



Julia Briggs. *Reading Virginia Woolf*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006. 240 pp. \$38.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7486-2435-5.



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In Search of Absence

Julia Briggs intended this volume to explore the conscious absences written into Virginia Woolf's work and to illuminate presumably unconscious absences in our critical appreciation of one of the greatest modernist writers. In fact, for those familiar with Briggs, that approach speaks widely of her career as a whole, which ended too soon when she died of brain cancer in 2007 at the age of 63. Briggs was primarily regarded as a pedagogue, first at Oxford, where she was credited with making women's studies a central part of the English curriculum, and later at DeMontford University in Leicester. She wrote widely on topics such as the ghost story, the life of children's author E. Nesbit, Jacobean stage plays, and the passage of the Mayflower. To dedicated readers of Virginia Woolf, Briggs is already known as the general editor of the Penguin editions of Woolf's works that were published in the nineties after they briefly came out of copyright on the anniversary of Woolf's death until the United Kingdom changed its copyright law. In 2006, Briggs also published a well-received biography of Woolf that centered on her unconscious life and not just exter-

nal events.[1]

Coming only a year after that monumental biography, *Reading Virginia Woolf* reads like a somewhat loose collection of secondary essays. While Briggs's biography is rightly considered to be ground-breaking, in that it centered on an inner life that had been largely ignored, *Reading's* fourteen essays, without exception, were read at conferences or published separately prior to their inclusion in this book. There is no new material in this volume, and although most of it is recent, there are four essays dating from the nineties, including one that was published fourteen years previously. The introduction claims, "If a single theme runs through these essays, it is that of absence" (p. 1). The word "absence" is appropriate. There certainly are essays that focus on the theme of absence, but the concern remains merely tangential in several others. These essays are really linked by Briggs's interest in the problems addressed, some of which, she appears to think, are of too narrow a scope to hold much interest for other Woolf scholars. More apropos to the scope of the book than the declared thesis is the book's

title, *Reading Virginia Woolf*, which is unapologetically broad in its statement of purpose and does not necessarily indicate a cohesive purpose. These fourteen essays, including one on an unfinished essay by Woolf on the nature of reading itself, are the result of fifteen years of reading Woolf, and each is concerned with a particular issue initiated by this careful reading process. Indeed, in Briggs, one can see the ideal reader to whom Woolf imagined herself writing.

The essays are uniformly readable and accessible, yet they cannot be said to be ordered chronologically or in regard to any development of a central argument. Briggs's volume is aimed at the Woolf specialist, and it is not of as much interest to the wider audience as is her fine biography of Woolf. Each essay voices individual concerns on a variety of Woolf subjects, and, for this reason, they are not chapters so much as separate essays. Hence, one of the regrettable characteristics of this book is the frequent repetition of issues already raised in earlier essays without any further elucidation the second or third time. These include sections on the 1910 statement, on Vita Sackville-West, on Woolf's admiration of Jane Austen, and on the *Dictionary of National Biography* (1885-1900). Occasionally, repetition happens within a single chapter, such as the observation that the original title of *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) was *The Hours* on page 117 and again, redundantly, on page 118. One senses that a book arranged around a central argument with a focused development and careful editing might have overcome such weaknesses. Perhaps a more useful way to summarize the volume is to say that Briggs is most concerned with her reading of *Night and Day* (1919), *Orlando* (1928), *Mrs. Dalloway*, *Between the Acts* (1941), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), the memoir *Moments of Being* (1976), and various essays of Woolf's. Yet, since Briggs identifies herself as a textual editor as well as a critic, these named sources include original drafts, proofs, variants between editions (especially between British and American editions), and even Woolf's writing diaries. Concepts of particular interest to Briggs include the underlying structure of writing, World War I, the social changes that occurred during the first two decades of the century, biography and representation, gender and sexuality, Woolf's work as a Hogarth Press typesetter, and the importance of the textual editor as opposed to the literary critic in advancing Woolf studies.

The first essay asks why Woolf never wrote on Shakespeare, which is curious, but Briggs answers that he is present as a rival in many of her works. Briggs demonstrates how Woolf took Shakespeare as a model in

other ways, as she was impressed by Samuel Coleridge's claims that the greatest writers, including Shakespeare, are androgynous. Essays 2 and 12 reflect, respectively, on Woolf's early and late short stories. The second also includes an interesting account of Woolf's ambivalence toward her father, Sir Leslie Stephen, who was the first editor of the British, male-dominated *Dictionary of National Biography*. Essay 3 is a reprint of Briggs's introduction to the Penguin edition of Woolf's critically ignored early novel, *Night and Day*. Here, Briggs too briefly questions Woolf's acquiescence to the unquestioning Anti-Semitism of her class and times (p. 47), which is later identified as simply 'apparently unconscious' (p. 179).

