

MODERNISM AND THE COMMON READER:
VIRGINIA WOOLF, REBECCA WEST, AND ELIZABETH BOWEN

by

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(Under the Direction of Adam Parkes)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines literary criticism written by Virginia Woolf, Rebecca West and Elizabeth Bowen. Taking *The Common Reader* (1925) as a model, I demonstrate an emerging counter-tradition among modernist women critics. These writers developed new critical means of challenging an intellectual and social hierarchy that privileged the work of the professional, and usually male, critic while treating the work of the female essayist as background noise. Combining literary-critical and historical approaches to these essay collections, I consider what it would mean to understand the notion of the common reader, not as a figure of the reader *per se*, but as the name for a critical method, or an array of methods. Understood in this way, the common reader becomes a framing device represented by shared formal characteristics such as strategic self-effacement, anti-intellectualism, and an impressionistic writing style.

INDEX WORDS: Literary criticism; Nonfiction; Archives; British literature; Irish literature; Women's writing; Woolf, Virginia; West, Rebecca; Bowen, Elizabeth.

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2020

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May 2020

DEDICATION

For my mother, Christine Crifo, and my grandmother, Elsie Crifo.
You have given me everything.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project first took shape amid conversations with the members of my dissertation committee at the University of Georgia. I am immensely grateful to Adam Parkes who has challenged me and encouraged me in equal measure. His patient supervision of this project has been invaluable, and I could not ask for a better mentor. Elizabeth Kraft has been enduringly generous with her time and her support; I have enjoyed every one of our conversations. Nicholas Allen has been a thoughtful reader of my work, and his incisive feedback has helped me through every stage of this project. I enjoyed many productive conversations with Aidan Wasley, and his feedback on Chapter Three helped expand the project in several important ways. I am grateful to previous professors at the University of Georgia, and to Ashley Cross and Bridget Chalk at Manhattan College for their early encouragement and for their continued support and guidance.

I appreciate the institutional support I received from the University of Georgia. I devoted the final year of my studies to this project thanks to a Dissertation Completion Award. The English Department, the Willson Center for Humanities and Arts, and the UGA at Oxford Program have all supported me at various stages. I am indebted to all the staff at the New York Public Library, the Beinecke Library, the Bodleian Library, and the Harry Ransom Center for helping me chase up sources.

I could not have finished this project without the strong support of my friends and family. Angie Alexander and Renee Buesking have been the best of friends in Athens; I

would not have nearly as much fun without them. My family has been a constant source of encouragement: John and Camille Vassari, Mike Vassari, Marissa Vassari, Jim and Elsie Crifo, Evan Gilman, Olivia Gilman, and John Gilman—your love and support has meant everything. The support of my stepfather, Ron D’Argenio, has been incalculable; I cannot express how much I appreciate his humor, his wisdom, and his love. My parents supported my education and instilled in me a love of reading that has carried me through the significant moments of my life. My mother, Christine Crifo, has been my greatest support. This project would not exist without her love, her guidance, and her enduring belief in me. I dedicate this work to her with all my love and gratitude.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: AMATEURS AND OUTSIDERS

In the third chapter of *Three Guineas* (1938), Virginia Woolf proposes the establishment of a professional society for women: an “anonymous and secret Society of Outsiders” to which the “daughters and sisters of educated men” might subscribe (130). Woolf suggests women organize themselves into a class of their own and “expertly” develop their “professional practices”:

The outsiders then would bind themselves not only to earn their own livings, but to earn them so expertly that their refusal to earn them would be a matter of concern to the work master. They would bind themselves to obtain full knowledge of their professional practices, and to reveal any instance of tyranny or abuse in their professions. And they would bind themselves not to continue to make money in any profession, but to cease all competition and to practice their profession experimentally, in the interests of research and for love of the work itself, when they had earned enough to live upon [...]. And they would bind themselves to refuse to take office or honour from any society which, while professing to respect liberty, restricts it, like the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. (133)

Woolf appears to instruct the women of the Society of Outsiders to professionalize: “to earn their own livings” and to “learn them so expertly” that any non-participation would prove a disruption to everyday life (133). Woolf imagines members of the Society of Outsiders becoming forces for change who have the courage to “reveal any instances of tyranny or abuse in their professions” (133). Woolf also hints at the power of collaborative work and suggests that if women can “bind themselves to obtain full knowledge of their professional practices,” then they can reshape those practices in their

own image (133). Yet, Woolf concludes that the truest show of professional authority would be to “cease all competition and to practice their professions experimentally, in the interests of research and for the love of the work itself” (133). Woolf thus reveals herself to be a champion not of the expert but of the amateur—a figure who in the French is defined as “one who loves or is fond of; one who has a taste for anything.”¹

Woolf’s comments in *Three Guineas* participate in a larger discourse on amateurism and expertise that was a central preoccupation of writers and critics in the twentieth century.² Woolf also hints in this essay at her own critical values. Woolf explains the Society of Outsiders must strive to regulate their professions and call out instances of “tyranny or abuse” (133). Woolf felt a similar sense of responsibility when producing her own criticism. While drafting *The Common Reader* (1925), Woolf admitted to her diary that she would require “courage & decision” and the nerve to “speak out, without mincing” to make a success of the critical project (*D2*, 259). In *Three Guineas*, and in other nonfiction projects, Woolf sketches out different versions of amateur readers and writers. Woolf argues, for example, in *The Common Reader: Second Series* (1932) that readers must alight on a “kind of criticism” grounded in “the opinion of people reading for the love of reading, slowly and unprofessionally” (270). This sort of criticism, Woolf concludes, “would be an end worth reaching” (270).

¹ “Amateur, n.1.” *OED Online*, Oxford UP: www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/6041.

² The poet and academic R. K. Blackmur, for example, famously declared that criticism had become the “formal discourse of the amateur.” Yet, Blackmur articulates the critic’s “job” as a series of professional “technique[s]” in a 1935 essay called “A Critic’s Job of Work.” Blackmur describes “technique on the plane of intellectual and emotional patterns...and technique, too, in that there is a technique of securing and arranging and representing a fundamental view of life.” Blackmur may have been friendly to the amateur critic, but this essay indicates he was not entirely free of professionalizing language. See: “A Critic’s Job of Work,” in *Language as Gesture* (Harcourt Brace, 1952).

What if the critical reading practices Woolf outlines in her *Common Readers* constitute not an end but a beginning? The present study is organized around a key conceptual question: What would it mean to understand the notion of the common reader not as a figure of the reader *per se*, but as the name for a critical method, or an array of methods? Using Woolf's figure of the common reader as a point of reference, I examine additional critical essay collections written by Rebecca West and Elizabeth Bowen to demonstrate an emerging critical counter-tradition championed by modernist women writers. In this "Society of Outsiders," to borrow Woolf's phrasing, we find criticism produced by a network of writers who were anxious to develop new critical means of challenging an intellectual and social hierarchy that privileged the work of the professional, and usually male, critic while treating the work of the female essayist as background noise (133).

This dissertation argues that the common reader constitutes the very body of the critical text. It would be more useful to consider a "reader" not merely as one who reads books, but as a compendium of material as well. Understood in this way, the common reader becomes a framing device that represents shared formal characteristics such as strategic self-effacement, anti-intellectualism, and an impressionistic writing style. Melanie Micir and Aarthi Vadde have argued that modernist criticism written by so-called "amateur" writers should be examined as "an evolving ethos and style of criticism" that is not only cognizant of "structural inequality" but also "responsive to the distinct conditions under which inequality endures and must be fought" (519). Laura Heffernan similarly argues in her study of the English poet and critic T. E. Hulme that writers who lacked institutional affiliation could "see the world more critically precisely because they

were not attempting to turn their knowledge into a formalized object of study” (885). Woolf, West, and Bowen were all amateur critics insofar as they lacked university degrees or, what Woolf calls in the opening lines of *Three Guineas*, “paid-for education” (6). These writers were treated by their contemporaries—and continue to be treated in current scholarship—as novelists who dabbled in criticism.³ However, strategically adopting the role of the amateur critic and eliding themselves with more democratic forms of mass readership allowed these writers to direct their work to a rapidly expanding reading community of non-credentialed but self-assured readers while reorienting the nucleus of critical power toward their own literary essays and reviews. Such writings tended, accordingly, to be composed in styles typically seen at the time as ephemeral and unserious, such as the personal, the feminine, and the confessional.

A significant aim of this project has also been to recover a neglected chapter of twentieth-century literary history through these critical archives. Woolf, West, and Bowen each arranged and edited two books of critical essays during their lifetimes. Woolf’s *Common Readers* were published, as I mentioned above, in 1925 and 1932 respectively. West published *The Strange Necessity* in 1928 and *Ending in Earnest: A Literary Log* in 1931. Bowen’s essay collections appeared some time later: *Collected Impressions* was published in 1950 and *Afterthought: Pieces About Writing* followed in

³ In a recent *Norton Reader*, eds. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar offer an account of “the historical evolution of feminist writing about literature in English from the Middle Ages to the twenty-first century.” Virginia Woolf is described as a writer who “triumphantly produced numerous literary essays and six major novels.” Gilbert and Gubar reprint “*Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*”: essays published in 1916 and 1925 respectively. The editors do not explain that Woolf herself first paired these essays in *The Common Reader*. Rebecca West is accounted for in the collection as a novelist and critic. However, her two essay collections are both mistitled: “Strange Necessity” and “Ending in Earnest.” See: *Feminist Literary Theory and Criticism: A Norton Reader* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), pp. 123-24, 137.

1962. Collectively, these critical works contain over one hundred and eighty distinct pieces of literary criticism. Notwithstanding Woolf's essay on "Modern Fiction," or West's comments on James Joyce in "The Strange Necessity," these individual essays have received scant scholarly attention.⁴ My project examines in equal measure the critical essays written by Woolf, West, and Bowen, and the publication histories of their respective texts. Nicola Wilson has argued that "the way an archive is organized and structured lends itself to certain formulations and conclusions" (78). This fact has certainly been true of the present study. The archival materials quoted herein exist in libraries and archives scattered across several states and countries. Because these critical works were generally understood as the minor works of popular novelists, the drafts, letters, and other documents from which they were comprised have not always been carefully preserved. As Melanie Micir aptly notes, there is often a sense of "unfinishedness" when piecing together the histories of these texts (14). I adopt a literary-critical and historical approach to shed new light on the critical significance of these works and to give clearer shape to the extensive work that went into their respective publications.

Much of the literary criticism examined in this dissertation was conceived of as a response to academic professionalization in the twentieth century. By the mid-1920s, the institutionalization of English literary studies had begun to set generalist readers at odds

⁴ *The Common Reader* and *The Common Reader: Second Series* have benefitted from a continued public and scholarly interest in Virginia Woolf and have been reprinted several times. The other four collections have been out of print for several decades. *The Strange Necessity* was last reprinted by Virago Press in 1987. *Ending in Earnest: A Literary Log* was reprinted once in 1967 by Books for Libraries Press. Neither *Collected Impressions* nor *Afterthought: Pieces About Writing* have been reprinted since their initial publications.

with trained specialists.⁵ It is easy to imagine the significance of the common reader model to writers like Woolf, West, and Bowen if we read their critical works as a response to forms of professional identity and acclaim that were articulated by literary specialists and authorities. Throughout this study, I use the term “professional,” as Lise Jaillant does, to denote paid and or credentialed readers and writers: academics, journalists, critics, and even book reviewers.⁶ The fluidity of the term “professional” makes it difficult to pinpoint the figures against whom these writers positioned themselves. Popular scholarly narratives would offer up a figure like T. S. Eliot as the sort of critic to whom these writers wished to respond. West once claimed that her “personal, almost fictional” critical method had been “killed stone dead” by Eliot and his calls for impersonality (*L*, 327). Woolf maintained a friendship with Eliot, but she was always suspicious of the “sinister & pedagogic Tom” (*D2*, 302). Bowen was more willing to accept Eliot’s commanding literary presence, and the two collaborated on at least one nonfiction project.⁷

Eliot was a convenient figurehead for academic or professional criticism because, as Louis Menand has argued, he was a writer who “produced a criticism whose vocabulary and criteria for judgment were scientific-sounding” (115). Eliot’s account of

⁵ Gerald Graff describes the end of the nineteenth century as the period in which “scholar and critic emerge as antithetical terms, and the gulf further widens between fact and value, investigation and appreciation, scientific specialization and general culture.” See: *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (U of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 122. Michael Levenson similarly argues that the rise of modern professionalism was a reaction to a “late nineteenth-century intellectual shallowness” that had produced a body of criticism that was “impressionistic, far-reaching but ungrounded, too abstract to even refute.” See: *The Humanities and Everyday Life: The Literary Agenda* (Oxford UP, 2017), p. 51.

⁶ *Modernism, Middlebrow and the Literary Canon: The Modern Library Series: 1917-1955* (Pickering & Chatto, 2015), p. 83.

⁷ Eliot asked Bowen to write the critical introduction to *The Faber Book of Modern Stories* (1937). I discuss this collaboration in greater detail in Chapter Four.

poetic impersonality in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” eventually became a central tenet of New Criticism and was championed by academics like I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis.⁸ Gail McDonald argues that New Criticism sought to “transcend curricular confusion” in English departments by producing terminology to narrow the gap between theory and praxis (193).⁹ If literature could be studied as a complex system of parts, then it could be taught to students. Richards, for example, believed that one could produce an empirical study of a literary text, and his *Practical Criticism* (1929) is thus modeled on a scientific report. Richards admits in his preface that his critical method requires a “certain unavoidable monotony” that “may prove a stumbling-block” to “impatient” readers (vii). McDonald alights on two important points of connection between Eliot and New Criticism: New Critical approaches derived from modernists’ insistence that the study of poetry is “a substantive and serious business” and their enduring belief that poetry “not only matters, but it matters on its own terms” (192). In service of these shared beliefs, New Critics began to articulate a system of values for the study of literature using Eliot’s language and critical judgment. McDonald rightly concludes that New Criticism thus “made classroom practice out of literary modernism’s efforts to save literature from amateurism” (192). Eliot’s institutional affiliations are more complex than the narrative history of New Criticism might suggest. Eliot had little patience for literary-critical

⁸ McDonald incisive account of Eliot and Pound’s relationship to American university systems also describes their relationship to New Criticism. McDonald argues that this movement, “as it became part of the educational institution, became one-dimensional, its larger culture concerns sacrificed to its formalist methodology. Pound and Eliot in the academy have been similarly flattened as they have been made usable.” See: *Learning to be Modern* (Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 208.

⁹ Douglas Mao similarly argues that New Critical reading practices were a “pedagogical method” designed to train university students. See: “The New Critics and the Text Object,” in *ELH* 63.1 (1996), p 227.

impressionism. Yet, he remained wary of the shaping power of the American university system, of which he was a product. Eliot's complicated relationship with the academy, and with New Criticism, does not change the material fact that he was a well-known figurehead of the movement and thus an apt figure for so-called amateur writers and critics to position themselves against.

The tenets of New Criticism might appear friendly to a common reader or to a student of literature. A practical, scientific analysis should result in some reproducible process of study to be used in future literary pursuits. However, Woolf makes clear in the Preface to *The Common Reader* that she has no interest in practical accounts of literature, and that there exists between the scholar and the common reader an unnavigable divide.

Woolf describes the common reader as a figure who:

[...] reads for his own pleasure rather than to impart knowledge or correct the opinions of others. Above all, he is guided by an instinct to create for himself, out of whatever odds and ends he can come by, some kind of whole--a portrait of a man, a sketch of an age, a theory of the art of writing. Hasty, inaccurate, and superficial, snatching now this poem, now that scrap of old furniture, without caring where he finds it or of what nature it may be so long as it serves his purpose and rounds his structure, his deficiencies as a critic are too obvious to be pointed out. (11)

Since Samuel Johnson first "rejoice[d] to concur with the common reader" in 1779, the common reader has existed in the literary imagination as a mythical figure in whom writers could invest qualities of intellectual curiosity, instinctual taste, and independent judgment. Yet, the perceived democratic reading community engendered by Woolf's evocation of Johnson is decidedly vague. Woolf's language tells us very little about the figure of the reader, but does indicate the qualities Woolf sought to articulate through her

own critical process. Woolf comments in *Three Guineas* that members of the Society of Outsiders should practice their professions “experimentally, in the interests of research and for love of the work itself,” just as she first explains in *The Common Reader* that one should be guided by “pleasure” and “an instinct to create” (133, 11). Woolf did not wish to cultivate a critical process designed to mold the common reader into a specialist or expert reader. Rather, Woolf emphasizes in her published criticism that “deficiencies as a critic” are to be celebrated (11).

Alternatively, the English scholar and literary critic Q. D. Leavis claims in *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1939) that “Dr. Johnson rejoicing to concur with the common reader” is a position that “for the modern critic of equivalent standing would be ridiculous” (35). Leavis, who studied for a PhD at Cambridge with I. A. Richards, was one of Woolf’s greatest detractors. Leavis’s book, a product of her dissertation research, adopts a sociological approach to examine what Leavis believed was a decline in present-day literary standards. The book and its method would have been of little interest to Woolf who believed that “men of taste and learning and ability [were] at work on a large-scale desiccation of the living tissues of literature into a network of little bones” (*CRI*, 234). One year earlier, Leavis claimed in a review of *Three Guineas* that Woolf’s nonfiction offered readers little more than the “deliberate avoidance of any argument” and was a result of Woolf’s “self-indulgence” (204). Woolf’s articulation of the common reader certainly leaves much to debate. Yet, the method Leavis reads as “ridiculous” and self-indulgent is quite a bit more strategic than it first appears.

Woolf, West, and Bowen each write with a rhetorical modesty that offers the appearance of democratic inclusivity, of whimsy, and perhaps even of self-indulgence.

West alludes to this potential reproof in the foreword to *Ending in Earnest* when she explains that the “personal manner” of the individual essays “must not be taken as a sign of undue egotism,” and should be understood as a “result of the agreement between myself and the editor that this was the most useful form they could take at the time” (viii). Bowen, too, appears to make allowances for her amateur method, writing in her Foreword to *Collected Impressions* that her “criticism is impressionistic,” and is thus not to be held to the same standards as that of the “anonymous critic,” who must be “impersonal and formal, because inevitably his voice carries greater weight” (vi). Even the titles of these books of criticism engender a similar sense of modesty. Woolf emphasizes commonality and community—or perhaps commonness, lack of refinement. West grounds her criticism in its strangeness, though she is bolder in her claim that what is strange can be necessary too. West’s second collection alights on a similarly modest appeal to earnestness. *Collected Impressions* was published nearly two decades after *The Common Reader* but only two years before F. R. Leavis shuttered his “critically intelligent literary organ,” *Scrutiny: A Quarterly Review* due to a lack of contributors and financial support (25). Though Bowen came of age as a writer amid the heyday of New Criticism, she aligns her criticism with the same brand of literary impressionism found in *The Common Reader* and offers to her own readers impressions and afterthoughts along with a critical process that requires introspection and self-adjustment.

This dissertation demonstrates how the criticism of Woolf, West, and Bowen catalyzed a dynamic set of exchanges concerning the relationship between the individual and the institution; the amateur and the expert; and the reader and the critic. Each of these writers found herself at odds with the literary establishment. Woolf lamented the critical

reception of *The Common Reader* and wrote angrily in her diary about a reviewer who sneered at the book's childlike cover art (*D3*, 16). West took up a more antagonistic approach to the literary market and often found herself engaged in public spats with established writers like Arnold Bennett and her erstwhile lover H. G. Wells. Bowen, too, subtly relished the role of the outsider. Allan Hepburn has argued that Bowen "positioned herself as an outsider" to both English and Irish culture so that she could "swoop down" and comment on the English or Irish depending on the occasion (10). Hepburn concludes that Bowen saw herself as the "lone survivor of the Ascendency class from which she sprang" (9). Bowen was one of the lone survivors of high modernism, too, as she began writing fiction in the early 1920s and continued up until her death in 1973. Bowen was interested in exploring the psychology of the outsider in her fiction and nonfiction alike. Her novels are populated with orphaned children, widows, and outsiders. Bowen hints that the outsider has a unique perspective and gleans power from existing outside and looking in. She asks in an essay on Trollope: "Is it the wistful outsider who gives that mirage-illusion to the ordinary scene?" (*CI*, 245). Bowen appears to suggest that an outsider's perspective offers great clarity and brings an illusory magic to everyday life.

To some degree, Woolf, West, and Bowen cultivated a rhetoric of modesty to embolden their critical experiments in the absence of credentialed authority. Setting themselves in conversation with—or writing against—a figure like Eliot was a necessary aspect of their anti-hierarchical plotting. It is likelier, though, that writers like Woolf, West, and Bowen felt pressure from and were ultimately responding to broad shifts in the literary market that coincided with the academic professionalization of literary study. Universities began to clarify the institutional role of literature, and the literary market

began to churn out a great number of book reviewers and literary journalists to occupy the professional strata below academics. Most book reviewers lacked academic credentials, though some had Oxbridge degrees. Still, this professional class managed to become a self-regulating profession with an articulated standard of measure that was supported by newspapers, journals, and publishers. In 1927, Knopf printed a how-to manual for aspirant book reviewers. Reviewers were instructed to “describe and classify” without resorting to an “interminable summary” (33). The author also described the value of reviewers to common or “ordinary” readers: “Today the production of books has reached a magnitude without precedent [...]. Obviously the ordinary reader cannot take time to search among all the books offered by competing publishers and to select those that likely would interest him. For this sorting and selection he must depend on the book reviewer” (“Foreword”). Claire Battershill explains that book reviewers in the 1920s were hired to influence taste more than to influence purchases, and these reviews predominantly appeared in women’s magazines.¹⁰ This confluence of book reviewing and women’s reading practices further clarifies the role of the book reviewer in the literary market. Book reviewers were not critics offering lofty literary judgment or instruction. Rather, book reviewers “wrote in styles and with voices to establish trust and familiarity” to more efficiently herd middle-class, female readers toward particular books and subjects (18).

Book reviewing practices in the 1920s certainly hint at the vexed relationship between the amateur and the expert and the individual and the institution. If we were to

¹⁰ Claire Battershill: “‘Tricks of Aspect and the Varied Gifts of Daylight’: Representations of Books and Reading in Interwar Women’s Periodicals” in *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1918-1939: The Interwar Period* (Edinburgh UP, 2018), pp. 15-20.

plot out various professional roles—book reviewer, journalist, professor, novelist—where would literary critics like Woolf, West, and Bowen end up? These writers lacked university degrees and, as I describe in subsequent chapters, tended to reject any proffered institutional affiliation. These writers did receive more attention and financial compensation than many anonymous book reviewers due to their acclaim as novelists. Yet, their critical authority was often relegated to a feminine realm: Rebecca West was introduced on the BBC in the mid-1920s as “the most brilliant literary critic of her sex,” and Hugh Walpole offered to West and Woolf in 1927 a shared “feminine crown” of literary criticism¹¹. Patrick Collier has argued that Woolf sought to empower amateur readers, and that her “figurative relocation of criticism from the lecture hall, and the weekly review to a non-authoritative domestic sphere” constitutes not only a gendered critique of professionalism, but an incisive turn away from “professors who issue declamatory criticism or from modernists who construct authority in a language that casts out women” (94). Woolf alights on the private, the confessional, and the feminine to build a world friendlier to the amateur reader. Woolf claims in *The Common Reader: Second Series* that the reader’s greatest “desire” should be “to draw the blinds and shut the door, to muffle the noises of the street and shade the glare and flicker of its lights” (40). Despite efforts by Woolf, West, and Bowen to empower amateur readers and thus eschew literary professionals, it is important to emphasize that these writers were aware of and greatly influenced by the larger systems of power that sought to classify and govern the terms of their critical work. The critical forms examined in this project were

¹¹ See: Hugh Walpole, review of "The Strange Necessity" by Rebecca West, *New York Herald Tribune Books*, 2 September 1928.

shaped by—and emerged from—the gendered, hierarchical systems of power that controlled the literary market.

Woolf warns women against professional allegiances in *Three Guineas*. She claims that to succeed in your profession is to accept that the words “‘For God and Empire’ will very likely be written, like the address on a dog-collar, round your neck” (85). Woolf’s sentiment recalls her assertion in a 1916 essay that “to become a specialist or an authority, is very apt to kill what suits us to consider the more humane passion for pure and disinterested reading” (*E2*, 55). Woolf appears to conflate professionalization with a loss of identity and with supporting values—“For God and Empire”—to which women have little claim (*TG*, 85). It is true that Woolf’s comments describe the vexed relationship between gender and authority. Yet, Woolf’s comments in *Three Guineas* offer an idealized narrative in which the women in her Society of Outsiders confidently cast off professional constraints and disappear behind closed doors to engage in “pure and disinterested” pursuits (*E2*, 55). West more realistically—albeit with a hint of sarcasm—concludes in *The Strange Necessity* that it would be worth producing a “study of the extreme discomforts and humiliations inflicted on women in any society where they are treated as the protected sex” (297). West’s comments hint at the material cost of navigating a literary hierarchy that was predisposed to privilege professional work.

The literary-professional hierarchy that Woolf, West, and Bowen attempted to navigate was more complex than a mere accumulation of binaries represented by one hierarchical system. Hierarchies are generally read as an organizational tool. Caroline Levine has argued that within the humanities, we accept that hierarchies “arrange bodies, things, and ideas according to levels of power or importance” (82). Yet, we tend to

overlook endemic inequality: “the most consistent and painful affordance of hierarchical structures” (82). Woolf, West, and Bowen produced criticism that responded to tension between the feminine and the masculine; the amateur and the expert; and the individual and the institution. It would be more useful, though, to imagine the literary market as an intricate and convoluted series of hierarchies. Broad categories such as gender, class, race, and education each splinter into smaller categories that seek to impose order and structure inequality, therein emphasizing discord among those ensnared in the various power constructions. Levine concludes that “a firm insistence on one hierarchy typically ends up reversing or subverting the logic of another, generating a political landscape of radical instability and unpredictability” (85). If, as Levine argues, an insistence on the power and validity of one hierarchy thus reverses or subverts the logic of another, it is reasonable to argue that a system that supported the work of the professional male critic necessarily devalued the work of female writers like Woolf, West, and Bowen. Reading these critical works in conversation reveals the imbalances of power endemic to this literary market and professional hierarchy. As I describe in the following chapters, these writers were often immobilized by self-doubt, and it is impossible to read their literary criticism without also understanding its conception in what Levine would term the “deeply unjust arrangement” of the literary market (82).

Woolf’s suspicion of literary professionals is at the very center of her *Common Readers*. In Chapter Two, “Virginia Woolf’s Common Readers,” I introduce Woolf’s literary criticism as a conscious turn away from critical theorizing about literature. I argue that Woolf renders not a theory, but an ongoing, frequently adjusted set of critical reading practices. Woolf believed she could empower the figure of the amateur by setting so-

called common readers at odds with trained specialists and academic professionals. Woolf wished to challenge the belief that there were constraints on amateur knowledge, and so she developed a critical style that relied on the development of personal impressions and the rejection of literary authorities. Privately, Woolf was ambivalent about her nonfiction and was often distracted by attempts to reach a new critical method: “some simpler, subtler, closer means of writing about books, as about people” (*D4*, 54). A careful examination of the extant drafts of *The Common Reader* and *The Common Reader: Second Series* reveals the degree to which Woolf was hampered by her lingering self-doubt and introspective reading practices. Woolf appears to offer in her critical texts a method of reading suitable for the ever-elusive common reader. Yet, Woolf was always more attuned to her own reading practices and sought to articulate a critical style that would authorize not masses of common readers, but Woolf herself.

In Chapter Three, “Rebecca West’s Critical Antagonism,” I trace the development of West’s critical persona, and I argue that West modeled critical authority through aggression and public spectacle. Woolf, too, made satirical targets of famous literary and historical figures in her published criticism and private writings. However, West engaged many of the same figures in public literary spats. After the publication of *The Strange Necessity*, West was ensnared in a legal battle with *The Evening Standard* newspaper fighting charges that she had referred to Arnold Bennett in an interview as a “poor old chap” (Beinecke, GEN 105, Box 39.1425). West may have gleaned some power from capturing the public’s attention. Yet, these stunts often devolved into chaos and earned her suspicion from established writers and professionals. West lacked the security and support of a literary set like the Bloomsbury Group. West did not come from any family

money, and she worked to support herself and her child by H. G. Wells. Partly out of necessity, West attempted to generate a literary reputation, and an income, by challenging the established system of literary power and its most famous representative figures. West appears to write criticism without articulating a defined process. Yet, West incisively comments on the state of modern English criticism throughout both texts and reimagines the role of the modern critic as a force for change. West argues for a “new and abusive school of criticism” that champions impressionistic criticism developed from nineteenth-century aesthetic models.¹² West wished to develop a “personal, almost fictional” critical framework that could bring together personal experience and impressions with literary judgment. West argues in *The Strange Necessity* and *Ending in Earnest: A Literary Log* that the rise of an Eliotic notion of impersonality will bring about the death of modern criticism. West argues instead for a critical sensibility that is generous to experimentation and accounts for personal impressions of literature.

Elizabeth Bowen similarly valued the articulation of literary judgment through personal experience. In Chapter Four, “Elizabeth Bowen’s Critical ‘Scrap Screen,’” I argue that Bowen sought to develop a process of critical arrangement and self-adjustment. I trace through Bowen’s criticism a self-conscious response to the legacy of high modernism and show how Bowen, as a critical descendent of writers like Woolf and West, wished to ensure the survival of her literary legacy by producing a retrospective of her own nonfiction work. Bowen’s criticism represents a strategic revisiting of past works: her own works and the works that inspired her. Many of the essays in *Collected Impressions* and *Afterthought: Pieces About Writing* were first produced in haste to turn a

¹² Rebecca West, “It is Our Duty to Practice Harsh Criticism,” *The New Republic*, 7 November 1914.

quick profit—particularly during the Second World War when paper restrictions limited the income previously generated by the sale of Bowen’s fiction. Revisiting occasional essays and rearranging them for publication in her critical essay collections allowed Bowen to reconsider their significance and develop a process of critical arrangement and revision through which she could also make sense of herself and her body of work. Yet Bowen, like Woolf and West, remained uncertain of her own critical authority. What begins in *Collected Impressions* as a critical process of self-adjustment becomes in *Afterthought: Pieces About Writing* an ongoing cycle of revision and self-doubt.

I demonstrate through their critical works how these writers catalyzed a dynamic set of exchanges concerning the relationship between the institution and the individual, while also providing case studies in the promotion of critical reading powered by the personal register. Important to this project is also an evaluation of the self-imposed limits of these critical experiments. Woolf, West, and Bowen developed and championed a rhetorical modesty and style of critical reading and writing that challenged the rise of a professional academic mode of criticism in the early-to-mid twentieth century. To some degree, these writers also internalized that rhetoric and found themselves frustrated and immobilized by their perceived marginalization.

Despite a shared belief that their criticism made little impact on the literary market, there is certainly reason to believe that these texts constitute not an end but a beginning. In the Chapter Five, “Coda: Two Directions for the Critic?,” I extend this narrative to the present day to argue that the critical values and methods first outlined by Virginia Woolf, Rebecca West, and Elizabeth Bowen exist in contemporary works like Zadie Smith’s essay collection *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (2009). Smith

offers her readers literary criticism that is “entirely personal,” and she frames her critical process as powerful and intentional (12). The shaping power of critics like Woolf, West, and Bowen is most evident in a book like Smith’s that promises her impressions and ideological inconsistencies are not failings: they are “article[s] of faith,” and constitute the very body of her critical text (“Foreword”).

CHAPTER TWO

VIRGINIA WOOLF AND THE COMMON READER

Eleven days after the Hogarth Press published *The Common Reader*, Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary of one “sneering” review printed in *Country Life* (D3, 16). *The Common Reader* had been released with minor fanfare at the end of April 1925, only weeks in advance of the publication of *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). After four years of strenuous work on the collection, Woolf accepted with somewhat bemused resignation the fact that the book was perhaps fated to fail, or to be “as if one tossed a stone into a pond, & the waters closed without a ripple” (12). The days immediately following the book’s publication were anxious ones for Woolf. She reported feeling “fidgety” about the lack of public and personal acknowledgment: “no body [sic] has written to me or spoken to me about it or in any way acknowledged the fact of its existence,” she protested on May 1st (15). Writing *The Common Reader* had been an alternately pleasure-filled and painstaking process for Woolf. She often wrote of the satisfaction that her reading had given her. But at other times, Woolf felt the book was “like heaving bricks over a wall,” and her diaries and letters record the several false starts made over the years of drafting (L2, 499). Despite its quiet reception, Woolf considered the venture complete and attempted to re-orient her attention toward future projects. She promised her diary that she would allow her feelings of disappointment to float away and instead be “off on new adventures” (D3, 15-16).

Woolf first began the process of revising and collecting her essays for publication in a spirit of self-reflection. Woolf's eagerness to publicly outline her opinions on the importance of reading—and reading well—had already produced reviews such as “The Wrong Way of Reading” (1920) and “On Re-Reading Novels” (1922). In the latter, Woolf worries that the reader's “dilemma” is that they “have obviously got it into [their] heads that there is a right way to read, and that is to read straight through and grasp the book entire” (*E3*, 336). Woolf eventually develops this concern into an argument in her later criticism and posits that the reader should attempt a “rickety and ramshackle” survey of literature rather than any sort of systematic approach to a text (*CRI*, 1).

This chapter argues that Woolf's essay collections represent a conscious turn away from critical theorizing about literature and instead seek to render not a theory, but an ongoing, frequently adjusted set of reading practices. Woolf positions herself as a sort of counter-force against the professional readers of whom she was highly suspicious.¹³ Woolf sought to produce and promote criticism that could be “open-minded and generous to novelty,” but also “unflinching in its critical standards” (*CRI*, 101-2). I am interested in Woolf's attempts to use her literary criticism to challenge the prevailing belief that there are constraints on amateur knowledge. Woolf hoped that championing this style of criticism might eventually render professional critics and reviewers wholly unnecessary.

Another aim of this chapter is to examine Woolf's compositional practices on *The Common Reader*, *The Common Reader: Second Series*, and on her final critical project,

¹³ Evelyn Chan argues that Woolf was suspicious of professionalism because a profession is generally a “closed organization, limiting the free availability of both service and training.” Chan characterizes these credentialed readers as professionals who were reading for monetary reward and for the opportunity to join closed communities. See *Virginia Woolf and the Professions* (Cambridge UP, 2014), pp. 12-13.

which was tentatively titled “Reading at Random.” Doing so emphasizes Woolf’s many attempts to challenge the notion of expertise and interrogate the relationship between the amateur and the professional. In her study *The Work of Revision* (2013), Hanna Sullivan asks an important question: “how are a text’s thematic or formal concerns linked to its genesis?” (5). Collectively, *The Common Reader* and *The Common Reader: Second Series* represent over a decade of sustained critical work. Although there were certainly ebbs and flows in Woolf’s productivity, to examine her many false starts and continued revision of both collections is to address questions of form, audience, and critical legacy that Woolf herself grappled with throughout her years of work on the projects.

