

Virginia Woolf and Michel de Montaigne: Ethics and Aesthetics of the Literary Essay

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Abstract

Virginia Woolf's literary essays emerge out of an eagerness to communicate a self at odds with its own time, rejecting ideological assumptions present in her contemporaries' critical practice. Woolf's reformulation articulates itself as a return to the humble origins of the essay as form, which she acknowledged to appear embodied in Michel de Montaigne's *Essais* (1580). The present paper aims to explore the ethics of subversion which underpin Woolf's criticism and her conception of the literary essay, along with the aesthetics which its form presents as promulgated by its "modern" inventor, from Woolf's first reception of the Frenchman's essayist to her own first collection of criticism, *The Common Reader* (1925).

In a short story written in 1925 and entitled "The Introduction", Virginia Woolf dramatised the struggle for confidence of a young woman writer in a man's world.¹ The story in question may also serve as an "introduction" to this work, for it addresses "under the decent veil of print" (Woolf 1986, 26), as Woolf would have it, some basic assumptions concerning both the nature of the literary essay and its practice as seen by two women writers: Lily Everit, the protagonist of the story, and Virginia Woolf herself.

"The Introduction" dramatises Woolf's conception of the essay as a literary response to a world that has become problematic and thus requires an urgent reassessment of the place of men and—especially—women in the new social order. For both Woolf and her *alter ego* Lily the essay is a suitable place to contest the male world of specialists, it emerges as an amateur's raid in a world of those professionals who have erected themselves as sole producers and interpreters of literature. Such a reformulation of the literary—and critical—practice is an attempt to communicate a female soul in the light of an old tradition which also originally resisted prevailing values (order, rigour and coherence) and rethought the author's position of authority in favour of establishing a kinship with readers. For Lily, it becomes necessary to revise the present state of affairs by looking back to the character of Dean Swift; for Woolf, Michel de Montaigne is her literary mentor.

The aim of this paper is to explore the ethics of subversion which underpin Woolf's critical practice through her conception of the literary essay, as well as the aesthetics which its form presents as promulgated by its 'modern' inventor Michel de Montaigne. This work attempts to trace a trajectory from Woolf's first reception of the Frenchman's essayist to her own first collection of criticism, *The Common Reader* (1925), in which a whole chapter is dedicated to Montaigne, whom she acknowledged she was indebted to.

Coming back to Woolf's short story, it is evident that the work illustrates the introduction of the aptly named Lily to the world of letters performed by means of an

essay upon the character of Dean Swift, which has been marked by an Oxford Professor “with three red stars; First rate” (Woolf 1985, 184). In spite of her proven capacity to write, Lily feels that she is dangerously trespassing the borders of the traditionally feminine realm, characterised by the presence of a passive subject: “That is the conviction that it was not hers to dominate, or to assert; rather to air and embellish this orderly life where all was done already” (Woolf 1985, 186).

Lily’s essay upsets the established social order, which is inevitably male-gendered: “The towers of Westminster; the high and formal buildings; talk; this civilisation, she felt ... this regulated way of life, which fell like a yoke about her neck, softly, indomitably, from the skies, a statement which there was no gainsaying” (Woolf 1985, 186).

In addition to this, Lily feels that her conscious choice of the essay as a genre places her in an uncomfortable position, since it has traditionally been associated to features allotted to the male, such as order, rigour and coherence. Essays have been so far an exclusively male territory, a fact which enhances Lily’s lack of assurance as well as her feeling of isolation, devoid of a female tradition in essay writing. The title of the story corresponds to its climax, when Lily is being introduced to Bob Brinsley, a college young man who presumes that her literary vocation is for poetry, an assumption which Lily only timidly revokes:

‘Essays,’ she said. And she would not let this horror get possession of her. Churches and parliaments, flats, even the telegraph wires—all, she told herself, made by men’s toil, and this young man, she told herself, is in direct descent from Shakespeare, so she would not let this terror, this suspicion of something different, get hold of her and shrivel up her wings and drive her out into loneliness. (Woolf 1985, 187)

“The Introduction” inauspiciously closes by presenting the threat which Lily represents for Bob’s historically consolidated superiority, and who violently responds by killing a fly after having brutally torn its wings off: “He tore the wings off a fly, standing with his foot on the fender his head thrown back, talking insolently about himself, arrogantly, but she didn’t mind how insolent and arrogant he was to her, if only he had not been brutal to flies” (Woolf, 1985, 187).

