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A Room of One's Own, Personal Criticism, and the Essay

ANNE FERNALD

> Here then was I (call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please—it is not a matter of any importance).
>
> (*A Room of One's Own* 5)

Why is *A Room of One's Own* taken so personally by so many readers when it is full of devices designed to distance Virginia Woolf from the speaking voice of the essay? How can something be personal when the author wants to keep her life entirely private, so private that her book on women and writing is presented through the medium of a first-person narrator, Mary Beton? Does it seem personal largely because we now have almost total access to Woolf's private letters and diaries? One way to answer these questions would be to examine Woolf's role as a cultural icon, as Brenda Silver does in a recent article. Where Silver emphasizes the importance of extra-literary factors in creating an author's reputation, I have focused on literary qualities which precede and must in some measure shape the kind of icon that gets constructed. In *A Room of One's Own* Woolf writes a personal criticism that does not compromise her privacy, that, in fact, conceals it even as it enters into a conversation with the reader which seems very personal. This allows her writing to speak to readers such as Alice Walker who feel a connection to Woolf in spite of their awareness of the many differences between them. That is, the persona of Mary Beton deflects attention from Virginia Woolf as a personality and focuses it on the narrator's general openness of mind. This in turn translates into a similar porousness of the text for her readers. The seeming paradox is:

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how can a writer as private as Woolf be associated with "personal criticism"?

When the idea of the personal comes up in literary criticism, it is usually part of a discussion of either feminism or the essay. With the exception of G. Douglas Atkins's *Estranging the Familiar*, these two discussions of the personal have rarely overlapped. Feminists advocate a more personal literary criticism, apparently unaware of the category of the essay, while critics of the essay often seem to have only a nodding acquaintance with feminism's theorization of the personal. Atkins connects recent developments in feminism, especially Jane Tompkins's conversion-experience essay, "Me and My Shadow," to a resurgence of interest in the essay among general readers, and argues that literary critics should seize the opportunity to move away from arid articles to a more personal style.

This paragraph from "Me and My Shadow" has become the chief example of the personal in recent discussions:

> Just me and my shadow, walkin' down the avenue.
> It is a beautiful day here in North Carolina. The first day that is both cool and sunny all summer. After a terrible summer, first drought, then heat-wave, then torrential rain, trees down, flooding. Now, finally, beautiful weather. A tree outside my window just brushed by red, with one fully red leaf. (This is what I want you to see. A person sitting in stockinged feet looking out of her window—a floor to ceiling rectangle filled with green, with one red leaf. The season poised, sunny and chill, ready to rush down the incline into autumn. But perfect, and still. Not going yet.) (128)

The coy "Not going yet" refers both to the coming autumn and to a passage, several pages earlier, about having to go to the bathroom, and this, I suspect, is a large part of what makes the passage memorable: it is an attempt at being outrageous and personal that is ultimately neither. While going to the bathroom may be private, it is certainly not unique to Tompkins, and not particularly personal. More to the point, her other attempts at placing herself are not particularly complex or individual. The description of the weather is generic. She lists the varieties of "terrible" weather she has experienced, "torrential rain, trees down, flooding," in a lazy shorthand and remains unconnected to the violence, turmoil, and drama implicit in the description. In spite of her assertions to the contrary, she does not demonstrate much care for the world around her, and as a result one cannot care much about her.

Similarly flat-footed is Jane Gallop's account of a crush she had on one of her male graduate students in "Knot a Love Story." Full of

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knowing references to her own resistance (to meeting with him initially, to having an affair, to writing the account, to writing it as romance), an astonishing number of the essay's transitions depend on Gallop's rereading herself—her actions and her prose: "Writing and rereading the narrative, I find myself embarrassed not, as I had imagined, by the romantic confession, but much more by the goody-goody, naively idealist language of the teacherly voice" (213). Gallop takes undisguised pleasure in presenting herself as a "bad girl" in the academy. Her corrupt idea of a "nearly unbearable ethical conflict" (212) revolves around a vulnerable student who made her "feel as if he let me put his balls in my mouth" (214), a position she portrays as more exciting than unbearable. None of this is balanced by her claims to represent a common "pedagogical experience," or the questions of genre with which she concludes:

> On the level of greatest actuality, in today's scene of writing rather than the pedagogical scene from my past, the real moral knot, the question that tears me is not about falling in love but about falling into story, not whether or not this is a love story, but whether or not *this* is a story. (218)

The psychoanalytic motif that emerges from "Knot a Love Story" is neither the resistance nor the obsession celebrated by Gallop but narcissism.

The odd result of Tompkins's and Gallop's experiments is a self-centered criticism that is also impersonal. While it may be easier to read, or require less background, this is no more original or interesting than the articles against which Tompkins and Gallop are rebelling. They seem to equate personal criticism with a flatly autobiographical mode, as Nancy Miller does when she defines it as "an explicitly autobiographical performance within the act of criticism" (1). That equation has begun to surface in many discussions of personal criticism, whose theorists commit the error Hazlitt described over a century and a half ago: they "mistake a familiar for a vulgar style, and suppose that to write without affectation is to write at random" (242).

Unlike Gallop and Tompkins, Elizabeth Abel uses her response to Toni Morrison's story "Recitatif" as "an allegory about reading and race" (495). The story, about an interracial friendship in which neither protagonist's race is revealed, leads Abel to examine her own assumptions and those of colleagues, both black and white. Abel, who is white, presents her interpretations alongside those of Lula Fragd, the black feminist critic who introduced her to the story: "Lula was certain that Twyla was black; I was equally convinced that she was white; most

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of the readers we summoned to resolve the dispute divided similarly along racial lines" (471). She offers her reading and the thinking behind it "with considerable embarrassment for its possible usefulness in fleshing out the impulse within contemporary white feminism" to idealize and obscure the complex social relations between black and white women (472). As these brief quotations testify, Abel's personal moments are always connected to an issue in the text she is reading. She speaks not only of her assumptions about race, but of how they affect her ability to read. This simple difference between a personal criticism chiefly about the critic and one that uses the critic as a model of the attentive, though sometimes mistaken, reader helps us begin to separate successful personal criticism from mere self-indulgence.