At its best, Woolf’s literary criticism supports a heuristic model in which the boundaries between reader, writer, and critic are reciprocal. Melba Cuddy-Keane has argued that Woolf is still seen as “an advocate for both democratic inclusiveness and intellectual education,” especially concerning women readers and writers (1). Although Woolf’s *Common Readers* do not broach the same feminist dialogue as *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) or *Three Guineas*, Woolf does make a clear effort to emphasize the lives of women and their important role in literary history in both of her essay collections. Her authorial voice may be “ungendered but curious,” as Anne Fernald describes it, but Woolf devotes herself to producing a rough chronology of English literary history that presents male and female subjects on equal terms (“Writing for everybody”). At least ten of the twenty-one essays in *The Common Reader* examine women writers and figures. *The Common Reader: Second Series* similarly contains at least ten essays that wholly or partially describe women. Woolf’s critical texts are idealistic enough to be positioned as

an alternative to mere book reviewing or a masculinist review of literary history, but also realistic enough to express their formal limitations.

In Woolf's estimation, the common reader is a figure "guided by an instinct to create for himself," so it is unsurprising that she values a critical model that "starts the reader and writer off on a journey and fires him with a phrase to shoot off on adventures of his own" (*CR1*, 182-83). In the Preface to *The Common Reader*, Woolf adopts a Johnsonian stance in which she advocates for a self-reliant literary sensibility. Woolf places great emphasis on an approach in which the critic refines a reader's sensibilities by modeling their own reading practices, but the reader is granted their own critical power. As Woolf instructs in the final essay of *The Common Reader*: "The only advice one can offer is to respect one's own instincts, to follow them fearlessly and, rather than submit them to the control of any critic or reviewer alive, to check them by reading and reading again the masterpieces of the past" (232). Woolf reasons that readers must understand their subject: "we must know what we mean when we say that they can write and give us pleasure"; readers should not simply laud the dead, "because we shall never meet them"; readers must be self-determining enough to be able to "point to this and say it is good because it is exact, truthful, and imaginative" (221). If readers can do all this then they can "become part of the atmosphere which writers breathe as they work" (*CR2*, 269). Woolf does not further enumerate specific guidelines for readers, reviewers, and critics. However, Woolf promises readers that they are simultaneously invested in the process of discovery, judgment, and influence.

Woolf happily advocates for the role of the amateur reader and critic in her *Common Readers* despite her private fears that her own lack of formal education tended

to slow her work and had left her with gaps in her knowledge-base. John Whittier-Ferguson has argued that the “unqualified celebration” of a lack of authority in the *Common Readers* is not a submissive move (79). After all, Woolf “reinforce[s] her arguments concerning women’s exclusion from a wide range of conversations about past and present, all the while proving in her notes that she is quite capable of combing through sources, of reading histories, of making political assessments,” and even writing criticism (79). Woolf acts as a staunch advocate of critics who require no professional certification—namely, common readers—and therein gleans authority by setting herself in opposition to systems of hierarchical power she knew intimately.

Woolf’s relationship to her title, and her understanding of the common reader, articulates something more about the author herself than her intended readership. Woolf was unable to reach the “new critical method” she explicitly strives for in her *Common Readers* and *Reading at Random* because her critical gaze was most often reflective, turned inward to such a degree that she was unable to answer questions about her own reading and writing practices, let alone the reading practices of others (*D4*, 54). The perceived democratic reading community that Woolf engenders with her title and her adoption of Samuel Johnson’s praise for the common reader is tenuous at best. Woolf does, to some degree, use her critical essay collections as a space for discourse on readers and reading practices. However, Woolf seems to write to a very particular sort of middle-class, reasonably educated, and economically-independent reader—a reader like herself. I agree with Hermione Lee, who claims that when Woolf alludes to the common reader, her goal is to “make clear, not so much whom she thought her book of essays was for, but how she thought of herself as a reader: non-specialist, adventurous, and open” (408).

Anna Snaith similarly reasons that the book's title represents the ease with which Woolf moved between the positions of writer and reader, "obviously because she was both, but also because of how she conceived of the space between a writer and his/her reading public: the writer is always a reader and vice-versa" (120). Lee is certainly right to highlight that Woolf was writing not as a specialist but as an adventurer; however, Snaith's explanation of this critical self-fashioning is more useful because it considers the very real possibility that Woolf used her rhetorical status as an amateur critic to move between specialist and non-specialist writing so that she might strengthen her own authority and, as Woolf describes in early writings about the project, enact a "clever little experiment" designed to refine her own reading practices (*D2*, 178) .

Woolf understood that there were aesthetic and ethical concerns to writing literary criticism. Examining her compositional practices tells us much about the balance she tried, and failed, to strike between her own desire to settle upon a new, successful mode of writing literary criticism, and her belief in supporting amateur or common readers in a rapidly changing literary marketplace. Amid work on *The Common Reader*, Woolf believed the book would stand as a "rough, but vigorous statute" testifying to the "great fun & pleasure" that reading had given her (*D2*, 259). Yet, Woolf also believed criticism should "investigate literature with a view to answering certain questions about ourselves" (265). Woolf wished to elevate her critical reputation by developing a critical process that relied on self-aware reading practices to produce a thorough account of literature.

An underlying tension of Woolf's criticism arises from her desire to reach a level of artistic purity in her fiction and her nonfiction. Woolf famously champions an impressionistic approach to literature. However, Woolf makes clear in her *Common*

Readers that she also understands the significance of aesthetic responses to literature. Woolf believed the professional literary market was adulterated by a glut of so-called experts, unduly influenced by the academy, and unable to produce anything without extraneous matter. Alternatively, Woolf admired artists and saw their work as a “pure” craft. Woolf claimed once in her diary that “Art is being rid of all preaching: things in themselves: the sentence in itself is beautiful” (*D4*, 126). In Woolf’s estimation, “pure” criticism could focus exclusively on the work of art or literature at hand and remain free of other professional influences.

Pure criticism, in Woolf’s conception, would be something like what she describes in her chapter “Coleridge as Critic” as: “an atmosphere where the substance of these [human] desires has been shredded by infinite refinements and discriminations of all its grossness” (*E2*, 222). For Coleridge, and those nineteenth-century critics who wrote with the security of a public “which had not only time to sit down to its magazine seriously, but a high, peculiarly Victorian, standard of culture by which to judge it,” criticism could perhaps reach the height of artistic expression in which the written word “is concentrated and confined in one ray—in the art itself” (215, 223). Art subsumes artist and the critic exists on a plane beyond that of common desire and prejudice that might otherwise adulterate the critical product. One use of “pure” in the *OED* connects form and content: “Of a subject of study or practice: restricted to the essential matter; not concerned with related subjects or topics; *spec.* dealing with the theory or abstract understanding of a subject as distinct from its practical application.”¹⁴ One of the

¹⁴ “Pure, e.”: *OED Online*, Oxford UP: www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/154843.

illustrations provided for this definition is from *Rambler* No. 14 in which Johnson describes “pure science” as having “only to do with ideas.”

Woolf similarly argues in “The Modern Essay” chapter of *The Common Reader* that the essay itself “must be pure—pure like water or pure like wine, but pure from dullness, deadness, and deposits of extraneous matter” (213). This Paterian impulse seems to have resonated with Woolf, who understood the essay in its truest form as a burst of pleasure: a piece of writing that “should lay us under a spell with its first word, and we should only wake, refreshed, with its last” (211). Woolf imagined *The Common Reader* as a book of “pure and simple” criticism (*L3*, 80). Yet, it is difficult to tease out what precisely Woolf means by “pure,” because there is often slippage between her use of the term (*CRI*, 213). Woolf warns in “The Modern Essay” that there is “no room for the impurities of literature in an essay” (213). Woolf then reasons that the reader endows an essay with great value that comes from “his desire to get as much into the book from all possible sources as he can” (213). Woolf discovered the more she strove to develop or reach a “pure” form of criticism, the more elusive that form became to her (213).

The ideas Woolf outlines in her *Common Readers* remain unfinished. In her drafts and published work alike, Woolf attempts to articulate a critical viewpoint that is separate from but still informed by her experience as a reader and writer. Woolf actively sought a critical form that suited these aims, so her essay collections are filled with meditations on the practice of amateur reading and writing. The guidelines and critical parameters Woolf offers are often haphazard, whimsical, and changeable. Yet, Woolf’s attempts to clarify and refine these standards are evident at every stage of her writing process.

Reading and Expertise

Woolf first recorded her work on *The Common Reader* in a 1921 diary entry in which she proclaimed it was “time to read like an expert” (D2, 120). Nearly two years later, Woolf was still “reading with a purpose” for the project (205). Woolf simultaneously worried that she had tasked herself with writing about subjects about which she was “appallingly ignorant,” or that months of reading and writing like an expert had produced “merely a quick sketch [...] supplied by books” (D2, 242, 189). Maria DiBattista has argued that Woolf’s multifarious attitude to critical writing represents “an approach, not a set itinerary” (97). I share her view that what makes Woolf’s criticism distinctive is its spontaneity, the breadth of subject matter, and an impressionistic writing style that encourages readers to make of the scraps what they will. In her criticism and fiction alike, Woolf constantly warns readers that “to read on a system, to become a specialist or an authority, is very apt to kill what it suits us to consider the more humane passion for pure and disinterested reading” (E2, 55). Woolf’s thorny, often paradoxical, assessment of expertise arose from her desire to alight upon some new mode of critical reading while challenging professional readers and their prescriptive criticism.

I conflate the terms “expert” and “professional” here not because they are in fact indistinguishable, but because Woolf tended to use the terms interchangeably. The slippage between this terminology indicates that Woolf saw little difference between the work being done by a variety of professional readers and writers. Woolf declares in *A Room of One’s Own*, for example, that reviewers and professors alike are engaged in “the pastime of measuring,” which has very little to do with any productive study of literature (139). Woolf argues that the work of reviewers and professors similarly engenders a

sense of futility, of mindless busywork. For Woolf, the victims of such futile measuring are the readers ensnared in their expert traps. Alternatively, Woolf advocates for a system of reading and evaluating literature that returns the power of choice and judgment to readers:

So long as you write what you wish to write, that is all that matters; and whether it matters for ages or only for hours, nobody can say. But to sacrifice a hair of the head of your vision, a shade of its colour, in deference to some Headmaster with a silver pot in his hand or to some professor with a measuring-rod up his sleeve, is the most abject treachery [...]. (139)

In Woolf's estimation, literary professionals have left no room for pure and disinterested reading. Although professionalizing literary studies might appear to foreshadow a more democratic system in which anyone can study literature, it in fact confirms a system of power in which those with credentials dictate to those without. The "Gutter and Stamp system" of accepting or rejecting books that Woolf satirizes in *Reviewing* (1939) promotes an image of the reviewer as a mindless, almost mechanical being: reviewers offer their approval or disapproval of various texts handed down to them by those with more prestigious credentials. However, this system does not consider human fallibility. After all, reviewers can never be entirely unbiased. Peter Keating's historical study of the English novel and trade influences suggests, for example, that book reviewers and magazine editors often wielded considerable institutional power to promote the fiction they admired.¹⁵ Woolf was especially wary of literary professionals who masqueraded as tastemakers (*CRI*, 233).

¹⁵ See *The Haunted Study: A Social History of the English Novel, 1875-1914* (Faber and Faber, 2008).

Woolf emphasizes in *Reviewing* the frenetic nature of book reviewing. She warns that book reviewers offer too many opinions and too many options for readers to be able to even select a book to purchase, let alone make an independent judgment of that text. Kate Flint has argued that for Woolf “escapist modes of reading are presented as more attractive than dry scholasticism, for, ideally pursued as a 'passion', reading is stifled by the deliberate pursuit of knowledge” (188). Flint’s comments certainly ring true if we understand the amateur, as Woolf does, as one who loves or is fond of reading. Woolf considered the life of a reviewer a feeble one, and she comments in *Reviewing* on the “irresponsible” nature of their jobs (7). Woolf’s work on her *Common Readers* had often been interrupted by the necessity of paid reviewing work, especially in the first project’s early stages. Woolf lamented in one diary entry, “Alas, for the break in my scheme of work—but we must make money, just when I don’t want to; & so the novels get shelved & Reading, which I had tackled afresh, must be put away, & I must accept Desmond’s reviewing, & Maynard’s too, if offered” (*D2*, 240).¹⁶ Long before she began working on her own essay collections, Woolf recorded numerous quips about the troubled life of a book reviewer. Woolf wrote on one occasion to Lytton Strachey, the eventual dedicatee of *The Common Reader*, about Desmond MacCarthy, who had recently taken up more reviewing work than he could manage:

It’s such a joke now, writing reviews, and I once took it seriously. Poor old Desmond was here again yesterday, with his despatch box in which was a half written review of George Trevelyan’s edition of Meredith’s poetry—Out it came and we went through it with a pencil [...]. On we went, defining youth, poetry and

¹⁶ Desmond MacCarthy (1877-1952) was an English literary and dramatic critic who was also a member of the Bloomsbury Group. MacCarthy became friends with Lytton Strachey while they were students at Trinity College, Cambridge.

what precisely is meant by optimism. It was awfully gloomy—this poor man searching about in the roots of things at 2 guineas a column, and sweating and grunting and saying ‘If I had time, of course, I could do something better than this’. (L2, 13)

MacCarthy, in Woolf’s rendering, is paralyzed by economic necessity and searches about for critical insight to exchange for capital. Woolf saw the reviewer’s task as gloomy and haphazard; it consisted of hastily written proclamations designed to fill a page and to meet a deadline. Although Woolf was often compelled to turn to reviewing for income, at times forcing the sacrifice of what she saw as her “better” work, her opinion of reviewers rarely strayed from this bleak portrait—even when she herself was complicit and active in the venture (13).

Woolf likely maintained a negative opinion of professional reviewers because she had already established and worked within her own loose system of ethics as a critic and reviewer. Woolf explains in *The Common Reader* that “we have certain responsibilities as a reviewer which we are not going to evade” (185). Woolf reiterates a similar point, albeit from the perspective of readers, when she comments in the final essay of *The Common Reader: Second Series* that “still we have our responsibilities as readers and even our importance” (269). Woolf was also able to enact a critical distance between herself and other book reviewers because she was not wholly dependent on income from book reviewing to support herself and, as Julia Briggs reasons, Woolf saw the activity as a form of professional development and a productive diversion from her novel writing (“Reading,” 63).

Woolf’s desire to see reviewing and reviewers made obsolete is apparent in her published nonfiction. Woolf queries in *Reviewing*, “Why bother to write reviews or read

them or to quote them if in the end the reader must decide the question for himself?" (12). Leonard Woolf offered an amendment to his wife's comments perhaps in an attempt to temper her forthright assessment:

I can speak with the experience of a journalist who was responsible for years for getting reviews and reviewers on a reputable paper. Reviewing is a highly skilled profession. There are incompetent and dishonest reviewers, just as there are incompetent and dishonest politicians, carpenters, and writers; but the standard of competence and honesty is as high in reviewing as in any other trade or profession of which I have inside knowledge. (30)

Leonard Woolf makes a valid point that the average book reviewer has not set out to do irreparable harm to the reading public. Indeed, most reviewers were merely engaged in honest, skilled labor. Virginia Woolf's point of contention, though, is just that: book reviews had become the product of skilled work done in the service of a profession. By nature, the profession was supported by workers who were "hampered, distracted, and prejudiced" by time constraints and limited educational training and financial resources (19). This sort of frenzied work stood in direct opposition to the pleasure-filled amateur reading Woolf describes in *The Common Reader*. An amateur reader may be "hasty, inaccurate, and superficial," but only if they are reading for pleasure "rather than to impart knowledge or correct the opinions of others" (1).

Woolf's pamphlet did catch the attention of scholars and reviewers alike, as Beth Daugherty's research has shown. W. Denham Sutcliffe, a graduate student from Oxford at work on a dissertation on book reviewing, wrote to Woolf to express a point of contention. Sutcliffe argued in his letter that "that the roots of modern reviewing lay in the early eighteenth-century essayists who had combined criticism with publicity in their attempt to 'guide the public taste'" ("You," 173). Although Sutcliffe's work may have

focused on the didactic history of literary criticism the notion that a reviewer might “guide the public taste” would have been alarming to Woolf, who believed that the great critic, “the Dryden, the Johnson, the Coleridge, the Arnold,” was an extinct being in need of sufficient replacement (*CRI*, 233). Woolf did not wish to replace literary professionals with some version of the great eighteenth-century critic. Woolf explains in the Preface to *The Common Reader* that, in her estimation, the common reader “differs from the critic or the scholar,” and so it seems likely Woolf wished to alight on a new style of critical reading (1).

Woolf treated professional readers as an indistinguishable mass. It is certainly possible that Woolf’s anxiety over broad shifts toward professional literary study brought about this reluctance to recognize their precise roles. However, it is likelier that Woolf grouped these professional figures together to emphasize the difficult task of challenging such an expansive professional hierarchy. Eliding differences between reviewers and academics allowed Woolf to set herself in opposition to a much more powerful antagonist comprised of inauthentic practitioners of literary study. Woolf could argue persuasively enough to abolish the “sweating and grunting” reviewer (*Reviewing*, 13). It would take a great deal more work to effectively set herself in opposition to “some professor with a measuring-rod up his sleeve” (*AROOO*, 139).

Woolf’s wish to be viewed as an amateurish outsider was complicated by her place among the Bloomsbury set and by her own formal education. Scholars have shown that Woolf was not exactly an autodidact, though it is reasonable to say that Woolf felt her real learning occurred beyond the university.¹⁷ The rhetorical modesty Woolf adopts

¹⁷ Research by Christine Kenyon Jones and Anna Snaith has revised the popular notion that Woolf was self-educated. Kenyon Jones and Snaith examine Woolf’s time spent as a student at

in her literary criticism serves as a point of connection between Woolf and her readers. Mirroring her many predictions that the *Common Readers* would fail to leave an impression on the reading public, Woolf reported a similar fear during her research for *The Common Reader* in January 1922: “[Reading Proust] seems to be a tremendous experience, but I’m shivering on the brink, and waiting to be submerged with a horrid sort of notion that I shall go down and down and down and perhaps never come up again” (L2, 499). The published book reveals Woolf transferred that fear of submersion from self to text. Woolf reframes her own fear of inadequacy in *The Common Reader* to suggest that she and her readers are actually engaged in a productive, collective venture:

A rope is flung to us; we catch hold of a soliloquy; holding on by the skin of our teeth, we are rushed through the water; feverishly, wildly, we rush on and on, now submerged, now in a moment of vision understanding more than we have ever understood before, and receiving such revelations as we are wont to get only from the press of life at its fullest. (179)

Instead of submersion leading to an end, Woolf reconstructs the image to something suggestive of rebirth: readers are submerged, but come up for breath with a “moment of vision” that joins them in collective understanding of the text (179). This submersion is revelatory. Woolf’s fear of “never com[ing] up again,” becomes the “press of life at its fullest” (179).

Woolf concluded in the years following the publication of *The Common Reader* that she had been tasked with “casting about all the time for some rope to throw to the reader” (L4, 204). For Woolf, it was essential that the *Common Readers* modeled to readers a critical but unhurried examination of literature. Woolf believed this sort of

King’s College London. See ““Tilting at Universities’: Woolf at King’s College London,” *Woolf Studies Annual*, Vol. 16, 2010.

reading would produce literary judgment that might be of some use to writers.¹⁸ If Woolf indeed believed that the modern novel depended on the development and success of this style of criticism and literary exchange, it is of little surprise that Woolf's mistrust of professional readers, especially those ensconced in universities, intensified during and after her work on her *The Common Reader*. Even in Woolf's fiction academics are subject to unflattering portrayals. Mrs. Ramsay in *To The Lighthouse* (1927) is exasperated by Charles Tansley's "ugly academic jargon" (12). And in *Mrs Dalloway*, Clarissa Dalloway remains intensely suspicious of the "bitter and burning" Doris Kilman who is responsible for her daughter's history lessons (188). Woolf's mistrust of the academy reaches a climax in *Three Guineas* in her conclusion that a Society of Outsiders must be self-sustaining and maintain few ties to the academy and its educated members.

Nearly six months after *The Common Reader* was published, Woolf was solicited by her cousin H.A.L. Fisher to contribute a book on Post-Victorian literature to the Home University Series.¹⁹ The book was to follow the style of *The Common Reader*, which was already enjoying reasonable commercial success in Britain and America. Woolf declined the offer upon realizing she could easily write a similar book and publish it through the Hogarth Press. Woolf wished to retain control of her intellectual property. "To think of being battered down in the hold of those University Dons fairly makes my blood run cold," Woolf mused (*D3*, 43). Fisher was not only Woolf's cousin. He was a

¹⁸ See Randi Saloman: *Virginia Woolf's Essayism* (Edinburgh UP, 2014). Saloman accounts for the important relationship between Woolf's fiction and nonfiction writing.

¹⁹ H. A. L. Fisher (1865-1940) was an English historian who tutored modern history at Oxford. He became the Warden of New College, Oxford in 1926.

representative of the Oxford elite. Fisher and his fellow Oxonians were frequently cited in Woolf's private musings, and she recounted one 1907 visit to Oxford in vivid detail:

The atmosphere of Oxford is quite the chilliest and least human known to me; you see the brains floating like so many sea anemonies, nor have they any shape or colour [...]. Now my brain I will confess...floats in a blue air; where there are circling clouds, soft sunbeams of elastic gold, and fairy gossamers—things that cant be cut—that must be tenderly enclosed, and expressed in a globe of exquisitely coloured worlds. At the mere prick of steel they vanish. (*LI*, 319-20)

Woolf mentions “brains floating” among the Oxford elite; however, sea anemone are brainless organisms, and so there is perhaps a subtle joke to be found in Woolf's description (319). It is curious that Woolf suggests a lack of distinction among Oxonians. They lack “shape or colour,” just as Woolf remarks of her cousin that his work lacks merit because his brain attempts “only solid things—histories, and triumphant little text books” (319). Woolf's own work was conceived of in a decidedly more colorful atmosphere: a world of “soft sunbeams of exquisite gold,” and ideas shooting off in one direction or the other (319).

Despite outward appearances, Woolf was not entirely disconnected from the academy. Alex Zwerdling has argued that Woolf was careful to describe herself as an outsider in general terms because adopting more “hostile language would have meant [...] cutting herself off from a tradition to which, when all is said and done, she had the strongest ties” (36-7). Still, anecdotes from Woolf's personal life reveal her discomfort with academics and also her repeated efforts to trivialize their authority. Isaiah Berlin described meeting Woolf in a letter Elizabeth Bowen. He had been invited by Fisher to a

dinner in Oxford at which Woolf was meant to deliver a talk to eager students.²⁰

Woolf avoided most opportunities to ingratiate herself further into the academic world, and she ridiculed and rejected their attempts to model expertise and professionalism. William Plomer described in another letter to Bowen a weekend spent with Leonard and Virginia at Monk's House.

Plomer recalled Woolf's amusement at the existence of the educationist and her many documents:

Bowen once described Woolf as made up of a "fairy cruelty," and that spirit is evident here (*LCW*, 30). Woolf had little interest in the educationist herself, though she enjoyed spinning a narrative out of her professional paraphernalia. In her nonfiction, Woolf

²⁰ Berlin recounted the same dinner in another letter to Bowen. He reported

similarly draws upon academics and literary professionals to shape her satiric portraits and complicate the notion that professionalism and expertise are to be aspired to.

One example of this practice occurs in Woolf's sketch of the English classicist, and Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, Richard Bentley in *The Common Reader*. Woolf describes Bentley as a furtive academic whose life is "a sealed book to us" (CR1, 190). Woolf's "us" strategically situates herself alongside amateur readers rather than the learned academics. Woolf describes an insurmountable chasm between amateur readers and academics that exists due to academic gate-keeping. Woolf argues that academic authority is conferred by the university's own hierarchical system—a system that is designed to keep amateurs outside:

It is true that the infirmities of our education prevent us from appreciating his emendations as they deserve; his life's work is a sealed book to us; none the less, we treasure up the last flicker of his black gown, and feel as if a bird of Paradise had flashed by us, so bright is his spirit's raiment, and in the murk of a November evening we had been privileged to see it winging its way to roost in fields of amaranth and beds of moly. Of all men, great scholars are the most mysterious, the most august. (190)

Woolf's rendering suggests little regard for Bentley's storied persona. Woolf describes the academic as an elusive, exotic creature whose life will always remain a closed book to common readers.²¹

Woolf makes clear that "great scholars" like Bentley are not necessarily creatures worthy of veneration, nor should their formal education be a mark of genius (190). Rather like Woolf's description of sea anemone, the academic is dressed up as a bird of paradise

²¹ This moment anticipates Woolf's exclamation in *AROOO*: "Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bold that you can set upon the freedom of my mind." Woolf concludes that a "lock on the door means the power to think for oneself" (114, 159).

flying around the university with little regard for outsiders peering over the university walls. Woolf undermines Bentley's credentials from his very first appearance in *The Common Reader*. The Table of Contents reads:

Outlines—

- I. Miss Mitford
- II. Bentley
- III. Lady Dorothy Nevill
- IV. Archbishop Thomson

Woolf removes “Dr.” Bentley's honorific title and reduces his appearance of authority.

Woolf mediates his presence in *The Common Reader* and appears to diminish the degree to which readers of her criticism will appreciate his alleged expertise.

Within the Bentley chapter, Woolf also alludes to Alfred, Lord Tennyson's “The Lotos-Eaters” (1832). Woolf compares academics returning to the university to birds returning to roost in “fields of amaranth and beds of moly” (241). In the twelfth stanza of Tennyson's poem, the mariners appear “propt on beds of amaranth and moly / [...] To watch the long bright river drawing slowly” (134-37). Woolf's comparison is hardly flattering. Tennyson's mariners isolate themselves in favor of their insular “Lotos-land” (154). Although the mariners exist in a sort of community, their camaraderie leads only to stagnation, slumber, and a rejection of the outside world. Bentley similarly exists within the shelter of the university. Save “short excursions to eat and pray,” he spends his life “wholly in the company of the Greeks” (190). Even that existence is futile because, as Woolf has warned in a previous chapter, language translation is not the same as mastery: “translators can but offer us a vague equivalent; their language is necessarily full of

echoes and associations” (55). Bentley’s expertise is thus reduced to “echoes and associations” (55). Bentley is also ill-tempered and “habitually absent from chapel” (191). His isolation is matched only by his failure to uphold proper university policies, which also hints at an air of unprofessionalism that Woolf believes is characteristic of even the modern academy.

Woolf’s allusion to Tennyson indicates that she sees Bentley as inattentive and distracted by his scholarly pursuits. Although Bentley is devoted to his scholarship, Woolf emphasizes the tension between his supposed profession and his lack of professionalism. Woolf reminds readers that for all his academic success, there are failures to record as well. Bentley’s work, which “expanded in the atmosphere of Homer, Horace, and Manilius, and proved in his study the benign nature of those influences which have been wafted down to us through the ages,” requires him to be removed from the minutiae of daily life and absolved of the responsibility of dealing with the “patricians and their windows” (192). Woolf’s description of Bentley recalls a figure like the supercilious Edward Casaubon with his “key to all mythologies” in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871). Bentley’s hermetic existence leaves little room for the common reader to learn from him. Indeed, his scholarship depends upon avoiding the distractions of everyday life. However, this cloistered existence is perhaps the safest all round; if Bentley and those like him remain ensconced in the university, then they have little chance of exerting undue influence over everyone beyond the university gates.

Almost precisely one year after the publication of *The Common Reader*, Woolf published a book review in the Early May 1926 edition of *Vogue*.²² Woolf’s caustic

²² The review’s subject was Walter Raleigh (1861-1922), the English scholar and poet who in 1904 became the first Chair of English Literature at Oxford University.

signed review of *The Letters of Sir Walter Raleigh* (1926) develops several points about literary professionalism first outlined in *The Common Reader*. While at work on the review, Woolf wrote to Vita Sackville-West and asked: “why are all professors of English Literature ashamed of English literature? Walter Raleigh calls Shakespeare ‘Billy Shax’--Blake, ‘Bill’--a good poem ‘a bit of all right’. This shocks me. I’ve been reading his letters” (L3, 242). Woolf concluded in another letter to Clive Bell: “As for Walter Raleigh I find him disgusting” (L3, 252). Unlike Bentley, who spent much of his life pursuing his scholarship in solitude, Raleigh is cast as an entirely more dangerous presence. After all, Raleigh was a celebrated academic who had championed the professionalization of literature at the turn of the twentieth century. Woolf argued in her review that for all his talk about the profession of English literature, it was “difficult to find a single remark of any interest whatsoever about English literature” in his letters (E4, 342). Woolf found Raleigh to be disingenuous and concluded that there was “nothing to suggest that literature was a matter of profound interest to him when he was not lecturing about it” (343).

Bound up in these satirical portraits and ripostes are Woolf’s attempts to answer through her nonfiction certain questions about amateurism, expertise, and the stakes of criticism like the *Common Readers*. “A Professor of Life” hints at Woolf’s concern over the viability of a critical method that relies on self-education and the development of personal impressions into literary judgment. Woolf locates her criticism amid a room “full of books, where the pursuit of reading is carried on by private people” (CRI, 1). Woolf explains in *The Common Reader: Second Series* that to “admit authorities, however heavily furred and gowned, into our libraries and let them tell us how to read,

what to read, what value to place upon what we read, is to destroy the spirit of freedom which is the breath of those sanctuaries” (258). Woolf’s satirical scholarly portraits may seem unnecessarily derisive when examined as discrete units. Yet, when examined alongside Woolf’s other critical work, particularly her *Common Readers*, we can see how Woolf uses these pieces to test out arguments that are later developed in other critical texts. Woolf reasons that there is no use rejecting authorities if the reader is not committed to the serious work of developing a critical judgment, of becoming the sort of reader who “never ceases to create for himself, out of whatever odds and ends he can come by, some kind of a whole” (*CRI*, 1). If there are constraints on amateur knowledge, then they are likely self-imposed.

The Common Reader

Something important to glean from examining Woolf’s years of work on her *Common Readers* is the frequency with which she vacillated between the persona of a modest amateur and an intensely self-conscious writer who feared her work would be judged harshly due to a lack of credentials and marketable critical theory. For all of Woolf’s published assurances that the common reader needs no institutional support, Woolf privately feared that professionals would think her “obscure and odd” (*D3*, 16). Juliet Dusinberre has argued that Woolf’s most enduring struggle “has always lain in the uneasy territory she herself occupied somewhere between amateurism and professionalism” (6).²³ Despite the unease with which Woolf often wrote, reading her

²³ Gillian Beer similarly remarks that Woolf is often distracted by her own inconstancies: “skittish and imperious, conscious of her own strangeness, troubled by her shudder of snobbishness.” Beer agrees that this skittishness is most obvious in Woolf’s diaries and letters, though it is palpable in

critical work through her other professional activity does allow for a more nuanced explanation of how the projects eventually took shape for publication. It also allows us to challenge Woolf's assertion that the common reader is "hasty" and unsystematic (1). Woolf's own writing process was quite the opposite: disciplined, carefully researched, and adeptly plotted out.

It is likely that Woolf enacted a distance between herself and the academy to avoid becoming something akin to what E. M. Forster terms the "pseudo-scholar" in *Aspects of the Novel* (1928). Woolf wished to be classed as an adventurous outsider, not someone who merely reads around books rather than through them:

[The pseudo-scholar] loves mentioning genius, because the sound of the word exempts him from trying to discover its meaning. Literature is written by geniuses. Novelists are geniuses. There we are; now let us classify them. Which he does. Everything he says may be accurate but it is all useless because he is moving round books instead of through them, he either has not read them or cannot read them properly [...]. The reader must sit down alone and struggle with the writer. (13)

The attempt to "classify" literature is futile. Forster and Woolf both champion a style of criticism and reading practices that returns the power of judgment to the reader. When Woolf describes herself in her early stages of writing as "reading with a purpose," it is likely that her purpose was not to classify literature, but to work out how she might avoid becoming something like this caricature Forster eventually creates (*D2*, 205).

Woolf's self-conscious work on *The Common Reader* often hampered her progress. Even when she wrote at great speed (four thousand words in "record time"), she

her fiction and essays as well. See *Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground* (Edinburgh UP, 1996), p. 3.

claimed the work was insignificant: “merely a quick sketch of Pastons, supplied by books” (189). Mary Childers has argued that Woolf’s authorial voice is frequently at odds with itself and that her commentary on social, political, gender issues are often fraught with contradictions that arise from Woolf’s elitism encountering a readership comprised of varying classes. Childers argues that Woolf’s contradictions are most evident when she writes about gender and class. I agree with Childers’s speculation that Woolf’s writing tries to achieve several goals while still adhering to vague aesthetic principles. However, I do not believe that Woolf’s inconsistencies, particularly in her nonfiction, are due to classism. It seems likelier that contradictions or hesitations in Woolf’s critical voice result from her repeated attempts to answer questions about critical theory, about readers and reading practices, and about how her work might break down the boundaries between the amateur and the expert. Anne Fernald similarly argues that “part of [Woolf’s] unforgiving judgments of others emerges also from her effort to distinguish good writing from bad and, more importantly, good from great” (2). Perhaps Woolf’s “unforgiving” judgments represent her own efforts to practice the sort of critical reading she advocates in her *Common Readers* (2).

Woolf was always at work on multiple writing projects. She made progress on her *Common Readers* between her fiction writing, so an unstable authorial voice may be due to the simple fact that she was often working in different genres at the same time. Her projects would often appear on the same pages of her reading notebooks. One reading, labeled “52 Tavistock Square, Nov. 22nd 1924,” enumerates her forthcoming work:

Woolf lists at least three separate projects in three separate genres. Woolf was correcting *Mrs Dalloway* for publication, she was correcting three chapters of *The Common Reader*, and she was also at work on a short story, “The New Dress,” which was published in the May 1927 edition of *New York Magazine, The Forum*.

By July 1923, there is marked shift in how Woolf describes *The Common Reader* and her compositional practices. Woolf was writing *Mrs Dalloway*, and she spent much of the summer drafting the novel. Helen Wussow explains that one can see the “textual layers” of *The Common Reader* in drafts of “The Hours”:

Woolf used the reversed pages of notebook 3 to set out the structure and draw up several of the essays in *The Common Reader* [...]. Side by side, in her mind, in her diary, and in her notebooks, ‘The Hours’ and *The Common Reader* complement and expand one another. Through both books we learn again how to read, how to interpret a multiple, multi-faced text. (xv-xvi)

Woolf worked this way to keep from growing frustrated with one project or the other, and she referred to this process in her diary as her “quick change theory,” and later called it “rotating my crops” (D2, 188-98). At the end of July, Woolf was preparing to return to Rodmell to plot out the next stage of her writing. She recorded finishing a chapter on Chaucer for *The Common Reader*, and she was also steadily at work on “The Hours,” and continued to fill in any spare time with “serious” reading: that is, what Woolf described as “reading with pen & notebook” (259).

Woolf's renewed interest in the project came just six days after she recorded in her diary a conversation between herself, Leonard Woolf, Raymond Mortimer, and Scofield Thayer.²⁴ The group discussed the state of modern literary criticism and Woolf claimed during their talk that it would surely be "much better if Rebecca West wrote criticism" (*D2*, 260). Woolf may have admired West, but she was also jealous of her apparent popularity. She complained in the same entry, "I am never praised except by my contemporaries or younger. When Wells picks young writers, he neglects me" (260). Within two months of the conversation, Woolf marked the end of her "reading book" and settled on "The Common Reader" as a working title. Evidently, Woolf's ruminations on West inspired some movement on the project.

