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Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader* and the common reader

‘I always feel apologetic about publishing my own criticism, because I don't know that there is much excuse for adding to books about other books’ (L5 116) worried Virginia Woolf to William Rothenstein, while, to Ethel Smyth, she lamented that the articles of *The Common Reader* ‘bore me to a kind of dancing agony at the futility of all criticism’ (L5 40). For Woolf literary criticism often seemed a frustrating and fruitless task, though she wrote two volumes of *The Common Reader* and countless articles for magazines and newspapers during her lifetime. Why should one opinion or voice be privileged over another she consistently asks? Why write books about books and not simply write books? Woolf's concern with the reasons for and value of literary criticism and her continuing desire to write it in spite of these doubts are perhaps attributable to her position as the daughter of Sir Leslie Stephen, author of *Hours in a Library*, and to her inheritance, both respected and loathed, of the Victorian essay tradition.

The work of such literary didacts as Leslie Stephen amongst other notable Victorian patriarchs appears to have not only instigated her interest in literary criticism, but simultaneously fuelled her antipathy for it. As the daughter of this noted nineteenth century essayist, Woolf was inadvertently part of the great Victorian tradition of literary criticism, though she had little sympathy for its stylistic approach and as a woman felt excluded from the right to criticise the

work of the great, predominantly male, canon. Woolf disliked the style and tone of educated 'masculine' essay writing which she saw as bombastic, monolithic, exclusive and therefore inaccessible. Her hostility towards this seemingly incontrovertible method of writing literary criticism was vented in various polemics including *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and the lecture/essay 'Professions for Women' (1931). However, the dichotomy between the Victorian tradition into which she was born and the Georgian tradition in which she found voice combined to create a unique style of critical writing in which Woolf rebelled against the formulaic approach favoured by many of her predecessors.

After *The Common Reader: Second Series* was completed Woolf recorded in her diary: I 'like to think that father would have blushed with pleasure could I have told him 30 years ago, that his daughter [...] was to be asked to succeed him: the sort of compliment he would have liked' (D4 79). This sentiment seems at odds with the concern that she describes in her earlier lecture to the Women's Service League, 'Professions for Women' (1931) in which the archetypal Victorian woman, 'the angel in the house', steps between the female writer and her criticism counselling her to abandon her task or at the very least to: 'be sympathetic; be tender; flatter; deceive' (CE2 285). Woolf was aware of the 'Victorian manner' that she adopted while writing *The Common Reader*. In her memoir 'A Sketch of the Past' she 'lay[s] the blame for their suavity, their politeness, their sidelong approach, to my tea-table training' (MB

[1976] 129).¹ Instead of asking the young men ‘directly and simply about their poems and their novels’ she finds herself enquiring ‘whether they like cream as well as sugar’ (*MB* [1976] 129). Despite this ‘sidelong approach’ the style that her Victorian upbringing cultivated did possess, by her own admittance, redeeming features and allowed Woolf ‘to say a great many things which would be inaudible if one marched straight up and spoke out’ (*MB* [1976] 129). Strange that, at the same time Woolf reflects on the pride her father would have taken in her critical achievement, he also stood next to ‘the angel in the house’ to stop her pen: ‘Father’s birthday. He would have been 1928 1832 96 96, yes, today; & could have been 96, like other people one has known; but mercifully was not. His life would have entirely ended mine. What would have happened? No writing, no books;—inconceivable’ (*D3* 208). The essays of *The Common Reader* were not merely a response to the elitist literary criticism of her peers and predecessors, but an answer to her Victorian upbringing and a partial resolution (along with *To the Lighthouse* (1927)) of her troubled relationship with her father.²

Thus far Woolf’s *Common Reader* can be read as a challenge to the established forms of critical writing and a rectification of the balance between herself and literary her father. However, the impetus behind the two collections

¹ The 1976 edition refers to *The Common Reader* in this connection while the 1985 edition refers to ‘old *Literary Supplement* articles’ (*MB* [1985] 150).

² For a detailed investigation of Woolf’s relationship with Leslie Stephen and his impact on her writing see Katherine C. Hill, ‘Virginia Woolf and Leslie Stephen: History and Literary Revolution’, *PMLA* 96, No. 3 (May 1981), 351-362.

of essays that comprised *The Common Reader* series was as public as it was personal. In a 1922 essay, 'On Re-reading Novels' Woolf appeals to the everywo/man not to 'sit any longer open-mouthed in passive expectation' when reading literature (*CE1* 165). Instead, the common reader him/herself should 'press hard upon the novelist's heels; be quick to follow, quick to understand' (*CE1* 166). But how could the average reader achieve this level of perspicacity? How could the dustman with but a few years of education 'press hard on the novelist's heels' in the same way that a scholar of literature might? From a reply to Ben Nicholson's criticism of Bloomsbury's exclusivity it seems that this aim would be soonest achieved if education was afforded to all: 'The other day [27 April 1940] I went and lectured to the Workers Education Association at Brighton, and felt that it was hopeless for me to tell people who had been taken away from school at the age of 14 that they must read Shakespeare. It is impossible so long as they are educated as they are' (*L6* 420). The lecture that Woolf read on this occasion was published in November 1940 as 'The Leaning Tower' in the Hogarth Press's *Folios of New Writing* and revealed Woolf's dislike for 'the small aristocratic class' who had been educated while 'the other class, the immense class to which almost all of us must belong, [has] to pick up what we can in village schools; in factories; in workshops; behind counters; and at home' (*CE2* 180). Woolf sought a higher objective than writing for the general reader who the highly educated critic to a certain extent must talk down to - instead she desires the education of all. Her egalitarian call for every reader

to be educated to the extent that they can no longer ‘sit... open-mouthed in passive expectation’ (*CE1* 165) suggests that the common reader should cease to exist. Ideally ‘humanity in the mass’ (*L6* 420) would be educated well-enough to have the confidence to criticise on their own without the need for an intermediary such as herself. The general public would become uncommon readers.

