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"A NEW TRADITION": VIRGINIA WOOLF AND THE PERSONAL ESSAY

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Virginia Woolf's fairly gained prestige as a novelist has tended to eclipse the fact that for more than two decades of her professional life —from 1904 to 1922— she was primarily a reviewer and essayist. These literary manifestations have been most often regarded by the critics as secondary or incidental to the rest of her *oeuvre*. The present paper aims to vindicate the relevance of the essay as part of Virginia Woolf's artistic genius, and develops a two-fold argument: on the one hand, the importance of the essay in the consolidation of Woolf as a professional writer; on the other, the substantial contributions which Woolf made to the genre, which resulted in the invention of a new genre, namely the "personal" essay.

In her essays Woolf reformulated the positivist conception of authorship and readership, rejecting a position of power and authority on the critic's side. Moreover Woolf challenged the traditional definition of the essay as expository prose in favour of a flexible form particularly suited to express personal opinion and thus to encompass the multiplicity of human experience. Such arguments were largely to influence Woolf's perception of the relation between creative writing and the essay, as well as to contribute to the modification of the latter in the direction of narrative.

In January 1931 Virginia Woolf delivered a paper to the National Society for Women's Service —to be published posthumously in *The Death of the Moth* (1942) as "Professions for Women"— which, along with *A Room of One's Own* (1929), is probably one of her most famous essays on women and literature. In that lecture Woolf posed, on the one hand, the difficulties she encountered becoming a woman writer in a man's world while, on the other, she traced back her own development as an artist. As Beth Rosenberg and Jeanne Dubino have suggested (1997: 1), Virginia Woolf's fairly gained prestige as a novelist has tended to eclipse the fact that for more than two decades of her professional life —from 1904, the date when Woolf moved to Bloomsbury and her first published work came out, to 1922, the year when she published *Jacob's Room*, her first experimental novel— she was primarily a reviewer, essayist and short story writer, though these literary manifestations have been most often regarded by most critics as secondary or incidental to the rest of her *oeuvre*. Leonard Woolf himself argued that his wife would "either write a critical

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essay or work upon one of the sketches for short stories" (1943: 1) in order to rest her mind from the more "serious" task of writing a novel; he even implied that "the part of her mind which she used for criticism or even biography was different from that she used for novels" (1964: 233).

A literary prejudice may be inferred from Leonard Woolf's assumption which has somehow prevailed: that of considering the novel a "major" artistic expression in comparison with other genres regarded as "minor", which lacked the backing of a solid tradition in England. Such a consideration may account for the fact that Woolf has most often been labelled a "novelist", to the point that some of her readers ignore her production in other literary fields, such as the essay. And yet Woolf's public recognition as a novelist was in part indebted to her previous reputation as an essayist, a recognition which was not to come until relatively late in her life, basically in the last years of the 1920s, when *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), *Orlando* (1928) and *The Waves* (1931) were published.

The present paper aims to vindicate the relevance of the essay as part of Virginia Woolf's artistic genius, and develops a two-fold argument. On the one hand, the importance of the essay in the consolidation of Woolf as a professional writer; on the other, the substantial contributions which Woolf made to the artistic consideration of the genre, which resulted in the invention of a new tradition: the personal essay.

Virginia Woolf herself linked her beginnings as a professional writer to the world of journalism, as she stated in "Professions for Women":

> You have only got to figure to yourselves a girl in a bedroom with a pen in her hand. She had only to move that pen from left to right —from ten o'clock to one. Then it occurred to her to do what it was simple and cheap enough after all —to slip a few of those pages into an envelope, fix a penny stamp in the corner, and drop the envelope into the red box in the corner. It was thus that I became a journalist; and my effort was rewarded on the following month —a very glorious day it was for me— by a letter from an editor containing a cheque for one pound ten shillings and sixpence. (1992b: 101-02)

Indeed journalism, although a profession of male dominance, did not exclude women from its practice.[1] Woolf's own answer to her fears of loss and failure —her vision of women trapped in silence and living in anonymity which she recreated in "The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn" (1906) after her discouraging experience as a

[1] Small literary journals and magazines provided, in the early decades of the twentieth-century, a vital outlet for women's writing. The feminist-based paper *The Freewoman* —later to be called *The Egoist* (1914) under the editorship of Harriet Shaw Weaver— was set up in London 1911 by Dora Marsden with regular contributors such as Hilda Doolittle, Dorothy Richardson, May Sinclair, Marianne Moore, Amy Lowell or Rebecca West. The same network of artists continued to submit contributions to journals initiated in 1920, such as *Transatlantic Review*, *This Quaker*, *Transition* and *Close-up* among others. These writers soon developed a sense of consciousness about each other's work, as reviews and correspondence show. For an illuminating insight into this topic, see Hanscombe and Smyers (1987).

teacher at Morley College— was also work: "There was one thing left which might make life endurable ... and that is work" (1990: 213). Woolf sought eagerly to be published. Part of her eagerness to be in print was motivated by her anxiety to make money, which was a sign of her professional status while representing additional wages which would supplement her private income. Yet Woolf's main motivation was to find a public response to her writing, "someone to tell me whether it is well, very well, or indifferently done" (1990: 226).