Woolf's revisions of *The Common Reader* highlight her thoughtful yet frustrated attempts to strike a balance between didactic lecturing and whimsical commentary. David Bradshaw has argued that Woolf saw her "age of fragments" as an age of possibility (ix). But perhaps Woolf was overwhelmed by possibilities. The holograph drafts of "How It Strikes a Contemporary" elucidate Woolf's writing process and highlight her abrupt shifts between confident instruction and self-conscious questioning. In one draft of the essay, Woolf remarks on the proliferation of book reviewers in the face of modern criticism:

²⁴ Raymond Mortimer (1895-1980) was a British writer and art critic. Scofield Thayer (1899-1982) was an American poet and editor. He served for many years as editor of *The Dial*, an American literary magazine.

Woolf grapples here with class dynamics. She worries that men of “faith” and “learning” are responsible for educating “the classes” and are perhaps failing at that task. The final version of the essay reads:

Reviewers we have but no critic; a million competent and incorruptible policemen but no judge. Men of taste and learning and ability are for ever lecturing the young and celebrating the dead. But the too frequent result of their able and industrious pens is a desiccation of the living tissues of literature into a network of little bones. (233-34)

Woolf makes several important changes. Woolf revises “Men of faith, & learning, & judgement” to “Men of taste and learning and ability” (233). These do not seem altogether different, but adding the descriptor “taste” indicates Woolf is getting at questions of education. Woolf eventually removes “educating” from the equation entirely and replaces it with “lecturing,” a hollow substitute for active learning (233). Most telling is Woolf’s substitution of “the young” for “the classes” (233). Woolf argues in her *Common Readers* that new generations of readers must be taught to cultivate their own literary judgment. If the young are improperly educated by those men of taste and learning and (in)ability, there will be few young readers able to participate in building of anything by “common effort,” as Woolf advocates for in the Preface to *The Common Reader* (1).

In early versions of the text, Woolf planned to include a preface called “Byron and Mr. Briggs,” that would also serve as a method of linking all the essays through a dialogue enacted with a fictional character named Mr. Briggs. Woolf wrote nearly forty pages of this preface before abandoning it as another false start to the project. As she continued revising, Mr. Briggs’s presence was continually diminished in favor of a general common reader whom Woolf could address. Woolf writes at the start of one

drafted paragraph: “In an age which has no <without a> critic, <[> and there is none to be found in England at the moment, <]> literature both past and present must rest in the hands of the people who continue to read it” (*E3*, 477).

Her own century’s “lack,” and Woolf’s attempt to respond to that void, is written across the various stages of the essays. These scribblings represent some of the more explicit comments Woolf makes on the possibility of amateur reader replacing literary professionals. Mr. Briggs was a framing device conceived of as a way to make “some kind of a whole” out of *The Common Reader*, and a device that would have been responsible for holding together the moving parts of the text. Woolf writes in the draft: “To make a whole—it is that which we have in common. Our reading is always urged on by instinct to complete what we read, which is, for some reason, of the most universal of our instincts” (*E3*, 482). Woolf removes the framing device from the published text, but notion that reader can function as judges or commentators remains present. By August 1922, Woolf put an end to Mr. Briggs and declared a fresh start to the project: “I must broach a new page to announce the beginning, the true not spurious beginning, of Reading this morning. I shall write next that I have never enjoyed any writing more, or felt more certain of success” (*D2*, 188). Mr. Briggs would have given too clear a shape to the otherwise abstract common reader that Woolf describes. His elimination was necessary, too, because the common reader in whom Woolf was most interested was herself.

The Common Reader: Second Series

Soon after *The Common Reader* was complete, Woolf began to “scheme a little” at a second volume, and the years following were productive (D3, 113). Woolf published *To The Lighthouse* (1927), *Orlando* (1928), and *A Room of One’s Own* (1929). Although Woolf’s method of “rotating [her] crops” was clearly still effective, the second iteration of *The Common Reader* stalled amid her work on other projects (D2, 188). Woolf was unable to decide upon the exact parameters of the second iteration. Woolf spent much of 1925 and 1926 reading in preparation, but was confounded by questions of form. Woolf considered transforming *The Common Reader* into something more instructive and developing “some theory about fiction” (50). Yet, Woolf was reluctant to dismiss a style of reading that would serve as a beginning and not an end. Woolf concluded that her goal was to “start some hares,” rather than to outline a specific course of action (50).

Woolf remained frustrated by these questions of critical form and method. Her reading notes for *The Common Reader: Second Series* also reveal a curious shift in how she had begun to think about her first critical work. Woolf initially hoped the book would increase her critical reputation.²⁵ However, as Woolf began to develop her second essay collection, she started referring to its predecessor as a “something useful for “beat[ing] up ideas,” but nothing more than a “test” or experiment (50). Woolf’s desire to produce criticism that was at once experimental and illusory, while also offering some new and specific theory, halted her progress for nearly five years. Even when Woolf returned to

²⁵ Woolf recorded praise for *The Common Raeder* in the months following its publication. She described its effect on her reputation: “The first fruit of the C.R. (a book too highly praised now) is a request to write for the Atlantic Monthly. So I am getting pushed into criticism. It is a great stand by—this power to make large sums by formulating views on Stendhal & Swift” (D3, 33).

the project in 1931, “working very hard” to plot out a new course of action, the book’s form still failed to take shape (*D4*, 54). Woolf had still not determined how she could effectively devise a “critical method” for her readers:

I feel, too, at the back of my brain, that I can devise a new critical method; something far less stiff & formal than these times articles. But I must keep to the old style in this volume. And how, I wonder, could I do it? There must be some simpler, subtler, closer means of writing about books, as about people, could I hit upon it. (*D4*, 54)

Woolf’s palpable frustration with the project is similarly evident in letters from around this time. She warned Ethel Smyth, for example, not to bother with *The Common Reader*, as it offered nothing more than “school girl articles done obediently to celebrate the great dead” (*L4*, 159). It is tempting to read these comments as strategically self-effacing, much like the tone Woolf adopts throughout *The Common Reader*, but Woolf’s slow progress on this volume reflects her ambivalence about the merits of the book and her own reluctance to face the possibility that a new critical form would be unreachable.

Woolf’s return to the project was further interrupted by personal circumstance. A month spent ill in bed at the end of 1931 was followed by Lytton Strachey’s death from stomach cancer in January 1932. Woolf’s work on *The Common Reader: Second Series* halted again, and she wrote to her American publisher six days after Strachey’s death to explain that the book would not be ready for a spring publication. Woolf spent much of February at work, but her progress was slow and yielded little. Woolf outlined her schedule for the month as such:

This list would seem to suggest quite a bit of completed writing. However, Woolf finished few of these projects and she complained to her diary that her mind was restless and she was too prone to distraction to continue work. The only new writing produced that month was fiction, and even that work was shelved and edited again years later.²⁶ Woolf lamented at the end of the month that revisions to *The Common Reader: Second Series* had proved futile:

Why did I ever say I would produce another volume of Common Reader? It will take me week after week, month after month. However a year spent—save for diversions in Greece & Russia—in reading through English literature will no doubt do good to my fictitious brain. Rest it anyhow. [...] These remarks are jotted down at the end of a long mornings work on Donne, which will have to be done again, & is it worth the doing? I wake in the night with the sense of being in an empty hall: Lytton dead, & those factories building. What is the point of it—life,

²⁶ Susan Dick explains Woolf drafted these stories in early 1932. Yet, they do not appear together in any collection. See “A Book She Never Made: Editing *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*” in *Editing Virginia Woolf: Interpreting the Modernist Text* (Palgrave, 2002), pp. 114-27.

when I am not working, suddenly becomes thin, indifferent. Lytton is dead, & nothing definite to mark it. (*D4*, 74)

Woolf's fatalistic account of a bleak, unproductive future is symptomatic of her exhaustion with her critical work. She asks: "is it worth the doing?" (74). Woolf considered any time spent reading to be time well spent for the development of her "fictitious brain," but the solace she found in reading was not to be found in writing (74). Woolf's question—"is it worth the doing?"—reverberates throughout her work on *The Common Reader: Second Series* (74).

Several factors encouraged Woolf to continue with the project. Woolf still believed that devising a new critical method would be one way of "proving [her] credentials" in the absence of paid-for education (77). At the end of the February 1932, Woolf was also encouraged by a bit of institutional recognition. On 29 February, Woolf received a letter asking her to deliver the Clark Lectures at Cambridge. Woolf's father, Leslie Stephen, delivered the inaugural address in 1883.²⁷ Woolf believed that this sort of institutional affirmation would have made Stephen "blush with pleasure" (79). Woolf believed *The Common Reader* and her other critical work had "borne this odd fruit" and warranted the invitation (79). Despite apparent pleasure at receiving the invitation, Woolf denied their request and wrote in her diary that the only thing to give her greater pleasure than the offer itself was her ability to turn it down.²⁸ The invitation did, though, have the unwitting effect of reinvigorating Woolf's work on her essays.

²⁷ Stephen delivered an address on English literature in 1888.

²⁸ Woolf wrote in her diary: "And I am pleased; & still more pleased that I wont do it; & like to think that father would have blushed with pleasure could I have told him 30 years ago, that his daughter—my poor little Ginny—was to be asked to succeed him: the sort of compliment he would have liked" (*D4*, 79).

Woolf was unsure whether the final version was at all different than its predecessor, but she spent the next six months finishing essays and correcting proofs. During this period, Woolf completed extensive revisions that do indicate serious attempts to engage readers in a discussion of critical reading practices. The extant drafts of “How Should One Read a Book?” are a useful example of this effort. “How Should One Read a Book?” addresses itself to “true readers” like the ones described in earlier chapters (23). In the first chapter of the collection, for example, Woolf describes Gabriel Harvey as a man who loves books “as a true reader loves them, not as trophies to be hung up for display, but as living beings that ‘must be mediated, practised and incorporated into [the] body and soul’” (23). Woolf advocates for in drafts of “How Should One Read a Book?” a refinement of critical sensibility through close reading. Woolf is not interested in an enumerated list of the qualities of a good reader; she is interested in refining critical sensibilities. In the margin of the draft, Woolf asks a simple question:

The first line of the published essay confirms the question is genuine: “In the first place, I want to emphasize the note of interrogation at the end of my title” (238). Woolf’s voice is much quieter in earlier versions. An early draft begins:

Woolf lurks in the background of this version and guides her readers through an imagined space in which they might begin their reading amid the hum of everyday life. Woolf acknowledges the sheer number of books one finds in an ordinary house, and appears to

anticipate the declaration made in *A Room of One's Own* that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (4). Perhaps readers similarly require a private space to go about the business of reading literature and recording their impressions.

The final version of the essay is quite different than these earlier iterations. Woolf instead articulates her own critical responsibilities and offers readers some indication of her critical process:

In the first place, I want to emphasize the note of interrogation at the end of my title. Even if I could answer the question for myself, the answer would apply only to me and not you. The only advice, indeed, that one person can give another about reading is to take no advice, to follow your own instincts, to use your own reason, to come to your own conclusions. If this is agreed between us, then I feel at liberty to put forward a few ideas and suggestions because you will not allow them to fetter that independence which is the most important quality that a reader can possess. (258)

Woolf writes with an unusual degree of decisiveness and describes herself not as a professional or an expert but a sort of guide. Woolf's account of these reading practices is relatively free of any language of instruction. Woolf is willing to offer a few “ideas and suggestions,” but expresses to readers that her critical process is defined by introspection and self-awareness (258). To Woolf, “Independence [...] is the most important quality that a reader can possess” (258). Woolf also writes Gabriel Harvey into this last chapter: he appears suddenly, “arguing about poetry” (262). Harvey is a man who refuses to “drug himself with the dust of scholarship” and who confidently declares that “the only brave way to learn all things with no study and much pleasure” (23). Woolf offers, from the first essay of the collection to the last, examples of readers who judge literature, hastily,

excitedly, even poorly, for themselves. Woolf concludes *The Common Reader: Second Series* without any great desire for accuracy or even literary insight. Rather, she models a variety of readers who are confident enough in their critical reading practices to make a judgment and follow that judgment wherever it leads.

Woolf's *Common Readers* exists in a curious borderland between the amateur and the expert; the innovative and the traditional; and the insider and the outsider.²⁹ Most important to Woolf in her criticism is the ability to negotiate these identities. It appears that Woolf was aware of this necessity. Woolf emphasizes in "How Should One Read a Book?" the importance of engaging oneself in ongoing processes of self-examination. Of the reader's ability to communicate critical judgment, Woolf asks: "Would it not be wiser, then, to remit this part of reading and to allow the critics, the gowned and furred authorities of the library, to decide the question of the book's absolute value for us?" (268). Woolf concludes that to do so would be "impossible," because we must value personal impressions and judgments (268). For Woolf, such reading practices encourage intellectual growth: "even if the results are abhorrent and our judgments are wrong, still our taste, the nerve of sensation that sends shocks through us, is our chief illuminant; we learn through feeling; we cannot suppress our own idiosyncrasy without impoverishing it" (268). There is a subtle argument in this conclusion. If readers are decisive, self-regulating, and focus their minds on "imagination, insight, and learning," then professional or academic literary study is unnecessary because readers will find "more than the seeds of such powers in himself" (268).

²⁹ Susan Stanford Friedman: Virginia Woolf's Pedagogical Scenes of Reading: *The Voyage Out*, *The Common Reader*, and her 'Common Readers', in *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 38.1, p. 119.

Woolf remarks in “How It Strikes A Contemporary,” the final essay of *The Common Reader*, that a “great critic” is the “rarest of beings” (240). Woolf revise this statement in “How Should One Read a Book?” and concludes that “to read a book as it should be read calls for the rarest qualities of imagination, insight, and judgement” (269). Amateur readers may never be accounted for as “great” critics (240). Readers can still develop reading practices that set them in conversation not only with the books they read but with the authors who write them. Away from the university, and from professional expectations, and far “behind the erratic gunfire of the press,” exists for Woolf “the opinion of people reading for the love of reading, slowly and unprofessionally, and judging with great sympathy and yet with great severity” (270).

Woolf completed her work on *The Common Reader: Second Series* in August 1932 and treated the project’s end as an auspicious occasion. Woolf celebrated with “a new pen & a new page” in her reading notebook, and the manuscript was officially delivered for publication on 26 August 26 (*D4*, 115). Yet, Woolf’s excitement waned in the days immediately following its release from her grasp. Woolf reflected soon afterward that “there is no sense of glory; only of drudgery done. And yet I daresay its a nice enough book to read—I doubt that I shall write another like it all the same” (115). *The Common Reader: Second Series* was described on its jacket as “a book of unprofessional criticism dealing with books and characters that have chanced to come the author’s way.” The book was first published in England by the Hogarth Press, so it is likely Woolf wrote or contributed to the promotional materials. The book’s description suggests that Woolf had come to see the text as a sort of outsider’s field guide to literary studies: a common reader’s cursory overview of literature with haphazard parameters.

Reading at Random

Perhaps it was fate that in lieu of producing a new critical theory *The Common Reader: Second Series* instead served to “start some hares” for Woolf (D3, 50). Aside from its influence on Woolf’s various published work throughout the 1930s, the most significant “hare” remains Woolf’s unfinished critical project, “Reading at Random.” In the autumn of 1940, Woolf was at work on three projects: her novel, *Between the Acts*, an untitled memoir, and a new essay collection. All three projects remained unfinished at the time of her death in March 1941. *Between the Acts* was published posthumously in July 1941; the untitled memoir was eventually published by Leonard Woolf, and it was also reissued as *Moments of Being* along with a collection of other personal essays in the 1972. “Reading at Random” remained unpublished and was sold by Leonard Woolf to the Henry and Albert Berg Collection of English and American Literature at the New York Public Library where it remained relatively untouched in the archives until Brenda Silver’s extensive study of the project was published in late 1979.³⁰ Woolf claimed soon after the publication of *The Common Reader: Second Series* that she would never “write another like it” (D4, 115). Yet, Woolf spent the last years of her life (roughly 1938-41) once more turning over the idea of producing another collection of essays.

Woolf alternated between calling this third iteration “Reading at Random” and “Turning the Page.” Both titles suggest extended intellectual work—reading, turning—and both return to Woolf’s interest in the acts of reading and writing. Woolf completed the introductory essay, “Anon,” and had made considerable progress on the second essay,

³⁰ Brenda R. Silver. ‘Anon’ and ‘The Reader’: Virginia Woolf’s Last Essays.” *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 25, no. 3/4, 1979, pp. 356–441.

“The Reader,” at the time of her death. Woolf’s notes and marginalia suggest that she conceived of the project as more of a cultural history than a text exclusively devoted to literary study and exploration.

The image is a curious one, and seems designed to draw interest and attention: to adorn the project with something glittering and strong enough to hold together its myriad impressions. There is an intimate quality to the image of Woolf removing a necklace, perhaps from her own neck, and using it to draw together all her thoughts and ideas about literature, history and culture. The project was certainly personal to Woolf, who was simultaneously working on a memoir, and she anticipated it would require careful work rather like Mrs. Ramsay’s impatient but composed knitting in *To The Lighthouse*.

In the final months of her life, Woolf fell into compositional practices very similar to what she had first developed while working on her *Common Readers*. Woolf had begun in the weeks before her death referring to the project as “a new Common Reader” (*L6*, 475). Just as she rotated her crops in 1923, Woolf rotated these three projects of varying genres all throughout 1940. In another curious echo of the past, Woolf also recorded in her diary at the end of the year that she had once again taken up book reviewing out of economic necessity: “We are very poor; & my hoard is 450: but must not be tapped again. So I must write [...]. When Desmond praises East Coker, & I am jealous, I walk over the marsh saying, I am I; & must follow that furrow, not copy another. That is the only justification for my writing & living” (*D5*, 347). 1940 rather circuitously returned Woolf back through to the past, back to when “Reading, which I had tackled afresh, must be put away, & I must accept Desmond’s reviewing, &

Maynard's too, if offered" (*D2*, 240). Most foreboding in Woolf's diary entry, though, is her repeated assurance that "I am I; & must follow that furrow, not copy another" (*D5*, 347) Woolf struggled to find the value of her nonfiction, and she felt a particular sting of jealousy at the success of Eliot's *Four Quartets*, which was published in March 1940 and sold nearly 12,000 copies in its initial run.³¹

Woolf grew anxious amid her work on *Between the Acts* and "Reading at Random." The Second World War had taken a physical toll on Woolf; her London houses at Tavistock Square and Mecklenburgh Square both sustained significant damage during the Blitz and Woolf lost many of her possessions—most significantly a large portion of her library. Even after retreating to Monk's House, Woolf recorded "bombs shaking the windows" of her writing lodge as she attempted to make headway on her various projects (*D5*, 313). Many of Woolf's last musings about "Reading at Random" were self-conscious and melancholic:

On Sunday night, as I was reading about the great fire, in a very accurate detailed book, London was burning. 8 of my city churches destroyed, & the Guildhall. This belongs to last year. This first day of the new year has a slice of wind—like a circular saw [...]. This book was salvaged from 37: I brought it down from the shop, with a handful of Elizabethans for my book, now called 'Turning a Page'. A psychologist would see that the above was written with someone, & a dog, in the room. To add in private: I think I will be less verbose here perhaps—but what does it matter, writing too many pages. No printer to consider, no public. (*D5*, 351)

Woolf imagined a world almost entirely devoid of life. Buildings crumbled and London burned. Her imaginings also shut out the reader, giving her "no public" to consider as she

³¹ See Lyndall Gordon's *Eliot's New Life* (Oxford UP, 1988), p. 110.

worked on “Turning a Page” (351). In her private musings, Woolf was reluctant to go on “writing too many pages” when so much in the world was uncertain (351). What would be the point of producing a third *Common Reader* if it were conceived in a world with no printer to consider, no public?

It is possible that “Reading at Random” would have taken shape as The Common Reader: Third Series if Woolf had lived to continue her work on the project. Yet, it is equally possible that Woolf would have been faced with and stymied by “the old problem”: the desire to “invent a new critical method—something swifter and lighter and more colloquial and yet intense: more to the point and less composed; more fluid and following the flight; than my essays” (*AWD*, 324). The same problem had plagued Woolf since the very start of her “reading book” in 1921, and the problem continued to plague her throughout her work on her last critical projects. Woolf wrote with dogged intensity in her final months, but she made little progress on “Reading at Random.” Woolf instead busied herself with writing draft after draft of a review of “a vast fat book about Mrs Thrale” (*L6*, 467). Woolf referenced “Reading at Random” in a letter to Ethel Smyth, but seemed ambivalent about completing the work: “Did I tell you I’m reading the whole of English literature through? By the time I’ve reached Shakespeare the bombs will be falling. So I’ve arranged a very nice last scene: reading Shakespeare, having forgotten my gas mask, I shall fade far away, & quite forget...” (*L6*, 466). Woolf’s allusion to Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale” may indicate something about her state of mind. The speaker of Keats’s poem wishes to follow the nightingale into the trees and to “Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget / What thou among the leaves hast never known, / The weariness, the fever, and the fret” (21-23). Woolf similarly wished to turn inward, away

from the frenetic wartime atmosphere and away from the constant stress and aggravation of her work.

Like Woolf's *Common Readers*, "Reading at Random" tells us as much about its writer as it does about its intended audience. Woolf affirms in her criticism her desire to develop a set of critical reading practices to empower readers and writers—and herself. Woolf remained faithful to the aims outlined in *The Common Reader*: she wished to "write down a few of the ideas and opinions which, insignificant in themselves, yet contribute to so mighty a result" (2). The fragmentary remains Woolf left behind were assuredly of use to her contemporaries, and to future generations of readers, writers, and critics as well.

CHAPTER THREE

REBECCA WEST'S CRITICAL ANTAGONISM

I am too good for the world of modern literature [...].

—Rebecca West, *Selected Letters*, p. 440

I should like to be approved of, oh, yes. I blench. I hate being disapproved of. I've had rather a lot of it.

—Rebecca West, “The Art of Fiction No. 65,” *Paris Review*

On 28 August 1928, Rebecca West filed a statement of claim in the High Court of Justice against *The Evening Standard*. Nineteen days earlier, the newspaper printed “My Brilliant But Bewildering Niece,” a review of West’s first book of criticism, *The Strange Necessity* (1928). The author of the review happened to be the very subject of West’s second chapter, the novelist and critic Arnold Bennett—a literary giant whom West refers to as “Uncle” Bennett throughout her text. Bennett had little interest in establishing familial connections with West, and his review posits that West’s “disorderly mind” has produced a “preposterous” collection of essays (*Evening Standard*, 184). West and Bennett had never been great supporters of one another. Months before the publication of *The Strange Necessity*, West solicited her publisher Jonathan Cape for new books to review and expressed interest in reading any of Laura Riding’s works because Riding had recently received, in West’s phrasing, “a very unfair notice from that old ass Arnold Bennett” (*Letters*, 100). Bennett seemed to consider West with a sort of avuncular disregard. Yet, West was certain that Bennett’s seeming indifference to her was rooted in

his disapproval of her affair with H.G. Wells and bolstered by false narratives perpetuated by Wells himself. “It’s been bitter learning what sort of stories H.G.’s been telling for years,” West considered. “I don’t wonder that people like Arnold Bennett have regarded me with disapproval” (112-13). Years after Bennett’s death, West concluded that both “H.G. and Arnold Bennett lived as if they had masses of *capital* behind them” (423). West derided Bennett for his grandiosity, but hinted at a more significant critique of the elder statesman: namely, that his persona was built upon insecurity. Bennett may have performed the role of literary uncle well enough, but West considered his “baroque exterior” merely the artifice behind which “a shy man had converted all the oddities of which he was most sensitive, so he could have somewhere to hide” (*Arnold Bennett Himself*, 6). West’s relationship with Bennett was punctuated by a series of similarly fractious interactions all generally instigated by West. Near the end of her life, West complained to an interviewer that Bennett was a “horrible, mean-spirited, hateful man” whom she had always disliked intensely.³²

West’s attitude toward Bennett is not altogether surprising. West treated most literary authorities with suspicion and often with aggression or contempt. The ensuing dramatics between West, Bennett, and *The Evening Standard*, to which I will return in a following section, ultimately tell us very little about West’s dislike of Bennett. West’s negative feelings for Bennett were long-held and not merely the product of one newspaper review. West’s approach to Bennett and to the press hints at her desire to navigate an established critical hierarchy and refashion English literary criticism in the 1920s and 1930s. The significance of West’s critical essay collections has largely been

³² West, Rebecca. “The Art of Fiction, No. 65.” Interview by Marina Warner. *Paris Review*, Spring 1981.

erased from the modernist canon, and West is still most famously known as the author of the 1918 wartime novel *The Return of the Soldier*. Bernard Schweizer argues in a recent edited collection of West scholarship that West is “currently enjoying a long-overdue and sustained revival” (21). This fact remains untrue of West’s critical works. *The Strange Necessity* has been out of print for nearly thirty years; meanwhile, *Ending in Earnest: A Literary Log* (1931) has been out of print for over fifty years. It is true that West’s brand of modernism has always been “off-centered,” and her relationships to and with canonical modernists rather oblique (22). To understand West’s critical work is to accept its thorny defiance of generic conventions along with West’s bellicose authorial persona. Much has been said about West’s expansive critical oeuvre, and critics tend to agree that the “long and knobby sprawl” of her non-fiction work is ungenerous to those hoping to extrapolate some critical theory from the seventy-year mass of work.³³ Yet West’s critical essay collections are in dire need of reupholstering and it is my aim to articulate how this body of critical work represents an emerging counter-tradition among modernist critics in the early twentieth century.

West was eager to challenge an intellectual and social hierarchy that seemed intent to exclude or disregard her critical work and indeed her critical authority as well. Laura Cowan has argued that West’s critical work evades generic conventions and thus reflects her refusal to “entertain the hierarchical constructions that dominated literary criticism in the 1920s and 1930s” (106). It is certainly true that West’s criticism offers a specious appearance of revolution and innovation. In a 1914 essay written for *The New*

³³ Debra Rae Cohen, “Rebecca West’s Palimpsestic Praxis: Crafting the Intermodern Voice of Witness” in *Intermodernism: Literary Culture in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain* (Edinburgh UP, 2009), p. 150.

Republic entitled “It Is Our Duty To Practice Harsh Criticism: A literary manifesto for the ages,” West’s call for a “new and abusive school of criticism” anticipates her desire to alight upon a more aggressive critical approach and distance herself from established critical norms.³⁴ However, it would be rather short-sighted to argue that West’s critical work successfully evades, in Caroline Levine’s phrasing, the “hierarchical constructions” of the literary market (83). West may have outwardly refused to entertain literary norms. Yet, West’s critical essay collections emerged from her vexed relationship with literary professionals, and her critical essay collections reflect the atmosphere of “instability and unpredictability” that Levine argues is characteristic of anyone within any hierarchical system (85).

Rebecca West, Virginia Woolf, and the “Feminine Crown”

My aim is not to cast Virginia Woolf and Rebecca West as diametrical opposites, though I will closely examine their works for contrasting effect. Instead, through a careful analysis of West’s critical essay collections, I will emphasize a shared desire to challenge systems of power that sought to reverse and subvert the logic of their critical work. Not unlike Woolf, West wished to produce literary criticism that could effect change in the literary market and embolden her own critical position in the absence of credentialed authority. Although the nuances of their respective methodologies may differ, West’s essay collections share the same sort of strategic self-effacement, impressionistic writing style, and suspicion of intellectuals that is emblematic of *The Common Reader* (1925) and *The Common Reader: Second Series* (1932). West, however, is more obviously

³⁴ Rebecca West, “It is Our Duty to Practice Harsh Criticism,” *The New Republic*, 7 November 1914.

opportunistic than Woolf. West's literary criticism often takes advantage of public scrapes, as in the case of Arnold Bennett, and social disorder, as in the case of the First World War, to comment on the importance of developing new critical means to greet the modern world. To manifest oneself as a recognizable critical voice in the 1920s was a reasonably difficult task. The sheer glut of books on the market occasioned a similar excess of professionals ready to produce quick, concise reviews, and this culture of excess compelled West to make a name for herself through any means possible. West remarks on the sheer volume of new publications in the very first sentence of *Ending in Earnest: A Literary Log* (1931):

So many books are published nowadays that works deserving of a considerable measure of survival are swamped almost immediately and sink into the region of the forgotten [...]. Bad as this excess of publication is when it steals from us the memory of what we have read, it is worse still when it prevents us even finding out what we should enjoy reading. (1-2)

West's comments reflect Woolf's fear that *The Common Reader* would appear on the market only to sink beneath the surface "as if one tossed a stone into a pond, & the waters closed without a ripple" (D3, 12). West, though, takes a more impersonal approach to the crowded environment and is primarily concerned with how this surfeit of literature will affect reading practices. West predicts this trend will not only occlude memory; it will hamper the development of individual literary taste. After all, no common reader can parse such a multitude of literature.

T. S. Eliot claimed in 1927 that the *Criterion's* aim would be "to revive some of the characteristics of the quarterly reviews of a hundred years ago, which had languished in this century of rapid production and consumption" ("Commentary," May 1927, 187). However, as Patrick Collier's research has shown, most commentaries on reviewing from

the 1920s and 1930s “mark the struggle of the institution of book reviewing to adapt to an expanded and diversified publishing market that threatened to render it obsolete or unrecognizable” (80). A significant trend during this period was also the emergence of what Collier terms the “star reviewer” or “novelist-critic” (81). Many newspapers allotted their reviewing space to a single star reviewer, as in the case of Arnold Bennett and *The Evening Standard* or Compton Mackenzie and the *Daily Mail*.³⁵ This sort of arrangement intensified the hierarchical nature of the literary marketplace and bred competition among many well-known reviewers and writers. West groused, for example, that Bennett took advantage of his position as “top-dog” and manipulated newspapers into allowing him to write “a whole thousand words or so,” when most reviewers were allotted a few hundred (“Craft”).

In a typewritten manuscript for an unpublished article called “The Craft of the Reviewer,” West argues that the “organisation of the press” must accept responsibility for imposing unreasonable space limits on professional reviewers (“Craft”). West wrote the article roughly around the same time she was working on her critical essay collections. West alludes to *The Common Reader*, which was published in 1925, and mentions Arnold Bennett’s present-day work for *The Evening Standard* which ended upon his death in 1931. West’s primary goal in the article appears to be articulating the specific role of the critic: “To state the subject of the book, to state what is its place in relation to the literature of its kind, to find out what individual contribution it makes, to subject it to criticism, to make it plain whether it will entertain the reader of average culture, or the reader of special interests, or nobody at all” (“Craft”). It is worth noting West’s assertion

³⁵ Bennett maintained a weekly column for the *Evening Standard* from 1926-1931. Mackenzie was a regular contributor to the *Daily Mail* from 1931-1935.

that the reviewer must “subject [a book] to criticism” (“Craft”). West’s phrasing calls to mind her earlier desire to fashion a “new and abusive school of criticism” in England (“Duty”). West describes herself as a reviewer and speaks freely about the constraints of the job. West adopts a professional tone and diagnoses the various troubles of the literary world. “There is no reason to suppose that the stream of literary talent has run dry,” West explains. Rather, the likelier conclusion is that “the public finds it impossible to get in touch with even the most lively and ingenious minds when they are presented to it in snippet form” (“Craft”). West argues that truncated space in newspapers has denuded the reviewing profession. To reconnect the public to their literary critics, West offers a critical practice that reveals historical and cultural nuance and insight through a ramshackle yet unhurried survey:

It is a joy to see how [S. K. Ratcliffe] can take up a book on any branch of social history and bring forward every political event of the last hundred years and every passage from great and middling writers which are made more important or less so by its arguments and findings of his immediate subject. The scholarship of Virginia Woolf gives us again and again the same delight in *The Common Reader*. (“Craft”)

West gleans considerable “delight” from Woolf’s impressionistic critical style (“Craft”). She particularly admires any writer who can master the intermingling of the “immediate subject” with varied political and historical events of the previous centuries (“Craft”).

In West’s estimation, any critic worth her salt must be able to dash from subject to subject with ease. It is more than simply developing a good memory for facts. West believes that the best reviewers have a more abstract quality: “memory combined with an eye for what according to the highest scale of values are true relationships within reality” (“Craft”). Criticism must look beyond the text and reveal the interconnections between

text and context. In the case of Virginia Woolf, West believes her “grace of writing” is most obviously linked to her ability to bring life to a piece of literature—to “[seize] on various significant details that [bring] before one the social atmosphere of the place” (“Craft”). The qualities West describes are particularly apposite to Woolf’s own critical aims. Woolf similarly puzzled over her desire to make students and readers “feel the flesh & blood” in the shadows of history.³⁶

West’s criticism maintains an epistemological self-consciousness that is largely absent from Woolf’s published criticism. In the decades that followed the publication of her two essay collections, West lamented that she had been writing in a “personal, almost fictional framework, such as Remy de Gourmont and several other French writers had used,” but that had since been “killed stone dead” by T. S. Eliot (*Letters*, 327). As Margaret Stetz has argued, West sought to “fashion ways of focusing upon the present while still connecting it meaningfully to the cultural past and to a future” (48). Whereas Woolf often seeks to answer questions about her own reading habits through a critical examination of literature, West more aggressively interrogates contemporary critical trends and speaks directly to working critics to offer instruction and guidance on critical practice. Only a handful of essays in *The Common Reader* discuss contemporary subjects: most famously “The Modern Essay” and “Modern Fiction.” *The Strange Necessity*, in contrast, deals with contemporary figures in every chapter. For West, the critic is not an illusory figure in need of reinvention or a proper burial. Rather, it is the institution of criticism that requires renovation. She explains in *Ending in Earnest* that “it is the perfectly appalling state of English criticism which permits the older generation to

³⁶ Virginia Woolf, “A Report on Teaching at Morley College,” in Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography* (London: Harcourt, 1972), p. 203.

lay a dead hand on the literature of to-day” (132). There is, in West’s writing about criticism and the criticism itself, an emphasis on methodology— “can we cultivate [?]” West asks, and the question perpetually thrums in the background of her non-fiction work. West is decidedly less reticent than Woolf in her assessment of the contemporary critical landscape and her criticism looks stubbornly toward a future in which there is an industrious critical profession.

Many of West and Woolf’s contemporaries drew parallels between the two writers. Hugh Walpole concluded, for example, in a 1928 review of *The Strange Necessity* that “*The Strange Necessity* and *The Common Reader* by Virginia Woolf are the two finest volumes of literary criticism written by women in the English language.”³⁷ Walpole commented that of all working critics, “Mrs. Woolf and Miss West divide the feminine crown between them” (7). Yet, his comments are not altogether complimentary. Woolf and Walpole were close friends, and their interactions through the Hogarth Press and the Book Society have been well documented by Nicola Wilson. However, West and Walpole had long been at odds over her critical assessments of his writing. In the preceding decade, Walpole had taken such offence at West’s numerous unflattering reviews of his work that he wrote to her protesting against her repeated “public scalping[s]” (qtd. in Scott, 24). West declined the chance to apologize and replied: “It’s certainly true that I don’t like your work; I think it is facile and without artistic impulse” (24). She explained in the same letter that “the duty of a critic [is] to point out the fallaciousness of the method and vision of a writer who was being swallowed whole by

³⁷ Hugh Walpole, review of “The Strange Necessity” by Rebecca West, *New York Herald Tribune Books*, 2 September 1928.

the British public, as you are” (24).³⁸ In the same review, Walpole alluded to West’s infamous reputation and remarked that “Miss West has published so little in book form that it has been sometimes said that her reputation has been one of human personality rather than literary merit” (7).³⁹ Walpole likely sought to temper Woolf and West’s respective critical authority by emphasizing a shared methodology and reminding readers that their work had been composed in a style seen at the time as ephemeral and unserious.