Essay 5 is a fascinating look at Hope Mirrlees, a Scottish modernist poet whose *Paris: A Poem* (1919-1920) anticipates many high modernist techniques. The essay is more concerned with the friendship between the two women, the content of the poem, and the subsequent forgetting of it by academia rather than with Woolf's typesetting of it for Hogarth. Briggs, it should be noted, reset the poem in question for inclusion in a new collection of feminist modernist texts and so was quite familiar with the inherent difficulties in arranging the complex piece for publication.[2] Linked together, essays 6 and 7 seek to unravel the hidden structures of Woolf's fiction insofar as her form is influenced by forces like the English climate, Roger Fry's concept of 'significant form' in the texture and structure of art, and the new understanding of words on a page effected by her work at Hogarth. Too much time is spent defending Briggs's unconvincing argument that in Woolf's fiction, especially *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* (1931), structure is arranged by a unique and elaborate numbering of chapters. At best, these ideas seem to be guesses at the hidden meanings behind relatively unimportant coincidences, and they are explained by statements such as 'It may or may not be an accident that ...' (p. 106). This seems odd in conjunction with earlier claims that for Woolf, 'her fiction came first and theory afterwards' (p. 16), while there may have been, according to Briggs, a 'formalist' phase as a novel neared completion, a phase in which the underlying form was made more explicit though this assumption relies on 'missing typescripts' (p. 114-115). Indeed, Briggs even concludes the argument by insisting that 'modernism was beginning to recognise that the order of numbers might be as central to art as it had now become to the sciences' (p. 123), a claim which remains unjustified, at least on the basis of this essay.

On the other hand, one of the strongest essays of the collection follows. In 'This Moment I Stand on': Vir-

ginia Woolf and the Spaces of Time,â Briggs gives the best explanation I have read of Woolfâs famous statement that âon or about December 1910 human character changed.â[3] Over several pages, Briggs carefully explains the convergence of various factors that make the choice of that month much more than an arbitrary declaration. Briggs then links this statement to Woolfâs understanding of the generation gap of her day between the Edwardians and the Georgians and its subsequent portrayal in *Orlando*, *The Years* (1937), and *Between the Acts*.

Essays 9 and 10 look at Woolfâs concept of space. 9 focuses on the image of the seashell in her essay âTime Passesâ (1926), where it represents emptiness and mortality, themes that reoccur again in *To the Lighthouse*. Essay 10, perhaps the most finely written piece in the collection, analyzes Constantinople as a privileged urban space open to lesbian love and relationships (at least for European women) within the wider geography of Woolfâs writing. It is a beautiful essay that is at once far-reaching and almost poetic in its depiction of Constantinopleâs history and its role as the setting and the catalyst of *Orlando*. 11 concerns itself with public and private censorship and argues that “while Woolf experienced convention and censorship as constraining, she also found a certain exhilaration in exploring the limits of the permissible, or (to change the metaphor), patrolling the delicate border between the acceptable and the forbidden—between the allowed and acknowledged and the unspoken and unspeakable” (p.163).

Here, Briggs offers a solid exploration of the place of the unspoken (and therefore the absent) in Woolfâs work, and it emphasizes issues such as lesbian love, critiques of patriarchy, and even Woolfâs practice of draft revision. Likewise, essay 13 peers into Woolfâs predictable rejection of English nationalism, a protest which she identi-

fied as all too often hushed by the establishment.

The final piece looks at the textual editing difficulties that remain to be explored in Woolf studies. It is in this last essay that Briggs speaks to her remarkable experience as the general editor of the Penguin editions of Woolfâs works. The essay partially defends the choices that Briggs made as the general editor of the series, and it treats the issues involved in navigating the several different texts and prints and proofs and relevant diary entries Woolf left. Briggs is at her best in applying the methodology of the textual editor and using her critical eye to assess earlier attempts at synthesizing textual variants (which she judges insufficient). One especially detailed sequence looks at the several alterations Woolf made to the American editions of most of her novels and then attempts to explain Woolfâs reasons for doing so. Briggs concludes the essay and the book by clarifying the present state of textual investigations into Woolf, and by urging scholars to pay more heed to these questions in their research and editorial policies. Briggs asserts that textual editors rather than critics are best trained for these tasks, and she laments that their important work is so often sidelined, contributing further to absences in our comprehension of the authors and the literature that we value so much.

Notes

[1]. Julia Briggs, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life* (London and New York: Alan Lane, 2005).

[2]. Bonnie Kime Scott, *Gender in Modernism: New Geographies, Complex Intersections* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

[3]. Virginia Woolf, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Nigel Nicolson, 4 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1992), 3:421.

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