Virginia Woolf's entrance in the world of the periodical press was favoured by her personal circumstances of class and family which made editors overcome their initial suspicion of her capability: being the daughter of Sir Leslie Stephen partly accounted for Woolf's passion for essay-writing and her personal response to this patrilineal inheritance.[2] Woolf's ambivalence towards her father did not exclude the field of criticism: on the one hand, she was always to preserve Stephen's passion for history, biography, criticism and editorship; on the other, Woolf was radically to change the focus of these disciplines with their implicit criticism of women's writing as well as their positivist approach to the subject, a spirit which prevailed in most of the criticism done by Woolf's male contemporaries. Significantly, Woolf did not publish her first work until her father's death in 1904 for, according to her, Leslie Stephen would have prevented her from becoming a professional writer: "Father's birthday. He would have been ... 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" (1980: 208).[3]

From the inception of her career as a professional writer, Virginia Woolf was conscious of entering a terrain dominated by male figures from whom she encountered opposition. As early as 1905, she wrote an essay entitled "The Feminine Note in Fiction", where she argued that "women having found their voices have something to say which is naturally of supreme interest and meaning to women" (1986: 16). Such a view Woolf consistently preserved and developed through her writings, adopting a position of defiant resistance against, on the one hand, masculine standards of measuring experience and, on the other, that stereotype of the sympathetic, tender, flattering woman without a mind of her own that she described as the "Angel in the House", Coventry Patmore's poem which, in Woolf's view, had come to summarise the deplorable exaltation of women's domestic role:

[2] Leslie Stephen had been editor of *Cornhill Magazine* from 1871 to 1882, and also made frequent contributions to the *Saturday Review*, *Pall Mall Gazette*, *Fraser's Magazine* or the *Fortnightly Review*. However, at the request of the publisher George Smith, Stephen gave up this practice to devote himself to the *Dictionary of National Biography*, editing articles of the first twenty-six volumes and writing 378 entries himself. On the other hand, Virginia Woolf's friendship with Kitty Maxse gained her access to the *National Review*; through Violet Dickinson, Woolf came to know Bruce Richmond, editor of *Times Literary Supplement*; John Middleton Murry —Katherine Mansfield's husband— introduced her to the *Athenaeum*; her aunt Annie Ritchie to *Cornhill Magazine*.

[3] For an approach to the literary relationship between Leslie Stephen and Virginia Woolf, see Hyman (1983: 197-216) and Fisher (1990: 31-40).

> Had I not killed her she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing. For, as I found, directly I put pen to paper, you cannot review even a novel without having a mind of your own, without expressing what you think to be the truth about human relationships, morality, sex. And all these questions, according to the Angel of the House, cannot be dealt with freely and openly by women; they must charm, they must conciliate, they must —to put it bluntly— tell lies if they are to succeed. (1992b: 103)

This "fatal bias" is what Woolf called "the tyranny of sex" or, in other words, the "effect of these repressions ... in women's work, and the effect is wholly to the bad". According to Woolf, this is a "sin against art" (1987: 315); the greatest challenge for a woman writer is to free herself from what the opposite sex would expect her to write like. She describes her position of resistance in "Women and Fiction" as follows:

> When a woman comes to write..., she will find that she is perpetually wishing to alter the established values – to make serious what appears insignificant to a man, and trivial what is to him important. And for that, of course, she will be criticised; for the critic of the opposite sex will be genuinely puzzled by an attempt to alter the current scale of values, and will see in it not merely a difference in view, but a view which is weak, trivial or sentimental, because it differs from his own. (1966b: 146)