The story summarises Woolf’s apprehension at the critical reception of *The Common Reader* (1925), published only a month after the composition of “The Introduction”. She particularly feared the reaction of the male critical *establishment*, that she very often presented in terms which closely resemble Bob Brinsley’s authoritative and abusive position.² The reviews of Woolf’s critical pamphlet *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown* (1924)—which would also be included in *The Common Reader*—had not been totally favourable; for the *Nation and the Athenaeum*, Woolf’s criticism was “obviously of little use” (Majumdar and McLaurin 1975, 134).

Moreover, in a review in *Bookman* Frank Swinnerton described Woolf’s essay as a “world of aesthetic cliques”, an indication of her lack of imagination in “critical writings and in her novels” (in Majumdar and McLaurin 1975, 131). Yet the most deplorable aspect of Woolf’s criticism concerned, according to these critics, its detachment from expository prose, consisting instead of a “vague and speculative method of an inactive dreamer”, “intellectually capable but creatively sterile” at work in a “short yarn about hypothetical Mrs Brown” (Majumdar and McLaurin 1975, 132).

However, Woolf’s method constitutes a conscious position of resistance against male critical assumptions of authority over their readership which she did not wish to

perpetuate. Historically speaking, the 1920s represented the inception of a process for establishing professional criticism in Britain, pioneered by I.A. Richards and T.S. Eliot and consolidated by F.R. Leavis, among others. Like his predecessor Matthew Arnold, Leavis opposed culture to mass civilization in an attempt to elevate criticism to a position of social and cultural authority, which should be located in the university (McNees 1997, 44), a position which presupposed a hierarchical stance and ignored those who did not belong to the academy.

The *Scrutiny* critics railed against Virginia Woolf, whose work was, in their view, elitist and insulated by class; whose method showed a belletrist and amateur flavour which invalidated her critical assumptions. Yet, and unlike these academics, Woolf enjoyed a broad and varied readership by virtue of her regular contributions to the *Times Literary Supplement*, and, unlike professional critics, Woolf was able to write disinterestedly, for she had no answers to give, no axes to grind and no reputation to protect (Kaufmann 1997, 140).

By positivist standards, Woolf's criticism was a spurious hybrid void of the order, coherence and rigour which characterised the expository prose of her male contemporaries. As a result, her critical *oeuvre* was often called a number of disparaging names, such as "belletrist", "impressionist", "rancoteur" and "amateur" (Bell and Ohman 1974, 362). And this is exactly what Woolf's criticism pretended to aim at: creative, non-professional art, free from dogmatism in order to establish a kinship with readers, enhanced by the "longing to be closer to their kind, to write the common speech of their kind, to share the emotions of their kind, no longer to be isolated and exalted in solitary state upon their tower, but to be down on the ground with the mass of human kind" (Woolf 1993a, 173).

Woolf's efforts to subvert male critical standards made necessary to find an alternative critical tradition with which she should feel at ease, a "common place" which should be far removed from the settled ideologies of early twentieth-century England. The Renaissance represented for Woolf not only her personal revolt against the male culture in which she had been brought up, but also—as its very name suggests—the possibility of her own rebirth to a new critical tradition of writing against the grain.³

In 1903 Virginia Woolf was given by her brother Thoby a copy of Michel de Montaigne's *Essais*: while immersed in his writing, Woolf perceived the fluid boundaries between the amateur and the professional and the different values he associated to them: "I marvel at the assurance and confidence everyone has about himself, whereas there is virtually nothing that I *know* that I know and which I would dare to guarantee to be able to perform" (Montaigne 1991, 721).⁴

Even the form that Montaigne invented—the modestly named *Essais*—summarised the Frenchman's "attempts" (1991, 1) to try out his personal opinions, removed from the great philosophers' weight of certainty and authority, as he poses in the preface to his work: "I myself am the subject of my book" (1991, 1). As her reading of the essays progressed, Woolf also discovered with fascination Montaigne's joys of digression and freedom from an imposed order: "I like ... my formless way of speaking, free from rules and in the popular idiom, proceeding without definitions, subdivisions and conclusions" (Montaigne 1991, 724-725).