The increase in the degree of autobiographical disclosure in scholarly writing is explained partly, I believe, by the spread of talk shows and other types of public confession that have expanded our interest in revealing and having revealed virtually every aspect of private life. Furthermore, our culture now endorses the view that all such information is interesting. Woolf's more reticent personal criticism offers an alternative to this voice, and this alternative is not merely marked by an absence of details. Instead, because being "personal" for Woolf was more limited, she wrote about thinking as a deeply personal act in her criticism and was not tempted to take the short cut through her private life. Eliot's praise of John Donne applies to Woolf as well: "A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility" (64). To achieve such responsiveness requires intelligence and flexibility. It is something to strive for, something against which to measure the essays we read and write.

G. Douglas Atkins's book does not attempt to suggest what one might mean by personal criticism. It is understandable that he has left such a gap. "Personal" is exactly the sort of word that gives people trouble: it is so common that we can come to feel that we just know when something is personal, hardly aware that there may be almost as many ideas of what is personal as there are people. This difficulty makes all the more important an attempt to define the "personal" in criticism. Without explaining, we will not be able to recognize personal criticism, learn to know its uses and problems, and decide how fully we want to incorporate it in our own work.

In light of the many current exhortations that literary critics be more personal in their writing, it is crucial that we be self-conscious about our invocations of the "personal." Many—perhaps most—of us enter academic life out of a love of literature, an enthusiasm for reading

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and talking about ideas and language, but our writing does not easily reflect that original enthusiasm. We want our reading of articles—a duty of academic life—to be enlivened by the idea (fictional or not) that their authors have enjoyed writing them. We want to write for an audience of readers, not of specialists.

What makes writing personal? Autobiography and confession, diaries and letters carry the implication, central to their forms, that there is an unusually thin veil, if veil there be, between reader and writer. Still, this does not explain the sense we have of knowing one diarist or letter-writer better than another. One very general principle seems central to creating personal writing: an interest in showing the process of the work, in revealing contradictions, enthusiasm, and misgivings. It was precisely this interest in documenting uncertainty and change that led Montaigne to give his writings the name "*essai*." From the beginning, essays have been written to guide the reader through doubts and false beginnings, and even essays written to convince or persuade do so by leading the reader through the process by which a conclusion was reached. This spirit of *essayant* permits and even encourages later writers to add their thoughts to the conversation.

Personal criticism is not autobiography. It opposes itself to more theoretical writing, a more systematic approach. To call for personal criticism is to ask critics to write essays, not articles. In *Estranging the Familiar* Atkins offers a distinction between articles and essays that provides a beginning point: "Unlike that done in article form . . . literary commentary done essayistically reflects the critic's passionate engagement and expresses his or her involvement *in* the commentary" (39). The difference between the terms "personal criticism" and "essay" lies not in meaning but in connotation. For many, "essay" suggests a tired, bell-lettristic excursus, fusty and irrelevant. "Essay" may also suggest the mind-numbing exercises that we wrote as students. And of course not all essays are literary, or even critical. In contrast, "personal criticism" connotes a passionate and candid critique written from a self-consciously individual perspective. Nonetheless, throughout this study I have resisted "personal criticism" in favor of "essay" for several reasons. First, the best essays have always done what personal criticism claims to do. Second, much recent personal criticism—especially that which calls itself "autobiographical literary criticism"[1]—trades on a fantasy of the literary critic as celebrity, so that if we learn anything it is not about *Jane Eyre* or reading novels but about the critic's personal life. If these essays scrutinize anything, it is the author's life. Furthermore, essays have a more comfortable relation to argument than does

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personal criticism. That is, essays honor the minute articulations of a point of view, while personal criticism has made the very acknowledgment of subtlety into a polemical stance. When personal criticism announces that it is judging a text by individual rather than theoretical criteria ("This one time, I've taken off the straitjacket, and it feels so good" [Tompkins 138]), it reveals itself as the naive latecomer to a conversation that the essay has been engaged in for centuries.

Feminists would be wise to embrace the essay, for it is a form well suited to making arguments for social change, in spite of many dismissals of it as too polite, too conciliatory, too willing to play the feminine role of "hostess" to contradictory or even offensive ideas. The essay's meandering, baggy form embodies the values so often espoused by feminist critics, especially the willingness to accept indeterminacy, the "both/and" vision celebrated by DuPlessis and others. The essay's particular power lies in its ability to lead a reader to a new perspective. It speaks to the unconverted. Consider, for example, Virginia Woolf's success in convincing non-feminists that the lack of a female Shakespeare is due not to female weakness but to social pressures and restrictions. Woolf chose to address the enemies of her feminist ideas and has been criticized by feminists ever since. Those preferring arguments that announce their purpose and politics should beware that polemic can turn away the sympathetic as quickly as an essay, in its willingness to hear and even articulate an opposing view, may turn away the ardently committed.[2] It is nothing against the essay that it is not polemic, just as it is nothing against polemic that it is not an essay.

My chief dispute with "personal criticism" is not with the expression of "passionate engagement . . . *in* the commentary"—how could it be?—but with the manner in which that involvement has been expressed. The current conviction seems to be that by telling you quite literally where I am sitting as I write, I will make you understand my critical position. But many different conclusions have been reached at these long, low tables in the main reading room, and giving you a map to my seat will not explain how I reached mine. In "The Critic as Artist" Oscar Wilde wrote: "It [criticism] is the only civilized form of autobiography, as it deals not with the events, but with the thoughts of one's life; not with life's physical accidents of deed and circumstance, but with the spiritual moods and imaginative passions of the mind" (154). The principle that we are fee to choose our ideas has always been a liberating one. Accidents of circumstance are not, or, to the imaginative writer, are *not yet* liberating in the same way.

