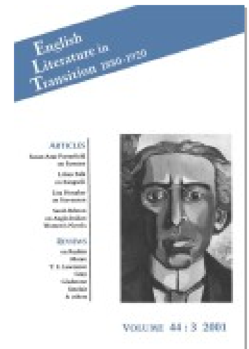
PROJECT MUSE®

Woolf's Essays

Ian Blyth



English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920, Volume 44, Number 3, 2001, pp. 397-399 (Review)

Published by ELT Press

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/366589/summary

[18.97.9.174] Project MUSE (2024-12-10 12:48 GMT)

Woolf's Essays

Elena Gualtieri. *Virginia Woolf's Essays: Sketching the Past.* London: Macmillan, 2000. ix + 176 pp. $59.95

THE WORD *essai* originated with Montaigne. In French, *essayer* means to try out, to test. Etymologically, then, the genre of the essay is speculative and indecisive. Woolf's own view on the subject may be found in "The Modern Essay" (1922; rev. 1925): "The principle that controls [the essay]," she says, "is that it should give pleasure; the desire which impels us when we take it from the shelf is simply to receive pleasure."

This is all well and good, but it must be noted that Woolf is in no way advocating a concentration on style at the cost of substance. It must surely be no mere coincidence that when reprinting this essay in *The Common Reader* (1925) Woolf chose to precede it with "The Patron and the Crocus" (1924; rev. 1925). After all, the central thesis of this second work is that a writer must choose his or her "patron" with great care. Woolf understood that whatever high ideals essayists may aspire to, their essays were ultimately in the power of outside forces of production. Gualtieri takes up this point: "Because of its connection to journalism, Woolf tends to see the essay as the form that is most readily influenced by changes in the distribution and composition of newspapers and magazines and therefore by changes in the size and composition of its readership. While at times such changes are perceived to be for the best, it is more usual for Woolf to stress the negative effects of an excessive encroachment of market demands upon literary activity."

Gualtieri finds in this worldly strand of the Woolfian essay common ground with the Continental tradition of "literary historiography"; and in particular, the work of Lukács and Adorno. Lukács, she says, "insisted that the essence of the essay lies precisely in its ability to bring together modes of being and thinking that are commonly thought of as being in opposition to each other." The essay is both inside and outside of history, political and personal: for Lukács, it "creates a form where knowledge can be expressed as art."

Gualtieri links these Marxist approaches to the paths taken by feminist writers and critics who also found themselves writing against the grain of male tradition. Because it refuses to settle comfortably into one camp or the other, the essay, she claims, allows an "exploration of the intersections between private and public, personal and political." In fact,

[18.97.9.174] Project MUSE (2024-12-10 12:48 GMT)

as Gualtieri concludes, the essay "is a genre that has transformed the writer's self from something that lies outside literature into its controlling force."

In the right hands, the essay can be highly subversive. As Woolf notes in "A Sketch of the Past" (1939–1940), its inherent ambivalence allows the essayist "to slip in things that would be inaudible if one marched straight up and spoke out loud." Gualtieri relates the play of ambiguity in Woolf's essays to the description of "essayism" Robert Musil gives in his novel *The Man Without Qualities* (1930–1942; trans. 1995). Essayism, says Musil, is "a form of living and of writing that is dispersive and without an organising centre." This recalls the opening paragraph of *A Room of One's Own* (1929). After telling her audience that she has failed in "the first duty of a lecturer" (to provide them with their "nugget of pure truth"), Woolf's narrator explains that "One can only give one's audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions." Throughout her long career as an essayist (longer, by over a decade, than her career as a novelist), Woolf quite consciously and deliberately refused to let her work be tied down to one thing or the other; she kept her writing open, in a state, one might say, of *différance*.

Woolf was wary of labels. In her diary, for instance, she can frequently be found trying out a word other than "novel" with which to describe her book-length fiction. Her essays are no less problematic. Gualtieri notes that "Woolf's experiments with the form of the essay tended to underline their closeness to fiction rather than to argument," adding that "her most ambitious pieces in the genre became effectively indistinguishable from the form of the short story." For this reason, Gualtieri chooses to include *Orlando* (1928) amongst the usual suspects of Woolf's book-length non-fictional writing (*A Room of One's Own*, *Three Guineas* [1938], "A Sketch of the Past"). That *Orlando* deserves consideration in a study of Woolf's non-fiction is a decision that it is very easy to agree with; but given that she has included *Orlando*, why then does Gualtieri fail to give mention to either *Flush* (1933) or *Roger Fry* (1940), Woolf's two "serious" biographies? *Flush*, in particular, has much to offer to any discussion of Woolf's predisposition to resisting genre.

In the course of her argument Gualtieri identifies two distinct forms of essay: the essay itself, and the sketch. In Woolf's oeuvre, the essay, she explains, is "the embodiment of the modernist fragment," a form whose "extreme pliability and flexibility" became for Woolf "a source of artistic liberation." The sketch on the other hand is "a hybrid form," often found

to be "cutting across boundaries of genre." The difficulty of finding a label that will stick is readily apparent in both cases. The dust jacket to *Virginia Woolf's Essays* claims that the essay and the sketch are shown to be "the two poles within which [Woolf's] historical project comes to be defined." However, as poles, it seems that they must be of the slippery kind. In fact, it is difficult to see (as the dust jacket implies) that they could ever be looked on as "opposite."

Perhaps this is the very point of them. The impulse behind the writing of *Virginia Woolf's Essays* is to reveal how Woolf's essays contain "the traces of a never-realised historical work that would have covered the whole panorama of English literature." Traces, like Gualtieri's essays and sketches, are by their very nature elusive and ephemeral. Perhaps, as Woolf's narrator suggests in *A Room of One's Own*, to provide a definitive summation or conclusion would serve only to muddy the water. The story needs to be left unfinished, the reader encouraged to add his or her own contribution/conclusion. Perhaps, Woolf's never-realised historical work was always intended to be incomplete. In this way it forms an alternate, anti-canonical tradition (if there can be such a thing?) to the emphatically final "great men" tradition of historical criticism as practised by men such as her father, Leslie Stephen. Perhaps.

Read by more people than her novels in her own lifetime, but neglected for much of the second half of the century, Woolf's essays are once more enjoying a popular and "catholic" readership (the word is Leonard Woolf's.) This mini-renaissance owes much to the ongoing publication of Andrew McNeillie's *The Essays of Virginia Woolf* (1986–), and to Rachel Bowlby's two volumes of selected essays, *A Woman's Essays* (1992) and *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life* (1993). New developments have also been made in Woolf criticism. Elena Gualtieri's book joins what she describes as "a cluster of monographs exclusively dedicated to Woolf's activity as a cultural critic, journalist, reviewer and literary historian" that have appeared in the last half-decade. It is a welcome addition.

Ian Blyth
University of St Andrews