Introduction: a wider sphere

Virginia Woolf was an intellectual writing at a time of public debate about the role of intellectuals and the nature and value of literary education. Between 1904 and her death in 1941, she published over five hundred essays and reviews in more than forty periodicals and two volumes of collected essays. These writings offer a magnificent compendium of literary opinions and judgments, but they go further to scrutinize the process of reading, to locate reading in a context of historically and ideologically variable standards, and to outline a model for active, self-reflexive reading practices. The overall impact is pedagogical and empowering: Woolf's penetrating readings make a vast range of literature accessible, but they also offer the tools for readers to gain that access for themselves.

Concerns about reading and cultural literacy have been widespread in the West for at least a century and a half. Yet the complexities of our increasingly global and technological age are disturbingly accompanied by the shrinking priorities given to intellectual education and the belief that intellectual interests are not particularly relevant to the lives of the people known as "the mass." In these circumstances, uniting the highbrow values of intellectual life with a broad public base may seem a paradoxical goal. Yet, in a similarly threatened environment, Virginia Woolf, the "high modernist," was an advocate for both democratic inclusiveness and intellectual education. In bridging these two spheres, she forged a positive answer to one of her culture's most pressing concerns. The achievement of universal franchise, the extension of adult education to the working class and to women, and the rise of mass publishing all added urgency to the need to foster accessible cultural education. At the same time, the institutionalization of English studies within the universities augured an increasing gap between professional study and the general reading public. The intellectual debates of the time revolved around issues only too recognizable today: the gap between specialized theoretical discourse and the generalist reader; the fate of critical reading and thinking in an age of increasing mass communication;

the need to assert value while maintaining an awareness of historical and cultural contingency; and the dependency of a free democracy on a broad base of intellectually trained minds.

In the midst of such upheaval, Woolf's endorsement of the "common reader" was a significant intervention in public debate. At a time of growing specialization and increasingly objective methodology in academic English studies, Woolf defended an amateur status and a wide-ranging and catholic reading practice. She promoted a dialogic rather than an authoritarian relation between writer and reader and opposed the increasing standardization or "massification" of the reading public implicit in the processes of mass production and distribution. Publishing through a private press and seeking a readership in part through the public library, Woolf developed an alternative pedagogy outside the educational institutions. Working in the genre of the informal essay, she promoted the ideal of a classless, democratic, but intellectual readership, recasting "highbrowism" as radical social practice.

The approach I have just outlined opposes both the older image of Woolf as elitist or "aloof" and more recent accusations that she was an aesthetic capitalist bent on acquiring cultural and economic power through self-commodification.[1] As radical perhaps as the first representations of a "feminist Woolf," my subject is a "pedagogical Woolf" concerned about making highbrow intellectual culture available to all. Her essays, I argue, have a social project: she wrote about literature to inculcate good reading practices, and she did so because she believed that an educated public is crucial to the success of democratic society. I argue as well that Woolf was, in the words of Andrew McNeillie, "a considerable theoretician in her own oblique fashion."[2] Her way of reviewing a book was frequently to pose a question whose theoretical implications she then explored in the process of discussing the work. Positing theories through questions rather than statements, through the applied test of specific works rather than abstract conceptualizations, and in accessible rather than abstruse language – this is what seems to me to be at the heart of Woolf's writing about literature and what seems now in our "post-theory" climate to have some potential for guiding scholars and readers today.

In our own time, such terms as "organic intellectual," "transformative intellectual," and "public intellectual" have sprung into our vocabulary, raising questions about the intellectual's role in relation to the "mass" or "commodity" culture that is regarded as the dominant force.[3] In the 1920s and 1930s, "highbrow," middlebrow," and "lowbrow" were the terms that focused debate. But whatever the language, at issue is the relation of the