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On 3 March, 1926, Woolf wrote in her diary: "He is not, & now never will be, a personage: which is the one thing needful in criticism, or writing of any sort, I think; for we're all as wrong as wrong can be. But character is the thing" (3:65). In "The Modern Essay," written four years earlier, she praises essays with a personal tone and the presence of personality, while cautioning against a too liberal use of the self in writing:

> [Max Beerbohm] 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. . . . 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. Some of the essayists in Mr. [Ernest] Rhys' collection, to be frank, have not altogether succeeded in solving it. We are nauseated by the sight of trivial personalities decomposing in the eternity of print. As talk, no doubt it was charming, and certainly the writer is a good fellow to meet over a bottle of beer. (*Common* 217)

These cautions go against the welcoming tone of contemporary American personal criticism. Woolf has no patience for any but the best personal criticism. The distinction she makes is subtle but important: Beerbohm's success relies on "the spirit of personality," which may or may not be distinct from the author. In fact, as Woolf's own intense interest in biography attests, readers are deeply interested in the lives of authors, and in comparing the facts of biography with the work of art. Still, such correspondences are never simple, nor does art's meaning begin and end with the autobiographical. Furthermore, not every life story is interesting, and strangers must work to make themselves interesting to us. Wendy Lesser makes a similar point in her introduction to an outstanding collection of autobiographical essays:

> The crucial art of the essay lies in its perpetrator's masterful control over his own self-exposure. We may at times be embarrassed *by* him, but we should never feel embarrassed *for* him. He must be the ringmaster of his self-display. He may choose to bare more than he can bear (that is where the terror comes in), but *he* must do the choosing, and we must feel that he is doing it. (ix–x)

It is remarkable that these premises of essay writers—that some lives are more interesting than others, that some occasions are more appropriate

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to confession and anecdote than others—have been so overlooked that they bear repeating.

To suit our sense of the personal, several categories of experience seem eligible: the experience of having a body; emotions; the events of life; and thought. Feminism has seized notably on the first three, sometimes at the expense of the fourth. The result is that, in quarters where the personal remains opposed to the professional, feminists run the risk of allowing thought to remain defined as professional, impersonal, male, and better. There is no reason why this should be the case. Without discounting other aspects of the personal, or reinscribing the division of thought from bodies, my discussion of the personal in Virginia Woolf emphasizes thought. This stance has the added advantage of offering an answer to the question with which I began: How have such various readers come to take Woolf so personally?

Woolf makes thinking seem personal in part by creating an argument passionately committed to securing "the greatest release of all . . . which is freedom to think of things in themselves" (*Room* 39). More important, she focuses on perfecting the details of her argument, hoping to uncover small truths; she does not pretend to present a theory, but offers a collection of persuasive observations. As Susan Sontag writes, "This is quintessentially the essayist's point of view: to convert the world and everything in it to a species of thinking" (xviii). Writing that treats thought as personal displays its conclusions not as the unassailable results of research but as the idiosyncratic perceptions of an individual. Personal writing makes smaller claims to truth because it is skeptical of grand theories. It is contingent, ironic, and self-conscious. The personal dimension to these thoughts can propel a reader through an otherwise difficult or unfamiliar argument. Those who ignore the possibilities of taking thought personally miss an important opportunity to write essays that are lucid and accessible without compromising intelligence.

Atkins's suggestion for how his favorite critic, Geoffrey Hartman, might make his writing more personal reveals the difficulty inherent in such suggestions. As the following quotation shows, Atkins finds Hartman's work both intensely personal and intellectually difficult. Atkins's own enthusiasm for Hartman's ideas leads him to suggest that Hartman alter his style to suit a broader audience:

> Hartman very rarely speaks about himself. He is never distanced, objective, clinical; he is, on the contrary, always deeply engaged with texts, and you certainly cannot mistake the play of this

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> particular, agile, amazing mind with ideas, texts and emotions. . . . Were Hartman more willing to be more confessional, more personal, more willing to speak directly and openly to the reader about himself, I wonder if he might achieve a broader audience, the kind of readership that criticism ought to be in the business of addressing and attracting. (72)

The imputed desire for a broad audience flatters the critic's sense of importance and is appealingly democratic. Nonetheless, I prefer the tone struck by Stanley Cavell in *Pursuits of Happiness*, which does not condescend to an imagined audience but instead finds a place for several levels of discussion within the same conversation: "My juxtaposition of Kant and Capra is meant to suggest that you cannot know the answer to the question of worthwhileness in advance of your own experience, not of the worthwhileness of Capra *and* not that of Kant" (10). Furthermore, I am skeptical of the advantages of speaking more "directly to the reader about himself." If by this Atkins means his candid and considered opinion of the text being discussed, that is indeed a good too often omitted from literary criticism, but if he means that critics should let us "get to know them," I concur with Virginia Woolf, who is "nauseated by the sight of trivial personalities decomposing in the eternity of print."

While personal criticism remains only loosely defined, almost as ill-defined is the nature of the loathed "impersonal" criticism against which Atkins, Tompkins, et al. are struggling. Tompkins does offer an indictment of impersonal writing in "Me and My Shadow." She recounts feeling disappointed by her attempts to read Félix Guattari, Harold Bloom, and Michel Foucault. Her dismissals of their writing, which she presents in brief excerpts, as "incredibly alienating" (131) do not examine what makes them "impersonal" in any detail. Instead, she quotes approvingly another essay, by Jessica Benjamin, and asserts that the erotic, Benjamin's topic, is more interesting than the topics of Guattari, Bloom, and Foucault. Skirting a discussion of role of temperament in reading, Tompkins wants to maintain that, for women at least, if not for everyone, "erotic domination, as a subject, [is] surer to arouse strong feeling than systems of machines or the psyche that can be represented as a text" (134). Tompkins ultimately comes to a circular conclusion: writing that is familiar is personal and, for women, the personal, being familiar, is personal. In Tompkins's own words:

> What is personal is completely a function of what is perceived as personal. And what is perceived as personal by men, or rather, what is gripping, significant, 'juicy', is different from what is felt

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> to be that way by women. For what we are really talking about is not the personal as such, what we are talking about is what is important, answers one's needs, strikes one as immediately *interesting*. For women, the personal is such a category. (134)

This version of the personal—reading what is familiar or accustomed—endorses a parochial idea of "interest" that runs contrary to Tompkins's purported desire to "expand the canon." It runs contrary to the idea of education.