The passage summarises Woolf's anxiety to depart from a male literary tradition in order to create a new one, where the female voice should be distinctively heard, as she put it in *A Room of One's Own*: "Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" (1929: 37). Woolf inaugurated a new tradition of women's writing which was heralded by her essays, introducing into them a shift of perspective which affected to both the content and the form of the genre as an aesthetic form. As will be seen, Woolf reformulated the positivist conception of authorship and readership: she rejected her contemporaries' view of the critic as a "privileged" reader which, on the one hand, implicitly bore a position of power and authority on the critic's side and, on the other, responded to an anxiety to institutionalise critical practice as objective science. For Woolf, the essay is not written just to justify literature, but is an aesthetic end in itself, which means that the traditional definition of the essay as "expository" prose should be also subject to reformulation. The emphasis which Woolf's contemporaries placed on objectivity and order as a means of articulating knowledge is removed in favour of fluidity and movement as qualities inherent to the self engaged with an equally fluid conception of reality. The essay is, for Woolf, the expression of personal opinion and its form should be flexible in order to encompass the multiplicity of human experience. Finally, and following Montaigne, Woolf sees herself as an amateur in a world of professionals, addressing an equally amateur reader whom she names, after Dr Johnson, the "common reader" and with whom she establishes a relation of kinship and a vision of literature as a "common land".

Woolf eagerly sought to alter the prevailing male "scale of values" which translated into a particular way of conceiving literary expression, both in fiction and non-fiction. In "The Mark on the Wall" (1917), Woolf's first experimental work, the narrator plunges into a "world of intoxicating freedom", a world from which "the masculine point of view which governs our lives" is absent, a world without figures of authority embodied in "professors or specialists or house-keepers with the profiles of policemen" (1985: 86, 87). Some years later, in what was probably to become one of Woolf's most famous essays ("Modern Fiction"; 1925) she reiterated her attack on the male triumvirate Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy and H. G. Wells, for making "the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring", for allowing "life" to escape from their novels, for "without life nothing else is worth while" (1994: 159).

Woolf's rejection of a type of fiction which would "preach doctrines, sing songs, celebrate the glories of the British Empire" that had made "the form of the novel so clumsy, verbose, and undramatic" (1988: 425) applies also to what has been traditionally regarded as non-fiction, a label which, according to her, should be also subject to reformulation, as will be argued. When Virginia Woolf first started to write criticism, the field was dominated by figures such as T. S. Eliot, John Middleton Murry and Desmond McCarthy, and her first reaction translated into a refusal to perpetuate that male critical canon.

For Desmond McCarthy, the critic was seen as a privileged reader, "better able than the ordinary reader to interpret creative experience", and he advocated the professional critic in opposition to the long-established tradition which blended the figure of the critic and the artist into one. As the word "professional" indicates, McCarthy also conceives of an ideal and restrictive readership; the "odd" and "common" impulse to "address our fellow-men at large" is not only futile, but also vain, motivated by the critics' anxiety "to assert themselves and impress others" (1932: 40). According to McCarthy, the emergence of the professional critic is needed for the sake of objectivity, since he "may know things about the work he is examining which the creator of it, who has never shifted from his own window, cannot know" (vii). Objectivity becomes for McCarthy an aesthetic value which should prevail not only in criticism but in literature itself, explicitly rejecting the new writers' tendency to emphasise the "subconscious" in their work, thus finding the "value of its results doubtful" (x).

A similar claim for objectivity grounded on "order" and "reason" can be found in John Middleton Murry's criticism, as the title of one of his most renowned essays ("Reason and Criticism"; 1926) suggests. "Criticism", Murry argues, "has a positive work to do", namely "to justify literature" (1931: 23). Yet in doing so, the critic must discard any need for "self-expression" (32) which would diminish objectivity and, therefore, the value of criticism. In order to offer true and valuable judgement, the critic must be guided by "reason" only, in order to achieve "an ordered and comprehensive experience. To this ordered and comprehensive experience science and poetry alike make their appeal, and by it they are judged" (35-36).

Yet the triumph of positivist philosophy in criticism, with its emphasis on reason, order, causality and argumentative thought may find a culmination in T. S. Eliot's critical *oeuvre*. The questions of rank and order according to which the literary canon is organised (1932: 15) apply also to criticism, and "the function of criticism seems to be essentially a problem of order too" (1932: 23). The prevailing form of Eliot's essays —as well as of those by Murry or McCarthy— mirrors the order of the argumentative principle, starting with a given premise which progresses by means of a chain of causality in order to reach a conclusion. "Criticism", Eliot argues, "must always profess an end in view, which, roughly speaking, appears to be the elucidation of works of art and the correction of taste" in order to achieve "true judgement" (1932: 24-5). The critic's task, given his position of authority, must be to put "the reader in the possession of facts which he otherwise would have missed" (1932: 32).