As Juliet Dusinberre argues (1997, 54), Montaigne was perfectly aware of a fact already lost to Woolf's contemporary critics, that logic and linear progress are the artificial constructs of male education: "There is nothing fluent or polished about my language; it is rough and disdainful, with rhetorical arrangements which are free and undisciplined. And I like it that way ... striving to avoid artificiality and affectation"

(Montaigne 1991, 725). The linear progress of the Ramists, based on a formal male pedagogy of logic and rhetoric is alien to his style.

A further act of rebellion in Montaigne's rethinking of the male culture he inherited concerned the conscious choice of the vernacular for the *Essais*, in spite of the fact that Latin was his mother tongue and, therefore, more natural to him than French: "Latin is a native tongue for me: I understand it better than French; yet it is forty years now since I used it for speaking or writing" (Montaigne 1991, 914). By doing this Montaigne was not only subverting the necessary usage of Latin as a *rite de passage* to adult life, but also broadening his readership.

Montaigne's ambivalence towards the masculine culture implicit in this period is further enhanced by his rejection of certainties, his judgements being provisional, inconsistent and fluctuating as the very self he wishes to portray:

The world is but a perennial see-saw. Everything in it ... all waver with a more languid rocking to and fro. I am unable to stabilize my subject: it staggers confusedly along with natural drunkenness. I grasp it as it is now, at this moment when I am lingering over it. I am not portraying being but becoming: not the passage from one age to another ... but from day to day, minute to minute. (1991, 908-909)

The young Woolf reads Montaigne from an urgent need to communicate the sense of a self similarly at odds with its own time and culture. She may have felt that Montaigne's elliptic writing was essentially feminine in his implicit rejection of the traditionally male modes of discourse. Furthermore, Montaigne's choice of the vernacular as the vehicle to express himself drew him close to the realm of the female, where the vernacular articulated itself in opposition to male classical training, as Woolf would imply in "On Not Knowing Greek"—also included in *The Common Reader*—by pointing out a "tremendous breach of tradition" (1994, 38).

Significantly, Woolf published her first essays in the *Guardian* only a year after her first reading of Montaigne's. "Haworth, November 1904" partakes of Montaigne's elliptic exposition and it appears underpinned by one of the Frenchman's favourite images: the journey which records the individual mind both at work and at play while also enhancing the self's process of exploration and discovery. Woolf's pilgrimage to Haworth—the birth place of the Brontë sisters—serves her to place them against a particular background as well as to familiarise the reader through the narrator's impressions with the novels of these writers: "I do not know whether pilgrimages to the shrines of famous men ought to be considered as sentimental journeys ... The curiosity is only legitimate when the house of a great writer or the country in which it is set adds something to our understanding of his books" (Woolf 1986, 5).

The *Guardian's* editor considered Woolf's first essay as a "talented" beginning, and encouraged her to go "deeper" into the subject (Bell 1972, 94). Within the next twelve months Woolf published more than thirty articles, which already partake of a spirit of revision and exploration, as "The Decay of Essay-Writing" (1905) shows.⁵ This piece of work inaugurates a series of critical reflections on the nature of the essay as form and, significantly, Woolf begins by acknowledging the debt to its creator, Michel de Montaigne: "We may account him for the first of the moderns" (Woolf 1986, 25).