intellectual to the general literate public – that audience whom presumably the intellectual, as opposed to the scholar, seeks to include.[4] From the earliest reception of Woolf's work, the predominant view assumed a separation between her highbrow status and the public sphere – an assumption implicit in the textual criticism that elevated her writing for its complex but difficult formal qualities, and overtly claimed by politically oriented critics who attacked the supposed "unreality" of her work. The latter argument was then supported by generalizations about modernism's opposition to mass culture, forcefully articulated, for example, in Andreas Huyssen's *After The Great Divide*.[5] But Huyssen's "divide" puts the ordinary female reader (typed in Madame Bovary) on the same side as mass culture, gendering the binary in a way that is problematic for a feminist intellectual like Virginia Woolf. And the antithetical positioning of modernists and masses (even begging the question of the categorical definition of *all* modernists) is further muddied by slippages among the concepts of popular, ordinary, and mass. John Carey, for example, one of the more hostile of modernism's critics, fails to note the crucial distinction between massification as an approach and the large number, or mass in another sense, of ordinary readers. Carey's argument in *The Intellectuals and the Masses* is "that modernist literature and art can be seen as a hostile reaction to the unprecedentedly large reading public created by late nineteenth-century educational reforms."[6] While there may be support for his view in what I would call certain misanthropic writers, or certain misanthropic moments in otherwise affirmative writers, when Carey claims that "the purpose of modernist writing was to exclude these newly educated (or 'semi-educated') readers, and so to preserve the intellectual's seclusion from the 'mass,'" or that "denial of humanity to the masses became, in the early twentieth century, an important linguistic project among intellectuals," he falls prey to a common fallacy.[7] He confuses the massive number of ordinary readers with those discourses that inscribe ordinary readers as an undifferentiated mass. Virginia Woolf definitely objected to the second; but she did so precisely to preserve the humanity of the first.[8]

Unfortunately the kind of misperception we see in Carey is too often accepted without scrutiny or examination. Even such solidly researched work as Patrick Brantlinger's *The Reading Lesson*, for example, after asserting "the modernist reification of the antithesis between high and mass culture," slips into an unexamined conflation of popular with mass: "the claim of modernist fiction to high cultural status entails rejecting or demoting ordinary novels as commercial, mass-cultural detritus."[9] Now Woolf, to take one significant modernist, was not immune from the effects of class privilege,

but she did not dismiss ordinary novels and mass culture in the same breath. My concern is not that such critiques have no basis but that they miss both the value of Woolf as a complex, intelligent individual and the complexity of the culture in which she worked.

Some of that complexity is addressed, from a different perspective, by Jonathan Rose in his mammoth study, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, a work that is interestingly both complementary and contradictory to the present study. Rose's thorough documentation leaves no doubt that the working classes *had* an intellectual life, and that their intellectual activities included the avid reading of literary classics in addition to a broad range of other reading materials. By pursuing for the first time a detailed history of working-class readers, Rose effectively dismantles the restrictive linkage between "intellectual" and "upper-class" and demonstrates that, for many working-class people, "the expanding culture of print opened up opportunities to write and act in the public sphere."[10] There is a marked compatibility between the results of his research into the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) and the arguments I make later in this book. But unfortunately, although Rose justifiably attacks the blind spot in academics who assume that ordinary citizens are the manipulated tools of popular media and hegemonic discourse, when it comes to an assessment of modernist writers, he falls victim to a similar blind spot himself. His otherwise useful and illuminating text is accompanied by the increasingly angry and repetitive accusation that modernists not only disdained the lower classes but deliberately cultivated difficulty as a way of maintaining ascendancy over the rapidly encroaching populace and preserving their cultural prestige. This monolithic construction of modernists produces an unremittingly antagonistic construct of "two rival intelligentsias squared off against each other";[11] it also creates an unbridgeable impasse between highbrow and democratic concerns.