Eliot's doctrine of impersonality in art ("the progress of an artist is a continual ... extinction of personality"; 1932: 17) should equally apply to critical practice. The critic's personal impressions —what Eliot defines as "aesthetic criticism" or "impressionistic criticism" (1920: 2) deriving from the aesthetics of Pater and Swinburne— cannot be regarded as "the criticism of a critic, that is emotional, not intellectual" (1920: 5). Such would be the work of an "imperfect critic" who is eventually "an incomplete artist": satisfying "a suppressed creative wish" (1920: 7).

To summarise, these critics' approach towards a systematic study of literary production is underpinned by an effort to dignify and consolidate criticism as science, and which was institutionalised as a discipline in the academic world by F. R. Leavis and his work in *Scrutiny*. If criticism was to attain the rank of science, it necessarily had to become objective and, therefore, impersonal.[4] Yet it should be noted that the era of the academic establishment of criticism coincides chronologically with high imperialism in Britain which resulted, as Terry Eagleton has argued, in an urgent need to create a "sense of national mission and identity" (1983: 28), a "great tradition" —to use Leavis's words— in the study of literature.[5]

Woolf considered that, as was the case with literature, criticism also needed to be rethought and reformulated. Such an innovation should apply not only to what was traditionally agreed to be the content of criticism, but to the essay as an aesthetic form in itself. In 1916 Woolf published an essay in *Times Literary Supplement* entitled "Hours in a Library", which heralds her own aesthetic development.[6] The question of literary tradition is implicit both in the subject-matter

[4] In the opening pages of *A Room of One's Own*, the narrator insists on being called "Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please", for "'I' is only a convenient term for somebody who has no real being" (1929: 6-7). Such an "unauthored" technique —shared by other modernist writers— points to the universal quality of individual experience by presenting "the thing in itself, satisfactorily achieved" (Woolf 1980: 62). On the other hand, the substitution of the personal pronoun "I" for the impersonal "one" may be connected with Woolf's conception of the artist's "androgynous mind", for "a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine" (1929: 97).

[5] For an extensive discussion of this point, see Eagleton (1983: 17-53).

[6] The date is indeed significant, for the essay stands on the threshold of Woolf's own progression from

of the essay —a revision and re-reading of the classics piled on the shelves of a library— as well as in its title, echoing that of Leslie Stephen in his collection of critical essays published in 1874 and 1876, *Hours in a Library*. Yet, and as Rachel Bowlby has argued (1992a: ix), Woolf was also careful to state the main point of departure from her father's tradition —shared to some extent by her contemporary male critics— in an effort to emphasise what she saw as the astonishing shifts in the writing of this genre.

While Stephen begins by quoting Charles Lamb as an authority, Woolf chooses to draw a distinction between the "man who loves learning" and the "man who loves reading" (1987: 55), between the professional and the amateur, the specialist and the layman: "A learned man is a sedentary, concentrated solitary enthusiast, who searches through books to discover some particular grain of truth upon which he has set his heart". By opposition, the reader "is very apt to kill what it suits us to consider the more humane passion for pure and disinterested reading" (55). Unlike her father and most of her contemporary critics, Woolf sees herself as an amateur in a world of professionals after the manner of Montaigne (Dusinberre 1997: 10), addressing her critical work to the layman whom she names the "common reader": "The common reader, as Dr Johnson implies, differs from the critic and the scholar. He is worse educated, and nature has not gifted him so generously. He reads for his own pleasure rather than to impart knowledge or correct the opinions of others" (1994: 19). Herself a "common reader", Woolf adopts a position of resistance to what she sees as a threat both to literature and to readership, namely, the critic's assumed position of authority: "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 [libraries]" (1994: 397).

Yet Woolf not only reformulated the positivist conception of authorship and readership; her revision of the essay as a literary genre equally applies to its very form, as she poses in "Hours in a Library": "Did we ever in our youngest days feel such amazement at their [classics'] achievement as that which fills us now that we have shifted myriads of words and gone along uncharted ways in search of new forms for our new sensations?" (1987: 60). It seems obvious that Woolf thought it necessary to explore "uncharted ways", literally, to "try" —the original meaning of *essai*, as coined by Montaigne— in accordance with 'modern' times, as she would explain in "Character in Fiction" (1924): "All human relations have shifted.... And

traditional realism towards more experimental approaches to literature. In 1917, and along with her husband, Virginia Woolf set up the Hogarth Press, which relieved her from editorial pressure. She described the writer's submission to editorial requirements in the following terms: "If a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accented style" (1994: 160). Woolf's literary efforts to write "what she liked" resulted in her first experimental work —"The Mark on the Wall" (1917)— which was shortly followed by "Kew Gardens" and other short pieces compiled in the collection of short fiction entitled *Monday or Tuesday* (1921), where Woolf first put into practice her vision of a fragmented human identity rendered in the so-called stream-of-consciousness.

when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics and literature" (1988: 422).

