

On Virginia Woolf on the Essay · Carl H. Klaus

Even things in a book-case change if they are alive; we find ourselves wanting to meet them again; we find them altered. So we look back upon essay after essay by Mr. Beerbohm, knowing that, come September or May, we shall sit down with them and talk.

WHEN I FIRST ENCOUNTERED this haunting passage from Virginia Woolf's "The Modern Essay," some thirty-seven years ago, I took no more note of it than I did of any other passage in the essay. To tell the truth, I didn't pay much attention to anything in that piece, compared to the time I spent on her other essays in *The Common Reader*. They were assigned reading for an undergraduate survey of modern British literature, and I made my way through them, as I did through the essays of T. S. Eliot, E. M. Forster, and George Bernard Shaw—to discover Woolf's ideas about literature, especially about great authors, great books, and the great literary forms. Essays, of course, didn't belong anywhere in that pantheon. They were *about* literature and therefore couldn't *be* literature too. So, it didn't seem especially important to hear what she had to say about the modern essay. Never mind that three out of twenty essays in *The Common Reader* were about essayists and the essay. Never mind that she, the doyenne of the Bloomsbury Group, had achieved her reputation as much for her essays as for her novels. Never mind that her reflections on the modern essay resonated with so vivid a play of personality that I might well have taken the piece for a dramatic monologue. I was one and twenty, no use to talk to me:

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Twenty-five years later, I did find myself wanting to sit down again with Woolf's essay. No longer the cocksure honors student, his sights trained on the big time and the big forms, I was instead revising a little

textbook piece on the essay as a form of literature, and I hoped her essay might provide me with a few suggestive ideas or passages. Having cut through it so quickly during my salad days, I had no idea of what I would find, so imagine my surprise when I heard her refer to the essay right off as one of the “forms of literature,” whose controlling “principle . . . is simply that it should give pleasure.” Heady stuff that, even for someone already predisposed to look upon the essay as literature. Pleasure, after all, is hardly what I’d thought of as the purpose of essays, nor what I’d led my writing students to think about them, though upon reflection then I couldn’t help admitting that the essays I’d been reading at the time—pieces by the likes of Arlen, Baldwin, Didion, Dillard, Eiseley, Ephron, Hoagland, and Mailer—had been giving me a good deal of pleasure. And the pleasure, as I thought more about it, seemed to emanate, just as Woolf claimed, from my passing “through the most various experiences of amusement, surprise, interest, indignation. . . .”

What I couldn’t accept so readily—or perhaps more accurately what I couldn’t understand—was her equally bold assertion that the essay “should lay us under a spell with its first words, and we should only wake, refreshed, with its last,” that it “must lap us about and draw its curtain across the world.” How, I wondered, could such a trance-like, other-worldly state of mind be induced by essays, given their so frequent immersion in the world of human experience, in the press of human affairs? But I didn’t puzzle over this troubling question very long, for Woolf’s conception of the essay as a virtually magical or hypnotic kind of writing seemed to endow it with the imaginative power ordinarily attributed to literature, which was all I really wanted to avow at that point in my little textbook piece on the essay. So, as it happens, I didn’t on that occasion bother to read any further than the first few paragraphs of Woolf’s essay—and thus didn’t notice how she returns to the theme of hypnosis in her concluding declaration that the essay “must draw its curtain round us, but it must be a curtain that shuts us in, not out.” Having shut myself out of Woolf’s essay once again, I also didn’t notice that within the hypnotic circle of her essay Woolf herself seems to be more vividly and variously present than the host of essayists who figure in her observations.