Although West and Woolf were both well-known for making cutting remarks about their contemporaries, they tended to maintain a grudging respect for one another. Woolf made clear in her personal writings that she saw West as a creature of fascination. In several letters following one of their meetings, Woolf described West in animalistic terms: “like some prehistoric aboreal [sic] animal to look at”; “like an arboreal animal grasping a tree, and showing all her teeth, as if another animal were about to seize her young”; and “fascinating—ungainly, awkward, powerful, arboreal [sic], like some sloth or mandrill; but oh what a joy to grapple with her hairy arms!” (*L5*, 258-60). In a diary entry from roughly a year earlier, Woolf described West as “rather rubbed about the thorax: with a great supply of worldly talk” (*D4*, 131). Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann have argued that Woolf’s latter description likely derived from her interest in lepidopterology (*D4*, 131, n1).⁴⁰ The phrasing calls to mind a certain shabbiness, and a Prufrockian sense of anxiety at being judged by one’s peers. Still, Woolf was enchanted by West’s “electric mind,” and observed her with some interest (*L5*, 258). Describing

³⁸ Nicola Wilson, “Virginia Woolf, Hugh Walpole, the Hogarth Press, and the Book Society,” in *ELH* 79 (2012), pp. 237-60.

³⁹ West had written and published hundreds of articles and many short stories by 1928. She had also published two novels: *The Return of the Soldier* (1918) and *The Judge* (1922).

⁴⁰ Woolf’s interest in classification, taxonomy, and lepidopterology is well documented in Christina Alt’s *Virginia Woolf and the Study of Nature* (Cambridge UP, 2010).

West as a “mandrill” was similarly high praise from Woolf. In letters between Woolf and her husband Leonard, Woolf adopted the pet name “mandrill” to Leonard’s “mongoose.” In 1932 when Harcourt Brace solicited names of authors suitable to write a book on Virginia Woolf, Leonard suggested that “Rebecca West would be the best person probably,” though he admitted that they “[did] not know her very well” (*Letters of Leonard Woolf*, 239-40). Woolf also wrote personally to West to solicit a contribution to the short-lived Hogarth Letters series, and in her request commented that she was writing to West “as an admirer who actually drove 8 miles the other day to buy a copy of the Daily Telegraph in order not to miss your article. This is not an effort I am in the habit of making,” Woolf considered, “but proof of the great admiration with which I hold your work” (Beinecke, GEN 105, Box 22.1027).

West, for her part, had enough regard for Woolf to issue a rare apology for comments made in *The Strange Necessity*. Specifically, she apologized for calling Woolf and Roger Fry “Fortnum & Mason authors” (119). Kathryn Laing points out that Woolf owned a first edition copy of *The Strange Necessity* and the book is inscribed with West’s contrite praise: “To Virginia Woolf from Rebecca West. If you knew how much I owed Fortnum & Mason you would be convinced that the allusion on p.119 was highly complimentary.”⁴¹ The allusion itself is not terribly inflammatory, but it does cast Woolf as a somewhat sedate figurehead of modern literature:

I think there is no difficulty in accepting the view of Beethoven’s character held by Mr. Newman; whom I count along with Roger Fry and Virginia Woolf as Fortnum & Mason authors, about whom one knows that they know all sorts of

⁴¹ G. A. Holleyman, ed., *Catalogue of Books from the Library of Leonard and Virginia Woolf* (Holleyman and Treacher, 1975), p. 4.

things one would like to know just as certainly as one knows that Fortnum & Mason sells all sorts of things one would like to eat. (119)

Woolf may indeed be a reliable source of information, but West marks that reliability as a failing. There is nothing particularly revelatory about the “sorts of things” Woolf knows, just as there is nothing terribly interesting about a catalogue of digestible food found in a grocery store (119).

Years later, West was asked to contribute to a memorial book project in honor of Woolf. West laments in *Recollections of Virginia Woolf* (1972) that Woolf had a certain critical “disability” (91). West argues that Woolf “was no judge of writers of her own day” (91). West considers in the same essay that “too much is made of *The Common Reader* [and] if you contrast her critical writings with those of her father, it is apparent what a much smaller world she inhabited” (92). Even in a memorial essay dedicated to Woolf, West offers a careful measure of Woolf’s critical ability. West could be complimentary, as she was of *Orlando* (1928), and offer an ebullient “trumpet call of praise” so effusive that it would leave the subject “a little sheepish & silly” (*D3*, 200). Yet West showed little critical allegiance. Her love for *Orlando* grew tepid upon the publication of *Flush* (1933), and Woolf recounted in a diary entry that she was “less jubilant, due to Rebecca West’s criticism: that F[lush] is not one of my best” (*D4*, 183-84). Although Woolf once advised Vita Sackville-West to disregard West’s harsh critique of *The Land* (1926) on account of West’s suspect critical authority—“[she] doesn’t know a turnip from an umbrella, nor a poem from a potato”—Woolf vacillated between rejecting and relishing West’s critical attention (*L3*, 446). Years later, Woolf would admit that West personified “all the qualities I lack & fear” (*D4*, 277).

“A New and Abusive School of Criticism”

In 1929, Rebecca West and T. S. Eliot both presented lectures on “Tradition and Experiment in Present-Day Literature” at the City Literary Institute in London. Eliot concluded the proceedings with a talk on “Experiment in Criticism,” in which he claimed that “there is no department of literature in which it is more difficult to establish a distinction between ‘traditional’ and ‘experimental’ work than literary criticism” (198). West’s lecture earlier that day seemed designed to catch Eliot’s attention. As Debra Rae Cohen explains, his remarks were preceded by West’s lecture, entitled “Tradition in Criticism,” in which she “baited Eliot [...] with reference to a form of criticism ‘of which Mr Eliot would disapprove and I would not ... which takes almost the likeness and habit of imaginative work’” (qtd. in Cohen, “Sheepish,” 149-50). West remained unconvinced by Eliot’s supposed love of Remy de Gourmont and believed her own critical work was a more fitting tribute to the French writer. West would warn readers two years later that “we reap the consequences of one of Mr. Eliot’s misrepresentations of French writers” (*EIE*, 283). Even at the end of her life, West maintained a sour opinion of Eliot and opined to the *Paris Review* that he was a “poseur” whom she “didn’t like a bit” (259).

West often commented on what she saw as the perversity of Eliot’s critical influence—an influence that she believed “[made] people distrust writers who have any substance to their work—who have anything to say” (*Letters*, 313). As Laura Heffernan has argued, West’s personal writings on Eliot reflect her persistent belief that “the rise of an Eliotic modernism effectively erased her contributions to this movement not as an author, but as a critic” (310). That West fixated on her critical form being “killed stone dead” by Eliot is quite telling; West did not wish to champion a feminist criticism or to

be the joint recipient of a “feminine crown.” West sought to develop a relationship between contemporary criticism and the “personal, almost fictional framework” popularized by Gourmont in the nineteenth century. As Heffernan concludes, West did not believe that literary value arose from a work’s internal form. Rather, West believed literary value could be more effectively “manufactured within a social field: a field comprised of tastemakers [...] and critic-biographers” (310). Eliot and West did share an affection for Gourmont, and Eliot revisits a sentiment from the French critic’s *Lettres à l’Amazone* (1914) in the epigraph to “The Perfect Critic” in *The Sacred Wood* (1921): “Eriger en lois ses impressions personnelles, c’est le grand effort d’un homme s’il est sincère” (1). To erect personal impressions as laws is the great effort of man if he is sincere, Gourmont writes, and so too Eliot concurs. In the Preface to a 1928 reprint of *The Sacred Wood*, Eliot explained he was “much stimulated and much helped by the critical writings of Remy de Gourmont” (viii).

West’s non-fiction asks us to consider seriously what it would mean to argue for a school of criticism that is experimental, critical of contemporary works, yet emphasizes the value of past aesthetic models. West believed that critics had grown complacent and were content to pour old ideas into a new form without making significant changes appropriate to a modern world that had been wholly changed by the First World War. West diagnoses in her critical essay collections an accepted critical tendency to recapitulate the merits of English literature of previous centuries, therein turning a blind eye to the present moment. West’s assessment of her contemporaries is not entirely unsympathetic: she considers that London effuses such historical resonance that it is nearly impossible for anyone to walk down the street without enjoying a “comfortable

revisiting of the past” (*EIE*, 35). West concludes this spirit of “comfortable” reverie has contributed to the decline of modern criticism: “It is because every moderately intelligent and literate person who lives in London (or indeed in any part of England) is perpetually exposed to this fourth dimensional temptation that there has arisen a particularly scandalous state of affair in modern English criticism” (35). Again, the question thrums: can we cultivate something new?

For West, criticism served the vital purpose of enacting a bridge between art and literature, theory and practice, and as Marina MacKay has argued, between “the modernist championing of myth against materialism” (64). Criticism could no longer offer “mere information,” West argues in *The Strange Necessity*. In West’s estimation, “there is something more vital afoot than that” (257). West described *The Strange Necessity* in advance of its publication as a development of concepts rendered in print:

[It is] a discussion of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* which is probably the first estimate to be done neither praying nor vomiting. In it I come to the conclusion that though it is ugly and incompetent it is [an art] [a work] of art. That is to say it is *necessary*. Then I go on to discuss what is this ‘strange necessity, art’ which is so inconclusive of opposites? –as for instance the paintings of Ingres and the books of James Joyce? This leads to an analysis of literature, and the discovery of a double and vital function it fulfills for men. (*Letters*, 98)

West’s commentary on Joyce develops into a discussion of art, literature, and the nature of humanity.⁴² In doing so, West outlines a brand of modernist criticism that is evolutionary rather than revolutionary, and her comments on Joyce are similarly

⁴² Margaret Stetz argues that West’s criticism was heavily informed by Western European art of the past and that West worked “to emphasize not their [modernist writers’] revolutionary, but their evolutionary, character.” See “Rebecca West’s Criticism: Alliance, Tradition, and Modernism” in *Rereading Modernism: New Directions in Feminist Criticism* (New York: Garland, 1994), p. 44.

representative of her critical practice: appreciative of aesthetic value but interrogative and corrective as well.

West understood the difficulties of the literary market and generally approached it with a strategic defense of her work. Rather like a fencer, West would first advance toward her opponent—generally a writer or critic of considerable fame, such as Arnold Bennett or T. S. Eliot. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, West portrayed Eliot’s literary criticism as a clumsy attempt at reinforcing his own institutional legacy. One of West’s most famous critical essays is a standalone piece for *The Bookman* entitled “What is Mr. T. S. Eliot’s Authority as a Critic?” West describes Eliot as a pernicious influence on the literary marketplace: a man who took advantage of “the time of war, when English criticism was at its low ebb” to put forth his essays of “sober and seemly quality” (qtd. in Rainey, 713). The allegation of opportunism seems rather hypocritical as West herself had taken advantage of the “time of war” to present an early-stage outline of her own critical method. If, as Debra Rae Cohen has argued, West’s wartime literary production can be read as “compositions in crisis,” then West has acted in accordance with Eliot and taken advantage of a reading public seeking a call to action (“Frame,” 85).

At the outset of her 1914 essay on a “new and abusive school of criticism,” West wonders if the “disgust at the daily deathbed which is Europe” will be enough to reorient the public gaze away from “militarism and orthodoxy” toward beauty and art. “For only through art,” West writes, “can we cultivate annoyance with inessentials, power and exasperated reactions against ugliness, a ravenous appetite for beauty; and these are the true guardians of the soul.”⁴³ West, who was often blinded by her own self-righteousness,

⁴³ Rebecca West, “It is Our Duty to Practice Harsh Criticism,” *The New Republic*, 7 November 1914.

did not see this early literary criticism as exploitive. West lays a nationalistic claim to the task of establishing a new school of criticism and claims that Eliot is merely an “American author [who has] inflicted damage on our literature from which it will probably not recover for a generation” (qtd. in Rainey, 715).

West’s comments in *The Bookman* were occasioned by Eliot’s appointment to the Chair of Poetry at Harvard, and she believed his potential to inflict damage on American literature would only be mitigated by the brief appointment term.⁴⁴ It was contradictory of West to decry Eliot’s influence while she actively sought institutional access and widespread public approval and influence.⁴⁵ However, West believed she lived “in a world dominated by Eliot, who did not care for reality, who only cared to give out passes that certified the holder to be respectful to reality” (*Letters*, 440). West strengthens her commitment to this argument in *Ending in Earnest* where she expresses contempt for those who follow Eliot with “blind admiration” and fail to see his criticism for what it is: “a flustered search for coherence disingenuously disguised by a style which suggests that he has found it” (282-83). Bridget Chalk considers that Eliot’s “shaping power over modernism and its creative and critical legacies [has] guided our understanding and treatment of the period for nearly a century.” Chalk contends that the more recent expansion of modernist studies has produced “alternative genealogies that shed light on the multiple active vectors of aesthetic theory and criticism of the period,” therein

⁴⁴ T. S. Eliot was appointed as the Charles Eliot Norton professorship at Harvard for the 1932-1933 academic year.

⁴⁵ West accepted The Dwight H. Terry Lectureship at Yale University during the 1955-1956 academic year. Her lectures were published as *The Court and the Castle: Some Treatments of a Recurrent Theme* in 1958 by Yale UP. West also lectured at American universities throughout her career.

shedding a light on critical work produced by figures like Rebecca West.⁴⁶ To understand West's critical oeuvre as an alternative genealogy of modernist criticism further emphasizes the hierarchical nature of the literary market with which she had to contend. West was crowned a (shared) queen of feminine criticism; a "brilliant but bewildering" niece; "Bernard Shaw in skirts"; and considered by some to be "the most brilliant literary critic of her sex."⁴⁷ Yet, West's critical aggression germinate from her longstanding belief that the only way to navigate a world dominated by Eliot would be to turn it on its head and champion a body of criticism that rejects his model of literary interpretation.

Stefan Collini has argued that it is possible West's "professional precocity" was rooted in another important point of contrast: West had very little experience of higher education, save "an unsatisfactory year at the Academy of Dramatic Art in London" (45). West's hostility toward the generally male establishment may have been rooted in self-consciousness. "I have always felt the lack of a University education as a real handicap," West once considered, and Virginia Woolf agreed that West was characterized by her "rather dirty nails, immense vitality, bad taste, [and] suspicion of intellectuals" (*L3*, 501). I believe it is likelier that West's antagonistic strikes against Eliot were more strategic than emotional. Though I agree, as Collini later notes, that West was likely jealous of Eliot's considerable influence. West understood the power of credentialed authority and wanted her son Anthony to be educated at Oxford, where she believed he would be put in touch with "the means of self education" (*Letters*, 133). As is characteristic of West, though, there is an element of hypocrisy in her comments on Oxford. After all, West

⁴⁶ Bridget T. Chalk, "John Middleton Murry and Ethical (Anti-) Modernism." *Modernism / modernity Print Plus*, vol. 4, no. 2, 24 June 2019.

⁴⁷ Quoted in: Collini, *Common Reading: Critics, Historians, Publics* (Oxford UP, 2008), p. 44.

relished the sort of self-conscious outsiderdom that conferred upon her authorial persona and body of work a sense of freedom and lack of institutional obligation. Of West's relationship to Eliot, Collini suggests that "what she resents above all about his success [...] is the way even his slightest review essays laid claim to a critical authority that exacted a certain deference from his readers, thereby bolstering his reputation and reinforcing his authority on future occasions" (55). West was not a diarist, but she often jotted down notes in an appointment book. On one page from October 1933, alongside notes about lunch appointments and her work on *The Thinking Reed* (1936), is a mention of Eliot: "Bothered about whether I should review T. S. Eliot" (Beinecke, GEN 105, Box 38.1413). West was deliberating over writing a review of *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933), a compilation of the 1932-1933 Norton Lectures Eliot delivered at Harvard University. As there is no record of West reviewing the book, she obviously decided against it.

West's decision to not review *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* was by no means an avoidant measure. West was never content to simply advance upon a professional adversary, and critical strikes would almost always follow through with a strategic attack delivered on a public stage. Robert Blatchford, an editor of the *Clarion*, remarked of West's earliest reviews for the *Freewoman* that she could handle "the battle-axe and the scalping knife" with great dexterity.⁴⁸ George Bernard Shaw similarly commented in 1916 that "Rebecca can handle a pen as brilliantly as ever I could, and much more savagely."⁴⁹ West believed that literary criticism should be critical before

⁴⁸ Stefan Collini, *Common Reading: Critics, Historians, Publics* (Oxford UP, 2008), p. 49.

⁴⁹ George Bernard Shaw, letter to Mrs. Patrick Campbell, September 4, 1916. Quoted in Harold Orel, *The Literary Achievement of Rebecca West* (St. Martin's Press, 1986), p. 15.

complimentary and she endeavored to make unfailingly honest assessments of her peers—often to the detriment of her professional relationships and literary reputation.

Soon after the publication of *The Strange Necessity*, D. H. Lawrence wrote in support of West's aggressive criticism:

I always like you when you are on the war-path, a real good squaw for scalps. But somehow I thought you were a bit disheartened—in your article. Don't be downhearted; there's such a lot of scalps ripe for the taking, and so many would rejoice to hear that a good tomahawk was down and out [...]. No good, the battle is here—below, and it's too soon for us to look on from the heavenly balconies. So I am once more spitting on my hands—so no doubt are you. Then a war-whoop. (*Selected Letters*, 444)

Lawrence's praise reinforces the rather antagonistic critical reputation West had assumed by the late 1920s and recalls Blatchford's admiration of West's critical "scalping knife" (49). To Lawrence, West did not merely wield the tomahawk; she was the weapon itself, and her critical aggression was strong enough to strike fear in any of her contemporaries.

Though West rarely extolled the virtues of other writers, she did admire Lawrence. Her admiration seems fitting for one who tended to elide herself with those similarly misunderstood by the literary establishment. Upon Lawrence's death, West objected to the "savage and indecent" tone of memorial reviews printed in the papers and noted in a letter that Lawrence had been unfairly ignored—a fact she sought to rectify in her own reviews of his work:

I am so glad you quoted and approved the <sentence> passage about *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, because I think it was such a great and endearing effort of Lawrence's mind, and I am very conscious of how it wasn't honored by the world in the horrible reviews I am getting of this book [...]. What I hate is the sniggering about Lawrence and the actual candid joy in his death which is

expressed in review after review—particularly the illustrated weeklies and the provincial papers. The tone is savage and indecent. There is a kind of lewd hysteria about it [...]. He was right—he was and is hated. And that he was hated by the <wrong> vile people makes one revere him more—but the frightful vitality of their vileness, and the amount of it, makes one despair. (*Letters*, 130)

West had little patience for literary artifice, but she respected Lawrence’s “great and endearing effort.” That he was ridiculed by the “<wrong> vile people” for what West saw as his authenticity enraged her. In her *Elegy* (1930) to Lawrence, which was reprinted as the final chapter of *Ending in Earnest*, West describes her sadness over his death as “the general malaise one feels after a severe shock, after a loss that cannot be made good” (6). West comments that “knowledge is but a translation of reality into terms comprehensible by the human mind, a grappling with mystery” (26). West makes a similar assertion in her critical work and considers how writers can most effectively render human experience and knowledge as something comprehensible not only to readers, but to oneself. West asks in *The Strange Necessity*: “What is the meaning of this mystery of mysteries? Why does art matter? And why does it matter so much? What is this strange necessity?” (58). As West concludes of Lawrence, and perhaps so too of herself, few undertake the translation of reality into terms comprehensible by the human mind “unless they care very greatly” (*Elegy*, 26). West cared greatly about the survival of modern literature and tended to elide herself with writers like Lawrence who she believed were up to the task of supporting a new and abusive school of criticism.

Rebecca West Hits Back

Arnold Bennett’s unfavorable review of *The Strange Necessity*, with which this chapter began, was published in *The Evening Standard* on 9 August 1928. The review prompted

what West would later refer to as a “sickening business” over her first essay collection (*Letters*, 105). But what occurred between Bennett and West is not merely emblematic of West’s antagonism toward Bennett. It is a set of circumstances more broadly indicative of West’s approach to the literary marketplace.

Bennett’s review participates in a rhetorical game first established by West in *The Strange Necessity* wherein she writes to her literary “Uncle” Bennett as an outspoken but precocious niece. West’s essay reasons that Uncle Bennett “has, superficially, very little charm at all,” and that his writing is often flat and his books are “isolation hospitals full of the most feeble qualities” (203-4). Casting herself as Bennett’s literary niece allows West to assume a playful tone as she lodges critiques against his writing. Stefan Collini considers that “the extended conceit of the ‘uncles’ starts to wear thin before the end, but it allows [West] to camp up her criticism as that twittering of her seniors customarily permitted to an outrageously outspoken but affectionate ‘niece’” (49). However, West’s twittering only intensifies as she asserts that Bennett’s main gift is his simplicity of mind and his mastery of the “socially and personally mediocre” (*TSN*, 212). West’s concluding sentiment is a thinly-veiled critique of Bennett’s materialism:

He can see the tram-car passing through a suburb at twilight as the chariot of fire it veritably is. Like Wordsworth, he has triumphed over the habitual; he has not let it disguise the particle of beauty from him. Though he might never produce one single perfect or even imperfect work of art, or never produce a work of art at all, he remains an artist. (213)

In his quest for the “particle of beauty,” true artistry eludes Arnold Bennett. West appears to invite comparison between Wordsworth and Bennett. However, there is an element of critique even in her allusion to the great Romantic poet. Wordsworth famously asserts in *Lyrical Ballads* (1802) that poetry is a “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it

takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility” (111). West almost certainly had this notion in mind when she describes the pleasure of reading Pavlov’s *Conditioned Reflexes* (1926) in *The Strange Necessity*:

In reading that book one feels again and again that one is lit up by a flash of pleasure, warmed by a glow of satisfaction, which obviously cannot proceed from any sensuous excitation arising from the beauty of the manner or matter (‘With the help of injections of a suitable dose of caffeine the dog was brought back to its usual condition of wakefulness...’). When I was reading the book for the second time, on reflection I found that these emotional states persistently reviewed in my mind the memory of an incident which took place at some point in a period between seventeen and twenty-five years ago, when as a child I lived in Scotland. (122)

West reorients the nucleus of power away from the author and directs it toward readers.

This “flash of pleasure” is not produced by the source material; rather, it is a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings that takes its origin from some emotion recollected in tranquility by the reader (102). West alights upon the pleasure and power of reading to affirm that it is the reader’s task to glean pleasure and insight from a piece of literature.

Wordsworth explains that the most “successful” composition often begins with the author in such a state, but reasons that there is a modicum of power allowed to readers as well:

“whatever passions he communicates to his Reader, those passions, if his Reader’s mind be sound and vigorous, should always be accompanied with an overbalance of pleasure”

(111). In West’s construction, the reader is given greater agency and power: the beauty of Bennett’s prose does not radiate from his pen; it emerges from readers who glean a “flash of pleasure” from the work (*TSN*, 122).

In *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975), Roland Barthes considers that “what I enjoy in a narrative is not directly its content or even its structure, but rather the abrasions I

impose upon the fine surface: I read on, I skip, I look up, I dip in again” (11). So too does West take pleasure from Bennett’s fiction: “It is a success because one likes it to the extent of carrying it about with one all day, reading and re-reading little pet half-pages” (205). She adds that “it is a failure because it does nothing at all with its subject. It distils no significance from it; it merely makes a bungling statement of it” (205). Still, West concludes that despite his penchant for materialism, Uncle Bennett may remain an artist because his writing often crystallizes into “exquisite things” that represent to readers the “general texture of life” (212).

Bennett’s review of *The Strange Necessity* primarily takes aim at the collection’s titular first essay. Bennett extends West’s familial conceit and his review acts as a corrective to what he sees as West’s performative and flighty criticism. Bennett claims that *The Strange Necessity* is a dazzling failure produced by a “disorderly mind”:

I expected her to be less unsuccessful than in fact she is. She succeeds only in being bewildering. Take any page, every page, and it is certainly great fun, but the separate pages, whose numbering might be rearranged without anybody noticing it, amass themselves into enormities of tedium. If she had any conscious direction in composing the wild work, she has managed to hide nearly all trace of it. She dashes from notion to notion, from fancy to fancy, from author to author, from city to city, from moral to moral. You cannot catch up with her [...]. This essay is infested from end to end by this sort of mere irresponsible silliness. (183-84)

In Bennett’s account, West’s precocity becomes recalcitrance; her criticism lacks a “conscious direction” and her composition fails to reach any logical conclusions (183). Bennett marks her critical effort as “irresponsible silliness” and suggests that the project is “infested” with disorder (184). Bennett concludes that West’s “gifts are enviable and

indisputable. But she has not learnt how to use them. In other words, she does not know how to live. And unless and until she sets her mind in order she won't know" (185).

Bennett's was not the lone critical voice in a roomful of praise. However, it was not Bennett's review that inspired a public response to *The Strange Necessity*. Rather, it was West's defiant riposte that captured the public's attention. The "sickening business" that prompted West to take legal action against the newspaper concerned an interview between West and an *Evening Standard* reporter in the days following the publication of Bennett's remarks (*Letters*, 105). West recounted a reporter turning up on her doorstep to solicit a response to the review, and then claimed her comments had been misconstrued:

[The reporter] produced this cutting, about which I said a few things, just the things one would say. He went away. I came back to town and had a good old-fashioned attack of colitis, which kept me busy for three days. On the third day I arose, as they say in the Bible, and found that the *Evening Standard* interview had been a tissue of lies simply beyond belief, representing me as having covered Bennett with the lowest kinds of insults. On several succeeding days they had published letters insulting and deriding me for this interview, and they finished up by starting a literary competition for the readers to supply the best imaginary conversation between Bennett and myself. (*Letters*, 104)

The "lowest kinds of insults" West referred to in her letter were reasonably salacious and would explain the public outcry against her (104). Of Arnold Bennett's critical reading skills, West was quoted as saying: "He has never read anything in his life except some old French works and books he has read in his day's work for reviewing. The poor old chap has no approach. I don't want to be harsh, but he knows nothing" (Beinecke, GEN 105, Box 39.1425). West described his virtues as akin to "those of a very good solicitor's clerk," and claimed it was unlikely Bennett read *The Strange Necessity* before reviewing

it. Throughout the interview, West referred to Bennett as “poor old fellow” and “old Bennett,” and she recounted one terse meeting between the two years before:

Of course, Arnold Bennett has not thought a great lot of me for a long time now. I remember one or two things. One of them is a meal years ago when Lord Beaverbrook, Michael Arlen, Arnold Bennett and I were there, and Bennett said to me: ‘Why don’t you write a book? You ought to do so’[.] Well, I had been putting my back into a book, working with great pain and care, and it was ready to come out, and then I said: ‘You know, Mr. Bennett, I have been doing some essays’[.] The dear old thing said sternly ‘Essays aren’t work at all’. I happened to say I had been reviewing some of his and I agreed entirely. (Beinecke, GEN 105, Box 39.1425)

Emboldened by West’s angry public retort, published in *The Evening Standard* as “Rebecca West Hits Back,” the public began to issue its own responses to her work. Edward Garnett described West’s critical practice as the work of “an enterprising baby with a bucket of tar.”⁵⁰ Conrad Aiken warned that West should stop pandering to her readers and “treat her audience a little less as if it were gathered for tea.”⁵¹ These disparate images do little to paint a clear portrait of readers’ displeasure with West’s critical tome. Most of the objection appears to be to West’s person rather than her essay collection. Garnett’s metaphor rouses subsequent images of clumsiness, danger, irresponsibility and further hints at his belief that *The Strange Necessity* will do more harm to West than to anyone else. Though the baby may be enterprising, it cannot be left

⁵⁰ Edward Garnett (1868-1937) was an English publisher and critic. Garnett was friendly with Joseph Conrad, Ford Madox Ford, and D. H. Lawrence. Garnett edited Lawrence’s novel *Sons and Lovers* (1913) and Lawrence dedicated the book to him. Quoted in Carl Rollyson, *Rebecca West: A Life* (Scribner, 1996), p. 126.

⁵¹ Conrad Aiken (1889-1973) was an American writer and Critic. Aiken won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1930. He was a lifelong friend of T. S. Eliot’s. Ibid.

to carry on unimpeded. Indeed, the image begs the question: who gave the baby a bucket of tar in the first place? Who has authorized West's haphazard critical experiment?

It was not only fellow writers and critics who commented on the article. Many *Evening Standard* readers similarly expressed their displeasure with West's comments on Bennett and wrote directly to the newspaper in support of Bennett. One reader lauded Bennett for "standing up against the arrogance and 'push and go' so characteristic of our present-day feminism, which flourishes mainly by men's good-humoured tolerance—a masculine quality very imperfectly understood by women."⁵² The author of another letter was preoccupied with West's apparently superficial intellectualism: "The cheap gibe of Mr. Bennett having 'the virtues of a very good solicitor's clerk' sounds very smart, but I'll wager my hat that Miss West couldn't tell us in plain language what she really means by this MOT D'ESPIRIT" (Beinecke, GEN 105, Box 39.1425). The anonymous reader believed West was full of witticisms but lacked substantive critical judgment (Box 39.1425). Another reader promised he would refrain from taking West's "childishly petulant" attack on Bennett seriously unless she produces work on par with *Riceyman Steps* (1923) or *Lord Raingo* (1926). Until then, the reader would content himself with the knowledge that "Mr. Bennett was [right] in HIS remarks a week ago!" (Box 39.1425). The final letter to the editor quoted in West's legal proceedings was the most sexist:

Miss Rebecca West's epigram regarding Mr. George Moore and the sewing-machine has been offered twice to your readers. It would be clever if it had not happened to be an unconscious plagiarism. 'That man has the mind of a sewing-machine,' exclaimed Mr. W.B. ~~Years~~ Yeats, when someone referred to Mr. H.G. Wells. The remark was printed a year or so ago, and was widely quoted in the

⁵² Quoted in Bonnie Kime Scott, *Refiguring Modernism* (Indiana UP, 1995), p. 29.

press. Uneducated feminine brains are notorious pickers-up of unconsidered trifles. (Box 39.1425)

The claim of plagiarism is made sharper by the suggestion that West did not consciously plagiarize Yeats. Rather, her “uneducated feminine brain” mistakenly reproduced the quip (Box 39.1425). The letter-writer frames West’s intellectual failure as an invariable result of her sex.

In the background of this legal muddle and professional scrape was another personal element. West was not only defending herself against Bennett and the public opinion. In 1928, *The Evening Standard* was owned by Max Beaverbrook, a Canadian-American newspaper magnate with whom West had an unhappy affair years prior. In her letter to Fannie Hurst describing the lawsuit, West recalled *The Evening Standard* being one of Beaverbrook’s papers and considered that all the “unsavory business” regarding the misappropriated interview “tallies with the extraordinary behaviour that is reported concerning Max these days” (*Letters*, 105). Though their affair had been reasonably brief and largely unhappy, West claimed in 1925 that she had “loved him for seven years” and felt “so dirty, so fouled, [and] so infected” by his rejection of her love (75). It is possible that West sought to exact some retribution against Beaverbrook by taking legal action against his newspaper, and Bennett was merely a convenient target.

West’s account of the misappropriated interview is reasonably suspicious. West claimed to have had no prior knowledge of the review until the journalist turned up on her doorstep. However, West was a loyal customer of Durrants Press Cuttings Agency and received deliveries of any press clipping that included her name.⁵³ West kept

⁵³ Many of these newspaper clippings are held in the Rebecca West Papers at the Beinecke Library at Yale University. See: GEN MSS 105, Series II, Box 37.1390.

numerous clippings from August 1928, several of which refer to Bennett's review and her retort. Durrants also cut and delivered Bennett's article from *The Evening Standard*, so it is rather unlikely that West saw the article for the first time when the reporter appeared on her doorstep. One cutting delivered to West on 16 August 1928 alluded to the "literary duel" between West and Bennett. Another, titled "Thrust and Parry," from the *Lancashire Daily Post* relishes the excitement of the literary duel and claimed that West and Bennett were "indulging in the ancient prerogative of their profession (Beinecke, GEN 105, Box 31.1263). The hard words which they have been casting at each other by way of essay, review and interview have no doubt given them a certain sharp delight, and in the encounter their admiring readers have enjoyed a chuckle too." The news of the legal action reached the Continent as well, and Italian newspapers delighted in reporting the "clamoroso processo Inglese per una polemica letteraria": a sensational English trial over a literary controversy (Box 31.1263). Though these various accounts of the proceedings generally come from small, local papers and may not accurately represent the London literary scene's response to the dealings, they do indicate a broad public interest in the sparring. What's more, West's collection of cuttings seems evidence enough that she was carefully following the public response to her interview in *The Evening Standard*. West issued a public statement amid the growing spectacle:

I wish to protest in the strongest terms possible against inaccuracy. I deny utterly that I called Mr. Bennett 'poor old fellow,' 'funny old chap,' 'dear old thing,' or 'Old Bennett.' It happened that when your reporter handed me the clipping of Mr. Bennett's review of my book I said, never having seen it before, 'Oh, what has - - got to say about it?' using an affectionate nickname which a friend of mine who is devotedly attached to Mr. Bennett applies to him. (Box 39.1425)

West's private writings from around the same time similarly refute her insistence that she meant to address Bennett as an old friend. West commented in one letter that "Arnold Bennett, whom I have always loathed, and who always has loathed me, wrote me a very hostile review of *The Strange Necessity* in the *Evening Standard*" (*Letters*, 104). Years later, West told Jane Marcus, the American literary scholar, that she had really intended to sue Bennett, "presumably to make money in his defeat," but settled on taking legal action against the newspaper instead (qtd. in Scott, 264).⁵⁴

In the August court proceedings between "Rebecca West (Spinster). Plaintiff" and "Evening Standard Co., Ltd. Defendants," West's lawyer argued that the interview was "falsely and/or maliciously and/or recklessly and/or negligently drafted and/or composed by the Defendants in London and was never submitted to the Plaintiff for verification or approval." In the statement of claim, West's lawyers did not refute the fact that West gave the interview. They argued that the interview was not submitted to West for verification before publication and thus made a claim of gross negligence:

THE [sic] words complained hereof meant and were calculated and intended and understood to mean (as appears from the issues of the *Evening Standard* hereinafter mentioned) that the Plaintiff was a vindictive and silly and impertinent and ill-bred person and an unbalanced and spiteful and uneducated and incompetent Writer and literary critic of no worth or merit in her profession. (7)

This phrasing is curiously similar to the language of Bennett's original review. Bennett argues that West is "unsuccessful," "bewildering," "disorderly," and full of "mere irresponsible silliness" (183-84). In her case against *The Evening Standard*, West's

⁵⁴ Jane Marcus (1938-2015) was a literary scholar who worked with Rebecca West in the early 1980s. Marcus produced an edited volume of West's early journalistic writings. See: *The Young Rebecca: Writings of Rebecca West, 1911-17* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989).

lawyers appear to function as a mouthpiece for West to address Bennett directly. The comments accuse Bennett of launching a calculated attack against West and her critical work. It is apparent that West used the court case to do what she was otherwise unable to: challenge Arnold Bennett in a public arena and mitigate the damage to her professional reputation. West not only won a settlement from *The Evening Standard*; the newspaper was required to pay her legal fees as well.