The word "sensations", as Rachel Bowlby has argued (1992b: ix), calls into mind Walter Pater's —of whom Woolf was an avid reader— *fin de siécle* aesthetics. In his conclusion to *The Renaissance* (1873), Pater summarises our physical life as a "perpetual motion ...: the passage of blood, the waste and repairing of the lenses of the eye, the modification of the tissues of the brain under every ray of light and sound" (1986:150), processes which mirror the fluctuation of human perception. Like Pater, Woolf sees life as a fluid, a rapidly shifting and varying succession of emotions and sensations, as described in "The Mark on the Wall": "If one wants to compare life to anything, one must liken it to being blown through the Tube at fifty miles an hour —landing at the other end without a single hairpin in one's hair! ... Yes, that seems to express the rapidity of life, the perpetual waste and repair; all so casual, all so haphazard..." (1985: 84). The writer, unlike other artists, takes life as the scope of his/her art: "A writer has to keep his eye upon a model that moves, changes, upon an object that is not one object but innumerable objects. Two words cover all that a writer looks a —they are, human life" (1992a: 159).

And yet, for Pater the "whole scope of observation is dwarfed into the narrow chamber of the individual mind" (1986: 151). In opposition, Woolf's repeated "new" and collective "our" implies the existence of a communal —rather than solely individual— experience. As she explains later, "one of the signs of passing youth is the birth of a sense of fellowship with other human beings as we take our place among them" (1987: 57). Equally, modern literature partakes of the desire "to be whole, to be human ... to share the emotions of their kind, no longer to be isolated and exalted in solitary state upon their tower, but to be down to the ground with the mass of humankind" (1992a: 173): the image of common land becomes an expression for intellectual as well as formal freedom.

Such freedom is what allows the writer to try "uncharted ways" and those "new sensations" also require the invention of "new forms". While sensations —life— are associated with movement and fluidity, "form" recalls permanence and order. This apparent paradox is also the difficult task of the writer: to create a form that endures out of sensations which flicker; to find order out of chaos, a whole out of fragments, to make form out of formlessness: "to describe, to unify, to make order out of severed parts, a new art is needed and the control of a new tradition" (1966b: 113).

Woolf's arguing for a "new tradition" was also an important point of departure from the dominant panorama in the criticism of her time. "Our quarrel is not with the classics", Woolf asserted in "Modern Fiction", but with those who "have excited so many hopes and disappointed them so persistently that our gratitude largely takes the form of thanking them for having shown us what they might have done but have not done; what we certainly could not do, but as certainly, perhaps, do not wish to do" (1994: 158). In opposition to those who advocated the essay as an impersonal genre, Woolf defiantly declares that the genre is "primarily the expression of personal opinion" (216). The essay is not "scientific" in its nature; "it is clear", Woolf argues, "that you are not writing history or philosophy or biography" (1986:

25). Quite the opposite: according to Woolf, the aim of the essay is "to amuse the public in the space of 1,500 or 2,000 words" (1988: 212) in such a way that the "principle which controls it is simply that it should give pleasure" (1994: 216).[7]

Such an argument was largely to influence the structure of Woolf's perception of the relation between creative writing and the essay, as well as to contribute to the modification of the latter in the direction of narrative. According to a traditional division, "non-fiction" should be the proper place for polemical argument or explicit statement, while "creative writing" is thus separated from social concerns. Yet for Woolf, essays may deal with "the immortality of the soul, or the rheumatism in your left shoulder" (1994: 216); its definition should remain open in order to "include all the varieties of thought which are suitably enshrined in essays" (1986: 25), which is precisely what makes the genre still so modern, what conciliates the apparent opposition between novelty and tradition.

Woolf wrote her essays according to this new tradition. As a result, she did not turn to Leslie Stephen, T. S. Eliot, John Middleton Murry or Desmond McCarthy, but to those who considered the essay as aesthetic form, a means of artistic expression, such as Plato, Oscar Wilde or Montaigne, the latter defined by Woolf as "the first of the Modern" and the inventor of the "personal essay" (1986: 25). Wilde wrote two essays in dialogue form, "The Decay of Lying" (1888) —a title Woolf echoed in Woolf's "The Decay of Essay-Writing" (1905)— and "The Critic as Artist" (1890).[8] As Rodney Shewan has argued, Wilde certainly "handles [the essay] with a keen sense of its rich literary traditions from Plato and Lucian to Sidney, Dryden, and Landor" (1977: 99).