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Five years later, I once again found myself wanting to revisit Woolf's essay, and this time I stayed long enough to read it all the way through, two or three times in fact. I could hardly do otherwise, for I had assigned it as required reading in a graduate essay course I was then teaching—a speculative course in which a handful of students and I were trying to generate ideas about the most distinctive aspects and elements of the essay. Lacking a body of theory and criticism, I had suggested that we look at what the essayists themselves had to say, and Woolf, as it happened, had more to offer than most of her colleagues, for her essay was devoted to reviewing Ernest Rhys' *Modern English Essays*, a five-volume collection, published in 1920, of representative essays and essayists from each of the preceding five decades. But, as it turned out, her general reflections on the essay were so closely interwoven with her critical comments on the essayists in Rhys' collection that I initially found it quite difficult to disentangle the one from the other. Worse still, I was familiar with the writing of only a handful of the modern essayists she referred to—Pater, Beerbohm, Conrad, Belloc, and Leslie Stephen. The rest were unknown to me even by name—Mark Pattison, Mr. Hutton, Mr. Birrell, Henley, Mr. Lucas, Mr. Lynd, Vernon Lee, Mr. Squire, Mr. Clutton-Brock. No wonder I didn't pay any attention to this piece during my undergraduate days! No wonder the graduate students were having trouble with it! No sooner did those thoughts come to mind than I began to wonder how many of our own modern essayists would be known some sixty or eighty years from now. And what would people think of them then? For that matter, what would Woolf think of them, I wondered, if she were reviewing a five-volume collection of representative pieces from the last five decades? Would she find them beset by the same problems she had perceived in her own time—some “stumbling drowsily among loose words, clutching aimlessly at vague ideas,” others “strained and thin and full of mannerisms and affectations, like the voice of a man shouting through a megaphone to a crowd on a windy day”?

Idle speculations, of course, especially compared to what I should have been most curious about, namely the essays in Rhys' collection. Had I tracked down his collection and worked my way through it, I might not have been so puzzled as I then was by Woolf's heavy emphasis on style as “the first essential” art of the essayist, on the necessity that the essayist “know . . . how to write.” Had I read through Rhys' collection then, as I

did a few years later, I'd have seen enough stylistic clumsiness, and self-consciousness, and affectation to convince me too that "it is no use being charming, virtuous, or even learned and brilliant, unless . . . you . . . know how to write." Lacking sufficient grounds for that intense conviction, I considered her view of the essay to be so aesthetically self-conscious as to be art-for-art sakeish, especially because her preoccupation with style seemed to be occasioned primarily, if not exclusively, by its power to induce a hypnotic state—"to sting us wide awake and fix us in a trance which is not sleep but rather an intensification of life—a basking with every faculty alert in the sun of pleasure." More than that, she seemed to be so carried away by the supremacy of style as to denigrate the importance of content. How else to construe her assertion that "learning . . . in an essay must be so fused by the magic of writing that not a fact juts out, not a dogma tears the texture of the surface"? How else to account for her painstaking attempts to identify the point at which stylistic polish gives way to stylistic decoration? Such questions, I later discovered, would not have been troubling me then had I also paid more attention to the range of Woolf's voice, to the play of her personality, and to her intense concern with the personality of the essayist:

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Five years later, I did find myself wanting to sit down again with Woolf's essay, for I was writing a piece about essayists on the essay, and I planned to discuss her as the exponent of a highly aesthetical approach to its form. But in the process of making my way through her essay again, I found numerous points at which the piece didn't really match my prior impressions and recollections of it. Oh yes, I did hear her once again insisting upon the hypnotic power of the essay, especially in her first few paragraphs, and growing out of that discussion I did again find her worrying at length about matters of style. At the same time, however, I noticed that she gradually seemed to be working up to a more substantial and complex view of the essay—a paradoxical view that she announces most clearly midway through her piece when she celebrates Beerbohm as "an essayist capable of using the essayist's most proper but most dangerous and delicate tool. He has brought personality into literature, not unconsciously and

impurely, but so consciously and purely that we do not know whether there is any relation between Max the essayist and Mr. Beerbohm the man. We only know that the spirit of personality permeates every word that he writes. The triumph is the triumph of style. For it is only by knowing how to write that you can make use in literature of your self; that self which, while it is essential to literature, is also its most dangerous antagonist. Never to be yourself and yet always—that is the problem.”

Given so heavy an emphasis on the essayist’s persona, and given such a paradoxical conception of it as both an authentic reflection and a fictionalized construction of personality, I could see more clearly why Woolf had been so preoccupied with style, for an essayist’s persona is, after all, inseparable from the style in which and through which it is voiced. Remembering that truth, I could then also see why she might think that “to write like oneself and call it not writing is a much harder exercise in style than to write like Addison and call it writing well.” So, it seemed, she was invoking an elaborate form of artful artlessness, a thought that put me in mind of Montaigne’s reflections on his own essay writing, which he frequently referred to as an equally elaborate form of self-portraiture. Recognizing the kinship between Woolf and Montaigne made me feel much better about her essay—and about my self. And in the days and weeks to come I was to continue feeling better on both counts, as I recognized the kinship between her thoughts on the essayist’s personality and the thoughts of other essayists, such as Hazlitt, Lamb, Hoagland, White, and perhaps most interestingly her father, Leslie Stephen, who also had written an essay on the essay. Published in 1880, it offered a synoptic view of the essay from Montaigne through the mid-nineteenth century, so I could not help wondering if Woolf’s reflections on the modern essay had been engendered by the knowledge of her father’s piece, as if she were picking up where he had left off, especially because she seemed to be worrying about some of the very same issues—about a shrillness of voice in her own time akin to what he had been hearing in his. Exploring such connections distracted me temporarily from a renewed sense of puzzlement about her belief in the hypnotic power of the essay, so I didn’t return to that problem until a year later when I was rereading the essay again in preparation for a class discussion of it, and I finally happened to notice that haunting passage I had inadvertently been ignoring for so long:

Even things in a book-case change if they are alive; we find ourselves wanting to meet them again; we find them altered. So we look back upon essay after essay by Mr. Beerbohm, knowing that, come September or May, we shall sit down with them and talk.

My first reaction to the passage was, of course, an extraordinary sense of surprise at not having noted it before, especially because of its pertinence to Woolf's essay, to my own continuing desire to meet it again and again, to my sense of finding it altered upon each visit, and by extension to finding myself altered each time as well. But my surprise on those counts was followed quickly by surprise about another oversight—namely, my failure to notice that arresting metaphor in which she conceives of reading a good essay as comparable to carrying on a highly civilized acquaintance or friendship with someone:

So we look back upon essay after essay by Mr. Beerbohm, knowing that, come September or May, we shall sit down with them and talk.

Looking back over the paragraph in which that passage occurs, I then noticed that she invokes the metaphor several sentences earlier in talking of Beerbohm's essay, "A Cloud of Pinafores," which she refers to as having "that indescribable inequality, stir and final expressiveness which belong to life and to life alone. You have not finished with it because you have read it, any more than friendship is ended because it is time to part. Life wells up and alters and adds." How, I wondered, could she possibly conceive of an essay—and of reading an essay—in such intensely familiar terms, unless she found it to be suffused with the sense of a human presence? Not just with a voice to be heard, nor with a personality to be observed, but with a virtually living presence to be encountered and engaged in talk, as if one were in the presence of it! And how could that be possible, I suddenly realized, unless one were stung wide awake and fixed in a trance "which," as Woolf says in the beginning of her piece, "is not sleep but an intensification of life"? And as if to confirm this supposition, I suddenly felt in that passage I had never noticed before the overwhelming sense of a human presence, engaging me directly in thought and feeling, evoking for me in word and phrase and image the drawing-room ambience of Beerbohm's essays, where "there is no gin about; no strong to-

bacco; no puns, drunkenness, or insanity,” where “ladies and gentlemen talk together, and some things, of course, are not said.”

Feeling as I did at that moment, I could not imagine what more Woolf’s essay might hold in store for me, so my sense of elation with it was tinged with the melancholy feeling that we might have nothing more to talk about. But I had not yet reckoned with the conclusion of her piece, as I realized a year later when I was reading it yet again to prepare for another offering of that graduate course on the essay. Then I heard her saying things that I had noticed but had not taken sufficient account of before—in particular, “that the art of writing has for backbone some fierce attachment to an idea.” Having always believed that to be a fundamental premise of essay-writing, I suppose I must have thought it needed no saying. So I had more or less ignored it during prior readings of the piece as simply a gesture on Woolf’s part toward an axiomatic truth about the essay that she had previously not bothered to acknowledge in her discussion. But here she was, I realized, saying it not just once but at length in the peroration of her essay: “It is on the back of an idea, something believed in with conviction or seen with precision and thus compelling words to a shape, that the diverse company which included Lamb and Bacon, and Mr. Beerbohm and Hudson, and Vernon Lee and Mr. Conrad, and Leslie Stephen and Butler and Walter Pater reaches the farther shore.” And as if to challenge all that she had previously said about the essay, or to throw it into a new and more complicating framework, here she was crediting “an obstinate conviction” with the power to lift “ephemeral sounds through the misty sphere of anybody’s language to the land where there is a perpetual marriage, a perpetual union.” So it suddenly appeared as if neither style nor personality alone were sufficient to produce the hypnotic state that Woolf attributed to the essay—“some fierce attachment to an idea” was also needed. That seemed to me to be Woolf’s final and definitive word on the matter, until I thought again of her remarks about the experience of reading a good essay:

You have not finished with it because you have read it, any more than friendship is ended because it is time to part. 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.