***The Strange Necessity* (1928)**

It seems rather fitting that a book at the center of such a public legal muddle was composed in a similar spirit of chaos. West moved to a flat at 80 Onslow Gardens, Kensington, in December 1927 with her young son, Anthony. In a letter to Anthony's father and West's erstwhile lover, H.G. Wells, she described the inconvenient timing of the move: "I have been spending about two hours a day on busses and taxis—and I am finishing my book of criticisms. I am so tired I could cry" (*Letters*, 99). West's critical essay collection was soon published by Jonathan Cape as *The Strange Necessity*, though its appearance on the literary market had been delayed by near-constant interruptions of the mundane, personal variety: "the painters, telephone authorities, and gas companies" who all conspired to distract West from her writing (98-99). *The Strange Necessity* may have been one of West's most expeditious critical ventures. West admitted to spending only three or four months writing the long titular essay: "I wrote *The Strange Necessity* in <three> [four] months *and* moved into a new flat *and* minded G.B [Stern] in her horrific breakdown," she mused soon after the fact (102).⁵⁵ West's haste is similarly evident in

⁵⁵ G. B. Stern (1890-1973) was an English writer with whom West maintained a close friendship.

the scrawled handwriting of her drafts and the emphatic notes to her typist in the margins of the two notebooks in which she handwrote the collection.

West originally conceived of *The Strange Necessity* as a treatise on literature and aesthetics—a single essay to be called “A Hypothesis” (Beinecke, GEN 105, Box 31.1261). Despite her intention to write “The Strange Necessity” as the first essay on James Joyce’s *Ulysses* “to be done neither praying nor vomiting,” West’s critical project soon germinated “from 6,000 to 30,000 words,” and from one essay into a full critical essay collection (*Letters*, 98-99). In letters that refer to the collection, West placed great emphasis on the importance of “The Strange Necessity,” and regarded the other chapters as another sort of necessity. West understood that the book would not be published as a single critical essay on Joyce, so she allowed her “essay on art [to be] bound in” with a selection of her *Herald Tribune* articles (101). West delighted in preparing “The Strange Necessity” for publication regardless of her personal strife, and she enjoyed marketing the experimental essay. West asked in another letter to Cape that he “see to it that it’s treated as a *technical, highbrow* book [.] Reviewable really as a *book on psychology*” (99).⁵⁶ However, it is difficult to pinpoint the degree to which West was involved in the selection of the subsequent chapters. West makes no mention of selecting or arranging the chapters herself, and few edits were made to any of the articles. The one exception to this pattern is “The Tosh Horse” chapter which West likely selected herself. West explains in the prefatory note to the collection, she has included “The Tosh Horse,” which first appeared in *The New Statesman*, because “phrases contained therein are persistently quoted and almost as persistently ascribed to other authors” (7). As for the

⁵⁶ *The Strange Necessity* was priced at 10s 6d, as was *The Common Reader: Second Series* one year later.

other chapters, West explained in a letter that the book was dedicated to Irita van Doren only because she had been “very decent in collecting the stuff for me” (102).⁵⁷ In October 1926, van Doren commissioned West to write “Uncle Bennett” for the *New York Herald Tribune Books*, so it is certainly possible that the piece reappeared in *The Strange Necessity* thanks to van Doren rather than West.

In this section I will examine three of the lesser-studied chapters from the collection to argue that the critical work assembled in *The Strange Necessity* offers a nuanced depiction of West’s critical aims at this point in her career. Specifically, I will examine “The Classic Artist,” “The Long Chain of Criticism,” and “Tribute to Some Minor Artist.” West discusses in “The Classic Artist” the value of experimentation, and she comments on the relationship between art and literature by using Willa Cather and D. H. Lawrence as examples. “The Long Chain of Criticism” serves as an example of West’s adherence to and divergence from literary tradition, and the chapter also extends her critical commentary on T. S. Eliot. In the final chapter of the collection, “Tribute to Some Minor Artist,” West situates herself as a Baudelairean flâneuse who walks through Paris and the South of France offering literary judgment on contemporary writers while also drawing a self-portrait of an under-valued artist.

Even if West had minimal involvement in arranging the chapters, to examine “The Strange Necessity” as a standalone piece would be rather shortsighted. After all, West produced each individual article for *The New York Herald Tribune* over a relatively brief time period (roughly 1926-1927). Additionally, West places great emphasis on the importance of interconnections between art, literature and criticism in many of the essays.

⁵⁷ Irita van Doren (1891-1966) was the editor of the *New York Herald Tribune* from 1924-1963.

She also presents the idea of a “common fund” of experience: a repository of individual sensory experience that a writer or artist can draw upon (*TSN*, 172). Laura Cowan has argued that “this ‘common fund’ of experience [is] true to the democratic and inclusive impulses that inform all of [West’s] works” (90). West concludes that “what the artist needs is to live in a world unified by common experience and common art” (172). This idea also hints at West’s desire to explore collective experience and accumulated memory. To examine only one essay from an expansive collection limits the degree to which we can trace out some of the connections West develops. For example, in the marginalia of “The Strange Necessity,” West observes that “this is the business of literature. The experiments themselves form close parallels to imaginative works of art” (Beinecke, GEN 105, Box 31). In the third chapter of the collection, “The Classic Artist,” West similarly concludes that “the feat of making a composition out of the juxtaposition of different states of being” is a great accomplishment (216). If we understand each distinct chapter as a state of being, then the true imaginative work of art is only revealed when the experiments are drawn together and examined in unison.

“The Classic Artist”

West begins “The Classic Artist” with a description of Willa Cather’s novel *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927). West believes that Cather’s artistic talent lies in her ability to “make a composition out of the juxtaposition of different states of being” (216). To West, Cather is “the most sensuous of writers”; she “builds her imagined world almost as solidly as our five senses build the universe around us” (215). West characterizes Cather’s work as the world-building of a sensory artist. Cather transforms

abstract sensory experience into bright, tangible images: “small conical hills, red as brick dust,” and the “yellow waves of petrified sand” among a “land of carnelian hills that become lavender in the storm” (215-16). West extends her commentary on the analogous nature of literary composition and artistic production by noting



Fig. 1. Velázquez, Diego Rodríguez de Silva y. *The Spinners, or the Fable of Arachne*. 1655-1660, Museo del Prado, Madrid.

similarities between Cather’s composition and Velázquez’s artistic process:

That feat of making a composition out of the juxtaposition of different states of being, which Velasquez [sic] was so fond of practicing, when he showed the tapestry-makers working in shadow, and some of their fellows working behind them in shadows honeycombed with golden motes, and others still further back working in the white wine of full sunlight, is a diversion of [Cather’s] also. (216)

The painting West alludes to is Velázquez’s *Las Hilendaras* (c. 1657), or *The Spinners*.

In the foreground of the painting are several women weaving an elaborate textile in a tapestry workshop. In the background of the picture hangs a completed tapestry and another group of women examining the handiwork. This type of self-reflexive artwork is characteristic of the formal technique of *mise en abyme*. Werner Wolf explains that *mise en abyme* is a transgeneric phenomenon that highlights the contrasting effect of “two different, vertically (hierarchically) ‘stacked’ levels” (57). In *Ending in Earnest*, West

analyzes the work of French symbolist André Gide who popularized the term in the twentieth century and used Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656) to demonstrate this mirroring effect.

Scholars generally read *Las Hilendaras* as an allusion to Book Six of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and thus interpret the painting as a "narrative on artistic progression and competitiveness."⁵⁸ West was rather taken with the painting and it often appears in her nonfiction work, perhaps most famously in her 1916 critical account of Henry James where she imagines Velázquez's work on the painting as an anticipation of miraculous creation: "The artist at the moment of creation must be like a saint awaiting the embrace of God, scourging appetite out of him, shrinking from sensation as though it were a sin, deleting self, lifting his consciousness like an empty cup to receive the heavenly draught" (94). That same year, West described the picture in a newspaper article she wrote after visiting a munitions factory. In "The Cordite Makers," West compares the methodical work of the women cordite makers to that of the weavers in the painting:

This, in all the world, must be the place where war and grace are closest linked. Without, a strip of garden runs beside the huts, gay with shrubs and formal with a sundial. Within there is a group of girls that composes into so beautiful a picture that one remembers that the most glorious painting in the world, Velázquez's *The Weavers*, shows women working just like this. (*The Young Rebecca*, 381-82)

West praises in *Henry James* Velázquez's disregard for "sensation" in pursuit of "lifting his consciousness" to receive a "heavenly draught" (92). West believes that Velázquez de-prioritizes the representation of sensory experience in order to reach for something divine and illusory. West is also intrigued by Velázquez's ability to take the singular

⁵⁸ Javier Portús Pérez, *Fábulas De Velázquez: mitología e Historia Sagrada En El Siglo De Oro* (Museo Nacional Del Prado, 2007), p. 337.

work of the women in the painting and compose “the most glorious painting in the world” (382). To West, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts; the development of singular experience into a fully-realized composition is the work of a great artist.

West indicates in her comparison of Cather and Velázquez that Cather’s work falls short of this artistry. Cather may attempt a similar feat, but it is a “diversion” of hers, rather than a practiced skill (*TSN*, 216). West affirms later in the chapter that a successful critical method might look something like Cather’s synthesis of sensory experience into a digestible whole. However, West’s admiration for Cather and her novel is tempered by her acknowledgment of Cather’s limitations:

She arranges with mastery such phenomena of life as the human organism can easily collect through the most ancient and most perfected mechanisms of body and mind. But must not such an art, admirable as it is, be counted as inferior to an art which accepts no such limitations, which deals with the phenomena of life collected by the human organism with such difficulty that to the overstrained consciousness they appear only as vague intimations, and the effort of obtaining them develops new mechanisms? Ought not art that tries to make humanity superhuman be esteemed above art that leaves humanity exactly as it is? One is reminded constantly of that issue while one is reading *Death Comes for the Archbishop* by its similarity in material to some of the recent work of Mr. D. H. Lawrence. (221-22)

Cather is limited by her emphasis on the bodily, the natural, the human. To deal primarily with the “phenomena of life” may be a noble task, but it is a task with clear delineations and obvious limits (221). In an essay collection bookended by her own experimental criticism, West posits that it would ultimately be more useful for the artist, the writer, and the critic to strive to make “humanity superhuman” (222). West considers Lawrence’s literary experiments more effective than Cather’s material beauty. For example, in one

chapter of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Cather describes a mysterious cave with a “crack in the floor through which sounds the roaring of an underground river” (223). The spitting and hissing of the river calls to mind the nearby pueblos of Pecos, “which was reputed to keep a giant serpent out in the mountains” (223). Despite her beautiful images and the “splendid portentousness” of the cave interlude, Cather’s narrative remains fixed in the cave (223). As a point of contrast, West argues that Lawrence “would have been through the crack in the floor after the river. Irritably and with partial failure, but with greater success than any previous aspirant, he would have tried to become the whole caboodle” (224). West privileges the experimental nature of Lawrence’s fiction and applauds his desire to reach something yet unknown to readers. West finds in Lawrence’s failures incremental progress that will be of use to future generations. Lawrence’s work represents a disruption of the status-quo and such disruptions are emblematic of West’s own critical aims.

In “The Classic Artist,” West asks readers a prescient question of Lawrence’s art: “Does not such transcendental courage, does not ambition to extend consciousness beyond its present limitations and elevate man above himself, entitle his art to be ranked as more important than that of Miss Cather?” (224). West insists in “The Strange Necessity” that we must “transfer our attention to the proceedings of more developed types of humanity” (117). West poses similar questions regarding rank, effort, and ambition throughout the essay. How is Lawrence’s ambition and effort judged against Cather’s sensory achievements? Of greater importance to West is how experimental criticism is judged in a market that values tradition and impersonality.

“The Long Chain of Criticism”

Although *The Strange Necessity* represents an ambitious critical experiment that outwardly appears to reject convention, West had no particular quarrel with the idea of literary tradition as such. Paradoxically, West’s articulation of the relationship between criticism and literary tradition is not altogether dissimilar to Eliot’s explanation in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” that “the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order” (44). West similarly concludes in “The Long Chain of Criticism” that “criticism is a process that ought to be continuous,” and critics hold a “chain whose other end is held by Euripides and Sophocles” (266). Eliot values textual tradition; his essay considers how present-day writers are inspired by art objects of the past:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical criticism. The necessity that he shall conform, that he shall cohere, is not one-sided; what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. (44)

Eliot enacts a relationship between artists of the present and past. However, he focuses on how “existing monuments” change and are changed by new works of art—not how the artist changes and is changed by “dead poets and artists” (44). This type of criticism requires an exchange of self-expression for a world that objectifies the individual and the individual’s artistic creations as part of a vast and impersonal system of tradition.

“Tradition and the Individual Talent” also describes a sort of reciprocal relationship between past and present: though the past may inform the present, the development of new works simultaneously shifts our understanding of the past. In this way, Eliot imagines a vast network of literary interconnections that are constantly in flux.

Alternatively, West envisions criticism making linear progress. One end of the chain remains fixed in the past as critics add links and eventually pull it forward through history to the present. West’s sense of tradition relies upon the development of emotional connections and links the “heritage of our past” to the present moment (267). As Laura Cowan has argued, West tends to promote “process” over “product” (9). Specifically, West describes how critics must build upon personal impressions and interpretations:

There is need for an outside observer who will stand clear and look down on the proceedings as from a height. He is able to see the new angles of the spiritual situations because, as all human beings are unique, his conflict will not be the same as the artist’s. But because he has, if he has sufficiently vital need to make his criticism of value, a conflict of his own, his view will also have its limitations; which however, can be corrected by some other critic who will come along and read both the work and the criticism and in the light of both and his own state of mind can provide yet another interpretation of the conflict. (266)

West rejects an Eliotic notion of impersonality as her critical method is almost wholly dependent on the expression and development of individual responses to a text. Eliot distanced himself from impressionistic criticism and writing: he specifically describes poetry in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” as “not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality” (52-53). West, on the other hand, argues that any critical account of a text is an accumulation of individual impressions that are drawn together to represent a more complete interpretation. Each individual state of mind has the power to

reorient the reader's gaze and offer a new account of the "spiritual situation" (266). In this way, West's method similarly accounts for some degree of reciprocity between past and present—the heritage of the past is fleshed out as each new observer or critic adds a link to the chain of criticism.

The chapter itself is a review of *American Criticism, 1926*, an essay collection published by Harcourt Brace and edited by William Drake.⁵⁹ West spends much of the chapter describing the failings of the contributors whom she finds "ungracious to the gracious past" (265). West considers their essays not as criticism but as "ruptures of tradition" because they "sacrifice the heritage of [the] past to a smart phrase, and pull down the reputations of our great men in a glib and facile epigram" (267). Agnes Repplier's essay "is graceful enough about nothing in particular," and she spends too long pondering "why Mr. Yeats and not Mr. Thomas Hardy received the Nobel Prize in 1923" (258).⁶⁰ Repplier suggests that Hardy was disqualified by his "flimsy intellectual type of pacifism" during the First World War (258). West finds Repplier's comments superficial, "compact with error," and insensitive to the "greatness" of Hardy (258-59). West rebukes the American writer for mischaracterizing Hardy and adopts a nationalistic rhetoric to devalue Repplier's essay. "We in England are past pondering this [Nobel Prize] matter," West explains (258). West posits that Hardy's genius germinated from England itself and the country has shared in his development: "The greatness of Thomas Hardy was very largely due to the intensity with which he has learned such lessons as were taught him by the soil where he was born" (259).

⁵⁹ William A. Drake (1899-1965) was an American editor and screenwriter. His film *Grand Hotel* (1932) won an Academy Award for Best Picture.

⁶⁰ Agnes Repplier (1855-1950) was an American essayist who published thirteen essay collections, along with several novels and short-story collections.

Of course, West is not wholly generous to Hardy. One need only turn back to the previous chapter, “Two Kinds of Memory,” for West’s assessment of Hardy’s poetry: “One of Mr. Hardy’s ancestors must have been a weeping willow,” West writes. “There are pages and pages in his collected poems which are simply plain narratives in ballad form of how an unenjoyable time was had by all” (249). As is often the case with West, she fails to adhere to the critical guidelines she applies to her contemporaries. Though West broadly concludes that “over bad criticism one has a sense of real calamity,” her comments on Replier also hint at West’s disdain for outsiders who comment on English literature and tradition. She describes the specific emotional response to this sort of critical malevolence as such:

It will help, perhaps, if we try to recognize the particular kind of emotion we are feeling, and ask ourselves if we ever feel the same emotion on other occasions. We will find, I think, that we do; and that the occasion is when some one, a clumsy servant or visitor, breaks some treasured family possession. A sweep of the wrist, that Bristol decanter, that Nailsea vase is gone forever. Something beautiful that has lasted a long time is at an end. The man who made it, the hundreds of people who have tenderly appreciated it and guarded it, are insulted by its fracture. (265)

West casts Replier as a “clumsy servant or visitor” who has broken a treasured possession with a thoughtless “sweep of the wrist” (265). West imagines heirlooms made of Bristol or Nailsea glass, emphasizing fine English craftsmanship mishandled by a clumsy household visitor. In much the same way, West decries the “rupture of tradition” produced by American critics who “take the end of the chain [of criticism] with which patient critics have linked the common mind to the harmony of Henry James and Thomas Hardy and Jane Austen and they let it fall into the darkness” (267). West spends much of

the chapter describing her understanding of critical tradition. West's critique reminds us that she wishes to write these figures out of an English literary tradition and remove them from the "long chain of criticism" (257). West's emphasis on the personal impressions does however engender a degree of variability in her criticism because it is developed from personal experience and expression.

"Tribute to Some Minor Artist"

Recalling West's desire to write criticism in a "personal, almost fictional framework," it is worth examining the rather circuitous route that connects the essay "The Strange Necessity" and the collection's final chapter, "Tribute to Some Minor Artist." In nearly every chapter—save the first and the last—West invokes the indefinite pronoun "one": "There is no end to the pleasant debts one owes to that Mr. Ford Madox Ford," she muses in "Gallions Reach" (229). West tends toward the collective and speaks generally about themes and questions that affect her and her readership alike. West asks in "Two Kinds of Memory" why "one at times prefers writers of the last century to the writers of this?" (243). West concludes that one generally only prefers writers of the previous century when subject to the "bad writing" characteristic of Theodore Dreiser or Sacheverell Sitwell (244). At the outset of "The Strange Necessity," West begins with a personal, almost fictional narrative in which she arrives in Paris and wanders the streets before entering a bookshop to make a purchase:

I shut the bookshop door behind me and walked slowly down the street that leads from the Odéon, to the Boulevard St. Germain in the best of all cities, reading in the little volume which had there been sold to me, not exactly pretentiously, indeed with a matter-of-fact briskness, yet with a sense of there being something

on hand different from an ordinary commercial transaction: as they sell pious whatnots in a cathedral porch. (13)

The book in question is Joyce's *Poems Penyeach* (1927). West deems the book some of Joyce's "worst" work—a collection of writing that reminds one that "the mighty have fallen" (14). Still, West gleans pleasure from owning the collection and snidely describes having purchased it as one might buy a rosary or other religious talisman at Notre Dame. West also enjoys reading "Alone," an "exceedingly bad poem," and even relishes the process of communicating the negative emotional response that the book has inspired. West develops her commentary on Joyce to consider the strange relationships between art, literature, and human consciousness.

In the opening pages of "The Strange Necessity," West pauses her fictive walk to pause over the "gross sentimentality" in Joyce's work (15). As West teases out what precisely she means by "sentimental," another image appears before her: an image of "another part of France," the small village where West spends her summers (15). West situates "Tribute to Some Minor Artist" in this very part of France. West returns to the personal, almost fictional style of the first chapter to describe her summer in the Riviera:

This summer I am living on the French Riviera, which does not mean what you might think it must. One alights at a station at which only the slowest trains ever stop, and walks through a little village which has the disorder of a studio, whose inhabitants move about with the slouching and dishevelled aspect of artists at work, and have a right to look so, since they are practising an art in merely living. (327)

West then imagines the architect who might have designed the house in which she is staying. Thus begins her tribute to the minor artist: a nameless provincial architect with an "air of being a martyr" (333). The famous English ecologist G. Evelyn Hutchinson

was a friend of West's and was called upon to write an introductory note to the 1987 Virago Press edition of *The Strange Necessity*. In his introduction, Hutchinson describes the final chapter as "a rather puzzling but beautiful piece" (xii). To call the chapter "puzzling" is fair; the myriad details West includes about the nameless architect, the other house staff, and herself do not obviously coalesce into one cogent narrative. But when reviewed with broader consideration of West's critical aims, the final chapter serves an important purpose in highlighting West's deep sense of authorial insecurity alongside her somewhat paradoxical desire to write a public tribute to another minor artist: the literary critic Rebecca West.

The architect first appears through an object of his own creation. In her narrative, West approaches the house and describes the meticulously designed structure. "There is indeed nothing at all accidental about this place," West considers (330). Upon entering the house, West views the staircase and imagines the man who designed it:

That staircase is not only illuminated, it is illuminating. For immediately on seeing it one perceives in that unnumbered dimension which is the imagination the figure of the architect who designed it and who chose the incredible gate. So solid does it appear that almost it obscures some of the trails of bougainvillea that surround the glass doors with snippets of pale magenta paper: a tall and slender personage carrying himself with a deliberate stoop because of the early nineteenth century Romantics' contentions between phthisis and the arts has never been repudiated in provincial France, wearing a moustache which trails like a delicate fern, a flowing tie which says he is an artist, a wildness of the pupil of the eye which says the same thing as the tie, and is as purely an arranged external device. There is just a suggestion of repressed but dominant horse-sense about him. (331)

West's provincial architect embodies all the physical qualities of a beleaguered artist desperate to make a name for himself. He stoops in the fashion of a tubercular Keatsian hero and cannot mask the wild passion in his gaze. Yet, despite all the physical signifiers of his artistry, it is the staircase itself that is "illuminated and illuminating" (331). The portrait of the artist is first roused by taking in his art. Though there is something ridiculous about the architect, he has common sense and a desire to build something "fantastic" (331). West wrote criticism that emphasized a personal, emotional response to a text and did not require the critic to dissolve into an illusory presence hidden behind layers of theory. West and her personal, almost fictional critical framework are rather like the architect and his staircase. West's criticism is patently her own; her impressions and biases are discernable in every chapter, and to read through the collection is illuminating. Immediately on reading it, one perceives in that unnumbered dimension which is the imagination the figure of the critic who wrote it.

West's self-consciousness is similarly evident in the figure of the architect. He laments his "obscure parentage and lack of fortune and an early marriage," and he wonders "what might have happened if his talent had not been hampered" by those mitigating factors (332-33). I do not wish to offer a reductive comparison of West and her architect; however, there are certain commonalities worth noting. West's parentage, for example, was similarly troubled. Born to a Scottish mother and an Anglo-Irish father, West spent much of her childhood recovering from the loss of her father after he abandoned the family in London and retreated to Liverpool where he later died in a boarding house. West's mother, Isabella Fairfield, was a classically trained pianist who abandoned a burgeoning musical career upon her marriage. West considered of her early

years that “the whole of life was extremely uncomfortable for us at that time” (*Paris Review*). When West contracted tuberculosis in 1907, she was forced to leave George Watson’s Ladies’ College in Edinburgh and did not continue her education. West was not hampered by an early marriage; she was thirty-seven when she married Henry Andrews, a London Banker. However, West was just twenty-two when she gave birth to her son, and her letters often alluded to the burdens of maternal responsibility and her reluctance to be financially reliant on Wells’s inconstant generosity.⁶¹ When considering West in light of the nameless architect, it is also worth noting that West herself was in effect nameless: she was born Cecily Fairfield and adopted the pseudonym Rebecca West after seeing Henrik Ibsen’s *Rosmersholm* (1886). Though it seems fitting that West adopted the name of a dramatic heroine, she told the *Paris Review* that she had chosen the name for “not really any profound reason. It was just to get a pseudonym.”

West’s critical persona is most evident in her descriptions of the architect’s subtle but significant genius as juxtaposed with the other characters introduced in the chapter. One character is a famous dramatist with whom the architect is unfavorably compared. However, West makes clear that it is the architect whose talent should be celebrated by the public. The famous dramatist “has no idiosyncrasy, because he has no individual vision of reality to become dynamic” (341). The dramatist relies on “the happy laughter of the theatre audience” to inspire his ambition, though he really has only a “passion for the average” (342). Meanwhile, within the architect is a “nucleus of a creative vortex [...], a spot where his individual vision of reality had become dynamic, [and] was swirling

⁶¹ In a 1923 letter to Sally Melville, West explained that she was “miserable as Hell” with Wells, but continued their romantic relationship because Wells had recently agreed to settle £20,000 on Anthony, the same amount he willed to his legitimate children (*Letters*, 58).

around the general matter of his mental being so that it was precipitating in significant forms” (341). Is the architect, then, not the truer artist of the two? West considers that although the dramatist will be better-known and his middling creative work eternally celebrated, it is to the architect to whom the masses owe a greater debt. As West concludes her narrative, she imagines walking through a garden of the architect’s design. “Because of the secret garden in the architect’s heart one has at last a secret garden,” West writes. “There is possibly nothing more necessary” (338).

Ending in Earnest: A Literary Log (1931)

Ending in Earnest: A Literary Log is one of Rebecca West’s most neglected works. Victoria Glendinning’s authoritative biography of West relegates any mention of the book to a handful of footnotes.⁶² Bernard Schweizer’s *Rebecca West Today* (2006), contains a single, brief mention of *Ending in Earnest*.⁶³ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s recent Norton Reader, *Feminist Literary Theory and Criticism* (2007), mentions West’s essay collections but mistitles one and describes West as the author of “Strange Necessity” and “Ending in Earnest” (137). The truncated title is no great oversight. Yet, it does hint at an accepted scholarly tendency to ignore the essay collection or to make quick generalizations about it—not only in Rebecca West scholarship, but in broader conversations about canonical modernist criticism. *The Strange Necessity* is certainly a flashier critical object: its titular essay is unlike any other works of modernist criticism and even its prolixity is enviable. However, *Ending in Earnest* arguably offers a more

⁶² *Ending in Earnest* is not indexed in *Rebecca West: A Life* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987). However, it is included in a list of works, and is referred to several times in the source notes.

⁶³ See Margaret D. Stetz, “Rebecca West, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of Oscar Wilde” in *Rebecca West Today* (University of Delaware Press, 2006), p. 167.

detailed representation of West's critical persona. *The Strange Necessity* is comprised of twelve chapters, and "The Strange Necessity" accounts for fifty percent of the collection. *Ending in Earnest* has forty-two chapters of varying but mostly equal length. All the chapters were articles formerly published in *The Bookman*, a New York literary journal that ceased publication in 1933.

The real significance of *Ending in Earnest* may be found in West's performance of critical authority throughout the text. Though West is provocative in *The Strange Necessity*, and in much of her other nonfiction, she counterbalances her provocations with the rhetorical modesty found in chapters like "Uncle Bennett," or in the layered allusions of "The Strange Necessity" and "Tribute to Some Minor Artist." West introduces herself as an experienced critic and canon-maker in *Ending in Earnest* and transforms her rhetorical modesty into a rhetoric of candor with which she relates her literary opinions to readers. Throughout *Ending in Earnest*, West pointedly examines the contemporary critical landscape to offer course corrections for anyone who wishes to enter the literary market as a critic or novelist. Though the subjects of the chapters are varied, and the tone occasional, West's critical power reaches its height as she instructs readers to cast off the "most influential English critics," as their favor will always remain with novels that resemble "tepid cups of sweetened tea" (203). Because the collection is so expansive, I will examine two chapters as set-pieces that are indicative of West's critical style. The first, West's chapter on André Gide, typifies this style. West develops her rather negative impression of Gide's fiction into a broad assessment of modern English criticism. West concludes that the English habit of praising mediocre work reveals the insecurity of English critics who fear a loss of authority in the modern world. The second chapter I

examine is “The Dead Hand,” which similarly builds upon West’s opinion of English criticism to argue that there is a chasm between critics of the “old manner” and critics of the “new manner” (39). West casts herself in both chapters as an experienced authority who is guiding readers and simultaneously warning fellow critics of the new order.

Ending in Earnest was the result of a sustained critical effort. Whereas West admitted to spending only a few months on *The Strange Necessity*, she spent several years writing and revising articles for *Ending in Earnest*. Notes made in her appointment book throughout 1930 reflect West’s struggle to produce anything useful for the collection, and similarly note the effect that personal turmoil had on her professional activity. On 10 January 1930, West wrote:

I need to write ‘Criticism’ article.

Cant.

Letter from H.G. accusing me of neglecting Anthony. Got upset.

Fear.

(Beinecke, GEN 105, Box 38.1410)

When the relationship between Wells and West ended in 1923, West spent several months in America on a lecture tour—a practice she kept up throughout her career to earn money. By 1928, West established a corporation in America to shield her from paying taxes in two countries. The “West Prose Corporation,” named at the suggestion of West’s American agent George Bye, enabled her to keep her profits in America but to draw a salary if necessary (Beinecke, GEN 105, Box 8.306). Though West disliked her corporation’s name—she thought it recalled “a company formed to build bungalows on some dull place on Long Island called West Prose”—it suited her financial purposes as

she was soon able to pay off outstanding bank debts in England (*Letters*, 109). West she was no longer financially dependent on Wells for an income by the time she published her second essay collection. Yet, their relationship remained contentious thanks to their varying opinions on the care of their son. West described in a letter to Bertrand Russell the “jealous” and “hostile” attitude Wells maintained toward Anthony, and she similarly recalled how Wells “prevented [her] from doing much work,” and distracted her from her writing (115). According to West, Wells took a peculiar pleasure in “advertising that [Anthony] was his illegitimate child,” and would only agree to pay his school fees if “he was described at school as H.G. Wells’ illegitimate son” (116). Wells and West continued to exchange terse letters over Anthony’s education through the 1920s and 1930s over West’s insistence that she be named a beneficiary to Anthony’s inheritance.⁶⁴

West’s attention to *Ending in Earnest* was also diverted by her impending marriage to Henry Andrews. West noted that she was “almost dead with overwork,” as she attempted to write fiction, make progress on *Ending in Earnest*, and settle various personal matters before the wedding (124). West’s private consideration of her critical work belied any public show of confidence. She complained in mid-January 1930 that she had “tried to write Criticism,” but that her “mind [was] still blank.” On 3 March 3, West recorded “Lawrence dead,” and three weeks later scribbled across the page “Cant write,” as though her notation might spark some sort of communion with the recently-

⁶⁴ In a 1928 letter to Wells, West asked: “I hope you’re giving me the life interest on this £5000? It is going to be difficult if after A. comes of age I am dependent on him for the rent of the house. It’s not a good or normal relationship. You know well that you can trust me to hand it over properly. I’ve taken very good care of all his funds. Also it’s not good for him to feel I haven’t anything” (*Letters*, 100).

dead Lawrence. By the end of the month, West also “fired [herself] from *Bookman* because of [...] Humanism” (Beinecke, GEN 105, Box 38.1410).

During her work on *Ending in Earnest*, West found herself at the center of another public literary debate. West’s final article for *The Bookman*, “A Last London Letter: A Counterblast To Humanism,” was written as an open letter to Seward Collins, the magazine’s new editor, as a strong riposte to humanism.⁶⁵ Here, West contends that the humanist movement is little more than a fad that will do irreparable harm to English literature, and it is a fad she wants “no part of” (520). West believes that young writers who subscribe to humanist ideals will end up “utterly sterile and utterly complacent” (520). “They may make some attempts to carry out this new recipe of creating works of art to exhibit the beauty of free will, but this is such a breach of tradition that as a traditionalist I can have but little faith in it,” West concludes (520). West envisions a “world of T. S. Eliots who have not achieved *The Waste Land*,” and foresees the collapse of the “humanist régime” and an eventual return to the moderns—to “Joyce and Lawrence and Huxley and Virginia Woolf, [who] will be the gods of their worship” (520). Lisa Rado has argued that “West suspected that Eliot undermined her position as a regular writer for the *Bookman* [sic], and resigned in protest to its Eliotic strain of humanism” (227, n4). Collins printed West’s article in the August 1930 edition of *The Bookman* and published his own reply just below. Collins praises West for her “vigorous and effective piece of writing,” and laments the end of their relationship, as West has done “brilliant work” as the magazine’s “roving European correspondent” (522).

⁶⁵ In 1918, the George H. Doran company purchased *The Bookman* and maintained control of the magazine until 1927 when Doran merged with Doubleday, Page & Company. During the merger, *The Bookman* was sold to Seward Collins (1899-1952) and Burton Rascoe (1892-1957).

Nevertheless, Collins defends Eliot and assures readers that the magazine “is editorially in favor of humanism and will continue to champion it as vigorously as possible” (522). West’s final article for *The Bookman* was revised and republished as “Regretfully,” the concluding chapter of *Ending in Earnest*. Carl Rollyson has suggested this controversy also offers insight into the collection’s title. West believed she was “breaking off her connection with *The Bookman* ‘in earnest’ because it had taken to adopting a false view of literature personified by critics who deemed themselves ‘in possession of the full tradition of mankind [...]’” (76).

Though West had abandoned her post as a contributor to *The Bookman* by the time *Ending in Earnest* appeared on the market in January 1931, West’s separation from the magazine proved more strategic than her sudden departure might suggest. When Rebecca West and Henry Andrews married in November 1930, several newspapers reported the marriage and particularly noted the absence of “obey” in her vows. West was unperturbed by these accounts of the ceremony and considered that “they just had to look for some aggressive aspect of the situation until they found it” (*Letters*, 127-28). West’s comments are broadly indicative of her symbiotic relationship with the press: West understood the strategic value of scandal and performance and was generally willing to play the role of antagonist. *Ending in Earnest* was published soon after West’s very public departure from *The Bookman* and it would be surprising if West had not been planning the departure for quite some time. The public debate over humanism would have served as a particularly attention-grabbing exit. Collins similarly cast doubt on West’s motivations in his published response to her departure:

There would be an added poignancy to my regret if I really thought, as your article might suggest, that you were leaving because of a sentence of Mr. More’s

which is hardly as sharp as you yourself are accustomed to use, and because of two sentences of mine interpreted in a way that the sentences themselves will not admit. But I realize that your difference with *The Bookman* has deeper causes, and that a regular association between you and the magazine was doomed from the time the present policy was adopted. (522)

Nevertheless, the “doomed” relationship between West and *The Bookman* had the unwitting effect of producing *Ending in Earnest* (522). The collection was published exclusively in America by Doubleday, Doran & company. West’s literary agent A.D. Peters lamented in various letters that West had received many offers to publish *Ending in Earnest* in England; however, West

West never commented on this curious omission, though it is possible she was wary of bringing out another book of criticism in England after the dust-up over *The Strange Necessity*. I believe it is likelier that West wrote the original articles and arranged the collection with American audiences in mind. In varying chapters, she “beg[s] all American visitors to England to visit the Victoria and Albert Museum in South Kensington,” and “again beg[s]” all American readers to obtain F. M. Mayor’s novels *The Rector’s Daughter* (1924) and *The Squire’s Daughter* (1929) (79, 132). West’s authorial position hinges on a very particular set of circumstances: she is an English writer offering instruction to American audiences, and it is very likely West suspected the collection would not fare well in an English market.