Woolf also wrote two essays in dialogue form: "Mr Conrad: A Conversation" (1923) and "Walter Sickert: A Conversation" (1934); such an embodiment suggests, both in Wilde and Woolf, that "criticism itself" —to use Wilde's words— "is an art. Criticism works with materials, and puts them into a form that is at once new and delightful.... Indeed I would call criticism a creation within a creation.... Nay, more, I would say that the highest criticism, being the *purest form of personal impression,* is in its way more creative than creation. That is what the highest criticism really is, the record of one's soul" (1994: 1027; emphasis added).

Yet, by positivist standards, this type of "creative" criticism was seen as a spurious hybrid. In "The Perfect Critic", T. S. Eliot poses the question of "how far criticism is 'feeling' and how far 'thought'", to conclude that "when we do not know, or when we do not know enough, we tend always to substitute emotions for thoughts" (1920: 7, 10). On the occasion of the publication of "Character in Fiction" —later to become "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" (1924)— Frank Swinnerton invalidated Woolf's critical views about character on the basis of the manner —a "yarn about two people in a railway carriage"— in which the argument is exposed: "Mrs Woolf does not think in terms of character at all. She thinks in terms of

[7] For an analysis of the pleasure principle in Woolf's essays, see Fernald, "Pleasure and Belief in 'Phases of Fiction'" in Rosenberg and Dubino (1997: 193-215).
[8] For an analysis of Oscar Wilde's essays in dialogue form, see Behrendt (1991: 93-118).

intuitions.... But the creation of character is something generated in the imagination of the writer. Of this imagination Mrs Woolf gives no sign, either in her critical writings or in her novels" (1924, 131). Swinnerton defines Georgian writers —and Virginia Woolf by extension— as "intellectually capable but creatively sterile. It is not a revolutionary impulse, as she seems to think, which makes these writers so very refined and pernickety. Their trouble is that they can none of them think what the devil to write about" (1924, 132).

As Barbara Currier Bell and Carol Ohman have suggested, Virginia Woolf has hardly been regarded as a "serious" critic, being called "a number of disparaging names: 'impressionistic,' 'belletrist,' 'ranconteur,' 'amateur'" (1974: 362), because her approach to the discipline deviated from conventional standards: "She [Woolf] will survive, not as a critic, but as a literary essayist recording the adventures of a soul among congenial masterpieces.... Her own approach was at once more subterranean than aerial" (Kronenberger 1955: 249).

Such clairvoyance proved itself wrong. Although Woolf's prestige as a novelist has overshadowed her practice as an essayist, some scholars have relatively recently started to approach her critical *oeuvre* afresh.[9] Two landmark theoretical approaches to the essay —Georg Lukács's "On the Nature and Form of the Essay" and Theodor Adorno's "The Essay as Form"— argue, as Woolf herself had, that the essay is an aesthetic form which is not scientific in nature, that essays are not written to prove anything, for such a vision would be a remnant of the nineteenth-century emphasis on the empirical representation and understanding of the facts of experience. Lukács, a contemporary of Woolf's writing in Germany, argues that "science affects us by its contents, art by its forms; science offers us facts and the relationships between facts, but art offers us souls and destinies" (1974: 3). Similarly, Woolf writes: "Whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide: ... the enormous labour of proving the solidity, the likeness to life" (1994: 160).

Theodor Adorno also argues that the lack of prestige of the essay as an aesthetic form is due to "identifying knowledge with organised science", a view which excludes as "impure anything that does not fit this antithesis" (1984: 151). Like Woolf and Lukács, Adorno argues for the flexible multiplicity of the essay as form, in order to encompass —since the essay is the expression of personal opinion— the wide variety of individual thought:

> The essay does not permit its domain to be prescribed. Instead of achieving something scientifically, or creating something artistically, the effort of the essay reflects a childlike freedom that catches fire, without scruple, on what others have already done. The essay mirrors what is loved and hated instead of presenting the intellect, on the model of a boundless work ethic, as *creatio ex nihilo*. (155)

[9] See, for example, Goldman (1976), Good (1988), Howe (1991: 1-33), Sharma (1977) and Fernald (1984: 165-89).

Essays, therefore, are not pragmatic in nature: "When art claims to be science and makes scientific criteria its standard, it sanctions a crude preartistic manipulation of raw material as devoid of meaning" (155). This also affects the essay as form, for "its concepts are neither deduced from any first principle nor do they come full circle and arrive at a final principle" (152); the notion of truth as "a network of causes and effects" (162) should be discarded. Such a method is also argued for by Woolf in "Modern Fiction" and is put into practice in one of her most famous essays, *A Room of One's Own* (1929): "Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end" (1994: 160).