Impersonal criticism might seem to be the New Criticism, especially T. S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent," but Eliot is rarely mentioned by advocates of the personal. Nonetheless, Eliot's condemnation of "personal" poetry bears repeating:

> In fact, the bad poet is usually unconscious where he ought to be conscious, and conscious where he ought to be unconscious. Both errors tend to make him 'personal'. Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things. (43)

Whatever one makes of Eliot's argument on tradition, this plea is remarkably personal: Eliot anxiously guards his privacy and that of poets generally, and smugly suggests that personal reticence is a mark of depth of personality and feeling. He, like Virginia Woolf, tries to keep his readers at a distance, asking them to understand poetry as more than veiled autobiography. Moments such as this demonstrate the difficulty involved in defining what makes writing personal.

It would not be difficult to find other such examples of personal moments in any of the best literary critics. Original thinking about literature will often be personal, while the application of a method to a new text will often be less personal. An essay by Foucault will likely be more personal than a Foucauldian essay. However, while we can imagine—and may even have read or written—Foucauldian essays, what would a Woolfian essay be like? Only Virginia Woolf could write such a text. Thus, when literary critics look for a modernist thinker on whom to rely, it has been simpler to derive a theory from Eliot, who argues with prejudices and perceptions as if they had emerged from a method that need never be fully revealed. It is the absence, in Woolf, of just this kind of officiousness that has led critics back to her essays. When Pamela Caughie suggests that "She gives us not her own subjective readings but stories of reading as a Woolfian reader" (184), she is only half right. Woolf's essays are indeed "stories of reading as a

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Woolfian reader," but such readings are also emphatically and proudly subjective. That these subjective readings are compelling and persuasive is frequently testimony to the breadth and depth of her interests, her alert and intelligent responsiveness to her reading. In a swarm of competing theories, the opinions of one who eschewed system in favor of "granite-like solidity and . . . rainbow-like intangibility" (*Granite* 149), offers a bracing change.

The power of subjective readings such as Woolf's has tempted many critics to write personal essays. For many, the most accessible and straightforward way to do this is to use the first-person pronoun. However, this apparently simple move toward connection can alienate the reader, as Woolf notes here:

> But after reading a chapter or two a shadow seemed to lie across the page. It was a straight dark bar, a shadow shaped something like the letter "I." One began dodging this way and that to catch a glimpse of the landscape behind it. Whether that was indeed a tree or a woman walking I was not quite sure. Back one was always hailed to the letter "I." One began to be tired of "I." (*Room* 99–100).

A happy accident of English allows Woolf to compare "I" to a great tree, whose trunk the letter "I" resembles. The problem with "I" is that it comes to dominate, and ultimately obscure, the subject it purports to describe; "I" wants to be its own subject. Thus, the egotistical "I" quickly becomes an authoritative one. In the end, it is less personal than many third-person forms. Personal writing, as Woolf shows throughout her essays, is nervous about and critical of the authoritative voice.

Like writing in the first person, the autobiographical anecdote has become a frequent device of those seeking to make their writing more personal. As we have already seen, this device poses problems of its own. When, for example, Jane Tompkins writes about having to go to the bathroom, or Patricia Williams notes which chapters were written while she was wearing a bathrobe and which she wrote fully dressed, the effect is to force the reader into the role of an admiring spectator. Impressed by their own courage in raising the curtain on their private lives, these authors overlook the degree to which they have put themselves on center stage. When Virginia Woolf compares the work of an essay to that of a curtain, it is not the stage curtain suggested by contemporary self-display. Instead, Woolf evokes an image of a sheltering library or four-poster bed: a good essay "must draw its curtain round us, but it must be a curtain that shuts us in, not out" (*Common* 222). This description is revealing in its inclusiveness.

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However narrowly Woolf might have imagined common readers, nothing in this sentence excludes any of us, for Woolf leaves "us" undefined.

Although *A Room of One's Own* opens with an autobiographical anecdote, it is an anecdote that focuses our attention on Woolf's idea, on the subject of women and fiction, not on Virginia Woolf herself: "When you asked me to speak about women and fiction I sat down on the banks of a river and began to wonder what the words meant" (3). Unlike Tompkins or Williams, Woolf tells us something about herself to help bring into focus the complexity of the idea, the seriousness with which she approaches the topic, not because she wants us to like her. This interest in the well-chosen clue that will help to explain one's ideas is central to personal criticism, as is the desire to situate explanation in the context of everyday life. In this mixed and ongoing conversation the essay must not only explain its opinions but also show a willingness to be persuaded otherwise. In her essays Woolf continually appeals to her mood, her opinion, her own knowledge, checking received opinions against the text and herself. So there is a sense of literature being open to anyone willing (and able—which is why she argues for rooms and money) to do that kind of rigorous thinking. It is not a kind of thinking dependent on any one education, on any system.

From its delivery as lectures to the women of Girton and Newnham Colleges, Cambridge, through its publication, to the present, *A Room of One's Own* has been taken very personally, especially by women students. This is partly due to Woolf's adoption of the narrator, Mary Beton, a less competent researcher than Woolf, who is thus able to stand between readers (especially undergraduates, most especially women undergraduates) and Virginia Woolf, the famous author and critic. Woolf dramatizes Mary Beton's difficulties as a series of interruptions and distractions, each of which offers the reader a model for coping with, controlling, and even benefiting from the interruptions and distractions in her own life.

These are the terms in which the apparent paradox of the very personal style of *A Room of One's Own* and the distancing effects of the book resolve themselves. That is, through the personal, Woolf emphasizes what she is likely to have in common with any reader: mixed feelings about using libraries, for example. At the same time, through the generic persona of Mary Beton, she erases some of what separates her from all but a very few of her readers: that she was, already in 1928, a famous, successful writer with a knowledge of literature that was unsurpassed. Through Mary Beton, Woolf creates a personal yet

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unspecific character. Thus we cannot say that Woolf's account of Mary Beton's frustrating day in the British Library is a factual or autobiographical account of Woolf's experience on a day in 1928, even though we recognize the tone, opinions, and quality of observation as very like what Woolf expresses in her own voice elsewhere.[3] Woolf's use of a narrator inhibits us from being distracted by Woolf the personality and allows us to enter into a sympathetic relationship with the persona.