The genre Woolf here advocates is far from scientific, expository prose, which she defines as the "personal essay", for it "is primarily an expression of personal opinion" (Woolf 1986, 25).⁶ It is precisely this peculiar quality that makes of the essay a modern and popular art—"we try to be new by being old"—capable of comprising "all

the varieties of thought". Its form and content make the essay a flexible and spontaneous genre, somehow similar to "our natural way of speaking", where "you can say in this shape what you cannot with equal fitness say in any other" (1986, 25). Such a critical form has, as a result, "permanent value", for it is the expression of "individual likes and dislikes" what thrills readers. Deprived of, then, dogmatism and authority, the essay "owes its popularity to the fact that its proper use is to express one's personal peculiarities, so that under the decent veil of print one can indulge one's egoism to the full" (1986, 26).

The formal features that Woolf allots to the essay coincide with the aesthetic and ideological predicaments that Montaigne had devised for his own: it is not by chance that the Frenchman occupies a privileged place in Woolf's *The Common Reader* (1925), which gained her a reputation as a literary critic. While at work in this compilation, Woolf wrote the following in her diary:

The question I want to debate here is the question of my essays; & how to make them into a book ... The collection of articles is in my view an inartistic method ... I should graze nearer my own individuality. I should mitigate the pomposity & sweep all sort of trifles. I think I should feel more at my ease. So I think a *trial* should be made". (1978, 261; my italics)

In such an entry Woolf silently enlists Montaigne in the politics of her discourse. Woolf's first collection of essays necessarily appears as a *rite de passage* which also implies a conscious selection of form—literally speaking, a trial—as well as a certain aesthetics underpinning this choice: the exploration of the writer's own self as central to the narrative, the rejection of authority and dogmatism and the selection of a digressive style—"all sort of trifles" (1978, 261)—as the conscious choice of the essayist.

Significantly, the working title of the first *Common Reader* was "Reading", also the name of a 1919 essay which was never published during Woolf's lifetime, probably because, as Nicola Luckhurst has suggested (in Greene 1999, 48), it reads too evidently as a *pastiche* of Montaigne's own work. While at work in this project, Woolf recorded in her diary: "Thus the hidden stream was given exit, & I felt reborn" (1978, 134). Woolf's own "rebirth" springs out of a spirit of exploration and discovery in a "hidden stream", which is inherent to the nature of the essay, in itself a trial. "Reading" articulates itself both as a re-examination of Woolf's past in literary terms and a reassessment of the place of the writer in a changing, unstable and provisional universe, which were precisely the historical conditionings which prefigured the emergence of the essay in the Renaissance (Butryn 1989, 75).⁷

In order to convey the novelty of such an experience, Woolf shares the excitement present in the early accounts of the New World made by Hakluyt and Raleigh, as Montaigne himself had done in "Of the Caniballes" and "Of Experience":

There is a balm for our restlessness in conjuring up visions of Elizabethan magnanimity ... And so, as you read across the broad pages with as many slips and somnolences as you like, the illusion rises and holds you of banks slipping on by either side, of glades opening out, of white towers revealed, of gilt domes and ivory minarets. It is, indeed, an atmosphere, not only soft and fine, but rich, too, with more than one can grasp at a single reading. (Woolf 1988, 149)

In addition to Elizabethan images of exploration and discovery, Woolf overtly proposes a method of construction for the essay, prepared to stay with digressions, with

the “slips” and “somnolences”, with the circular flights and ramblings of the individual mind.

Such politics of subversion of Woolf’s critical practice will underpin, on the other hand, *The Common Reader* which, after the manner of Montaigne, also opens by addressing the layman, for whom the compilation is devised: “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 to impart knowledge and correct the opinion of others” (1953, 1). Woolf addresses this particular—rather than universal—subject, her aim being to “write down a few ideas and opinions” (1953, 2) which are, however, provisional. By emphasising the role of the reader in the construction of meaning Woolf removes authority from the single voice of the writer, thus following the lack of dogma she so admired in her mentor: “He [Montaigne] refused to teach; refused to preach; kept on saying that he was like other people” (1953, 61).