The assertion reveals an emotional awareness drawn from the entire being. Yet, for Woolf, consciousness is more than a stream of associated ideas and feelings: it is part of a complex synthesis of the individual's total response to life, a response which at the turn of the twentieth-century had to be analysed not in terms of causality, but of perception, mind function and the experience of time and change.

Woolf was by no means alien to the dramatic changes which operated in society and which so profoundly affected the artist's aesthetic consciousness: "On or about December 1910 human character changed" (1988: 421), she argued in "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" (1924).[10] Woolf was conscious of being immersed in a cultural mainstream which detached her from "Mr Wells, Mr Bennett and Mr Galsworthy" —whom she calls "Edwardians"— and which brought her close to the "Georgians", "Mr Forster, Mr Lawrence, Mr Strachey, Mr Joyce and Mr Eliot", who "wrote against the grain and the current of their time" (1988: 421).

Therefore, Adorno says, the need arises in the essay as form —as in many other artistic expressions— to "annul the theoretically outmoded claims of totality and continuity" (1984: 164). The essay "thinks in fragments just as reality is fragmented and gains its unity only by moving through the fissures, rather than by smoothing them over" (164). Similarly, in "A Sketch of the Past", Woolf develops what she calls her "philosophy", that is, the existence of a "hidden pattern" behind

[10] Woolf may have been ironic when proposing such a specific date —in opposition with the vagueness of the preposition "about"— in order to refer to social processes which may have taken years to develop. And yet, the year 1910 heralded changes which profoundly affected and altered a whole way of conceiving life: labour unrest and workers' strikes, agitation for women's rights. Russian novelists —who so stirred Woolf's imagination— were being translated into English, as well as Sigmund Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, which seemed to authenticate the very voices from the underground heard in Dostoevsky's novels. Frazer's final volumes of *The Golden Bough* likewise directed attention to myth, ritual and the power of symbols, whose hold on the racial or collective unconscious Jung would systematically explore. This new view of man included more than a submerged irrational self: man was seen to be a complex of consciousness, existing on many levels. Such discontinuity of personality pointed to a fluctuating identity, an instability of the self which was echoed in Einstein's view of time, space, and objects, also seen as mental concepts. December 1910 was also the date in which the first Post-Impressionist Exhibition was organised by Roger Fry in London, where examples of non-representational art were being shown for the first time in Britain. Overcoming an initial rejection of their work, Woolf credited the Post-Impressionist painters for penetrating beyond the surface of reality. For a development of this point, see Stansky (1997) and Butler (1994).

fragmented experience, and "it is only by putting it into words that I make it whole" (1976: 72).

The positivist conception of the essay as a scientific and pragmatic form, aiming at objectivity and truth is, according to Adorno, nothing but "the marks of a repressive order; these ideals [of purity and cleanliness] are shared by the bustle of authentic philosophy aiming at eternal values, a sealed and flawless organised science, and by a conceptless, intuitive art" (1984: 156). "Literal truth-telling", Woolf similarly argues, "is out of place in an essay" (1994: 217); in "The Mark on the Wall", she makes a similar point, ridiculing nineteenth-century empiricism and its efforts to establish eternal rules, standards, and generalisations against which to measure human experience: "Generalisations are very worthless. It [the word] recalls leading articles, cabinet ministers —a whole class of things indeed which as a child one thought the thing itself, the standard thing, the real thing, from which one could not depart save at the risk of nameless damnation" (1985: 86).

As Woolf herself had argued, the essay does not obey the rules of organised science. "It revolts against the idea", Adorno writes, "that the changing and the ephemeral is unworthy of philosophy; against the ancient injustice towards the transitory.... The essay shies away from the violence of dogma, from the notion that the result of abstraction, the temporally invariable concept of indifference to the individual phenomenon grasped by it, deserves ontological dignity" (1984: 158). In "The Modern Essay", Woolf explains how the essay is concerned with the transitory, for that is intrinsic to life; it has "that indescribable inequality, stir, and final expression which belong to life and to life alone.... Life wells up and alters and adds. Even things in a book-case change if they are alive; we find ourselves wanting to meet them again; we find them altered" (1994: 221).