Though the project was abandoned sometime in 1932, West published several critical articles and reviews throughout the year—along with a

pamphlet in the John Day Series entitled *Arnold Bennett Himself*. After its initial publication, *Ending in Earnest* was reprinted only once in 1967 by Books For Libraries Press. The collection has since remained out of print.

“Gide”

When examining West’s chapter on the French symbolist André Gide, it is once again worth recalling West’s long-standing belief that her critical style—modeled after Remy de Gourmont and “several other French writers”—had been “killed stone dead by T. S. Eliot” (*Letters*, 327). It is similarly important to recall West’s warning in a later chapter of *Ending in Earnest* that readers would eventually “reap the consequences” of Eliot’s misrepresentations of French writers (283). Gide and Gourmont were both significant practitioners of the French symbolist movement. However, there was an obvious generational gap between the two. Though Eliot’s fondness for Gourmont is well-documented, his relation to Gide is more complex. As John Morgenstern has argued, Gourmont represents an important point of connection between Eliot and Gide: “When Gide asked Eliot to contribute to the *Revue* in 1921, he sent along a copy of his recent prose collection, *Morceaux choisis*, which included his 1910 attack on Gourmont. Eliot thanked Gide for sending the volume, adding that he had been familiar with some of the essays in it since 1910” (63). As West compiled her critical essays for *Ending in Earnest* in January 1930, Eliot mused in a letter that he could not help “feeling sympathetic to anything which is anti-Gide” (*Eliot Letters*, 50). And in 1948 after Gide won the Nobel Prize in Literature, Eliot told a *New York Times* reporter that he “fundamentally disagree[d]” with Gide on a great many things (Breit 37). Despite West’s belief that Eliot

could not offer a useful account of French writers, her own analysis of Gide is not altogether dissimilar to Eliot's remarks.

West models herself as a literary tastemaker throughout *Ending in Earnest* and this rhetorical positioning is especially evident in "Gide." At the outset of the chapter, West recalls purchasing *L'Ecole des Femmes* (1929) and tells readers that the novel is no better than the fiction of Anne Douglas Sedgwick, one of the American writers whom West attacks in "The Long Chain of Criticism." West criticizes Gide's "static" characters and notes the author's failure to produce anything more than a "dry and unnecessary exposition of ideas [that are] already well established in the mind of both author and reader" (184-85). West develops an extended psychological reading of Gide and considers that his authorial power is limited to his "ability to look into his own mind and describe the fantasies that lurk at the bottom of it" (198). These fantasies, West argues, manifest in his novels as masculine power and "the hatred felt by man for woman" (201). It is not my intention to parse West's Freudian reading of Gide. West's comments were likely rooted in her own private musings that the rampant "loathing of the non-virgin woman" had led to her own persecution (197). West believed that the sexual indiscretions of her youth had caused her reputation irreparable harm and her defensiveness is quite evident throughout "Gide."

West frames her critical assessment of Gide as a critical project in three stages: West asserts her critical expertise, develops her argument, and finally concludes with a broad assessment of contemporary English criticism. At the start of the chapter, West poses a question: "Am I showing myself a tasteless ignoramus who cannot appreciate austerity and subtlety, who does not understand the beauties of that restrained form, the

récit?” (185). Posing a rhetorical question allows West to acknowledge readers who might find her dislike of Gide a mark of critical infirmity. West’s answer suggests she is also addressing critics and other professional readers, as she is careful to accentuate her own critical reading experience: “I know my *Adolphe*, and I perceive that in that masterpiece Constant puts in all that Gide leaves out. It is simple in its style, but complex enough in its perceptions and its implications” (185). West contextualizes her comments on Gide amid a much broader landscape; she alludes to Benjamin Constant’s 1816 novel *Adolphe*, and the shared *récit* form, as a means of modeling her own literary education and tempering Gide’s supposed influence with the mention of another significant French writer.

“Gide” is written in the same hybrid style as many of West’s other critical essays. She begins with a personal narrative that soon gives way to critical judgment. In “Gide,” however, West hints at her critical opinion even as she develops her introductory remarks:

‘We will leave that book behind,’ I said in the morning to my companions, as we were packing. ‘It isn’t nearly as good as the rest of Gide. . . .’ And immediately I had an uncomfortable recognition that I have used those words nearly every time I have set down a book by Gide. I might, of course, have meant that each was worse than the last. But I had not meant that. I had meant that this book left a poorer impression on my mind than I had received on some other occasion from the works of Gide. (185-86)

West sets down the book and determines that it will be left behind as she and her companions continue their travels. The physical act of setting down *L’Ecole des Femmes* reflects West’s subsequent assertion that the book lacks merit and is not worth a place in West’s travel cases or indeed in the literary canon. West assumes responsibility for

educating her companions as well as readers of the chapter: “We will leave that book behind,” West narrates, and her emphasis on a collective abandonment of the novel is especially significant in light of her subsequent remarks on Gide. West casts herself as a critical authority and explains the process that has led her to this consideration of Gide’s oeuvre. West asserts her comments are neither hasty nor without evidence:

I tried, during the next few days, to find out which particular work had left this richer impression; and I was able to make that search in spite of the fact that I was travelling through France. At Nîmes I bought Gide’s *Essay on Montaigne* and his *L’Immoraliste* to start my course of rereading. I went over these during the two evenings I spent in the Cevennes. Then, when I emerged into the Auvergne, I waited until we got into a decent-sized town and stopped at one of its several bookshops and bought some more Gide; and when these were done I repeated the procedure in another town and then another. (186)

West models a critical process that is grounded in careful re-readings of the texts she wishes to analyze. She seeks to affirm her own impression of the novel through an investigation of Gide’s other works. In doing so, West ascribes significant value to a critical practice that is similarly thorough and pairs critical judgment with close literary analysis. West later argues that *L’Ecole des Femmes* is not a work of art and has already made clear that her opinions are supported by significant research. West also encourages comparison between this chapter and *The Strange Necessity*. West argues that *L’Ecole des Femmes* is not a work of art because “it is not an analysis of an experience and a synthesis of the findings into an excitatory complex” (197-98). This conclusion echoes West’s assertion in “The Strange Necessity” that *Ulysses* (1922) is a work of art because it represents “analyses and syntheses into excitatory complexes of experiences

apprehended by James Joyce” (177). West develops this earlier version of her theory and rewards readers who are familiar with her other critical work.

West concludes in her analysis of Gide’s fiction that he is “grossly imperfect as an artist,” but that his works engender a kinship with readers because “as we turn his pages, [...] the fantasies he reveals are those belonging to the common childhood of the race, and we have all inherited them to some measure” (199). At its best, Gide’s writing inspires a response similar to what West describes in *The Strange Necessity*: “In reading that book [...] I found that these emotional states persistently reviewed in my mind the memory of an incident which took place at some point in a period between seventeen and twenty-five years ago, when as a child I lived in Scotland” (122). At its worst, Gide’s fiction encourages readers to indulge in baser childhood emotions. As readers are dominated by the fantasy that “woman is so pernicious [that] man would be well advised not to love her,” Gide implicates female desire and childhood fantasy as similarly inconstant, dishonest, and cruel (200).

West considers these prejudices not solely representative of Gide, but indicative of a contemporary literary trend that reflects modern psychological turmoil in the collective English mind. In the final section of the chapter, West offers recent works by Jean Cocteau and Richard Hughes—*Les Enfants Terribles* (1929) and *High Wind in Jamaica* (1929) respectively— as further proof that “this attitude [...] cannot be traced to any other than that psychological cause” (203). However, West’s conclusion deviates from her discussion of Gide to offer a strong indictment not of *L’Ecole des Femmes* or the novels of Cocteau and Hughes, but of the critics who recommend them to readers. “I have commented in these pages on the dreary preference of some of the most influential

English critics for novels that resemble tepid cups of sweetened tea,” West writes (203). Coincidentally, one of the most influential critics to praise Hughes’s novel was Arnold Bennett. In his “Books and Persons” column for *The Evening Standard*, Bennett writes that *High Wind in Jamaica* is “governed by intelligence and knowledge” and represents children as “the callous, imperturbable, fatalistic, delightful, imaginative little animals they are” (*Evening Standard*, 309). Hugh Walpole’s review similarly reports that the novel is a work of “cruel genius” (*The Graphic*, 28 September 1929, p. 532). West concludes that it is her duty to “record the astonishing fact that these [critics] have taken the hot draught of mad fantasy which Mr. Hughes has offered to them as if it were one of their favorite cups of tea” (203). West believes it is her critical obligation to correct the misinformation spread by well-known English critics. Though West insisted in her suit against *The Evening Standard* that her comments on Bennett were erroneously reported, this sentiment recalls her alleged statement that he “never had very much to say, although he has said it often and at length” (Beinecke, GEN 105, Box 39.1425). By the end of her chapter on “Gide,” West emphasizes that the critical weight of writers like Bennett and Walpole is a far more pernicious influence on the literary market than a few bad novels by Gide or Hughes, and offers her criticism as a corrective.

“The Dead Hand”

West muses in *Ending in Earnest*, “it is the perfectly appalling state of English Criticism, which permits the older generation to lay a dead hand of the literature of to-day” (132). “The Dead Hand” supports a hypothesis at the crux of *Ending in Earnest*: the most celebrated English critics have largely resisted modern literature, which represents to them “the distressful present,” in favor of wandering back to the “comfortable past” (39).

West argues that contemporary English critics are quick to reward any novelist whose work lingers in outmoded plots or forms. Novelist who are content to bar “the whole of reality” from their works are widely praised by these same critics (37). Of greater issue to West is the fact that it is commonplace to allow this behavior to continue unchecked.

West reasons that generational shifts are natural and to be expected. However, she notes a particularly malevolent trend in the contemporary literary market. West argues that the rapid shift to the “new” post-war world has occasioned a much quicker changing of the guards than in previous generations (39). Older writers resent the loss of power to the newer generation and lament their diminished importance. To counteract the loss, these writers—specifically critics—tamper with critical standards by praising outmoded work in favor of anything that hints at the “new manner” of English literature:

They frequently try to arrest the landslide by tampering with our critical standards. They overpraise work done in the old manner (which is naturally followed by second-rate and timid minds) and underpraise work done in the new manner (which is naturally followed by first-rate and audacious minds). By ‘old manner’ I mean the style of the last decade or so, unshorn of the mannerisms which those who have come after have detected; by ‘new manner’ I mean the style the present decade evolves in its attempt to achieve greater precision and harmony than those mannerisms permitted their elders. In any age the new manner passes a harsh judgment on the old, but in this age the judgment is exceptionally harsh, and the reaction of the judged is proportionately more vehement and resentful. (39)

West is not wholly ungenerous to English critics; she considers this desperate escape to the past represents a desire to recapture the relative peace of the nineteenth-century.

“Aside from the Crimean and South African wars, nothing military vexed us save distant consequences of our militarist expansion,” West concludes (39). French writers in

contrast are likelier to look toward the future. After all, the same period in French history was rife with political unrest. West asks, “why should a Frenchman exchange unrest for unrest by going back a couple of decades?” (40). Meanwhile, the English are habitually seduced by the illusory comfort of the previous century. It is a pernicious habit, but a forgivable one.

“The Dead Hand” is not simply a meditation on contemporary critical trends. Rather, it is a warning to celebrated English critics like Bennett and Walpole that, as West explains in a later chapter, “the spirit of the age always wins” (72). The chapter’s titular symbol indicates West’s firmly-held belief that critics of the old manner are obsolete, and their opinions no more useful than a disembodied appendage. Though these critics may be irksome to navigate around, they have no power to “arrest the landslide” of modern literature and will eventually be subsumed by critics of the new manner—critics like Rebecca West (39).

The Vaudeville Show of 1928

Alexander Woollcott wrote to Rebecca West in December 1928 after reading *The Strange Necessity*.⁶⁶ The legal case with *The Evening Standard* had been settled that fall and West was finishing her next novel, *Harriet Hume* (1929). In his letter, Woollcott wrote of his admiration for West’s criticism and mused that only she was “the kind of person who could write it” (Beinecke, GEN 105, Box 2.1028). At the close of his letter, Woollcott included a postscript:

⁶⁶ Alexander Woollcott (1887-1943) was an American writer and editor. Woollcott was a regular contributor to *The New Yorker* magazine.

P.S. I have noted this odd phenomenon; That whenever I have read any book through the propulsion of one of your reviews, I find myself thinking of you as the author of the book. Thus it is actually true that it requires deliberate fixity of attention on my part to keep in mind that you didn't write Orlando. What I think happens is that you dip a book into the smoking vat of your mind and it comes out all smeared over with Rebecca. I put things so charmingly. (Beinecke, GEN 105, Box 2.1028)

The smoking vat offers a fitting description of West's critical orthodoxy. Woollcott also circuitously answers the question of what happens when Edward Garnett's imagined baby is left alone with a bucket of tar—or, in this case, the smoking vat of West's mind: a book emerges and it comes out all smeared over with Rebecca. The image does not quite suggest refined critical process or authorial control. It would not be unreasonable to note an element of chaos in this description, as Woollcott seems to regard West's critical process as entirely unsystematic but wholly miraculous. To read West's literary criticism is to propel a text through the smoking vat of her mind and find the book indelibly marked by the experience. West's critical voice is nuanced and original. In some respects, West embodies Woolf's description of the common reader: "Hasty, inaccurate, and superficial, snatching now this poem, now that scrap of old furniture, without caring where he finds it or of what nature it may be so long as it serves his purpose and rounds

his structure” (11-12). West’s literary criticism served two purposes: it offered West a medium to experiment and theorize about contemporary literature. It also became the battleground on which West aggressively defended her own professional reputation.

In May 1928, *The Graphic* published a series of caricatures drawn by Bohun Lynch entitled “The Vaudeville Show of 1928.”⁶⁷ In his historical account of caricature published two years earlier, Lynch notes Joseph Conrad’s sentiment that the art of the caricature is “putting the face of a joke upon the body of a truth” (1). One of Lynch’s

cartoons for *The Graphic* depicts West alongside Arnold Bennett and George Bernard Shaw. The three writers are drawn mid-performance, cast as the “trick cyclists of literature” (Fig. 2).

Lynch’s cartoon anticipates the spectacle of the lawsuit between West and *The Evening Standard* by nearly four months. Lynch draws West nearly double the size of Bennett and keeps her gaze fixed on Shaw. In many ways,

West’s presence in the cartoon reflects her precarious position in the

literary market. West could be entertaining, thrust into the spotlight to draw a crowd or



Fig. 2. Lynch, Bohun. “The Vaudeville Show of 1928.” *The Graphic*, 26 May 1928, p. 306

⁶⁷ Bohun Lynch (1884-1928) was an English author and caricaturist.

delight a readership well-versed in her particular brand of provocation and outspoken aggression.

West was a well-known public figure by 1928 and she used her fame, or at least her infamy, to harness public attention and for financial gain. In a January 1931 letter from *Ideal Cinemagazine*, editors requested West's participation in a "short, silent film-study" to accompany a pictorial interview. The letter explained

A.D. Peters wrote around the same time on West's behalf to *The Daily Telegraph* and requested they increase her fee per article from fifteen guineas to twenty.

Though in some respects West's critical aggression had clearly paid off, she faced the backlash of that aggression on numerous occasions. A year after the debacle over *The Strange Necessity*, West wrote in a letter to Sylvia Lynd that she was unsurprised people "regarded [her] with disapproval" (*Letters*, 113). This sentiment reverberates throughout much of West's personal and professional life. West nurtured an intense fear of being judged and found wanting in some respect. As West mused at the end of her life: "I've aroused hostility in an extraordinary lot of people. I've never known why. I don't think I'm formidable" (*Paris Review*).

CHAPTER FOUR

ELIZABETH BOWEN'S CRITICAL "SCRAP SCREEN"

In the opening lines of her little-known essay "Once Upon a Yesterday," Elizabeth Bowen comments on the relationship between literature and nostalgia. Bowen explains that despite an abundance of sentimental literature on the market in 1950—"novels set back in time, picturesque biographies, memoirs, diaries dated long ago"—nostalgia is not a "literary invention" (9). Bowen describes nostalgia as a pervasive mood that hints at a widespread desire to relive the glorified "better days" of the past (9). Yet, Bowen warns readers and writers that a sentimental fixation on old literary forms and celebrated writers of previous centuries comes at the cost of advancing the work of contemporary writers. Bowen argues that to ensure the survival of present-day literature writers must "examine the stuff of our time to see if through it also there does not run some gold vein" (37). Despite this apparent interest in questions of canon-formation and the contemporary literary market, Bowen was reluctant to condemn writers for an overreliance on nostalgia and personal memories. Indeed, in the same essay, Bowen sympathizes with writers:

In an age when change works swiftly, when each change spells so much obliteration, and when differentiation between person and person becomes less, each one of us clings to personal memory as a life line. One might say one invests one's identity *in* one's memory. To relive any moment acutely is to be made certain that one not only was but is. (10)

Bowen suggests that writers revisit and arrange personal memories and impressions to make sense of themselves and their work in an age of change. Writers invest in their

sense of self—in the personal memories that like “life line[s]” have buoyed them to the present day (10). Bowen more productively imagines nostalgia as an act of arrangement and composition rather than the lingering mood of postwar Britain.

“Once Upon a Yesterday” appeared in the *Saturday Review* just after the May 1950 publication of *Collected Impressions*, and Bowen alights on similar questions of nostalgia, memory, and arrangement in the Foreword to her essay collection. Bowen, who concedes that she is most conscious of her work when “re-reading” it, claims in the Foreword that nostalgia does not always indicate a selfish affection for the past (v). For writers, the process of revisiting and rearranging one’s work is a methodical and often painful task that requires a great deal of self-criticism. “Recollection of his own exertions and anxieties haunts, for him, each page of the book by another hand,” Bowen writes (v-vi). To revisit past works is to revisit past selves, and the writer’s task is to collect and make sense of these accumulated impressions and fragments.

Bowen’s interest in developing a process of self-adjustment is similarly evident in her revisions of “Once Upon a Yesterday.” After its initial publication, Bowen returned to the essay a year later to make several amendments and corrections. Bowen retitled the essay “The Bend Back” and submitted it for publication in the Summer 1951 edition of *Cornhill Magazine*. In this second edition, Bowen more clearly articulates the value for writers of revisiting the past. Bowen explains in “Once Upon a Yesterday” that “to relive any moment acutely is to be made certain that one not only was but is” (10). Bowen amends this statement in “The Bend Back” to conclude that “to re-live any moment, acutely, is to be made certain that one not only was but is. Desire to be reminded may be a modern symptom, but it deserves respect: woe to those who abuse it” (*The Mulberry*

Tree, 56). Bowen makes a distinction here between a sentimental and a strategic revisiting of the past, just as she does in the Foreword to *Collected Impressions*. “Recollections of his own exertions and anxieties” may indeed haunt the writer (v). Yet, to recollect these memories and writings is to bring to them new significance (v). In *Collected Impressions*, each essay “carries the colour of its year; each reflects, involuntarily, what was in that year a contemporary mood of thought or phase of feeling. They combine into something which is one of the many imponderable by-products of history” (vi). For Bowen, such self-reflection and self-adjustment is essential to the development of her literary criticism.

Bowen’s critical essay collections have long been treated as the lesser-works of a well-regarded novelist. *Collected Impressions* and *Afterthought: Pieces About Writing* (1962) were published at the midpoint of Bowen’s career and were conceived in part to recoup income lost during wartime paper rationing.⁶⁸ This fact has often led scholars to minimize the critical significance of the works and read both collections as the ephemera of a novelist whose attention was unfairly divided between her craft and her financial responsibilities.⁶⁹ Yet, *Collected Impressions* and *Afterthought* are more important to understanding Bowen’s critical aims than recent scholarship would suggest. Bowen

⁶⁸ Restrictions on paper supplies were announced by the Ministry of Production under the No. 48 Paper Control Order on 4 September 1942. John B. Hench argues that Britain’s wartime paper and manpower shortages put British writers at a great disadvantage in the open market because they “simply did not have the books with which to compete.” See: *Books As Weapons: Propaganda, Publishing, and the Battle for Global Markets in the Era of World War II* (Cornell UP, 2010), p. 209. Bowen claimed that the complete “non-existence” of her novels had led to a “temporary but acute” financial disaster. See: *Why Do I Write?* (Percival Marshall, 1948), p. 54.

⁶⁹ Phyllis Lassner claims that “financial anxiety [...] meant attention away from her real vocation.” See *Elizabeth Bowen* (Barnes & Noble Books, 1989), p. 16. Maud Ellmann also comments on Bowen’s divided attention and describes her as “a notorious soft touch as a reviewer” who tended to give “generous endorsements” to a variety of books with little discernment. See: *Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadow Across the Page* (Edinburgh UP, 2003), p. 196.

commented in a letter to Charles Ritchie just before the publication of *Collected Impressions* that the process of collecting and arranging her essays had been rather like “making a sort of scrap screen” out of the work (*LCW*, 169).⁷⁰ Popularized during the Victorian era, scrap screens were large paneled screens decorated with photographs, mementos, and other ephemera that were lacquered and displayed in the home, usually in shared family rooms, as a collaborative art object. Bowen’s analogy thus indicates a personal, if not haphazard, arrangement of material. However, Bowen’s “scrap screen” approach in both texts speaks to her interest in collection, arrangement, and revision. Bowen alights on a variety of generic modes to convey her literary impressions and judgments. *Collected Impressions*, for example, includes several prefaces to novels and to Bowen’s own writing, book reviews organized by topic, social commentaries, travel narratives, a radio broadcast, and concluding pieces on the craft of writing. *Afterthought* is similarly diverse and is comprised of nine prefaces, two radio broadcasts, four book reviews, one travel narrative, and several other literary essays. Examined together, the collections function rather like an artist’s retrospective that showcases Bowen’s critical writing from 1935-1960.⁷¹

Bowen may have wished to “relive” her occasional nonfiction writing in extended book form to shore up her authorial legacy as a novelist and critic—or, as she phrases it in “Once Upon a Yesterday,” to “be made certain that one not only was but is” (9).

⁷⁰ Charles Ritchie (1906-1995) was a Canadian diplomat with whom Bowen had an affair from 1941 until her death in 1973. Their affair is narrated through a series of letters and diary entries in *Love’s Civil War: Elizabeth Bowen and Charles Ritchie, Letters and Diaries, 1941-1973*, edited by Victoria Glendinning (McClelland & Stewart, 2009).

⁷¹ *Collected Impressions* was published in 1950 and fifty-seven percent of the collection is made up of essays originally written between 1935 and 1939. *Afterthought* was published in 1962 and is comprised of essays written from 1947 to 1961.

However, Bowen struggled to imagine herself and her legacy among canonical modernist writers. Bowen once insisted to a BBC interviewer that she had “never belonged to any group,” and saw writers like James Joyce as a “bible,” rather than a contemporary (qtd. in Hepburn, 237). Bowen does tend to evade periodization: she began writing soon after the First World War and continued up until her death in 1973. Many of Bowen’s most famous novels like *The Death of the Heart* (1938) and *The Heat of the Day* (1948) were written and published well after the heyday of high modernism. Yet, Bowen’s two essay collections offer many intriguing links to female modernists like Woolf and West, and the collections reveal a late modern sensibility that is important to our understanding of Bowen’s critical aims.

The titles of both collections suggest incompleteness and belatedness: Bowen offers readers a collection of miscellaneous impressions followed by a series of afterthoughts. Yet, Bowen built these retrospective layers into her criticism with a clear purpose in mind. Bowen’s critical method is really an ongoing process of arrangement and self-adjustment. Revisiting occasional pieces of writing that were written in haste for quick publication and profit allowed Bowen to relive the “mood of thought or phase of feeling” of each piece, and to assign new significance by reorganizing the works with other essays and new amendments (vi). Bowen claims that to “re-live any moment, acutely, is to be made certain that one not only was but is” (*TMT*, 56). We might consider this process of critical arrangement and revision one way that Bowen made sense of herself and her body of work amid great self-doubt and looming questions of authorial legacy. Scholars tend to disagree on the exact parameters of late modernism as a marker of time or as a stylistic

signifier.⁷² I do find in Marina MacKay's articulation of late modernism as a "self-conscious recapitulation of high modernism" both an answer to the implicit question of periodization as it relates to Bowen's nonfiction and a compelling reason to apply the term to her essay collections. A recapitulation is a "brief restatement or repetition; a summing up." Another meaning of the word also exists in music theory wherein a recapitulation is understood as a "section of a composition or movement [...] in which themes stated earlier are repeated, usually in modified form."⁷³ Both definitions hint at the nature of Bowen's relationship to and with other modernist writers. What would it mean to examine Bowen's nonfiction as a restatement or summing up of the modernist literary criticism produced in the 1920s and 1930s by other women writers?

We can certainly see that Bowen is in some sense a critical descendent of a writer like Virginia Woolf.⁷⁴ Bowen explained that her critical process was akin to making a

⁷² Frederic Jameson suggests that we should "probably also make some place [...] for what Charles Jencks has come to call 'late modernism'—the last survivals of a properly modernist view of art and the world after the great political and economic break of the Depression, where, under Stalinism or the Popular Front, Hitler or the New Deal, some new conception of social realism achieves the status of momentary cultural dominance by way of collective anxiety and world war." Jencks, an American architect, published a book on late modern architecture in 1980 in which he argues that late modern architecture coexists with postmodern architecture in the 1960s. See: *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke UP, 1989), p. 305. Tyrus Miller explores the nuances of late modernism and high modernism in his thorough account of literature of the late 1920s and 1930s. Miller traces in late modern works a self-conscious awareness of the decline of high modernism and "the disfigured likeness of modernist masterpieces: unlovely allegories of a world's end." See: *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts between the World Wars* (U of California P, 1999), p. 14. More recently, Thomas Davis has written on late modernism and defines one of its key characteristics as the "outward turn," or the "form of attention" that late modernism and its writers afford to "the temporalities of space, surface appearances, textures, and rhythms of everyday life." See: *The Extinct Scene: Late Modernism and Everyday Life* (Columbia UP, 2016), p 2.

⁷³ "Recapitulate": *OED* online, www.oed.com/view/entry.159361.

⁷⁴ Andrew Bennett suggests Woolf was "Bowen's friend, mentor and, in some ways, her model as a professional female author." See: "Bowen and Modernism: The Early Novels" in *Elizabeth Bowen*, ed. Eibhear Walshe (Irish Academic Press, 2009), p. 29. Victoria Glendinning recounts Woolf's influence on Bowen as well, explaining that "Virginia Woolf paid Elizabeth the tribute of taking her seriously." See: *Elizabeth Bowen: Portrait of a Writer* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson,

“scrap screen,” and this description calls to mind Woolf’s articulation of the common reader as “hasty, inaccurate, and superficial, snatching now this poem, now that scrap of old furniture, without caring where he finds it or of what nature it may be so long as it serves his purpose and rounds his structure” (11). Bowen did not arrange either of her essay collections in haste—despite her obvious financial need. *Collected Impressions* and *Afterthought* represent over twenty years of critical writing and thought. Rather than “snatching up” her old work for publication, Bowen spent several years determining what essays would reappear in the collections (11). She also spent considerable time working with publishers to determine how best to order the material and how best to market it. Thinking in terms of recapitulation as a composition in which themes are repeated in modified form, Bowen’s critical essay collections are self-conscious recapitulations of her own writing. These texts demonstrate Bowen’s interest in developing an ongoing process of self-revision. More significantly, both collections reveal Bowen’s insecurity regarding her criticism and critical authority. This insecurity manifests itself in these cycles of self-adjustment and is perhaps most evident too in Bowen’s simple concluding wish in *Collected Impressions* for the “survival” of her critical work (vi).

Bowen’s Critical Craftsmanship

Collected Impressions was published in May 1950 almost precisely twenty-five years after the publication of *The Common Reader*. Bowen wrote to Charles Ritchie soon after

1977), p. 99. Hermione Lee suggests seeing Bowen as an Anglo-Irish writer as well as setting her in “relation to Forster and Virginia Woolf, or with a group of English contemporaries.” See: *Elizabeth Bowen: An Estimation* (Vision Press, 1981), p. 19.

its arrival to register her disappointment that the book had failed to stir in her any sense of excitement:

It's called *Collected Impressions*, and is that collection, of which I think I vaguely talked to you, of reviews, prefaces, broadcasts, occasional pieces, etc. Its interest is mainly historic, I consider. I suppose it's for that reason that its coming out doesn't excite me more. Still, I can't feel indifferent to it—any style it has, I think, is in the arrangement: it was interesting arranging the stuff, like making a sort of scrap screen out of my own work. (*LCW*, 169)

Bowen still marked the occasion as a significant achievement despite this unenthusiastic account of its publication. Bowen announced to Ritchie earlier in the letter that she had “once again become a mother” thanks to the arrival of *Collected Impressions*. Reviewers did not share Bowen's tepid response to the book. *The Tatler* commented that to read Bowen's critical accounts of literature was akin to “reading the books—and with more profit—again.” The reviewer's only criticism of the book was its brevity; the essays contained within were “all too short for the reader's appetite.”⁷⁵ Bowen was a regular contributor to *The Tatler* from 1941 until 1950, so it is not altogether surprising that she received a friendly review from the magazine. However, *Collected Impressions* was widely praised in other publications as well. Another reviewer from *The Sphere* described Bowen as “a novelist of distinction [and] a critic of extraordinary taste and perception.”⁷⁶ And a reviewer for *The Scotsman* wrote about the book alongside a review of Virginia Woolf's posthumous collection *The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays* (1950).⁷⁷ The

⁷⁵ *The Tatler*, 16 August 1950, p. 316.

⁷⁶ *The Sphere*, 20 May 1950, p. 294.

⁷⁷ *The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays* is comprised of twenty-five literary essays, many written in the style of the essays found in *The Common Reader* and *The Common Reader: Second Series*. However, the collection was published nine years after Woolf's death and was arranged by Leonard Woolf.

reviewer described the two books as evidence of great “literary craftsmanship.”⁷⁸ Regional newspapers printed favorable accounts of Bowen’s writing as well. *The Montrose Review* called the book “incomparably interesting, subtle, and penetrating,” and the *Northern Whig and Belfast Post* described the “enjoyment” to be had from reading the book and suggested that readers keep a copy on their bedside tables so that they might revisit favorite passages.⁷⁹ I will return to the publication history of *Collected Impressions* in the following section. First I wish to develop Bowen’s comments on the arrangement of the collection: specifically, her assertion that the process of collecting and arranging her essays for publication had been like “making a sort of scrap screen” out of her own work (169).

Rather like the reviewer from *The Scotsman*, Bowen often described the “craftsmanship” of her work. Bowen liked to imagine herself not as a writer but as a maker of handicrafts. It is possible that these sorts of analogies that recur throughout Bowen’s personal and published writings are remnants of her art education. Before publishing her first short-story collection *Encounters* (1923), Bowen spent two semesters at the Central School of Arts and Crafts in Southampton Row in London. Scholars often minimize Bowen’s time at the school and generally read those two semesters as the prelude to her real artistic work as a novelist.⁸⁰ Bowen did not seem to lament her lack of formal education, remarking in *Bowen’s Court* (1942) that “education is not so important as people think” (124). Characters from Bowen’s fiction similarly cast aspersions on the

⁷⁸ *The Scotsman*, 22 June 1950, p. 9.

⁷⁹ *The Montrose Review* July 1950, p. 3; *Northern Whig and Belfast Post*, 9 September 1950, p. 4.

⁸⁰ Patricia Craig claims without cited evidence that “Elizabeth, who was better than average but probably not much,” spent time at the school and tried her hand at art and poetry before “relinquishing them in favour of prose.” See: *Elizabeth Bowen* (Penguin Books, 1986), p. 68.

merits of formal education for women. In *The Last September* (1929), Lois Farquar is sent off to a “school of art,” despite her inability to draw, and imagines for herself an “obscure” future at the school (241-42). Henrietta Mountjoy in *The House in Paris* (1935) recalls her sister Caroline being shipped off to a finishing school from which she returns “with an unchippable glaze” (54). Yet, Bowen’s time at the Central School may have been more influential than her two-semester stint would suggest. Bowen continued to use the language of the artist or the maker to describe her writing practice, and she often returned to these analogies when attempting to describe her nonfiction. Bowen mentioned the “scrap screen” in her letter to Ritchie, and she alights on a similar turn of phrase in the foreword *Collected Impressions*. Bowen explains that the individual chapters must be read as parts of a unified art object: “Put together, they can but act upon one another: a book becomes something more than layers of print compressed between boards” (vi). The image of the scrap screen read alongside the Foreword indicates how important these acts of arrangement are to the project.

As I mentioned earlier, Bowen’s phrasing seems to minimize the significance of her criticism. A “scrap,” after all, does not suggest writing of great import. Bowen tended to be reticent about her critical ability and varied professional work, though she did enumerate her activity in a 1948 publisher’s blurb:

Bowen's professional history reads like a collection of scraps strategically arranged to prove her professional authority. Although Bowen adopts a rather self-effacing tone when she claims she is not a critic, her listed qualifications are varied and prove her ability to write across genres and for audiences in Britain and America. Bowen hints at her connections to the literary establishment as well. T. S. Eliot's Faber and Faber published *The Faber Book of Modern Short Stories* in 1936, and Eliot himself asked Bowen to write the preface. Bowen was certainly aware that, among her professional colleagues, Eliot's authority mattered. Graham Greene, for example, did not have the same critical authority or earn the same respect as Eliot. However, he was a popular fiction writer and well-known contributor to newspapers and journals throughout the 1930s. Bowen is also careful to include a variety of publications from England and America to prove that she has a transatlantic audience regularly interested in her work.

Bowen clarified her self-effacing remarks regarding her "scrap screen" work and varied employment on several occasions. Bowen makes clear in a 1948 nonfiction project written with Graham Greene and V.S. Pritchett that she sympathizes with the precarious employment and income shared by writers and artists:

I don't see, referring to Pritchett's point, that we as writers differ in the practical sense—or can expect rightly to be differentiated—from any other freelance makers and putters on the market of luxury, or 'special' goods. Had I not been a writer I should probably have struck out in designing and making belts, jewellery,

handbags, lampshades or something of that sort—my aim being that these should catch people’s fancy, create a little fashion of their own, and accordingly be saleable by me at a rising price. Had that happened, I should be in about the same rocky, uncertain, incalculable position as I am in now. The putter-across, lucratively, of a presumably enjoyable hobby, gets very little sympathy. (*Why Do I Write?*, 53-4)

Bowen admits in a subsequent paragraph that her analogy is perhaps flawed: “a belt- or bag-maker sells his or her goods piecemeal, and does not expect to budget on anything but the specific sums paid down for specific belts or bags” (54). Alternatively, the writer should expect to generate long-term income from book royalties. The great irony, of course, is that Bowen was well-aware of the present state of the literary market. Due to the wartime rationing of paper, many writers had effectively become bag- and belt-makers who were left to sell their articles and stories piecemeal with no promise of future income.