This defense of Woolf closely resembles New Critical defenses of dramatic monologue. However, Eliot's discussion of Browning and Cleanth Brooks's reading of "Ode on a Grecian Urn" emphasize the ironic possibilities of dramatic monologue while I would emphasize Woolf's rhetorical need to mask her celebrity and ally herself with young, unknown women. Of course, Virginia Woolf's presence continues through the book alongside Mary Beton, and the blending of her voice with the narrator's supports Woolf's double interest in all women and women of genius in particular. Eliot described this blending of voices in "The Three Voices of Poetry":

> There may be from time to time, and perhaps when we least notice it, the voices of the author and the character in unison, saying something appropriate to the character, but something which the author could say for himself also, though the words may not have quite the same meaning for both. (*On Poetry* 109–10)

The creation of Mary Beton allows Woolf to adapt for nonfiction the novelist and poet's ability to move in and out of character.

The conjunction of essay writing and literary modernism was especially felicitous for Woolf: both the form and the movement encouraged her own interest in the transition from one thought to another, and in interruptions to that movement among thoughts. Geoffrey Hartman, Peggy Kamuf, and Lucio Ruotolo have all written about the role of interruption in Woolf's writing. Hartman sees resistance and continuity as primary themes in Woolf's novels, themes which are expressed through an ongoing tension between the plot and the expressionistic prose, so the mind is impelled forward with an avid interest not in what is next, but in how it will happen. Kamuf connects this idea of resistance and continuity to Penelope's weaving and unweaving in the *Odyssey*, and reads *A Room of One's Own* as a movement between art and violence. Ruotolo's *The Interrupted Moment* examines the interruptions Woolf imposes on the plots of her novels and her privileging of those characters who can allow themselves to be changed by them. For each of these critics Woolf's technique of interruptions is

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seen to anticipate a subsequent theory of reading: deconstructive, feminist, or Bakhtinian. For the common reader these interruptions provide an opportunity to enter the text, to form a personal connection as our thoughts follow Woolf's eccentric path. Interruptions in Woolf's argument, moments in which she claims to have lost her train of thought, acknowledge the reader's own interrupted reading, and reward our efforts to follow her argument with a change of perspective, if not a change of subject. In *A Room of One's Own*, this change is often a comic reminder of the impossibility of coming to a conclusion, as when Woolf's thoughts cause her to miss the turning in the road (15–16). These moments draw the distracted reader back into the text.

None of these accounts focus on the essay and the peculiarly intimate effect of reading descriptions of what it is to be interrupted. This effect is most apparent in *A Room of One's Own*, where interruption is both a method and a theme. As the list below attests, each of the first five sections of the book closes with an interruption, passing either to a new room or a new book:

> Even the door of the hotel sprang open at the touch of an invisible hand—not a boots was sitting up to light me to bed, it was so late. (24)
>
> But what bearing has all this upon the subject of my paper, Women and Fiction? I asked, going indoors. (40)
>
> If ever a mind was incandescent, unimpeded, I thought, turning again to the bookcase, it was Shakespeare's mind. (57)
>
> Happily my thoughts were now given another turn. (78)
>
> She will be a poet, I said, putting *Life's Adventure*, by Mary Carmichael, at the end of the shelf, in another hundred years' time. (94)[4]

For the most part, these deft transitions are not necessarily feminist, nor do the interruptions depicted here exemplify those domestic interruptions against which women have had to struggle: the interruptions of unceasing family obligation, an almost total lack of privacy, and hostile taunts. Woolf, who wrote of herself, "I can make up situations, but I cannot make up plots" (*Diary* 3:160) solves the problem of "plotting" her argument by imposing external interruptions. These interruptions have the added philosophical advantage of checking the flow of the argument against an obstacle, or, in reverse, of flowing past an apparent obstacle in search of the idea just ahead.

Furthermore, each intrusion of the non-textual world acts as a door into the text. It marks the pleasure of reading by calling attention to

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reading's attendant distractions. Woolf's argument is elastic enough to accommodate the additional interruptions that her readers will add. *To the Lighthouse* ends with an analogous moment. Several pages from the end of the book, Woolf writes: "Mr. Ramsay had almost done reading" (202). To one absorbed in the book this sentence creates an uncanny connection to Mr. Ramsay. The reader may think, as I inevitably do when I reach this sentence, that she, like Mr. Ramsay, is almost done with *her* reading. But, of course, this is built into the book: every time someone is almost finished reading *To the Lighthouse*, Mr. Ramsay will also be almost finished reading.

Whether or not an interruption acts as part of Woolf's feminist purpose, the interruptions of *A Room of One's Own* are not the highly controlled interruptions of a philosophical dialogue with oneself. About one such controlled dialogue of Foucault's, Peggy Kamuf writes, "Is it any wonder the narrator is never at a loss for a reply?" As Kamuf notes, in contrast to Foucault, Woolf forces her narrator to confront interruptions by figures like the Oxbridge beadle, who "has the position and the power to wave the narrator off the turf or to demand to see his [sic] permit to the library" (12). As important as these indignities are in themselves, more important is that the resulting interruption causes Mary Beton to forget what she had been thinking: "What idea it had been that had sent me so audaciously trespassing I could not now remember" (6). These intrusions serve the argument of *A Room of One's Own* as they could serve no other; they are Woolf's best evidence of the frustration of being interrupted. That is, the good which comes from anger at being expelled from the grass or the library is Woolf's ability to articulate the connection between patriarchal oppression and the loss of a thought. Were Woolf writing an explication of "Lycidas," for example, the fact that she lost track of her point would not be so relevant. Woolf frustrates and defers her "answer" to the relationship between women and fiction and embeds that deferral in a narrative about interruptions. Readers feel the loss of the thought acutely: first, analytically, as readers of an argument; then, sympathetically, as readers following a character's effort to construct an argument. Thus, though elsewhere Woolf finds the world to be indifferent to writing, the sympathetic reader is so thoroughly implicated in her argument that she cannot be indifferent (52).

