too. Yet as a person with a raging tooth runs her eye in a chemist shop over green bottles with gilt scrolls on them lest one of them may contain a cure, she considered: Keats and Shelley; Yeats and Donne. Or perhaps not a poem; a life. The life of Garibaldi. The life of Lord Palmerston. Or perhaps not a person's life; a county's. *The Antiquities of Durham*; *The Proceedings of the Archaeological Society of Nottingham*. Or not a life at all, but science — Eddington, Darwin, or Jeans.

None of them stopped her toothache. For her generation the newspaper was a book. (p. 18)

Woolf herself, on 6 September 1939, the day on which she records in her diary their first air raid warning, the hanging of blackout curtains, the provision of coals for evacuees from Battersea, finds her own mind curled up and undecided: to cure this, she writes, 'one had better read a solid book like Tawney[']s *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*], an exercise of the muscles'.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>35</sup> *Diary*, v, 235.

Where does this leave us, critics of Woolf as well as Common Readers of her work? Woolf's importance to discussions of women, writing, and language have been central to feminist studies in the last decade, but her innovative suggestions about profitable ways of reading have been less readily recognized. These suggestions, as I have indicated, are themselves diverse, in a dialogic relationship with one another, just as the very act of reading is at best a dialogic one, rather than an effort on the part of author or reader to establish, to impose dominance. On the other hand, reading is an affair of close communion with an author and her or his work, rivalled in its intensity and possessiveness only by sexual relationships. And, as in human relationships, however intense the passion, Woolf always has half an eye on the inevitable egocentric power struggles which simultaneously are in play: We may stress the value of sympathy; we may try to sink our identity as we read. But we know that we cannot sympathize wholly or immerse ourselves wholly; there is always a demon in us who whispers, 'I hate, I love', and we cannot silence him. Indeed, it is precisely because we hate and we love that our relation with the poets and novelists is so intimate that we find the presence of another person intolerable.<sup>36</sup>

The critic, in other words, is not just a robed and wigged figure of authority, but a voyeur, a rival lover, an oedipal third: one who breaks into the passionate liaison between reader and author. On the other hand, Woolf increasingly suggests that the reading process involves a connection with the text alone, and the intellectual as well as imaginative responses it arouses in us. In putting forward these two viewpoints, Woolf in fact prefigures the uneasy conjunction of empathic and theoretical approaches which characterize critical responses to her work today.

In her criticism, Virginia Woolf set biographical speculation and textual response in dialogue with one another, sporadically fusing them. Subsequent developments in literary theory have made these two approaches somewhat uneasy bed-partners. But the very mode of Woolf's work, the way in which the personal preoccupations of her fiction, essays, journals and letters intersect, coupled with — or set against — the search for an impersonal, 'poetic' voice on the other, helps to ensure the continued struggle for critical possession within Woolf studies. Submission and resistance: both reading positions have their appeal. No matter 'how great a power the body of a literature possesses to impose itself', Woolf wrote in 'Notes on an Elizabethan Play',

it will not suffer itself to be read passively, but takes us and reads us; flouts our preconceptions; questions principles which we had got into the habit of taking for granted, and, in fact, splits us into two parts as we read, making us, even as we enjoy, yield our ground or stick to our guns.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup> 'How Should One Read a Book?', p. 9.

<sup>37</sup> *Essays*, iv, 62