In an earlier draft of this paragraph,

The subsequent revision frames writers as hobbyists who are likely to earn little sympathy from the public when their income suffers. Yet, in the Foreword of *Collected Impressions*, Bowen acknowledges that the difficulties of creative and critical writing far exceed those of an “enjoyable hobby” (54). “It is hard for the novelist to disengage himself from problems generic to his calling,” Bowen writes. “He is aware, and may even exaggerate the magnitude, of problems confronting his fellow craftsman” (v). Rather than diminish the writer’s plight, Bowen enacts a sense of community among the writers to whom she alludes—though she does offer a subtle warning against exaggerating a writer’s suffering.

Bowen calling her critical process a “scrap screen” does not diminish its significance. More likely, it is a form of rhetorical modesty that invites others to grant authority or prestige. Bowen’s articulation of the project in these terms emphasizes her longstanding commitment to this process of revision and self-adjustment and her desire to frame the project as a unified artistic creation comprised of many parts. Scrap screens were indeed popular handicrafts in the Victorian era. Thad Logan explains that these screens enjoyed a “period of popularity” at mid-century, and several formally decorated scrap screens were even displayed at the Great Exhibition (120). These screens were ornamental, but they also provided “amusement and edification,” and were organized within a genre that included “scrapbooks containing collections of colored images, collections of prose and verse, books of pressed flowers or seaweed, and books of drawings” (124). One of the most famous Victorian scrap screens was made in 1849 by Thomas Carlyle’s wife Jane Carlyle and was displayed in their home.⁸¹ Woolf alludes to the object, a “bright little contrivance,” in her 1909 account of a visit to the Carlyle’s house (4).⁸²

The scrap screen was much more than a “bright little contrivance” to Bowen and this “scrap screen” style is a defining feature of her fiction and nonfiction alike. While in contract negotiations with the London publishing house Sidgwick & Jackson over the

⁸¹ Claire Gaskell describes the recent restoration of the Carlyle House scrap screen. The screen is made of four panels and is decorated with 442 distinct images and watercolors and is decorated with a border of embossed leather. The screen remains on display at Carlyle’s House in Chelsea, London, a National Trust property. See: “The conservation of a scrap screen from Carlyle’s House, London,” *The Paper Conservator*, 24:1, pp. 1-11.

⁸² In his 2003 edition of *Carlyle’s House and Other Sketches*, David Bradshaw explains that Woolf sets the word “contrivances” in quotes because it was “Carlyle’s favourite term for Jane’s thrifty refurbishment” of the house. See: *Carlyle’s House and Other Sketches*, Ed. David Bradshaw (Hesperus Press Limited, 2003), p. 20, n.10.

terms of her first book, *The Hotel* (1927), Bowen protested their proposed edits to the novel and asked to be released from her contract altogether. Bowen argued that a writer

Years

later, Bowen explained that any “style” *Collected Impressions* had was “in the arrangement” (*LCW*, 169). When Bowen’s American publishers were preparing *Eva Trout* (1968) for publication, the managing editors warned their copyeditors that “this is Bowen so one must bow to her peculiarities of style and syntax and not tamper” (HRC, 11.4). Bowen continued to explore the interplay between style and arrangement throughout her writing life.

We can trace through Bowen’s “scrap screen” process clear links to Woolf’s nonfiction as well. Bowen and Woolf maintained a close friendship throughout the 1930s and Bowen’s account of this relationship was often recorded in Charles Ritchie’s diary entries. Ritchie concluded in a 1942 diary entry that Woolf “must certainly have been a great influence in her life. An influence I can still feel alive in her” (*LCW*, 30). Recorded only a year after Woolf’s suicide, the entry also described the complexities of their friendship. Bowen talked of Woolf’s “fairy cruelty,” but complimented her grace and “incomparable conversation” (30). Bowen and Woolf shared many conversations all throughout the 1930s. They met just as Woolf was finishing work on *The Common Reader: Second Series*. Woolf invited the “stammering, shy, conventional” Bowen to tea in March 1932 amid her own revisions to “Dr Burney’s Evening Party” (*D4*, 86). Months after their first meeting, Bowen sent Woolf a copy of her novel *To The North* (1933). Woolf’s response alluded to a conversation the two had shared regarding Bowen’s

interest in writing some form of literary criticism: “I hope you will carry out your idea of a diary of books, not events—I mean not tea parties but Milton and so on,” Woolf wrote on 22 July 22 (*L5*, 79). No published record exists of this imagined project. Yet, Woolf continued to encourage Bowen toward nonfiction writing in subsequent meetings and in correspondence. After a 1934 visit to Bowen’s Court, Woolf implored Bowen in the postscript of a letter to “Remember the Lives of the Bowens” (298). Bowen would go on to publish a history of her family as *Bowen’s Court* in 1942.

The two writers also shared their complicated feelings regarding the mercenary nature of book reviewing and other writing. Just as Woolf planned to install a water closet and bathroom in her Rodmell house after the success of *The Common Reader*, Bowen similarly relied on her income from book reviewing and newspaper writing to install telephone lines, generators, indoor lighting, and to fund repairs to her London House after it was damaged in the Blitzes of 1940 and 1944.⁸³ Bowen lost out on a £40 literary prize to Stella Gibbon in 1934. Woolf lamented Bowen’s loss and particularly emphasized the lost prize money in her response. “Who is she? What is this book?” Woolf asked. “And so you cant buy your carpet” (*L5*, 303). It seems unlikely that Woolf had read Gibbon’s *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932). However, she was still quick to come to Bowen’s defense. Woolf complained to Bowen that she often felt

⁸³ Woolf wrote in a May 1925 letter to Ethel Sands: “I get so worried by all the old gentlemen telling me I’m a born critic and not a novelist, and all the young gentlemen telling me I’m a born novelist and not a critic. However, we are making some money this time, which is great fun, and if the Common Reader and Mrs Dalloway keep it up, we are going to build a W.C. and a bathroom at Rodmell” (*L3*, 187).

Yet it is obvious that both Woolf and Bowen were interested in developing their literary criticism and other nonfiction projects. Woolf complained in another diary entry from the same period that she had discovered the limitations of particular forms of writing:

What I have discovered in writing *The Years* is that you can only get comedy by using the surface layer—for example, the scene on the terrace. The question is can I get at quite different layers by bringing in music & painting together with certain groupings of human beings. This is what I want to try for in the raid scene: to keep going and influencing each other: the picture; the music, & the other direction—the action—I mean character telling character—while the movement (that is the change of feeling as the raid goes on) continues. Anyhow, in this book I have discovered that there must be contrast: one strata, or layer cant be developed intensively, as I did I expect in *The Waves*, without harm to the others. Thus a kind of form is, I hope, imposing itself, corresponding to the dimensions of the human being: one should be able to feel a wall made out of all the influences. (*D4*, 347)

Woolf was alluding to the development of her fiction, specifically *The Years* (1937), but these comments also describe Woolf's ongoing attempts to develop a critical method that would rely on the arrangement and development of these layers of "influences" and impressions (347). *The Years* was originally conceived of as a novel-essay and Woolf had started thinking about the project just as she completed *The Common Reader: Second Series*. In its earliest stages, Woolf imagined the project as a hybrid text or even a scrapbook. Woolf recorded how she planned to organize the project around "4 pictures" and various other ephemera (*D4*, 77). Eventually these components of *The Years* were separated into reading notebooks and scrapbooks and turned into *Three Guineas*.

Woolf's reading notebooks were not generally organized in a highly systematic fashion. Fiction and nonfiction often ran concurrently across pages full of corrections and marginalia, and Woolf enjoyed this process of "rotating her crops" (*D2*, 198). However, these scrapbooks exist in Woolf's archive as a point of contrast to her other reading notebooks:

For the first time, Woolf inserted 139 documents— newspaper cuttings, letters, pamphlets, and manifestos—into these volumes, selecting a particular order, sequence and arrangement for each page, even holding newspaper cuttings out of order chronologically and inserting them with other cuttings of different dates, either later or earlier, to create a thematic construct. The volumes continue Woolf's usual practice as well as note-taking from books that she was reading to build research and support for the arguments she planned to feature in *Three Guineas*. (298)

According to Merry M. Pawlowski, these research books are situated between two artistic traditions: the scrapbook and the commonplace book (299). Woolf was intrigued by both traditions and alludes to their merits in her *Common Readers*. Woolf describes, for example, the common reader snatching up "scraps" of material to produce "some kind of a whole" (11). Woolf also comments in her outline of Mary Russell Mitford on "the great merit" of biographies that function like "scrapbooks" to provide a rich account of a historical figure (183). Woolf alludes to the value of commonplace books in the first chapter of *The Common Reader: Second Series* as well:

But, happily, Harvey left behind him a commonplace book; he had the habit of making notes in the margins of books as he read. Looking from one to the other, from his public self to his private, we see his face lit from both sides, and the expression changes as it changes so seldom upon the face of the Elizabethans. We detect another Harvey lurking behind the superficial Harvey, shading him with doubt and effort and despondency. For, luckily, the commonplace book was

small; the margins even of an Elizabethan folio narrow; Harvey was forced to be brief, and because he wrote only for his own eye at the command of some sharp memory or experience he seems to write as if he were talking to himself. That is true, he seems to say; or that reminds me, or again: If only I had done this—We thus become aware of a conflict between the Harvey who blundered among men and the Harvey who sat wisely at home among his books. The one who acts and suffers brings his case to the one who reads and thinks for advice and consolation.

(20)

Gabriel Harvey is one of Woolf's most clearly articulated examples of a common reader. Woolf describes Harvey as a man who loves books "as a true reader loves them, not as trophies to be hung up for display, but as living beings that 'must be mediated, practised and incorporated into [the] body and soul'" (23). Woolf indicates in this section of the essay that Harvey's commonplace book is where he becomes most human—or perhaps most common and most known to readers. From this collection of private musings and hastily recorded impressions appears the fullest portrait of the common reader: a man guided by "sharp memory or experience" who makes sense of the world through his reading, writing, and reflection (21). Woolf concludes her portrait of Harvey on a note of reflection: "when we say that Harvey lived we mean that he quarrelled and was tiresome and ridiculous and struggled and failed and had a face like ours—a changing, a variable, a human face" (21). When Woolf wrote in her diary of attempting to reach a form of writing through the collection and development of layered impressions, her comments were very likely influenced by her critical writing.

The day after Woolf recorded these musings about collected impressions and *The Years*, she spent several hours in London with Elizabeth Bowen.⁸⁴ Years later, Bowen

⁸⁴ See: *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol. 4* (Harcourt Brace, 1983), p. 347.

would describe in her own nonfiction the difficulty of creating a comprehensible vision out of collected impressions and afterthoughts. Bowen warns writers in the Foreword to *Afterthought* that one cannot expect to find “a view of the whole, a more perceptive or comprehensive vision” until it is formed and elucidated by memories and impressions (9). Instead, one is left to make sense of the world by creating a “scrap screen” of personal memories and impressions (*LCW*, 169).

The “Unexpected Demands” of *Collected Impressions*

Bowen’s characterization of *Collection Impressions* as a “scrap screen” accurately describes the variety of material in the collection (169). Bowen herself refers to the works as “pieces” and so I will follow suit. When organizing the collection, Bowen grouped together reviews and other pieces with thematic threads, or by subject, and many of the reviews run concurrently and share space on a single page. The “Reviews” section and the review sub-groups, for example, coalesce into a sort of literary scrapbook in the middle of the text. It is important to note that Bowen selected material that was written over a period of thirteen years. I mentioned earlier that over fifty percent of the pieces were written between 1935-1939. Another thirty-two percent were written from 1940-1945. Any remaining pieces were written sporadically post-1945. Bowen organized the book into six sections: “Prefaces,” “Reviews,” “Two Pieces,” “Plays, Pictures, Places,” “A Broadcast,” and “Two Pieces From *Orion*.” The first section contains five critical prefaces. The first preface was written for a 1946 edition of Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Uncle Silas*. Bowen wrote the second preface for a Flaubert omnibus, though the project

never came to fruition and so exists only in *Collected Impressions*.⁸⁵ The third preface was written for the *Faber Book of Modern Short Stories* (1936), an anthology that Bowen also organized. Bowen wrote the fourth preface for an American edition of *The Demon Lover* in 1945, and the fifth preface was written for Rayner Heppenstall's first novel *The Blaze of Noon* (1939).⁸⁶

The generic variety of the prefaces alone hints at the spirit of the collection. The succeeding sections include reviews organized into three sub-categories: "Women," "Various," and "Irish"; two pieces of autobiography and social criticism; two theatre reviews, one review of the Royal Academy, four travel narratives; a script for a radio broadcast on Anthony Trollope that was delivered in 1945 and then reprinted as a pamphlet in 1946; and two essays on the craft of writing originally published in the short-lived literary magazine *Orion*.⁸⁷ Bowen isolates the prefaces and the final two essays as distinct from the "literary journalism" of the other sections (vi). She explains in the Foreword that these pieces have "put forward claims with which time has nothing to do,"

⁸⁵ Bowen explains in a textual note that she wrote the Preface to introduce English readers to Flaubert's novels—specifically *Madame Bovary* (1856), *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (1874) and *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (1881). Bowen explains that she has adopted a didactic tone to address and instruct readers who "might not yet know [Flaubert's] work, or his work's background," Any "re-statement of what may seem, to other readers, obvious facts about Flaubert much be allowed for" in the spirit of instruction. See: *Collected Impressions* (Longmans, 1950), p. 18, n1.

⁸⁶ *The Blaze of Noon* was published amid some controversy. *The Evening Standard* called the novel "a story of poultry-yard morals" and deemed it one of the most explicit British novels since *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Bowen, who was unacquainted with Heppenstall, found the novel "remarkably integrated" and "articulate." See: Hannah Van Hove, "'I have to Touch, As Another Man Will Look': The (Un)seeing Gaze in Rayner Heppenstall's *The Blaze of Noon*" in *We Speak a Different Tongue: Maverick Voices and Modernity, 1890-1939* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), pp. 255-57.

⁸⁷ "Notes on Writing a Novel" was published in *Orion II* in 1945 and "Out of a Book" was published in *Orion III* in 1946. *Orion* was conceived of by C. Day Lewis, Rosamond Lehmann, and John Lehmann as an "unpolitical" literary magazine dedicated to literature and culture. In total, four issues of *Orion* were published: two in 1945, one in 1946, and one in 1947. See: Selina Hastings, *Rosamond Lehmann: A Life* (Chatto & Windus, 2002), p. 240-42.

and that she stands by them as “serious work, for which I would wish survival” (vi). Bowen appears to have strengthened this wish by bookending the collection with these works. I will examine Bowen’s literary essay “Out of a Book” and the preface to *The Faber Book of Short Stories* as set pieces that model Bowen’s “scrap screen” critical approach (169). Bowen emphasizes the power of arrangement and self-adjustment by suggesting that it is through the accumulation and articulation of personal impressions that literary communities are created and literary histories written.

It is difficult to pinpoint precisely when Bowen began work on *Collected Impressions* because she did not keep a diary and a limited amount of her correspondence has been preserved. Records from the Knopf Archive at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin indicate the American publishing house was in contact with Longmans, Green & Co., Bowen’s English publisher for the project, as early as September 1948. The two publishing houses worked together to secure permissions to reprint the various pieces Bowen had selected for inclusion. Bowen likely did not finalize her choices until 1948; at least two of the pieces were published in 1947 and another, “Myself When Young,” appeared in the *Observer* in 1948. The contents of the collection remained in flux even months before its publication. A list of Bowen’s final selections sent along to Knopf via Longmans includes several pieces that were ultimately removed. Bowen removed, for example, the Preface to a 1948 edition of *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and the Introduction to a 1948 edition of Antonia White’s *Frost in May* (1933).⁸⁸

⁸⁸ The 1948 edition of *Pride and Prejudice* was published by Williams & Norgate. The 1948 edition of *Frost in May* was an Eyre & Spottiswoode edition. The latter was reprinted in Hermione Lee’s edited collection of Bowen’s nonfiction, *The Mulberry Tree* (Harcourt Brace, 1986), p. 114.

Bowen removed a second piece on Jane Austen and revised the “Three Pieces” section to “Two Pieces.”⁸⁹ Bowen added one additional review after 1948: a third piece on Virginia Woolf, specifically a review of Bernard Blackstone’s *Virginia Woolf: A Commentary* (1949). Bowen concludes the review with a rousing personal tribute to Woolf’s literary achievement and artistry:

It is possible—nay more, I know it to be a fact—that she reproached herself for being privileged, sheltered. The second World War, beginning with the Spanish War, was to her the material culmination of something she had always seen as latent, dreaded. It was her doom as a person

—she was too great an artist for it to have been her doom as that

—to live at a time when the intolerable must be faced.

That, had she lived, had the dreaded return of illness not driven her to the decision of death, she could have faced the intolerable, I do not doubt. Had she not, after all, preconceived everything? That ‘taste of the eternal’ that she transmitted remains with us. Her art, though it registered dismay and envisaged defeat, triumphed: it is the strongest incentive to succeeding artists to take in all, to transmute all, to continue to ride the waves. (82)

Bowen’s decision to include a third piece on Woolf indicates she wished to give Woolf pride of place in the collection. Woolf is the only author treated in three separate pieces. The only other subject afforded such detailed treatment is Bowen’s home country. In the “Ireland” sub-section, Bowen includes three reviews of recent books concerning the history and culture of Dublin. Before adding the review of Woolf to *Collected Impressions*, Bowen wrote to Charles Ritchie and described the difficulty with which she

⁸⁹ This second piece on Austen was published in a 1936 anthology on English novelists. Other contributors to the anthology included Graham Greene, Rose Macaulay, Seán O’Faoláin, and V.S. Pritchett. See: *The English Novelists, A Survey of the Novel by Twenty Contemporary Novelists* (Chatto & Windus, 1936).

had composed the original piece. Bowen recounted that Woolf was not simply a difficult subject; the process had stirred up “all sorts of impressions” and made the writing slow-going (*LCW*, 138). “I think I must have had something akin to an in-love feeling for her,” Bowen concluded. “Oh, supposing the horror if you were dead and somebody wrote a book about you and I was asked to review it!” (138).

The inclusion of the third piece on Woolf was Bowen’s final amendment to the draft before she released the material to her English and American publishers.⁹⁰ By mid-1949, Longmans had created galley proofs of *Collected Impressions* using the original newspaper cuttings and prefaces torn out of books.

Longman wrote to Blanche Knopf on 29 September 1949 and offered to send along the proofs, by then in this scrapbook form, and confirmed that the staff at Longmans had nearly finished securing permissions to reprint the individual pieces:

1. We are clearing permission for the whole world and have almost completed the process. There are two or three still outstanding but we are negotiating them and do not anticipate failure.
2. In view of the haphazard condition of the material, which consists of newspaper cuttings, bits of books, etc. etc. it seems to me best that we should let you have galleys as soon as they are complete. I will see that a set is sent over to you in New York. It is difficult to estimate when this will be but we expect to have them in February or March next year.

(HRC, 685.14)

⁹⁰Bowen corresponded primarily with Blanche Knopf (1894-1966) in America. Knopf was the president of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., a publishing house she established with her husband Alfred Knopf in 1915. In England, Bowen dealt mainly with Mark Longman (1917-1972), who was the president of the publishing company and the last of the Longman family to run the company.

Negotiations with newspapers, magazines, and publishers over reprinting continued through early 1950, but the proofs were sent to the Knopf offices by January of that year. Knopf wrote to Bowen the following month to confirm receipt and requested that Bowen sign a new contract before going to print. Knopf determined the book was unlikely to generate a large profit and as a cost-saving measure they wished to use the Longmans galley proofs for their own printing (685.14). Bowen signed an updated contract and the publishers jointly determined *Collected Impressions* would appear in England in May and in America in September.

It does not appear that Bowen thought of the project as “Collected Impressions” until early 1950. For all of 1948, and through 1949, the book was provisionally titled “Impressions” (685.14). William Koshland, an editor at Knopf, was still soliciting permissions for reprinting under the original title in December 1949. Blanche Knopf and Mark Longman called the project “Impressions” in their correspondence that fall and winter as well (685.14). No records exist to explain Bowen’s decision to change the title. However, the change occurred sometime between December 1949 and January 1950. When Knopf submitted a request for permission to reprint “Anthony Trollope: A New Judgment” on 18 January 1950, the paperwork reflected the updated title “Collected Impressions” and indicated their plans for an initial print run of 5,000 copies (685.14).

It is curious that Bowen retained her provisional title for so long. After all, the act of collection appears so essential to the project. Bowen spends much of the Foreword explaining that the individual pieces converge into a coherent whole and have to some degree “collected themselves” and “act upon one another” (vi). More significantly, Bowen explains that her critical method has developed from this notion of collecting:

I am conscious, in re-reading the book-review section of *Collected Impressions*, that I have written best, because most happily, about books whose claim was their subject rather than their style. Biographies, for instance, or histories of cities offer, without embarrassing consciousness of the literary medium, sorts of annexes to experience in actual life. Like any other experience, they are to be reacted to; and the reaction is agreeable to discussion. My criticism is impressionistic—its warrant being the present-day prevalence of the signed review. The anonymous critic must be impersonal, and formal, because inevitably his voice carries greater weight. (vi)

Bowen was well-aware of the specter of the impersonal critic. In the same BBC interview in which Bowen claimed she had “never belonged to any group,” she also remarked of the literary establishment: “I wouldn’t say that the establishment consisted of the novelists who were at work so much as the critics and the circle which they create” (qtd. in Hepburn, 237). Bowen believed her critical style was “warranted” or authorized by her willingness to reveal literary judgments as a collection of her own impressions (vi). In this excerpt from the Foreword, Bowen also describes one of the most enjoyable elements of the project: developing connections between nonfiction works and lived experience. Bowen explains the difficulty of writing about literature; no writer lacks the “critical faculty,” Bowen claims. However, a writer is “accustomed to keep the faculty bent, like a hooded lamp on his own work—which must not be allowed to slip, for an instant, out of the orbit of that remorseless glare” (v). To focus on one’s own shortcomings is second-nature to a writer, Bowen muses. To ask the writer instead to “wrench the neck of the lamp in another, outward direction is not easy; and, even when that is done, the light may not focus with the required certainty” (v). Bowen’s comments further elucidate the difficulty with which she attempted to write about contemporaries like Virginia Woolf.

Preface to *The Faber Book of Modern Short Stories*

T. S. Eliot approached Bowen in July 1936 regarding the proposed “Faber Book of Modern Short Stories”: he asked her to produce a preface of three to four thousand words for the anthology and select a series of stories that would total no more than 100,000 words. Eliot outlined several conditions in his letter. Bowen was instructed to choose twenty stories written in English (no translations) from British and American writers. American writers were to comprise no more than a fourth of the total collection.⁹¹ Eliot warned against selecting writers “too remote and too well-known,” and requested that Bowen account for any notable exclusions in her introduction (*Letters of TSE8*, 253-54). Bowen would be paid £50 for her effort. Bowen accepted Eliot’s outlined terms “very gladly” and immediately began work (255, n. 1). Yet, Bowen soon grew weary of the project. She lamented later that year in a letter to William Plomer her time spent on “those abominable short stories (the collection I mean),” and complained that the process of selection had taken up a considerable amount of time (qtd. in Glendinning, 118). “As far as I ever do read here, I read nothing else,” Bowen wrote. “4/5 of what I try out shows a level of absolute mediocrity; arty, they are, and mawkishly tender-hearted [...]. Really, they are the hell.... I long more and more to make a collection of *Great Middlebrow Prose*. Would this be actionable? Would you collaborate? I suppose it would ruin me” (118). That Bowen agreed to the project and then reprinted the Preface in *Collected Impressions* suggests that she saw the value of the work despite her repeated complaints about its unwieldy nature. That Eliot asked Bowen to lend her name and expertise to the project was certainly a deciding factor as well.

⁹¹ *The Letters of T. S. Eliot Volume 8: 1936–1938*, ed. Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden (Faber & Faber, 2017), p. 253.

However, Eliot did not choose Bowen for her expertise as a critic. Eliot's correspondence and the promotional materials for the project reveal quite the opposite: Eliot saw Bowen as a writer who would appeal to common readers. A blurb most likely written by Eliot to announce the book's publication described Bowen as "distinguished both as a short-story writer and as a novelist" (qtd. in *TSE* 8, 454, n. 3). The blurb further promised the forthcoming collection would serve the generalist reader in three ways: "first in the pleasure of reading stories of such quality, second as an introduction to writers whom he may not know, and third as evidence of the temper and tendencies of our time as shown in fiction" (454, n. 3). There is nothing in the promotional material to suggest that Eliot or anyone at Faber understood the project as Bowen did: an effort to clarify the role of short fiction in the modern canon. The Preface explains as much about the craft of reading and writing short fiction as it does the literary market and generic conventions. Eliot failed to see the critical worth of the project and instead emphasized its marketability. Just before *The Faber Book of Modern Short Stories* was published in 1937, A. Desmond Hawkins wrote to Eliot regarding his interest in writing a critical account of Bowen "in extenso," though he complained that Bowen was not a "big enough fish to be treated in this way" (qtd. in *TSE* 8, 480, n. 2).⁹² Eliot agreed Hawkins was "probably right about Elizabeth Bowen," but concluded she had a "very definite place, and a pretty high one, amongst novelists of her kind" (480).

⁹² A. Desmond Hawkins (1908-1999) was an English writer, editor and broadcaster. Hawkins served as the first "fiction chronicler" for *The Criterion*. Eliot complimented his "ability and character" and regarded him as a close friend. See: *The Letters of T. S. Eliot Volume 7: 1934-1935*, ed. Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden (Faber & Faber, 2017), p. 1042.

Eliot spoken in similar terms in correspondence with Bowen as well. Bowen sent several drafts of her short stories to Eliot in 1936 and he commented in a reply that “the popolo” would certainly like her titles, though they were unlikely to understand the stories in any significant way (HRC, 10.4).⁹³ Eliot remained an editorial presence for the duration of Bowen’s work on the project. After Bowen submitted the completed project, Eliot asked her to clarify her opening statement that the short story “is the child of this century” (CI, 38). Bowen accepted this editorial note and also added a paragraph on the second to last page that explains her decision to exclude stories from H.G. Wells and Rudyard Kipling: “stories already classic, too well known and well liked to warrant further prominence or a given place” (44). Despite these editorial interventions, Bowen completed the work on schedule and had found in the project an opportunity to develop her critical voice.

It appears that the *popolo* were pleased with Bowen’s critical efforts. William Plomer wrote to Bowen in September 1937 to congratulate her on the success of the collection and to offer anecdotal proof of its popularity:

It might amuse you to know that I lent the book to my landlord. He was so pleased with the introduction that he has copied pieces out of it into a notebook and says he has learnt a lot from it, and the Autumn Overture to *The Disinherited* he finds ‘really great.’ I tell you this because I think it is nice to know that one is reaching decent, honest, obscure people as well as one’s friends and the cognoscenti. (HRC, 11.18)

⁹³ In Italian, “popolo” translates to “the people,” and describes common people or the general populous. Benito Mussolini founded the Italian Newspaper *Il Popolo d’Italia* (“The People of Italy”) in 1914 and the paper became a significant tool used by the Fascist movement. Eliot appears to use the Latinate word “popolo” to colloquially describe the masses.

Unlike Eliot, who invoked the Latinate “popolo” to speak generally about masses of uneducated (or common) readers, Plomer complimented Bowen’s ability to reach this same readership full of “decent, honest, obscure people,” and he saw little value in reaching the “cognoscenti”—a much smaller minority of well-educated or expert readers (HRC, 11.18). It seemed to Plomer after reading *The Faber Book of Modern Short Stories*, and Bowen’s most recent novel *The Death of the Heart*, that her great strength as a writer was her ability to reach the “ordinary” person and subject in her fiction and nonfiction alike:

I think your peculiar strength as a writer is due to some extent to the fact that you are continuously able to approach “ordinary” people with cheerful curiosity, fortified of course with all your special qualities of intelligence and imagination, whereas the average intellectual is either indifferent towards them, or superior or contemptuous, or trying to fit them into some bloody theory or other. At the same time I feel that in [*The Death of the Heart*] you are perhaps more deeply moved than you have been in your other books, and it is wonderful to me that someone who has such sociable tastes and habits as you can be as profound and philosophical as [^] some old hermit who only leaves his library for his garden and his garden for his grave. (HRC, 11.8)

Plomer’s evocation of the “old hermit” rather calls to mind Woolf’s similarly phrased indictment of Richard Bentley in *The Common Reader*. Bentley cloisters himself within the university walls and leaves only for “short excursions to eat and pray,” just as Plomer’s “old hermit” scuttles from the library to the garden and back again (*CRI*, 190). Plomer’s compliments most likely would have pleased Bowen who indicates on several occasions in *Collected Impressions* her desire to reach, and describe, ordinary readers through her fiction and nonfiction. In the reprinted 1945 radio broadcast, “Anthony Trollope—A New Judgment,” for example, Bowen imagines a conversation between

William, a young reader, and Anthony Trollope. William admires Trollope's ability to write "ordinary people with the knack of living ordinary lives" (*CI*, 242). William explains that readers "long for" what is "ordinary" (242). Bowen may have been reticent to describe her own interest in the common, the ordinary, the everyday. Yet, including the broadcast in *Collected Impressions* allowed Bowen to articulate these values through the specter of a famed nineteenth-century literary figure.

Ultimately, Bowen's rhetorical positioning is not altogether dissimilar to Woolf's in *The Common Reader*. Woolf tended to narrativize literary history, as Bowen does, to understand her own reading practices. An important distinction to note between Bowen and Woolf, though, is Bowen's more clearly articulated desire to "wrench the neck of the lamp in another" outward direction (*CI*, v). Bowen was uninterested in producing only self-critique or understanding only her own reading habits through a critical account of literature. Bowen maintained a longstanding interest in describing "decent, honest, obscure" people and subjects in her writing and wished to alight on a critical process that would have pedagogical value for the sorts of "ordinary" readers Plomer described in his letter.⁹⁴ Bowen's interest in the generic significance of the short story, for example, became the foundational question of a class on the short story that Bowen taught to young women at Vassar College in 1960. Bowen's essay collection often vacillates between personal impressions and more objective commentary on the literary market. However, as Bowen explains in the Preface, her "century's emotion, dislocated and

⁹⁴ Bowen's essay "What We Need in Writing" appeared in the *Spectator* in late 1936 and similarly alludes to the question of everydayness in contemporary writing. Bowen commends American writers for their ability to "embrace the everyday widely and make everything their province." See: *People, Places, Things: Essays by Elizabeth Bowen*, edited by Allan Hepburn (Edinburgh UP, 2008), p. 309.

stabbing, has at least this value: it makes a half-conscious artist of every feeling man” (46). Bowen aimed to harness these half-conscious feelings into a comprehensible whole.

Out of a Book

“The aesthetic is nothing but a return to images that will allow nothing to take their place; the aesthetic is nothing but an attempt to disguise and glorify the enforced return” (269).

So writes Bowen in the conclusion to “Out of a Book,” the final piece in *Collected Impressions* and one of Bowen’s most famous critical essays. The piece, originally published in *Orion III* in 1946, has indeed captured much scholarly attention. Perhaps most significant is Neil Corcoran who argues that the enforced return represents “a return to the already written [and] it is one measure of her strength as a writer that this re-reading is also an invitation to us as readers to read the traditions themselves differently”

(6). Bowen was undoubtedly influenced by a childhood spent reading fiction. She confesses in the first sentence of “Out of a Book”: “I know that I have in my make-up layers of synthetic experience, and that the most powerful of my memories are only half true” (*CI*, 264). Bowen then begins a detailed account of beloved childhood books and the myriad threads of influence that have woven themselves through her own writing in the succeeding years. Corcoran has persuasively argued that we can find in Bowen’s fiction a deep indebtedness to several particularly strong influences: James, Proust, Flaubert, Woolf, and Joyce, among others. As Corcoran explains, though, this indebtedness does not manifest itself merely as a recapitulation of the stylistic conventions of these respective writers. Bowen often returns to these influences with a critical eye: “The return may be enforced, since these traditions are what she has, but it may also be critical, skeptical, suspicious” (6).

What if we extend Corcoran's reading of the enforced return to include Bowen's nonfiction? After all, Bowen selected "Out of a Book" to serve as the conclusion to *Collected Impressions*. The essay certainly reveals Bowen's desire to narrativize her reading life. However, Bowen also extends her personal narrative to suggest that it is through layers of "synthetic experience" and collected impressions that writers find their own voice and connect to other writers (264). "When I write, I am re-creating what was created for me," Bowen explains (269). Bowen describes this phenomenon as shared among writers as well: "It could lead to madness to look back and back for the true primary impression or sensation; those that we did ever experience we have forgotten—we only remember that to which something was added" (269). Bowen shifts between "I" and "we" to remind readers that this is a book of collected personal impressions; yet, *Collected Impressions* is also an "experiment" in criticism meant to serve readers, writers, and critics alike (v). Bowen argues that her fiction is to some degree a scrap screen of what was created for her. If the late modern sensibility of Bowen's nonfiction manifests itself as what MacKay describes as the "self-conscious recapitulation of high modernism," or more specifically as the self-conscious recapitulation of critical writings that have influenced Bowen, then we must treat "Out of a Book" as an account of the nonfiction to which Bowen's own criticism is indebted as well.

No records exist to confirm Bowen ever read *The Common Reader: Second Series*, though it seems likely that she would have done so. Bowen and Woolf became acquainted just as Woolf was finishing work on the collection, and the two writers often shared drafts and copies of their work with one another. As Woolf drafted a lecture to be delivered to the Worker's Educational Association in Brighton in May 1940, she sent a

copy of the untitled paper (what would eventually become “The Leaning Tower”) to Bowen for comments.

Still, mentions of *The Common Reader: Second Series* do not appear in any of Bowen’s surviving letters. Traces of the collection can be found in one of Bowen’s 1942 radio broadcasts for the BBC. Allan Hepburn suggests that Bowen was likely thinking of the “Dr. Burney’s Evening Party” chapter from *The Common Reader: Second Series* when she wrote “London Revisited: As Seen by Fanny Burney.”⁹⁵

Bowen appears to respond to—and indeed revise—another chapter of *The Common Reader: Second Series* in *Collected Impressions* as well. Reading “Out of a Book” alongside “How Should One Read A Book?” suggests that Bowen possibly imagines this critical essay in the catalogue of literature to which she is indebted. Both essays serve as the final pieces of their respective collections and Woolf and Bowen both begin with a declaration of a writer’s fallibility. Woolf admits she is unable to answer her titular question: “In the first place I want to emphasize the note of interrogation at the end of my title. Even if I could answer the question for myself, the answer would apply only to me and not to you” (*CR2*, 258). Bowen imagines herself as a creature made up of “synthetic experience” and cannot confirm how many of her memories are more than “half true” (*CI*, 264). Woolf concludes that her musings are made up of personal impressions—not empirical facts meant for other readers. Bowen, too, questions the

⁹⁵ See: Elizabeth Bowen *Listening in: Broadcasts, Speeches, and Interviews by Elizabeth Bowen*, ed. Allan Hepburn (Edinburgh UP, 2010), p. 346, n1.

degree to which her essay can speak to another reader's or writer's experience: "This is the case for me," she admits in an early comment on the influence of Dickens (265).