Geoffrey Hartman attributes Woolf's apparent unconcern at worldly indifference to her feminism and her resistance to signs of a patriarchal will: "The bustle she welcomes has, at least, the arbitrariness of life rather than of the will." The mind, Hartman continues, accepts

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indifference because the life of the mind "can only appear if thought is left as apparently free as the comings and goings beneath her window" (46). Earlier in his essay, Hartman elaborates his sense that Woolf's mind was "porous to the world":

> She refuses to separate her thought from certain imaginary accidents of time and place and writers something akin to the French *récit*. Her mind, porous to the world even during thought, devises a prose . . . which makes continuities out of distractions. It is as if a woman's mind were linked at its origin, like the novel itself, to romance; and one is quite happy with this natural picaresque, the author walking us and the world along the back of her prose. (44)

Hartman is right to find his metaphor for Woolf's prose in walking. Great essayists have often been great walkers, and Woolf was no exception. The essay takes shape, like a country walk, mostly in retrospect. Only after a day of wandering, when the inn is reached, the chicken served, and the book opened on the table, can we look back and trace the path that led us to this inn in particular. An essayist's control consists largely in her trust that there are connections among her observations and in her ability to show some of them to her reader.

Hartman's sentences, with their emphasis on continuity and authorial control, echo T. S. Eliot's praise of the poet's mind:

> When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes. (*Selected* 64)

But a critic now, noting this vein in Woolf's writing, might be more apt to praise her for doing precisely what Eliot criticized—showing experience to be "chaotic, irregular, fragmentary"—for delighting in distraction, rather than "making continuities out of distractions." In part this reflects a change in critical emphasis, but it also provides a richer context in which to read Woolf's use of interruption in passages like this one on Charlotte Brontë:

> It is thoughtless to condemn them [women], or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex.
>
> "When thus alone I not unfrequently heard Grace Poole's laugh. . . ."
>
> That is an awkward break, I thought. It is upsetting to come upon Grace Poole all of a sudden. The continuity is disturbed. One might say, I continued, laying the book down beside *Pride*

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> *and Prejudice*, that the woman who wrote those pages had more genius in her than Jane Austen; but if one reads them over and marks that jerk in them, that indignation, one sees that she will never get her genius expressed whole and entire. (69; ellipses in original)

Woolf repeats and emphasizes the "awkward break" she finds in Brontë by quoting her without any transition. Thus, the break she reacts against is in Brontë and also in her own argument. Woolf creates the illusion of a narrator absorbed by her reading. The narrator refers to "coming upon" Grace Poole, as if she, like Jane Eyre herself, were hearing Grace Poole's laugh in the halls. Thus the change within *Jane Eyre* has the force of an external interruption, and leads to a break in the narrator's reading. Rather than presenting us with the "new whole" she has formed from her rereading of *Jane Eyre*, Woolf depicts the moment in which two thoughts—the impulse to forgive ambitious women and the awareness of Brontë's anger—clash and impel her argument forward. Here Woolf's prose, with its loose tracery of connections, stands between Eliot's theory of the poet's mind, quoted above, and his method, especially in *The Waste Land*, of presenting a series of apparently unconnected thoughts and allusions with little authorial presence.

In a recent article Susan Stanford Friedman focuses on how Woolf's characters who read, especially Rachel in *The Voyage Out*, teach us how to read. This passage from *A Room of One's Own* exemplifies how Woolf unpolemically teaches critical thinking while she makes a feminist argument. Woolf's narrator takes her reading seriously, though not professionally: she enters *Jane Eyre* sympathetically while reading it; then, when she puts the book down she examines why she has stopped reading, briefly comparing *Jane Eyre* to *Pride and Prejudice*. In spite of her struggles in constructing an argument, struggles that Woolf occasionally uses to show the folly of pronouncing the definitive word on women and fiction, reading and thinking are clearly longstanding and passionate habits of Woolf and her narrator before *A Room of One's Own* begins.

Woolf—through Mary Beton—also reads the world around her, and when a Manx cat passes by the window after lunch at an Oxbridge men's college, she makes some suggestions about gender difference:

> I burst out laughing, and had to explain my laughter by pointing at the Manx cat, who did look a little absurd, poor beast, without a tail, in the middle of the lawn. Was he really born so, or had he lost his tail in an accident? The tailless cat, though some are said

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> to exist in the Isle of Man, is rarer than one thinks. It is a queer animal, quaint rather than beautiful. It is strange what a difference a tail makes—you know the sort of things one says as a lunch party breaks up and people are finding their costs and hats. (13)

It is not hard to see the tailless cat as a figure for gender difference, and Woolf's musings swiftly trace the contested ground, leaving the puns on "tail" and "Man" untouched. Patricia Klindienst Joplin's reading of this passage unfolds the feminist poetics contained here without losing sight of their comic context:

> She notes the cat's apparent "lack" but wonders if its condition is not primarily only a "difference" from cats with tails. . . . While testifying to a real sense of difference, and a gender-specific one at that, the lost tail as *tale* craftily resists the violence inherent in Freud's reductive theory of women's castration as the explanation for our silence in culture. (38)