The chapter which Woolf dedicates to Montaigne significantly stands as an overt exposition of what is, for Woolf, the ideal critical practice, as well as a poetics of the nature of the essay as form. Woolf credits the Frenchman for the invention of the “personal essay”: “All his effort was to write himself down, to communicate, to tell the truth, and that is a rugged road, more than it seems” (1953, 61). Montaigne’s essays are successful insofar as they communicate the individual and the particular which is in turn achieved by the rejection of the rigid conventions which constrain the soul: “The laws are mere conventions, utterly unable to keep touch with the vast variety and turmoil of human impulses; habits and customs are a convenience devised for the support of timid natures who dare not allow their souls free to play” (1953, 64).

Woolf’s essays not only explicitly bear Montaigne’s imprint of ideas, but are also reminiscent of his style, which recalls the provisional quality of the self and the turmoil of its ideas: “Movement and change are the essence of our being ... Let us say what comes into our heads, repeat ourselves, contradict ourselves, fling out the wildest nonsense, and follow the most fantastic fancies without caring what the world does or thinks or says” (1953, 64).

Such qualities make of the essay, as Woolf has it, a modern and intertextual practice in which she incorporates the reader to the construction of meaning while also introducing subjectivity, relativism and suspended judgement as its core politics. In her pursuit, Woolf takes Montaigne as a literary mentor and thus recovers the original aesthetics of the essay as conceived of by its first ‘modern’ practitioner.

Woolf turned to the Renaissance out of an eagerness to communicate her soul, inconveniently at odds with her own time. Within this frame of mind, Montaigne represented for Woolf the embodiment of her own rebel against the professionalisation of literature and of its critical practice, and thus railed with the Frenchman in his amateurish raid to assess a place for men and women in a provisional social order.

Woolf’s acknowledged debt to Montaigne does not only respond to a shared aesthetics for the essay, but also implies a whole ethics which they both attached to it. By establishing a kinship with their readers and incorporating them into the text, Woolf and Montaigne eventually imply the necessity of an ultimate rethinking of the literary act as a communal reality beyond the solipsistic realm of a few, and “common readers” stand as sole and rightful heirs to this tradition.

NOTES

¹ The story was probably written in 1925, although it remained unpublished in Woolf's lifetime (Woolf 1985, 308). "The Introduction" was published posthumously in the *Sunday Times Magazine* on 18 March 1973 and compiled by Stella McNichol in the collection of short fiction entitled *Mrs Dalloway's Party* (1973).

² In a late essay entitled "Reviewing" (1939), Woolf overtly pictured her anxiety over the critics' judgements by using images of voyeurism and prostitution which evidence the objectification of the writer and of literature as commodity culture: "In London there are certain shops that always attract a crowd ... The crowd is watching the women at work. There they sit in the shop window putting invisible stitches into moth-eaten trousers. And this familiar sight may serve as illustration for the following paper. So our poets, playwrights and novelists sit in the shop window, doing their work under the curious eyes of reviewers. But the reviewers are not content, like the crowd in the street, to gaze in silence; they comment aloud on the size of the holes, upon the skill of the workers, and advise the public which of the goods in the shop is the best worth buying" (Woolf 1993b, 152).

³ For an extensive view on the relationship of Virginia Woolf with European Renaissance, see Fox 1990; Brosnan (1997, 119-145); Dusinger 1997; Greene 1999 and Gualtieri (2000, 1-48).

⁴ For an analysis of Montaigne's "distrust, and even hatred of the professional", see McGowan (1974, 146).

⁵ The title of Woolf's essay echoes Oscar Wilde's "The Decay of Lying" (1888). For a critical approach to the conversational nature of Wilde's essays, see Behrendt 1991 and Cohen 1993.

⁶ For an extensive view of Woolf's conception of the "personal essay", see Fernald (1989, 165-189).

⁷ In "The Emergence of the Essay and the Idea of Discovery" (in Butrym 1989, 73-91), Michael Hall argues that the emergence of the essay as a new genre is inextricably related to the impact of Renaissance discoveries, particularly in the observational sciences of astronomy and geography. Thus, the essays of Michel de Montaigne exhibit a spirit of exploration as a product of the Renaissance idea of discovery and in response to it.

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