Bowen grows more comfortable applying these personal musings to others as she nears her conclusion. Bowen registers her belief that "all through creative writing there must run a sense of dishonesty and of debt" (268). Bowen further argues that "all susceptibility belongs to the age of magic, the Eden where fact and fiction were the same; the imaginative writer was the imaginative child" and so on (269). Bowen seeks to "glorify the enforced return," and thus sensationalizes the people, places, and things that populate her memory:

Readers of my kind were the heady ones, the sensationalists—recognizing one another at sight we were banded together inside a climate of our own. Landscapes or insides of houses or streets or gardens, outings or even fatigue duties all took the cast of the book we were circulating at the time; and the reading made of us an electric ring. Books were story or story-poetry books: we were unaware that there could be any others. (*CI*, 265)

"The reading made of us an electric ring," Bowen writes. Her memories of a childhood spent reading are characterized by a sense of community engendered through literary connection. The readers organized themselves and "banded together" inside a climate of their own (265). Bowen makes clear from the outset of this piece that she is not interested in remaining in a room of her own. Rather, Bowen traces the impressions that come "out" of a book and the communities of readers and writers that necessarily follow. Woolf alternatively describes the precariousness of impressions and suggests readers and writers must attempt solitary experiments:

Perhaps the quickest way to understand the elements of what a novelist is doing is not to read, but to write; to make your own experiment with the dangers and difficulties of words. Recall, then, some event that has left a distinct impression on you—how at the corner of that street, perhaps, you passed two people talking. A tree shook; an electric light danced; the tone of the talk was comic, but also tragic; a whole vision, an entire conception, seemed contained in that moment. (CR2, 259-60)

Woolf's "electric light" dances only in the singular memory of the individual reader or writer (259). There is no collective endeavor to embark upon, no "electric ring" to be found. Yes, there is power in Woolf's figure of the common reader. Woolf explains that readers can indeed harness individual impressions to create an atmosphere of critical judgment "which writers breathe as they work [and] an influence of judgment is created which tells upon them even if it never finds its way into print" (269-70). However, Bowen argues that an atmosphere of collected impressions will always find its way into print because impressions and influences are what give shape to a writer's work. It is to their influences, impressions and memories that writers are most indebted. "Almost no experience, however much simplified by the distance of time, is to be vouched for as being wholly my own," Bowen concludes (269). Bowen situates herself among a constellation of writers and imagines a network of influences that will continue to create and re-create. Woolf asks a prescient question in the final lines of her essay: "who reads to bring about an end, however desirable?" (270). Bowen's essay affirms Woolf's question and her belief in the eternal power of reading. Yet, Bowen revises this notion to suggest that there is even greater power in the interconnections between readers and writers: "the process of reading is reciprocal; the book is no more than a formula, to be furnished out with images of the reader's mind" (267).

“A More Perceptive or Comprehensive Vision”: *Afterthought: Pieces About Writing*

The ten years that passed between the publication of *Collected Impressions* and *Afterthought: Pieces About Writing* were transitional years for Bowen. At the time, Bowen described the 1950s as the most enjoyable “epoch” of her life: “it is really the first one, it seems to me, in which I’ve enjoyed being ‘grown-up’ as much as I expected to do when I was a child” (qtd. in Glendinning, 201). The decade was one of great professional success but it was also marred by personal loss. Alan Cameron died at Bowen’s Court after a series of illnesses on 26 August 1952. Bowen continued a steady pace of work after his death. She was on a lecture tour in America when he fell ill the previous year and set out again on a series of professional engagements soon after his funeral. Bowen made Ireland her primary home; however, she traveled frequently and spent a portion of every year that decade in America.⁹⁶ By 1955, Bowen claimed she had grown to love her “bachelor status” and “felt her faculties coming alive again” (*LCW*, 206). Years later, Bowen would admit that surviving the decade had not been quite as easy as she had originally claimed. Bowen recalled feeling “maimed” by her husband’s death and she struggled to write fiction amid the multitude of articles and occasional pieces that she had taken on out of financial necessity (qtd. in Glendinning, 201). *A World of Love* was eventually published in 1955 and *The Little Girls* (1964) followed nearly ten years later.

During this time, Bowen also began spending more time in the classroom. After selling Bowen’s Court in early 1960, Bowen left Ireland to take up a post at Vassar College where she was to deliver lectures to the university community and teach a

⁹⁶ For a detailed account of Bowen’s travel throughout the 1950s, see: Victoria Glendinning, “Dislocations” in *Elizabeth Bowen: Portrait of a Writer* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977), pp. 183-202.

semester-long class on the short story. These sorts of pedagogical influences are obvious in *Afterthought*. Bowen recalls in the Foreword to the collection her time spent with “students of writing” and apologizes to any readers who find the book “less reflective and more didactic” (9). *Afterthought* was not inspired by Bowen’s time at Vassar College. The book was already in production by the time Bowen arrived on the Poughkeepsie, New York campus. However, Bowen had spent much of the preceding decade among students and audiences at other universities in America, England, and Europe. When Bowen wrote to Charles Ritchie in 1959 to announce the forthcoming publication of her travel book *A Time in Rome* (1960) and *Afterthought*, Bowen reported that she felt “rather good” about the status of her literary future (*LCW*, 329). In the same letter, Bowen explained that *Afterthought* would be “on the lines of *Collected Impressions*” (329). Yet, the collection soon began to look quite different from its predecessor.

Two distinct versions of the book exist: the English edition, *Afterthought: Pieces About Writing*, and the American edition, *Seven Winters: Memories of a Dublin Childhood & Afterthoughts: Pieces on Writing*. Bowen was determined to bundle together a series of autobiographical writings on her childhood with the literary essays in the American edition. No autobiographical accounts of Bowen’s life and childhood exist in the English *Afterthought*, though there is one essay, “Autobiography,” on the craft of writing autobiography. Bowen’s editors at Knopf were not altogether pleased with the proposed changes. Blanche Knopf complained in an internal memo: “I do not think we can stop her [...] She wants Longmans to do it and if Longmans are going to do it we had better” (qtd. in Glendinning, 216). It is unlikely that Longmans seriously considered including the proposed autobiographical material in their edition of *Afterthought*. The

material had already been published as *Seven Winters* by Longmans in 1943, and there is no existing correspondence beyond the memos from Knopf to suggest that Bowen's English publishers were interested in this idea. Letters from Bowen's agents refer exclusively to the forthcoming project as "Afterthought" and describe only the contents of the English edition (HRC, 11.4). What is clear when comparing the two versions is that Bowen made several editorial changes aside from the title and the addition of autobiographical material. I have reprinted the Tables of Contents to emphasize several variations (fig. 3).

American Edition (Knopf)	English Edition (Longmans)
<p>SEVEN WINTERS <i>Herbert Place</i> <i>Nursery</i> <i>Governess</i> <i>Walks</i> <i>Shops</i> <i>Horse Show</i> <i>Stephen's Green</i> <i>Brass Plates</i> <i>Dancing in Daylight</i> <i>Society</i> <i>Sundays</i> <i>Drawing-Room</i></p> <p>AFTERTHOUGHTS <i>Reflections</i></p> <p>THE ROVING EYE</p> <p>DISLOYALTIES</p> <p>AUTOBIOGRAPHY</p> <p>SOURCES OF INFLUENCE</p> <p>EXCLUSION</p> <p>ADVICE</p> <p><i>Prefaces</i></p> <p>DOCTOR THORNE</p> <p>ORLANDO</p> <p>NORTH AND SOUTH</p> <p>STORIES BY KATHERINE MANSFIELD</p> <p>STORIES BY ELIZABETH BOWEN</p> <p>ENCOUNTERS</p> <p>ANN LEE'S</p> <p>THE LAST SEPTEMBER</p> <p>THE SECOND GHOST BOOK</p> <p><i>Reviews</i></p> <p>A WRITER'S DIARY</p> <p>THE GOLDEN APPLES</p> <p>THE ECHOING GROVE</p> <p>ALEXANDRIA</p> <p><i>Broadcasts</i></p> <p>SHE</p> <p>TRUTH AND FICTION</p> <p>I. Story</p> <p>II. People</p> <p>III. Time</p>	<p>FOREWORD</p> <p>I. PREFACES</p> <p><i>Doctor Thorne</i> <i>Orlando</i> <i>North and South</i> <i>Stories by Katherine Mansfield</i> <i>Stories by Elizabeth Bowen</i> <i>Encounters</i> <i>Ann Lee's</i> <i>The Last September</i> <i>The Second Ghost Book</i></p> <p>II. BROADCASTS</p> <p><i>She</i> <i>Truth and Fiction</i></p> <p>III. REVIEWS</p> <p><i>A Writer's Diary</i> <i>The Golden Apples</i> <i>The Echoing Grove</i> <i>Alexandria</i></p> <p>IV. TRAVEL</p> <p><i>A Ride South</i></p> <p>V. REFLECTIONS</p> <p><i>The Roving Eye</i> <i>Disloyalties</i> <i>Autobiography</i> <i>Sources of Influence</i> <i>Advice</i> <i>Exclusion</i></p>

Fig. 3. Tables of contents from the American Edition of *Seven Winters: Memories of a Dublin Childhood & Afterthoughts: Pieces About Writing* (Knopf, 1962) and *Afterthought: Pieces About Writing* (Longmans, 1962).

The American edition retains more of the scrap screen aesthetic characteristic of *Collected Impressions* whereas the English edition is more carefully arranged into five distinct sections with fewer overall pieces. Bowen also reordered the main sections in the English edition. The “Reflections” section that immediately follows the autobiographical content appears at the end of the English edition. Bowen also added a travel narrative to the English edition, “A Ride South,” which narrates a road trip Bowen took through the American South in 1960 and does not appear in the American edition. The variations reflect an obvious desire to arrange the material in a logical order. Placing the “Reflections” after the autobiographical material in the American edition allows for an easy transition from Bowen’s personal history to her personal reflections on literature.

Bowen also made several changes to the Forewords of the respective editions. The English edition was written in Oxford in 1961. The Foreword to the American edition is dated “Oxford, 1962,” though it is comprised mostly of material from the 1961 Foreword.⁹⁷ The most significant addition to the American Foreword is an introductory paragraph that contextualizes *Seven Winters*. Bowen describes the section as a “self-contained work” and a “fragment of autobiography” (vii). Recalling her interest in childhood influences in “Out of a Book,” Bowen describes her wish to explore the early years of her life in these brief sketches: “Something of the marvel, however, something of the amazement, recurs when I write or read. For this reason there is for me a link between *Seven Winters* and the rest of this book which I have entitled *Afterthoughts*” (vii-viii). Paradoxically, Bowen claims in the English Foreword that “discussion of my different stories, recalling the circumstances and time at their start surrounding them, is the nearest

⁹⁷ The English Edition is dated “Old Headington, Oxford, 1961”; the American Edition is dated “Old Headington, Oxford, 1962.”

I shall come to autobiography” (9). Bowen revises this statement in the American edition and instead explains that any “discussion of my different stories, recalling the circumstances and time and their start, has come to be autobiography in an indirect form” (viii-ix). This latter phrasing makes sense, of course, because the Foreword also accounts for a significant autobiographical inclusion.

The variations between the forewords and editions are not as puzzling as they may seem. Bowen’s essay collections were conceived in a spirit of self-adjustment and out of a desire to return to her earlier writings with fresh eyes. That Bowen was interested in combining *Seven Winters* and *Afterthought* for publication in England as well as America is not altogether surprising. Although the *Seven Winters* material had already been published in England, its addition would have more clearly aligned the project with *Collected Impressions* which contains two autobiographical essays: “The Mulberry Tree,” in which Bowen recounts her time at the Downe House School, and “The Big House,” in which Bowen describes her complicated relationship to the Irish Big Houses occupied by the Anglo-Irish landed gentry. Bowen rarely remarked on the changes in her surviving personal writings, though she mentioned the variations to Charles Ritchie:

Darling, a copy of a book by me will be reaching you quite shortly, straight from Knopf’s. It’s that collection of essays, etc., I told you about. It doesn’t actually appear (in New York) till 11th June, but Bill Koshland writes that the advance copies are ready, so I’ve asked him to send you one.⁹⁸ I’m sorry I can’t write your name in it, but will do so later. I wonder what you’ll think of the book as a whole. The New York edition (which will be the one going to you) is a bit different from the London one, which is simply called AFTERTHOUGHT (not in

⁹⁸ William Koshland (1907-1997) was a longtime editor at Knopf. Koshland joined the publishing house in the 1930s and was named President of Knopf in 1966.

the plural). The London edition, however, doesn't appear till autumn.... (LCW, 386)

Bowen's letter mentions one of the subtlest variations between the two editions: the English edition is called "AFTERTHOUGHT (not in the plural)" whereas the American edition is partially titled "Afterthoughts." Bowen was keen to note the distinction between the plural and singular. In many ways, the singular title of the English edition suggests critical and stylistic development from *Collected Impressions*. From a scrap screen of impressions comes a concise, methodical and unified critical text. Alternatively, the plurality of the American edition situates the collection as not a development from *Collected Impressions* but rather a recapitulation of the same aesthetic principles Bowen first outlined twelve years earlier.

To consider either version of *Afterthought* a concise and unified critical text would require a generous account of the material. The brevity of the individual pieces reflects the occasional nature of the magazines that originally commissioned the work. For example, Bowen wrote "Advice" for *Mademoiselle* in 1960, and the magazine advertised the piece as a response to two anonymous (ostensibly female) readers who had submitted questions on the craft of writing. "Sources of Influence" appeared in the *Saturday Review of Literature* more casually titled "The Sponge of the Present."⁹⁹ The pieces tend to be, as Bowen warns in her Foreword, didactic more than reflective and do not offer, even in their arrangement, a real sense of critical development from *Collected Impressions*. Instead, Bowen often return to ideas outlined in her first critical text. "Sources of Influences," for example, suggests a writer "is susceptible to environment, to

⁹⁹ Elizabeth Bowen, "The Sponge of the Present," *Saturday Review of Literature*, 20 June 1953, p. 11.

experience,” just as Bowen concludes in “Out of a Book” that “no experience, however much simplified by the distance of time, is to be vouched for as being wholly my own” (*A*, 206; *CI*, 269). Several of the pieces in *Afterthought* appear to be concise restatements of earlier essays.

I do not underestimate the critical significance of this collection. Bowen was a careful editor and *Afterthought* offers a fairly large collection of her critical work from roughly 1947-1961. The book also shares the generic variety of *Collected Impressions*. Bowen included prefaces, reviews, and broadcasts, in addition to social and literary commentary. *Afterthought* is perhaps unsuccessful in offering a “perceptive or comprehensive” account of Bowen’s critical method (*A*, 9). Yet, the book offers insight into Bowen’s writing life and hints at deeply-ingrained fears over her authorial legacy. Questions of influence and authorship haunt *Collected Impressions* and *Afterthought*. These questions and fears are perhaps most palpable in the Preface to *Stories by Elizabeth Bowen* (1959), which appears in the middle of *Afterthought* and poses a series of troubling questions: “Can I stand far enough away from my own work?”; “What, exactly, do I want to have represented?”; and “What, throughout my life, have I been trying to do, and at which points have I come nearest doing it?” (75).

Preface to *Stories by Elizabeth Bowen*

Three years before the publication of *Afterthought*, Bowen was commissioned by Vintage Books to choose and arrange an assortment of her own short stories for a new collection. Headquartered in New York City, Vintage was established as an imprint of Knopf in 1954. Ideally, the new short-story collection would introduce American readers to a curated collection of Bowen’s best short fiction. Bowen chose eighteen stories and wrote

a prefatory statement to the collection in which she described her process of arrangement. The preface also offers a brief commentary on Bowen's view of the relationship between fiction and the short story. Bowen emphasizes the difficulty of arranging her own writing and questions her ability to objectively assess her writing: "Choice, for instance, involves judgment; judgment requires a long perspective. Can I stand far enough away from my own work?" (75). The Preface to *Stories by Elizabeth Bowen* predates *Afterthought* by nearly three years. However, Bowen describes the difficulties of reflective writing in the Foreword to *Afterthought* as well. In the latter collection, Bowen claims that a writer cannot maintain a comprehensive view of her own work. "One may not exactly know what one has (finally) written till one has finished it—and then only after a term of time," Bowen explains. "Then begins a view of the whole, a more perceptive or comprehensive vision; but too late" (9). Bowen appears to have little faith in her ability to reach a "comprehensive vision" of her own work and instead regretfully concludes that the vision will always arrive "too late" (9). Perhaps it is impossible to produce comprehensible meaning from a "mass" of writing that has accumulated over four decades of work (75).

It is not altogether surprising that Bowen chose to include this particular preface in *Afterthought*. The Preface poses a series of questions that indicate Bowen's reluctance to make any sweeping claims or promises about the value of her work. Indeed, the questions reveal Bowen's palpable self-doubt. Bowen admits a similar reluctance in the Forewords to both her essay collections. Bowen worries in *Collected Impressions* that she cannot be both writer and critic because "the change over from invention to analysis is not easily made" (v). Similar fears return in the Foreword to *Afterthought*. Bowen claims that the "only form of criticism of which I am capable is a form of afterthought" (9). If to

Bowen an afterthought is an incomplete vision that always arrives “too late,” then it stands to reason that in her criticism Bowen notes a similar sense of incompleteness or even unfinishedness (9). Yet, Bowen was drawn to projects like *Collected Impressions*, *Afterthought*, and *Stories*—projects that required Bowen not only to revisit and collect her writing, but that required her to think critically about these acts of collection and arrangement.

It becomes increasingly clear while reading the Preface to *Stories* that Bowen was fixated on and perhaps even to some degree immobilized by this self-reflection. Bowen describes human imagination in “Out of a Book” as fruit that has “rooted in a compost of forgotten books” (*CI*, 268). Characterized as such, literary impressions collected from childhood provide the fertile ground for imaginative development into adulthood. Bowen returns to this idea in the Preface to *Stories*. Near the end of the piece, Bowen comments on the multitude of writers who contribute to the literary landscape: “—literature is a compost to which we are each contributing what we have. The best that an individual can do is to concentrate on what he or she can do, in the course of a burning effort to do it better” (80). Despite Bowen’s “burning effort,” there is an element of immobility in this revised account of the literary compost (80). Bowen paradoxically describes literature as a “compost to which we are all contributing”—it simultaneously grows and decays, then, with each additional contribution. Rather than the imaginative progress described in “Out of a Book,” the literary compost in the preface to *Stories* indicates a never-ending cycle of composition and decomposition.

Marina MacKay has argued that a defining trait of late modern fiction is its preoccupation with stasis in contrast with the mobility characteristic of high modern

works. For MacKay, late modernism is “going nowhere in the sense that it is imaginatively looking backward to the forms of the 1920s rather than orienting itself toward a future that might not arrive” (1609). Bowen too hints at the danger of the “enforced return” and warns “it could lead to madness to look back and back for the true primary impression or sensation” (*CI*, 269). What are we left to conclude of Bowen’s nonfiction if the dominant metaphor of late modernism is indeed, as MacKay argues, the thwarted journey (1611)? Bowen offers no obvious answers to the questions posed at the outset of the Preface and is preoccupied with the task of emphasizing the strongest of her works—the nonfiction and “stories on which [her] reputation could hope to rest” (*A*, 75). The questions Bowen poses, though, are important ones. What has Bowen tried to represent? What has she, throughout her life, been trying to do? Has she, since she first sat down to write, had always the same ideas? Bowen concludes of her short fiction that “every short story is an experiment—what one must ask is not only did it come off, but was it, as an experiment, worth making?” (76). This seems an apposite account, too, of Bowen’s criticism.

Bowen was immobilized by her desire to simultaneously look backward toward her past influences while also conceiving of a critical process suitable for present-day and future readers and writers. Bowen asks herself in the Preface to *Stories*: “What, exactly, do I want to have represented? (75). Bowen’s literary criticism certainly represents development from critical work produced by female modernists like Woolf and West. Bowen advanced critical work that clearly articulated the value of an impressionistic or “scrap screen” approach and in doing so modeled how the arrangement of work composed in styles typically seen as ephemeral and unserious, like the personal, the

feminine, and the confessional could be intentional and powerful (*LCW*, 169). Yet, Bowen was unwilling, or perhaps unable, to divest herself of the self-effacing language of her critical predecessors. She often retreated “back and back” to the self-criticism that haunts both collections. Bowen agonizes in the Preface to *Stories* that she has amassed too much writing to make sense of and has outlasted the “greatest writers” who died before “Time had stolen their freshness” (81). Still, Bowen concludes with a glimmer of optimism and looks toward the future. “I have remained in the world dangerously long,” Bowen writes. “I hope there may still be something I need not forfeit” (81).

CHAPTER FIVE

CODA: TWO DIRECTIONS FOR THE CRITIC?

In the opening sentences of *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (2009), Zadie Smith claims that her book emerged rather surreptitiously from a series of nonfictional pieces written while she was at work on a novel. Smith originally planned to write a “solemn, theoretical book about writing” (1). However, she soon realized that a mass of “a hundred thousand words piled up” would require a different approach (1). Reading Smith’s Foreword, it seems that Elizabeth Bowen makes a prescient assessment of a similar phenomenon when she claims in *Collected Impressions* that her essays have collected themselves. Despite these rhetorical similarities, it is unlikely that Smith consciously modeled her criticism after Bowen. Smith aligns her critical voice with E. M. Foster: a “chatty librarian” who writes in a style that is “resolutely conversational, frothy and without academic pretension” (16). Smith values in her criticism conversation with readers, a frothy tone, and the absence of professional or academic guidelines. Forster certainly wrote this sort of criticism. So too did writers like Woolf, West, and Bowen. Indeed, Smith’s phrasing calls to mind the “hasty, inaccurate, and superficial” common reader, and we find in *Changing My Mind* forms of attention paid to critical reading and writing that indicate Smith elides herself with a literary-critical tradition similar to that elucidated in the present study.

Questions of form and style regarding critical essay collections written by women extend well into the twenty-first century. For Woolf, West, and Bowen, claiming any sort

of critical authority required a keen awareness of the literary market and a willingness to challenge the prevailing belief that their nonfiction work was little more than the amateur criticism of well-known women novelists. Navigating institutional pressures and working without credentials did not stop these writers from developing criticism that championed the amateur reader and modeled a style of critical reading that relied on self-adjustment, curiosity, introspection, and sometimes even outspokenness. This dissertation does not end with the publication of *Afterthought* in 1962. Women writers have continued to stretch the limits of the essay form and renegotiate our expectations literary criticism. Smith, for example, alights on a style that is personal and confessional. She articulates her literary judgments through personal experiences and indicates that critical identity is forged through the self and cannot be taught. Smith diminishes the intellectual prestige and shaping power of literary-academic professionals and returns the power of judgment to readers like herself.

Smith explains early on in the collection that she does not aspire to critical neutrality. Her declarative title, what she calls an “apt, confessional title,” revises the notion that literary criticism must always dictate immutable fact, and she instead offers changes of mind and “ideological inconsistency” (11, 1). For Smith, these inconsistencies coalesce into some kind of a whole and give shape to a critical text that presents its loose ends as possibilities. Smith is attuned to the critical language of writers like Woolf, West, Bowen. She describes these loose ends as “practically an article of faith,” and claims any “high style” of criticism from the previous century evacuates a “partial or personal” love of literature (“Foreword,” 11). In Smith’s view, criticism must be “entirely personal” because it emerges from a personal experience with a text (11). Lingering on this notion

of love, Smith conceives of literary criticism as what Woolf describes in *Three Guineas* as work done “in the interests of research and for love of the work itself” (133). During the press tour for *Changing My Mind*, Smith explained in an interview with Paul Holdenraber that she envisioned the book as “a record of the things I guess that I have loved.” Smith later considered the importance of this expression of personal literary taste, concluding “there should “be some corner of the university where a student feels free also to say, ‘I love it. I love this book.’”¹⁰⁰

Smith appears to have great confidence in her personal, almost fictional critical framework, to borrow West’s phrasing. Yet, major publications and well-known writers have continued to debate the significance of criticism produced by women writers.¹⁰¹ Five years after Smith wrote *Changing My Mind*, Cheryl Strayed and Benjamin Moser debated a related question in the Bookends column of the *New York Times*. They asked: “Is This a Golden Age for Women Essayists?” Strayed concluded that despite the need to “wedge ‘women’ as a qualifier before ‘essayist,’” it would be difficult to refute the claim that “essayists who happen to be women” were earning new attention.¹⁰² Indeed, in the last decade, writers like Elif Bautman, Mary Oliver, Louise Glück, Rachel Cusk, Sinéad Gleeson and Olivia Laing have all published literary essays that demonstrate the interrelationship between personal narrative and critical judgment. Yet, the debate in *The*

¹⁰⁰ Zadie Smith, interview by Paul Holdenraber, “Zadie Smith in Conversation with Paul Holdenraber, Live from the New York Public Library,” November 22, 2010.

¹⁰¹ Current academic scholarship also seems to account for this renewed interest in women essayists. *Of Women and the Essay: An Anthology from 1655 to 2000*, edited by Jenny Spinner, was published by the University of Georgia Press in 2018. The anthology seeks to emphasize significant contributions made by women writers to the essay genre and claims that “the volume lifts women writers from the cutting-room floor of essay scholarship and returns them to their rightful place in the essay canon” (Front matter).

¹⁰² Cheryl Strayed and Benjamin Moser: “Is This a Golden Age for Women Essayists?” *New York Times Book Review*, Oct. 2014, p. 27.

New York Times hints at a continued intellectual divide over the perceived significance of women essayists and over criticism that evades a professional or academic approach.

I described in the preceding chapters how Woolf, West, and Bowen navigated a similar divide and developed criticism that eventually gave shape to a counter-narrative to literary professionalism. These writers often found themselves at odds with many well-known literary figures, and that tension is palpable in their critical works. This pattern appears to repeat itself as we follow the narrative through to the present day. I find in the relationship between Smith and the English novelist and critic James Wood intriguing points of convergence and divergence that offer a useful summation of the contemporary debates regarding criticism, critics, and common readers.

Soon after the publication of Smith's first novel, *White Teeth* (2000), Wood wrote in a review for the *New Republic* that he believed her novel typified an emergent genre he had begun to call "hysterical realism" (41). Wood criticized Smith amid a larger attack on the "big, ambitious contemporary novel," and he pointed to writers like Salman Rushdie, Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and David Foster Wallace as exponents of this troubling movement (41). Wood argued that novels like *White Teeth* modeled a "showy liveliness, a theatricality," and he claimed that Smith was being "evasive of reality while borrowing from realism itself" (41). Yet, Wood also evaded some key questions. Wood claimed that hysterical realism owed its conception to male and female writers, and he cited Smith alongside several celebrated male novelists. Still, it is difficult to ignore the feminized connotations of a word like "hysterical." Samuel Johnson defines "hysterical" in *A Dictionary of the English Language* as "troubled with fits; disordered in the regions of

the womb.”¹⁰³ Descriptions of female hysteria are readily found in historical documents and literary works from preceding centuries. Despite Wood’s apparent belief that hysterical realism owed its conception to male and female novelists alike, the review was heralded by two large photographs: one of a young Smith staring into the camera and one of the colorful cover of *White Teeth*. Using a young female writer and her first novel as a test of hysterical realism seems a rather calculated critical strike—a move that positioned Smith, and her judgment as a writer, to the center of the conversation.

Wood claimed in his review that hysterical realism offered mere “caricature” and “cover up” (41). Wood cast Smith and her contemporaries as cover-up artists who obfuscated reality to produce “glamorous congestion” (41). Smith lingered on this point in her published response. “We can only be who we are,” Smith concluded.¹⁰⁴ Instead of deliberate obfuscation, Smith argued that writers were simply attempting to communicate the “particularities of human existence” through their own voices. Smith commented on the importance of developing connections between personal experience and literary expression, and she worried that her literary experimentation would never make sense to a critic like Wood:

It's all laughter in the dark - the title of a Nabokov novel and still the best term for the kind of writing I aspire to: not a division of head and heart, but the useful employment of both. And I could mention dozens of novels (I haven't been writing, but boy, I've been reading) that create a light in my head in between the news bulletins. Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* - a miniaturist tale of a bourgeois man dying a bourgeois death - every time I read it, I find my world put under an intense, unforgiving microscope. But how does it work? I want to dismantle it as if it were a clock, as if it had parts, mechanisms. I wonder if Wood

¹⁰³ Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language, Vol. 1* (J. F. And C. Rivington, 1785).

¹⁰⁴ “This Is How It Feels to Me.” *The Guardian*, 13 Oct. 2001.

will take that question, then, as a replacement for my earlier one. Not: how does this world work? But: how is this book made? How can I do this?

Recall from Woolf the “electric light” produced by a single memory and from Bowen the assertion that “reading made of us an electric light” (*CR*, 260; *CI*, 265). So too did Smith describe a “light” sparked by “dozens of novels” and by her desire to communicate the significance of those novels to her own writing. Smith advocated in her review for critical reading that valued process over result. Smith wished to dismantle and examine—not solve. Alternatively, Smith believed Wood only wanted her to pose and answer questions about literature and writing: “How is this book made?” and “How can I do this?”

Wood is certainly interested in criticism as a mechanism to answer certain questions about literature and the self. Wood published his own critical text, *How Fiction Works* (2008) one year before *Changing My Mind* appeared on the market. The title alone hints at the style of criticism contained within. Wood explains in his Preface that he plans to answer certain “essential questions” about literature that academic criticism and literary theory have failed to answer (xiii). Wood claims he is a non-specialist, and he promises to be “mindful of the common reader” throughout his “little volume” (xv-xvi). Yet, Wood also delineates the role of the critic in such a way that writers like Forster—whom Wood cites—and perhaps Smith by extension, are deemed “imprecise” (xii). Wood’s desire for precision likely stems from his interest in aesthetic criticism. Wood points to Ruskin as an artist and critic who earned authority not from his “technique as a draftsman,” but from “what his eye has seen and how well, and his ability to transmit that vision into prose” (xi). Wood claims there is a divide between academic criticism and the honest and instructive textual analysis to be found in a book like *How Fiction Works*.

Wood first claimed in a 2004 book review that there was an unnavigable divide between writers and literary critics.¹⁰⁵ Wood argued that “literary criticism as a discourse available for, and even attractive to, the common reader [had] all but disappeared,” and he believed there was a simple explanation for this paucity of “capacious essays for the mythical common reader.” In Wood’s estimation, “the academy won: it was not writers who changed literary criticism, but academic criticism that changed literary criticism.” It seems likelier to me that the academy has not won, but has turned inward and no longer has any use for the “mythical common reader.” After all, scholarly monographs are readily found at academic meetings and in university libraries, but are rarely on display at local bookstores. Academics are competing for the attention of colleagues, of those who are also in the academy. Rarely are academic books marketed to a general reading public. Works of criticism like *Changing My Mind* and *How Fiction Works* constitute an entirely separate genre. Or, as Smith explained in her interview with Holdengraber, they exist in a separate sphere. These works of criticism are directed not to academic specialists, but to amateur readers who similarly love and are interested in literary study.

I have argued in this dissertation that the common reader represents not a figure of the reader, but a style of critical reading and writing that was popularized by women writers in the twentieth century. Contemporary debates over the application of this form have moved away from the academy and now exist between writers like Wood and Smith. Wood’s criticism, for example, relies on questions and answers. He is instructive and adopts a friendly yet authoritative tone when he speaks to and directs his readers:

The idea isn’t to intimidate, but to show and show and show; to honor the idea of criticism as, above all, the art of passionate re-description; to say to the reader,

¹⁰⁵ James Wood: “The Slightest Sardine.” *The London Review of Books*, 10 May 2004.

again and again, ‘Here! Look! It’s like this! Or this. Or this.’ I take seriously Walter Benjamin’s ideal: a critical book made up only of quotation, a generous anthology of re-presentation. (12)

Implicit in this sort of criticism, though, is a clear articulation of the reader’s limitations. The reader is not set off on a process of self-discovery. Instead, the critic must “show and show and show” (12). The “passionate re-description” emerges from Wood—he becomes a learned guide who offers the reader tidbits of interesting prose. This critical text, this “anthology of re-presentation,” relies on the critic directing the reader (12).

Smith alternatively develops a critical style that encourages readers to engage in more self-aware reading practices. Smith develops criticism that relies on the articulation of personal experience and impressions of literary texts. Smith combines the personal and the literary not because her essays have “piled up that way,” but because to her reading is an “intentional, directional act, an expression of an individual consciousness” (43). It is not Smith or the critic responsible for directing the reader, saying “Here! Look! It’s like this! Or this. Or this” (12). Instead, this style of criticism frames reading as a “directional act,” and something that the reader can do without much instruction (43). The differences between Smith and Wood may seem minor. Both are, ultimately, interested in criticism as work done by non-specialist readers and work inspired by a love of literature. Yet, Smith finds little value in someone else’s description or re-description of literature: she explains that “other people’s words are the bridge you use to cross from where you want to go to wherever you’re going” (102). Paradoxically, Smith has no particular destination in mind. Reading is a process of examination and self-examination, and that fact is evident even in the organizing framework of her critical text. Smith divides *Changing My Mind* into five

sections: “Reading,” “Being,” “Seeing,” “Feeling,” “Remembering,” and these phases of reading and feeling embody her approach to literature.

On the evening of her interview with Paul Holdengräber at the New York Public Library, Smith arrived early for a reception. In video recorded at the earlier event, Smith is seen poring over the Woolf manuscripts held in the Berg Collection. At the end of the interview, Smith commented on the significance of seeing those holograph drafts:

I already knew this about Woolf because I’ve seen other manuscripts, she will have for each chapter a word, pretty much, maybe two, and what she’s trying to get at is a sensation. She’s made a little edit for herself on the one page saying, ‘I see I used to be [sic] start loose and get tighter where now I always start tight and get loose.’ That means something to me immediately; I don’t know whether it means something to you [...]. I make absolutely no extensive plans, I have an idea of a sensibility and a color and whether it’s going to be loose or tight, literally.

Smith’s comments invite a sense of unfinishedness that is appropriate to this study. In her admiration of Woolf is evidence of Smith’s own critical style and her critical values.

Smith requires little more than “an idea of a sensibility” to begin writing, just as the common reader starts off with “whatever odds and ends he can come by” (11). Smith located in Woolf’s marginalia traces of impressions, ideas, and sensations. These scraps and scribbles affirmed Smith’s belief that writing “is something you do with your gut and it happens sentence to sentence.”

I have shown in the present study important critical contributions made by Woolf, West, and Bowen amid a rapidly changing professional landscape in the twentieth century. These writers envisioned literary criticism as a form of personal expression that could renegotiate the boundaries between the amateur and the professional; the feminine and masculine; and the individual and the institution. As Smith articulated, this criticism

was something visceral, something done “with your gut.” Woolf, West and Bowen each developed criticism out of personal experience, from memory and from impressions of literature and of the world. This style of criticism was also something that happened on the page, something that happened “sentence to sentence.” Reading these critical works allows us to trace the development of a style and a sensation. These literary impressions may seem at times incomplete and imprecise. Yet, it is worth remembering that Virginia Woolf conceived of the common reader not as an end but a beginning.

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