What interests me here is the way in which Woolf's offhand manner covers her anxiety. While Mary Beton's reading of *Jane Eyre* demonstrates what it is to be a Woolfian reader, the Manx cat asks us to perform the reading ourselves. Her narrator has been laughing not at the Manx cat but at her own nostalgia for luncheon parties before the war, where, she imagines, the sexes mixed as harmoniously as the poems of Tennyson and Christina Rossetti that she quotes. The Manx cat is thus a cover for her embarrassment at noticing difference, at being a woman, at laughing aloud. In the end, she seems to dismiss it as "the sort of thing one says as a lunch party breaks up," a narrative interruption that carries Mary Beton outside and down the road to visit Fernham, the book's fictional women's college. Woolf leaves the interpretation of the Manx cat to us. Her swift change of subject may be partly a gesture of self-protection, a sigh of her anxieties about sounding "shrill." She also offers a stronger reading of the same tone, one confident of the power of her suggestions: "I like to go out of the room talking, with an unfinished casual sentence on my lips" (*Diary* 3:7). Because Woolf is speaking through Mary Beton here, it is possible to read the anecdote of the Manx cat as both tentative and bold. That is, we hear "the voices of the author and the character in unison, saying . . . something which the author could say for himself also, though the words may not have quite the same meaning for both." (Eliot *On Poetry* 109–10). Subversion, rather than confrontation, is Woolf's preferred mode of argument throughout *A Room of One's Own*. Subversion and suggestion are central to the rhetoric of personal criticism, as they hope

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to surprise the reader into changing her mind. Even hesitation itself plays an important role in making the passage personal, for admitting uncertainty is yet another way of inviting the reader in. Someone who leaves the room with an unfinished sentence on her lips hopes that those who remain will ponder her meaning.

The personal element in Woolf has much more in common with moments in T. S. Eliot than with contemporary personal critics. Compare, for example, Patricia Williams's explanation of why her writing is personal:

> I say: Writing for me is an act of sacrifice, not denial. (I think: I'm so glad I didn't try to write this down.) I deliberately sacrifice myself in my writing. I leave no part of myself out, for that is how much I want readers to connect with me. I want them to wonder about the things I wonder about, and to think about some of the things that trouble me. (92)

After the tame paradox of writing her relief that she "did not . . . write this down," Williams discusses her writing, why she chose the tone she chose. And her daring is measurable: certainly legal scholarship is, as yet, less open to personal shadings than literary criticism. The problem with writing-about-writing is not that the completed work ends up being about its own fulfillments of confessional promise—in fact, a strength Williams's book shares with *A Room of One's Own* is the intelligence with which it discusses the difficulties of feeling at odds with a prevailing style. Nor is the chief problem that the issues she promises to discuss are continually deferred, displaced by discussions of how difficult it has been to publish her discussions of the issues. The problem is Williams's desperate desire for us to care for and approve of her and to believe that her interest in her topic is heartfelt. Insisting, as Williams does here, that she really cares implies that elsewhere—in her own work or the work of others—the author does not. The existence of the book should be proof enough of her commitment. As to our liking her, no one, in person or in print, has ever come to be liked by pleading for us to like her. There are moments in *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, particularly in the longer anecdotes, in which Williams does demonstrate her stake in the legal argument. For example, her account of not being permitted to enter a Benetton shop, of writing about the incident, and then having her anger edited out becomes a bitterly ironic commentary on the alienating effects of the law (46ff.). But the sheer weight of registered irritation or grievance was what Woolf insisted did *not* warrant esteem for an author, much as it might elicit commiseration with a person.

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Outside of Woolf, one may find examples of the imaginative and well-placed personal reference in Thoreau, in Ruskin, in Rebecca West; an especially illuminating instance occurs in Hazlitt's "On Dreams." Refuting the dream theories of one Dr. Spurzheim, Hazlitt writes, "I have alluded to this passage because I myself am (or used some time ago to be) a sleep-walker; and know how the thing is" (12:19). This passage has the satisfaction of complete authorial self-confidence; it carries a thump of empirical satisfaction. Furthermore, beyond our initial interest in learning something about Hazlitt, the subsequent personal description of sleepwalking clarifies his argument and makes it memorable. That is, because I was delighted by this moment in "On Dreams," I remember the essay and can reconstruct its argument months after reading it. But while some may "know how the thing is," women and non-whites writing in English have not had such easy recourse to common sense and facts. Thus interruptions in essays by women and non-whites are more frequently expressions of uncertainty and self-doubt, or, which amounts to much the same thing, protestations of qualifications.

Woolf manages to make such uncertainty seem the most intelligent response to a contingent world. Similarly, in her essay on Gertrude Stein, Elizabeth Hardwick plays off Stein's monumental self-confidence with her own wry questions and restatements:

> In any case, Gertrude Stein was born in 1874. . . . Her family and its situation must have been the womb of her outlandish confidence, confidence of a degree amazing. She was, after all, determined to be, even if *in absentia*, or because of that exile, our country's historian. (66)

Hardwick's self-revision, "or because of that exile," a practice she continues throughout the essay, separates her voice from Stein's and makes a virtue of hesitation.

In the writing of both Patricia Williams and Virginia Woolf, interruptions often come from those who doubt that a woman, or an African-American woman, can do the work that Woolf and Williams do. So, in *A Room of One's Own*, "The world said with a guffaw, Write? What's the good of your writing?" (52), and in *To the Lighthouse*, Lily Briscoe continues to hear Charles Tansley's "Women can't paint, can't write" (159) years after he first says it. Such discouragement has an insidious effect on existing insecurities. Thus, in "Professions for Women" Woolf does not kill the patriarchal father, but the Angel in the House, patriarchy's image of what woman should be. One has to cease believing in sexist and racist axioms before rising to fight against them.

As we have seen, *A Room of One's Own* explores the gradations of

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interruption, be they felicitous, calamitous, or indifferent. To this discussion of interruption Woolf adds the idea of distraction, punning on its double meaning of inattention and insanity. Enviously watching the student at the next desk, her narrator catalogues the variety of distractions that frustrate her efforts to build an argument:

> So I pondered until all such frivolous thoughts were ended by an avalanche of books sliding down on to the desk in front of me. Now the trouble began. The student who has been trained in research at Oxbridge has no doubt some method of shepherding his question past all distractions till it runs into its answer as a sheep runs into its pen. The student by my side, for instance, . . . was, I felt sure, extracting pure nuggets of the essential ore every ten minutes or so. (28)

As the unfolding of the argument demonstrate, this envy is both genuine and ironic. Whether or not we believe in truth, or the possibility of copying truth out into our notebooks—and Woolf herself has a wide variety of attitudes to the subject—there is something attractive in the sight of such self-confidence, however naive it may seem, to a mind that is both more distracted and more sophisticated. We do not learn the fate of the student's research. In contrast, this very distraction leads the narrator to draw the picture of Professor Von X, which in turn leads to the observation that male anger at women is central to patriarchy. As Woolf writes a few pages later, "It is in our idleness, in our dreams, that the submerged truth sometimes comes to the top" (31). Seldom has distraction yielded such fine fruit, for "the submerged truth" here is the germ of *A Room of One's Own*. In fact, Woolf's enthusiasm in transforming distraction into argument makes it easy to forget that not all of our dreams and distractions yield such books.