Woolf’s belief in literature for the under classes or ‘outsiders’ was earnest enough to lead her to turn down the opportunity of giving the prestigious Clark Lectures in 1932. These lectures given to the dons and students of Cambridge were, to Woolf at least, a symbol of the predominantly male, elitist academic establishment from which she, as a woman, had been excluded. The lectures would, she states, have forced her to become a ‘functionary’ of criticism and would have meant ‘sealing my lips when it comes to tilting at universities’ (*D4* 79), a hypocrisy Woolf was unwilling to practise. The lectures represented the antithesis of her projects in *The Common Reader* which sought to appeal to individuals who had also been excluded from the hallowed corridors of Oxbridge and who ideally would become, through inclusive education, braver and more self-assured readers with a right to criticise equal to any university graduate.

Her fictionalisation of the essay form offers the general reader footholds on the edifice of literary scholarship and, though ‘horrified by [her] own looseness [...] wobble & diffusivity & breathlessness’ (*D3* 235) it is perhaps this

that renders her essays so user-friendly. Woolf shied away from the formal literary criticism written by Leslie Stephen among others, though her articles derived from her work for *The Times* still bear, as she confessed, marks of polite journalism ‘done obediently to celebrate the great dead’ (*LA* 159). Nevertheless, she deliberately tried to avoid classifications and definitive interpretations in her criticism in order to encourage the general reader, naturally ‘suspicious of fixed labels and settled hierarchies’ (‘Phases of Fiction’, *CE2* 57), to come to their own conclusions. It is certain that Woolf’s critical style was a work in progress, hampered perhaps in the two volumes of *The Common Reader* by her ‘tea-table training’ and their derivation from her literary journalism. Had Woolf lived long enough to produce another volume of *The Common Reader* or collection of essays as she had planned it would doubtless have been a different book: ‘I can devise a new critical method; something far less stiff & formal than these Times articles. But I must keep to the old style in this volume [*CR2*]. And how, I wonder, could I do it? There must be some simpler, subtler, closer means of writing about books, as about people, could I hit upon it’ (*D4* 53-4). Despite her own criticism of her style in the two existing volumes, *The Common Readers* are witty, engaging and accessible as well as being supremely erudite. Her aim to appeal to a general readership (as far as the education system allowed) was largely achieved in these volumes.

In many instances Woolf achieved her aim of accessible criticism, not only in *The Common Reader*, but also in her longer feminist essays: *A Room of*

One's Own and *Three Guineas* and she stated as much in a letter to Benedict Nicolson: 'I did my best to make them [*CR*, *ROO* and *3G*] reach a far wider circle than a little private circle of exquisite and cultivated people' (*L6* 420)). However, her own fiction is still generally regarded as some of the more difficult and inaccessible pieces in the English literary canon. Leonard Woolf's assessment of *The Waves* summarises the general consensus: 'he... thinks the first 100 pages extremely difficult, & is doubtful how far any common reader will follow' (*D4* 36). It seems at first as though Woolf's mission in her essays, to give a critical voice to the reading public, is at odds with her fictional projects. However, Woolf was experimenting with the shape and form of the novel, to dumb down her innovations would have defeated her ideal of an educated public confident enough to tackle the most challenging of texts. Indeed, Woolf's literary criticism worked in tandem with her fiction as the reading required for the composition of these articles stimulated her imagination: 'a year spent - save for diversions in Greece & Russia - in reading through English literature will no doubt do good to my fictitious brain. Rest it anyhow. One day, all of a rush, fiction will burst in' (*D4* 74) – thus one could not exist without the other and her creative output, though, apparently difficult for 'humanity in the mass' to comprehend still sold thousands.

The Common Reader was many things to Woolf: it was a stand against her father and the Victorian critical establishment; it begged the reader to find a critical voice regardless of gender, class, wealth and education; it defied the

authority of the male-dominated, elitist, English education system; it contributed to her own fiction and our understanding of it. It is a call to arms, the beginning of a war to create an egalitarian form of criticism – inclusive rather than exclusive. After the completion of *The Common Reader: Second Series* Woolf immediately contemplated renovating her literary criticism: ‘I must find a quicker cut into books than this’ (D4 115) she wrote and considered penning a new *Common Reader* in a diary entry dated 14 February 1934 (D4 201). On the 1 March 1941 she wrote to Ethel Smyth: ‘I am at the moment trying, without the least success, to write an article or two for a new *Common Reader*’ (L6, p.475) which she had provisionally entitled *Reading at Random* and then *Turning the Page*.³ Despite her usual self-depreciatory comments and concern that ‘it seems rather foolish to write articles about books’ (L5 162), Woolf nevertheless saw merit in producing accessible literary criticism and less than a month before her suicide was still working out how to write for the common reader.

³ For a more detailed investigation of Woolf’s final essays for this volume see Brenda Silver (ed.), “Anon” and “The Reader”: Virginia Woolf’s Last Essays’, *Twentieth Century Literature* 25 (1979), 356-441.