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978-0-521-54756-7 - The Cambridge Introduction to Virginia Woolf

Jane Goldman

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*The Cambridge Introduction to
Virginia Woolf*

For students of modern literature, the works of Virginia Woolf are essential reading. In her novels, short stories, essays, polemical pamphlets and in her private letters she explored, questioned and refashioned everything about modern life: cinema, sexuality, shopping, education, feminism, politics and war. Her elegant and startlingly original sentences became a model of modernist prose. This is a clear and informative introduction to Woolf's life, works, and cultural and critical contexts, explaining the importance of the Bloomsbury group in the development of her work. It covers the major works in detail, including *To the Lighthouse*, *Mrs Dalloway*, *The Waves* and the key short stories. As well as providing students with the essential information needed to study Woolf, Jane Goldman suggests further reading to allow students to find their way through the most important critical works. All students of Woolf will find this a useful and illuminating overview of the field.

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Preface

Reading Virginia Woolf will change your life, may even save it. If you want to make sense of modern life, the works of Virginia Woolf remain essential reading. More than fifty years since her death, accounts of her life still set the pace for modern modes of living. Plunge (and this *Introduction* is intended to help you take the plunge) into Woolf's works – at *any* point – whether in her novels, her short stories, her essays, her polemical pamphlets, or her published letters, diaries, memoirs and journals – and you will be transported by her elegant, startling, buoyant sentences to a world where everything in modern life (cinema, sexuality, shopping, education, feminism, politics, war and so on) is explored and questioned and refashioned. 'My brain', she confides in one diary entry, 'is ferociously active' (*D3* 132); and Woolf's writing is infused with her formidably productive mental energy, with her appetite for modern life, modern people and modern art. Woolf's writing both records and shapes modern experience, modern consciousness; but it also opens up to scrutiny the process of writing itself, a process she herself frequently records, and also finds exhilarating.

She famously depicts fictional writing, in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), as 'a spider's web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners'. Fictional works may, Woolf claims, 'seem to hang there complete by themselves. But when the web is pulled askew, hooked up at the edge, torn in the middle, one remembers that these webs are not spun in mid-air by incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in' (*AROO* 62–3). This *Introduction* will guide you through Woolf's writing, but also delineate for you the life of the person who produced it (her critical and cultural afterlife, too): you will be introduced, then, to both spider and web. As an appetiser to both, let us sample Woolf's fascinating account of her writing process at the heart of her writing life.

In the spring of 1927, the 35-year-old Woolf takes stock, in one brief diary entry, of her achievements to date – she has by now published five novels, including *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927) – as she

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contemplates beginning her sixth novel, *Orlando* (1928), and even enjoys glimpses of her seventh, *The Waves* (1931); at the same time, she is also knuckling down to writing the most enduringly modern, feminist manifesto, *A Room of One's Own*. Considering the shape of the work that is to become *Orlando*, she envisages that 'Everything is to be tumbled in pall mall [*sic*]. It is to be written as I write letters at the top of my speed . . . No attempt is to be made to realise the character. Sapphism is to be suggested. Satire is to be the main note – satire & wildness' (D3 131). But this novel is also to 'satirise' her own, previous writing:

For the truth is I feel the need of an escapade after these serious poetic experimental books . . . I want to kick up my heels & be off. I want to embody all those innumerable little ideas & tiny stories which flash into my mind at all seasons. I think this will be great fun to write; & it will rest my head before starting the very serious, mystical poetical work which I want to come next. (D3 131)

This premonition of the novel that becomes *The Waves* sets her thinking about her writing agenda for the coming months, and her own creative processes:

Meanwhile . . . I have to write my book on fiction [*A Room of One's Own*] & that won't be done till January, I suppose. I might dash off a page or two now & then by way of experiment. And it is possible that the idea will evaporate. Anyhow this records the odd hurried unexpected way in which these things suddenly create themselves – one thing on top of another in about an hour. So I made up Jacob's Room looking at the fire at Hogarth House; so I made up *The Lighthouse* one afternoon in the square here. (D3 131–2)