In spite of the fruits of the narrator's distraction in *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf continues to record women's fear of being seen as distracted. In her discussion of Dorothy Osborne, she borrows Osborne's own disapproving assessment of the Duchess of Newcastle:

> One could have sworn that she had the making of a writer in her. But "if I should not sleep this fortnight I should not come to that"—one can measure the opposition that was in the air to a woman writing when one finds that even a woman with a great turn for writing has brought herself to believe that to write a book was to be ridiculous, even to show oneself distracted. (63)

Here Woolf focuses on the effects of "bringing oneself to believe" that

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women cannot write, not the source of such beliefs. (This refusal to blame the patriarchy has been criticized by many feminists.) She shows, through Dorothy Osborne, how well a woman can write when she is "merely" writing letters, and, through her narrator, how much research can profit from distractions. Woolf shows women the intelligence they already express in spite of discouragement from others and from themselves.

In *The Reach of Criticism*, Paul Fry distinguishes between the two meanings of "distraction":

> The difficulty inherent in ideas such as this should be evident. [Louis] Aragon's quip ["The merest summons can distract me from anything, save from my distraction"] reminds us that the moment of being distracted is very different from the *state* of distraction; the former is quite possibly a state of sudden alertness induced by a shock too great to be absorbed by the pre-conscious, whereas the latter is typically a state of revery or dullness in which the subject, overwhelmed by white noise or "fumant son houka," is in no condition to be affected by any *Verfremdung* short of . . . dynamite in the theater. (192)

In her several uses of "distraction," Woolf transforms "craziness" into an intellectual strength. She uses her narrator's (and her own) lack of an education in research methods to see society from an outsider's perspective.[5] Thus, while the narrator continues to experience distraction as an impediment to her progress, the reader experiences that distraction as a shift, an application of the idea to a new context. The state of distraction and the word itself remain important because feminist arguments have frequently been dismissed as crazy, and women have often been criticized for being "flighty" or distracted in their thoughts. When Virginia Woolf, a woman with a history of mental illness, takes advantage of this pun, she confronts a potentially frightening or dangerous part of herself and transforms it into a powerful advantage.

In his discussion of Walter Benjamin, Fry imagines a criticism that would be able to account for distraction, that would acknowledge its central role in all of our reading. For Fry, Benjamin offers at least a partial solution because he, like Woolf, is always reading, whether the material is text or not:

> For Benjamin, to be conscious is to read. There is no distinction worth making, that is, between reality and representation since it is quite natural and proper to consider experience to be exclusively one or the other. Experience itself, however, whether it concerns the language of nature or the language of art, has a

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> more legitimately two-fold character, consisting of the *Erlebnis*, in which life is loitered through, and the *Erfahrung*, in which the loiterer notices, on a sandy part of the sidewalk, a pearl. (185)

Fry's choice of metaphor here is particularly apt in relation to Woolf, who, in "Street Haunting" finds not a pearl, but an oyster, on the sidewalk:

> But when the door shuts on us, all that vanishes. The shell-like covering which our souls have excreted to house themselves, to make for themselves a shape distinct from others, is broken, and there is left of all these wrinkles and roughnesses a central oyster of perceptiveness, an enormous eye. How beautiful a street is in winter! (*Death* 21–22)

This passage, which moves from comparing the soul to a chambered nautilus to finding beauty in that ugliest of mollusks, the oyster, is remarkably willing to jettison the metaphor altogether for the disarmingly simple exclamation: "How beautiful a street is in winter!" Moves such as this one suggest a mind not too in love with its own creations, a mind capable of being surprised, and one interested in recreating that surprise for her readers. If we are admirers of Woolf, moments like this one are delightful for the light they cast on our sense of her, but their primary function remains the unfolding of the essay's topic: in this case, a meditation on the pleasures of a city walk.

Looking at *A Room of One's Own* as an essay does not overlook its more important role as a feminist pamphlet; in fact, it suggests that the very sidelong, personal approach of the book accounts for its success, for the book does exemplify a version of personal criticism that has endured and continues to speak to a broad and diverse audience. Each interruption and distraction is an opportunity for the reader to enter the argument, to feel a personal connection not with Virginia Woolf but with the ideas she is discussing.

After this somewhat skeptical analysis of personal criticism, it remains to be asked: Why write personal criticism at all? For me, an answer lies in the many successors to Woolf's personal criticism, essays that honor Woolf by disagreeing with her, by thinking for themselves. As a mode of criticism, personal criticism succeeds only with great difficulty. Woolf has been criticized, by Jane Marcus among others, for "suppress[ing] her feminist self" (818) in many of her essays. I have criticized others for indulging too freely in autobiography. However, as *A Room of One's Own* demonstrates, when the personal is brought to the service of an idea, it becomes the most persuasive criticism there is.

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NOTES

[1] See especially Freedman et al.

[2] I am thinking in particular of Jane Marcus's impatience with Woolf's essays, which she sees as a "suppress[ion of] her feminist self." For a discussion of working-class readers and their widely varying interpretations of canonical literature (which often understood and honored radical elements in writing generally considered to be conservative by academic readers), see Jonathan Rose.

[3] As, for example, in her refusal of a position on the all-male London Library board (*Diary* 4:298).

[4] I thank Patricia Klindienst Joplin for first making this observation.

[5] Friedman applies a version of this argument to *The Common Reader*.

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