In his essay "Über den Essay und seine Prosa" (1947), Max Bense distinguishes the essay from a scientific treatise in so far as this genre aims to reflect the fluidity of life, constantly varying before the perceiving human consciousness:

> He writes essayistically who writes while experimenting, who turns his object this way and that, who questions it, feels it, tests it, thoroughly reflects on it, attacks it from different angles, and in his mind's eye collects what he sees, and puts into words what the object allows to be seen under the conditions established in the course of writing. (418)

In "Street Haunting", Woolf had described this process in similar terms; what the "professional eye" does is to "decompose these trophies [life] in such a way as to bring out their more obscure angles and relationships" (1994: 483). Such a change of perspective is what Woolf applied to her conception of the essay which, like creative writing, needed rethinking and reformulation. As Bell and Ohman have suggested (1974: 363), Woolf's essays are "defiantly feminine", implying a revolt against the established terms of literary study as well as against the conventionally accepted ideals of the critical method: analysis, judgement and objectivity, qualities stereotypically allotted to males.

Woolf is deliberately "amateur", rebelling against the idea of a professional imparting knowledge and establishing instead kinship between the critic and the reader. Woolf is deliberately "belletrist", for she consciously blurs the rigid boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, applying to the latter the same theoretical and aesthetic principles which shaped her creative writing. Woolf is deliberately "impressionistic", for her writing was concerned with reflecting the fluid quality of life, by definition shifting, varying, chaotic and haphazard.

Woolf's essays deal with what is said to be creative, appreciative and subjective. They most often present embedded stories and scenes —"the germ of such fictitious gift as I have", she argues (1980: 160)— where Woolf's fluid appreciation of literary genres is overtly exposed: "So, if you will allow me, instead of analysing and abstracting, I will tell you a simple story" (1988: 422). This constitutes a method for her essays which ostensibly deviated from that used by her contemporaries and which, as she prophesised, would be underrated and condemned to oblivion. As Doris Meyer has put it, "if the essay itself is an invisible genre in Western literature, then we can safely and sadly say that essays by women ... have been victims of invisibility in third degree, which is akin to being literarily 'disappeared'" (1984: 3).

By means of the "invention" of the personal essay, Virginia Woolf has also influenced a whole generation of essayists. In her inaugural lecture for admission in the Academia Argentina de Letras, Victoria Ocampo acknowledged the debt of twentieth-century women to Virginia Woolf: "Ella me animó a escribir ... deseaba que las mujeres se expresaran en cualquier idioma, en cualquier país, sobre cualquier cosa por trivial o vasto que pareciera" (Correas 1978: 167).[11] Indeed, Woolf had encouraged Ocampo to deepen into the personal essay —"I'm so glad you write criticism and not fiction ... I hope you will go on to Dante, and then to Victoria Okampo [sic]" (1979: 356)— which in turn influenced other South American writers such as Gabriela Mistral and Alfonsina Storni (Meyer, 1984: 5).[12]

In her essays Woolf often offered pictures of women trapped in silence by a patriarchal structure which denied them a place in the literary tradition: "Such portraits as we have are almost invariably of the male sex, who strut more prominently across the stage, and it seems worth while to take as a model one of those many women who cluster in the shade" (1985: 17). Today the examination of canons involve structures of exclusion and structures of value; for, as Terry Eagleton

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[11] Victoria Ocampo (1890-1979) was one of the most outstanding intellectuals in South American letters. Born into an aristocratic family, Ocampo devoted her life to women and literature, especially through her activity in the literary journal and homonymous publishing house *Sur*. Ocampo was favourably impressed after having read *A Room of One's Own* and often manifested her desire to know its author, which she did in London in 1934 at a Man Ray exhibition. Ocampo regarded Woolf as "el más precioso regalo que me ha hecho Inglaterra" (1946: 92); the friendship between the two women ripened quickly, occasionally seeing each other and regularly corresponding until Virginia Woolf's death. Ocampo played a key role in spreading Woolf's work in South America, supervising the translations of *A Room of One's Own* [*Un cuarto propio*] (1936), *Orlando* (1937), *To the Lighthouse* [*Al faro*] (1938), *Three Guineas* [*Tres guineas*] (1941) and *A Writer's Diary* [*Diario de una escritora*] (1954).

[12] For a development of this point, see also Pratt in Doris Meyer (1984: 10-26).

has argued, literature "has to be recognised as a *construct*, fashioned by particular people for particular reasons at a certain time" (1983: 11). The assumption that criticism is not a "disinterested" and "objective" occupation underpins most theoretical approaches to literary works nowadays, which revolts against the New Critics' idea of the immanent value of literature and which mark out the reader, the reading process and response as areas for investigation (Tompkins, 1980: ix).

This may explain why Woolf's essays remain excitingly modern, thrilling and suggestive. They reveal themselves not as the product of her inability to produce according to the analytical method but as a position of resistance against it, which is translated into a reformulation of authorship, readership and criticism itself, and which transformed the latter into an artistic form.

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