While it is well beyond my present scope to defend a counter-definition of modernism or to argue the diversity of its many practitioners, the thrust of my entire study suggests that, in constructing "Mrs. Woolf" as disdainful of the ordinary reader, Rose misconstrues her goals. The problems themselves that Rose identifies, I must emphasize, are matters on which we agree. I share Rose's concern that his upbeat story may have a downbeat ending. If he is correct that the long, promising trajectory of working-class intellectualism ultimately succumbs either to a disaffected and alienated youth culture or to a fad-driven Bohemian entrepreneurism, then the consequences for the whole of society are grave. And I think that most educators today, at least in England, Canada, and the United States, wish that intellectual work

were more highly valued by society and that teaching students how to think were not such an uphill battle. But the reasons for our difficulties are numerous, not the least being that the scope of knowledge now available and the corresponding diversity of interpretation makes genuine thinking an extremely difficult task. It is naïve to place the blame for our difficulties on the modernist highbrows, especially when there is substantial evidence that many of them were concerned about precisely such problems, when, for Virginia Woolf at least, an intelligent readership was a goal on which she focused much of her work.

Rose's specific accusations meet a counter-testimony in various ways throughout this volume, so I will merely outline a few of the radical differences between his work and mine. The running trope he uses for the modernist disparagement of the lower class is E. M. Forster's aspiring clerk Leonard Bast. I could argue with Rose's detailed interpretations to point out, for example, that Margaret Schlegel's desire that Leonard "wash out his brain" is in fact precisely the opposite of the "brain-washing" that Rose imputes to the phrase,[12] and that Margaret is imagining a kind of cultural detoxification, enabling Leonard to reject the platitudinous attitudes that he has absorbed from his culture and to learn to think for himself. But it is not a phrase that is at issue here; it is the shift in the object of critique that a different reading of the phrase implies. My own discussion of Leonard Bast focuses on Woolf's and Forster's belief in adult and working-class education and their concern that the education being provided was not of the best kind. Their critique is not of Leonard Bast's brain but of the way that conventional education tried to stuff it. But, unfortunately, when Rose unquestioningly repeats assumptions about "Mrs. Woolf's serene confidence that literary genius could not arise from the working classes,"[13] he precludes any real scrutiny of what she wrote. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf does state that it is "unthinkable that any woman in Shakespeare's day should have had Shakespeare's genius," and that genius is "not born" in her own day among the working class (*R* 73). But her words must be read in their context. Woolf's argument here is that "[i]ntellectual freedom depends upon material things" (*R* 162–63), and her point about genius is that scope and nourishment (both physical and intellectual) are needed to bring great ideas to birth. In context, that genius is "not born" offers a deliberate challenge to patriarchal assumptions about innate abilities, turning the phrase into a feminist and socialist indictment of unequal social conditions.

As for the theory that modernists cultivated difficulty to baffle those lacking privileged educations, my argument in this book is that Woolf tried

to instill a love for reading by writing about non-modernist works, teaching at the same time the kinds of thinking practices that would make it easier to read modernist texts. Finally, Rose's discussion of the "brows" reinforces an antagonism that I work hard to undo: he entrenches intellectual culture in class war; I pursue a model in which intellectual interests, in multiple strata, are deployed across class, and in which the ordinary reader is not a working-class reader but anyone who reads for intellectual pleasure and goals. To Rose's assertion that "[t]he founders of the Labour Party and other self-educated radicals realized that no disenfranchised people could be emancipated unless they created an autonomous intellectual life,"[14] I respond that it is precisely Woolf's similar vision that I am examining in this book and that, in promoting the ideal of the *classless* intellectual, she pursued the emancipation of all. Immense differences, of course, separated the way Rose's working-class readers pursued their intellectual life and the way Woolf pursued hers and, in numerous instances, those differences produced a sense of distance and hostility on both sides. But the lines of division are not absolute, and there is more cause for hopefulness than for despair in the numerous parallels that I have sought to trace.