However quickly her works are conceived and 'made up', as she records here, Woolf's final published works we know to have been rigorously drafted and redrafted. Every word in every sentence on every page has been subjected to her scrutiny. Her pride in such perfectionism is evident in another diary entry: 'Dear me, how lovely some parts of *The Lighthouse* are! Soft & pliable, & I think deep, & never a word wrong for a page at a time' (D3 132). The following *Introduction* to Woolf aims to show you the main features of her web, but also to illuminate some of its finely wrought detail, too – the crucial engineering of her sentences, the devastating precision of her words. It will also consider how both spider and web have in turn been woven into decades of literary criticism and theory, and academic and popular accounts of modern culture. In short, *The Cambridge Introduction to Virginia Woolf* offers

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a unique combination of clear and informative entrées to the life, works, and cultural and critical contexts. As well as providing you with the essential basic facts in all these realms, it will give you the opportunity to make informed decisions about further reading in Woolf and Woolf studies. This *Introduction* owes its existence and is also dedicated to the international community of Woolf scholars, which is now so large, and its works so numerous, that it has not been possible to cite in these pages every name or contribution of significance. I would also like to thank the many students and colleagues with whom, over many happy years, I have studied Virginia Woolf's writings – at the Universities of Dundee, Glasgow and Edinburgh, and at the Scottish Universities' International Summer School.

'We are the words; we are the music;
we are the thing itself' (*MOB* 72)

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Abbreviations

Quotations will be cited in parentheses in the text by page number, or by volume and page number. Any inconsistencies and idiosyncrasies of spelling, syntax and punctuation are Woolf's own.

- AROO *A Room of One's Own* (London: Hogarth, 1929)
- BA *Between the Acts* (London: Hogarth, 1941)
- CE *Collected Essays*, 4 vols., ed. Leonard Woolf (London: Chatto & Windus, 1967)
- CH Robin Majumdar and Allen McLaurin (eds.), *Virginia Woolf: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975)
- CSF *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Susan Dick, 2nd edn (London: Hogarth, 1989)
- DI–5 *The Diary of Virginia Woolf (1915–1941)*, 5 vols., ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth, 1977–84)
- EI–4 *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, vols. 1–4 (of 6), ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth, 1986–94)
- F *Flush: A Biography* (London: Hogarth, 1933)
- JR *Jacob's Room* (London: Hogarth, 1922)
- L1–6 *The Letters of Virginia Woolf (1888–1941)*, 6 vols., ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautman (London: Hogarth, 1975–80)
- LAW Margaret Llewellyn-Davies (ed.), *Life As We Have Known It by Co-Operative Working Women* (London: Hogarth, 1931)
- LS *The London Scene* (London: Snowbooks, 2004)
- LWL Leonard Woolf, *The Letters of Leonard Woolf*, ed. Frederick Spotts (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989)
- M *The Moment and Other Essays* (London: Hogarth, 1947)
- MD *Mrs Dalloway* (London: Hogarth, 1925)
- MOB *Moments of Being*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind, 2nd edn (London: Hogarth, 1985)
- ND *Night and Day* (London: Duckworth, 1919)
- O *Orlando: A Biography* (London: Hogarth, 1928)

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- TG *Three Guineas* (London: Hogarth, 1938)
 TL *To the Lighthouse* (London: Hogarth, 1927)
 TLH *To the Lighthouse: The Original Holograph Draft*, ed. Susan Dick
 (Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press, 1983)
 VBL Vanessa Bell, *The Selected Letters of Vanessa Bell*, ed. Regina
 Marler (London: Bloomsbury, 1993)
 VO *The Voyage Out* (London: Duckworth, 1915)
 VWB1–2 Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, 2 vols. (London:
 Hogarth, 1972)
 VWIL Julia Briggs, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life* (London: Penguin,
 2005)
 VWL Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1996)
 W *The Waves* (London: Hogarth, 1931)
 WD *A Writer's Diary*, ed. Leonard Woolf (London: Hogarth, 1953)
 Y *The Years* (London: Hogarth, 1937)