We must therefore turn from Rose to the other side of the critical spectrum, to engage with the historical work that examines Woolf's relation to her readers and her involvement with the public sphere. Our view of Woolf is changing as we learn more about her early teaching experiences in a working-class college, the "fan-mail" she received from previously unknown readers, her contributions to public organizations and projects, and her commitment to diverse audiences. The work that began as feminist investigation into the political dimensions of Woolf's writing has broadened to a growing appreciation of her activist role in promoting intellectual causes. Anna Snaith has written extensively on Woolf's supportive contributions to the Women's Service Library, founded in 1926 to assist the study of women's lives and women's history, and which now, as The Women's Library, houses the most extensive collection of women's history in Britain. As Snaith indicates, "[Woolf's] name was on much of the campaign publicity, she signed (in bright green ink) letters to nineteen friends and acquaintances asking them to donate books and/or money, she herself donated money and each month until her death she bought a list of books which the library requested from her."[15] Beth Rigel Daugherty has argued that Woolf's experience as a teacher was a formative influence on her essayistic style, an influence that Daugherty demonstrates through her analysis of Woolf's preparation for her classes at Morley College and the various

versions and revisions she produced as she transformed a talk she gave to sixty young students at Hayes Court School for girls in Kent into the essay "How Should One Read a Book?"[16] Ann Banfield, in her profoundly argued study of the connections between Woolf, Bertrand Russell, and Roger Fry, relates the genre of "table talk" to the extensive evidence of Bloomsbury's commitment to a broad educational project: "The implicit *raison d'être* of Bloomsbury discussions was the extension of knowledge beyond the confines of the university elite."[17] And both Snaith and Daugherty share with me an interest in tracing Woolf's unknown readers – Snaith, introducing and editing the wide-ranging and fascinating letters to Woolf by readers of *Three Guineas*,[18] and Daugherty, like me, investigating related fan-mail housed in the archives of the University of Sussex.[19] While inevitably random and spotty, the letters that have survived provide ample evidence of the impact Woolf could have on people's lives. A woman writes from America to describe the way she and a friend are reading Woolf's essays out loud to each other and debating the ideas; a young man, nineteen years of age, writes from a small town in Missouri, to say, among other things, that *The Common Reader* has set him to reading Hazlitt and Donne. Readers say, too, how profoundly they have been moved by Woolf's novels, including the more challenging later works *The Waves* and *Between the Acts*.[20] That Woolf was an eccentric personality is not disputed, but that her eccentricity, or her indisputable intellectual superiority, inevitably removed her from the ordinary reader certainly is.

Our knowledge of the multiple dimensions of Woolf's life, however, is relatively new, so that what is surprising is not the lingering notion of Woolf's ivory-tower highbrowism but the vehemence with which this view is often upheld. As Brenda Silver's extensive survey in *Virginia Woolf Icon* demonstrates, representations of Woolf are particularly subject to "the ire and/or condescension of those who insist on a Virginia Woolf made only in their image, an 'authentic,' legitimate Virginia Woolf to whom, they assert, they have a direct line."[21] In this way, Silver argues, Virginia Woolf as icon becomes "symptomatic of embedded layers of cultural anxiety" – an anxiety perhaps fundamentally about the eroding of stable categorizations themselves. Such anxieties are understandably triggered by "boundary-dwelling, border-disrupting figures" of whom the intellectual woman can be a markedly threatening form. For Silver, it is "Virginia Woolf's uncanny ability to cross borders and reveal their arbitrary nature" that makes her cultural meaning so very difficult to limit and contain.[22]

My interest in this study, then, is to take Woolf outside the borders that would limit her sphere to Bloomsbury, or to high modernism, or to feminism, and to locate both the person and her ideas in a different context – one that involves public debates about books, reading, and education and, by extension, the changing construction of audiences and reading practices during her time. I offer this wider sphere as a valid historical context in which to investigate cultural and intellectual values in Virginia Woolf's essays, without any claims for its completeness or definitiveness in determining the meaning of "Virginia Woolf." I hope to show that Woolf circulated, both in her reading and in her personal contacts, in an environment rife with controversy about the dissemination and transmission of intellectual culture and that her essays in particular derive their meaning, at least in part, from their negotiations with on-going pedagogical debate. By pursuing the pedagogical outside institutional boundaries, Woolf took the intellectual into the border zone where professional and common reader/writer meet. None of this is to deny other public or private forums in which Woolf plays a role, nor the way, as Anna Snaith demonstrates, the public/private nexus itself is a border-crossing zone.[23] It is simply to propose that the context of historical debate about readers and reading is crucial to understanding the "intellectual Woolf."

Because my subject crosses the border between historical materials and textual analysis, this book has two main parts: Cultural contexts and Critical practice. Part I sets the essays in the historical context of concerns about reading: the institutionalization of English studies within the university, the activities of the Workers' Educational Association, and the developments in adult education after the First World War. It begins with a discussion of the words "highbrow" and "democratic" as cultural "keywords," in Raymond Williams's sense of this term. Part II examines Woolf's theories of reading and her rhetorical strategies for instilling good reading practices. Of course, because Woolf's critical practice derives much of its meaning from its relation to the cultural and critical debates of the time, Parts I and II necessarily intersect. Part I integrates discussion of Woolf's ideas with discussions of historical materials and examines a few specific essays at length. Detailed textual analysis is often crucial for understanding the complex thinking in which Woolf engages her reader and for avoiding the misinterpretation, or slanting of evidence, that can so easily occur when we quote isolated sentences out of context. What Woolf says cannot be considered apart from the process of thought in which an idea is embedded and the function of articulating it in a particular time and place. Part II turns to a more intensive analysis of her essays, but still with a constant eye on their pedagogical

intent. For if my first question is, What does it mean that she said what she said when she said it? my second is, How was she getting her reader to think by the way she said what she said?

In bringing together historical and textual analyses, I seek a holistic approach not unlike Roman Jakobson's communicative model in which the "message" passing from addresser to addressee is informed by context, contact, and code.[24] And in my interweaving of the multiple voices of the modernist period, I attempt, in a modest way, to employ Marc Angenot's concept of social discourse: not an era's belief, but the subjects it considered important enough to debate and the terms in which its problems were thinkable.[25] My approach also has features in common with pluralistic pragmatism in terms of the breadth of methodological field. In *Democracy's Children: Intellectuals and the Rise of Cultural Politics,* John McGowan claims that "[p]ragmatism identifies four elements (agent, other people, material things, social meanings and arrangements) in any situation and insists that none of these elements is determinant."[26] One advantage of this approach, McGowan points out, is that it negotiates between the extremes of determinism and agency, resisting the purely regulatory models derived from Foucault and Bourdieu, on the one hand, and the earlier Nietzschean models of a radical free self, on the other. The model seems extremely appropriate to discussions of Woolf, who both exposed the way social and economic conditions determine intellectual possibilities and yet consistently stressed her readers' abilities to respond in active, autonomous ways. And Woolf's commitment to independent, critical thinking – and its attendant diversity – was the foundation for the model of social equality that she upheld. As McGowan continues,

> Thus, pluralism suggests that intellectuals will find their work in the rhetorical effort to get people to change the names that they apply to situations. But it also suggests, in ways not fully compatible with that first task, that intellectuals, like teachers, will also direct their rhetorical efforts toward encouraging others to develop their own capacities as judges and to adopt a reflexive attitude toward their judgments after their production. Insofar as intellectuals can embrace this second task and cherish the rather chaotic and messy diversity of orientations and values that follow from it, they are aiding the cause of democracy.[27]

These words could easily describe the work of Woolf's essays, and the goal is one I can readily accept as my own.

This study of democratic highbrowism therefore seeks a broadly diversified readership. The core of my readers, I expect, will be students and teachers interested in Woolf's ideas about literature and their relation to

intellectual and cultural history, and researchers in various disciplines who are themselves reassessing modernism and Woolf. I hope also to interest those working on the history of the book, on reception theory and history, on pedagogy and reading, on theories of historicism, and on value theory (an upcoming field). It is also my hope that this book will be read by the general intelligent reader who cares about the *fate* of the general intelligent reader. Woolf did, I argue, and, despite our differences of background and culture, we all have something to gain from her concern.