REVIEW
BECOMING VIRGINIA WOOLF:
HER EARLY DIARIES & THE DIARIES SHE READ
by Barbara Lounsberry. Florida: University Press of Florida, 2014. 272 pages.
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Works about Woolf's life and fiction are numerous but few academics have focused on the 770,000 words that constitute her longest work so a book-length study of Woof's diaries is welcome. Significant contributions to this area of Woolf studies include a section in *Daily Modernism* by Elizabeth Podnieks' which considers Woolf's diaries as modernist literary works; Susan Sellers' essay sees them as expressions of selfhood, through the lens of French feminist theory; Joanne Campbell Tidwell's monograph focuses on the aesthetic and political aspects of Woolf's diaries; Anna Jackson considers the style and form of six early-twentieth-century diarists, including Woolf. Barbara Lounsberry has taken a different approach. She has undertaken meticulous research into the sixty-six diaries she knows that Woolf read and traces how these diaries might be seen as sources for her later work. She claims that Woolf's 'diaries disclose (when carefully studied) a clear path of development no biographer yet has shown' (225). She divides the diaries into three stages: the early dairies from 1897 to mid-1918; her 'spare modernist' diaries from 1919 to 1929; and a final 'flowering from 1930 to her death' (2). Lounsberry's book is a detailed exploration of the first twelve 'experimental' diaries over the first two decades of Woolf's writing life. It makes some intriguing connections with other diarists, considering how they might have influenced Woolf's own work.

Distinguished theorist of autobiography, Philippe Lejeune writes in *On Diary* about Woolf as diarist. He writes that we know very little about the private practices of journal writers because the form is still under-researched. He employs the term *terra incognita* and Lounsberry begins the Introduction to *Becoming Virginia Woolf* by using this expression. As this title promises, the book sets out to explore the process of its subject, Virginia Stephen, 'becoming' Virginia Woolf. 'Becoming' implies a teleological methodology, suggesting that the book will map the development of the writer and account for the construction of the writer as a subject. The sub-title, *Her Early Dairies and the Diaries She Read*, makes a direct correlation between the young writer's reading material and selfhood. The book finishes in 1918 so, by the end of that diary, its writer had 'become' the subject as we would recognise her: 'Virginia Woolf leaves a trail in her first dozen diaries that shows how she comes to be the writer we know' (225).

The project is conceived concurrently in terms of a 'treasure hunt' (4) and as detective work; Lounsberry is pursuing 'leads' and so, predictably, she finds them. In tracing Woolf's literary foremothers and fathers she employs words associated with narrative such as 'foreshadows' (151) and 'anticipates' (161). The reader is encouraged to see many details as indicators of Woolf's almost inevitable success. The objective is to explain, 'how she becomes the writer so widely revered today' (2). Arguably through, the diaries do not allow a neat and clear movement forwards towards a 'mature, spare modernist diary style' (226). The provisional diary form was so attractive for Woolf because of the satisfaction of continually making and re-making versions of a life. Lounsberry's hypothetical approach suggests some interesting ideas but, in places, her suppositions seem fanciful and occasionally awkward. She wonders if Sir Walter Scott's image of his work as composed of odds and ends like an *olla podrida* [stew pot] might have led to Woolf's metaphors for her diary of the compost heap or a great desk into which anything could be thrown (16). A great deal is inferred in this book: 'Scott often uses initials in place of names and he regularly employs ampersands—traits Virginia's diary also apes' (15). Several rather general and inconsequential similarities are discerned, for instance between the literary curate Stopford Brooke and Woolf. Both writers liked Scott's work; both suffered illness as children; both were speed readers; both wrote periodic diaries; both composed as they walked; both shared a passion for self-expression' (212) and had a 'love-hate affair with London' 9207). 'His quicksilver, perhaps even bi-polar, mind also resembles hers' (206). Lounsberry wonders: 'Did Woolf see that Brooke anticipated her intellectual as well as geographical

moves?' (207). She makes a conjectural textual link between the two writers when she points to Brooke's: 'There's never anything lost by hanging out our colours and letting them blow in the wind' (written in 1876). These words remind her of the March 1941 Woolf diary entry: 'I will go down with my colours flying' (*D* 5: 358). The unbearable poignancy of the last entry does not seem to me to echo Brooke's words. Such comments are made rather nonchalantly, as if in passing, or as if the writer is thinking aloud. Observations such as these, though speculative, do, however, serve as testimony to the very close textual work Lounsberry has done on Woolf's work and the diaries that she read as she seeks to find and plot a trail through 'unknown territory'. But, as is often the case when plotting is involved, suppositions have to be made about things that one could never know for sure.

The book aims to trace a discernable path but the trail through the diaries is neither straight nor steady, rather it is crooked and discontinuous. The text will not obediently allow neat mapping. In tension with her wish to control her route, Lounsberry acknowledges at several points that the diaries are heterogeneous; she writes that 'the first seven diaries are extraordinarily varied' (2). She recognises the chaos of the diary form, and uses Woolf's own expression for her diary: it was a 'compost heap' (10). The delightful rich fertility of the diaries is diminished somewhat by the way Lounsberry tries to sort them stylistically or thematically. She states her objective along with the problem of organising the book quite openly on its first page: 'How to sort through and say something meaningful about such a variegated mass?' (1). As she works chronologically through the diaries there is a tendency to gloss over contradictory qualities in the attempt to find an 'evolving aesthetic' (10). She argues that Woolf sees herself as an 'outsider' in the 1903 diary; that the 1904 diary is about the development of the 'professional' writer. She notes the gap between 1909 and 1915 and proposes that in 1918 Woolf is writing herself back from illness. 1897, 1909 and 1915 are 'life' diaries; 1899, 1906-1909 are 'travel' diaries; though Lounsberry indicates that a new interest in portraits rather than places is a significant development in the 1909 pieces. 1917-19 are 'natural history' diaries; 1917 is 'collaborative'. Her final section is headed 'The Diary Coalesces' and here she suggests that, between 1915-18, these various styles 'begin finally to fuse' (226). She seems almost relieved that contradictory styles and forms may be able to be more tidily resolved.

Certain diaries are seen as key to Woolf's development as a writer and this symptomatic approach recalls clinical psychologist Katherine Dalsimer's book *Virginia Woolf: Becoming a Writer*. Lounsberry frequently returns in her book to the problem of sub-text, what may be done consciously and what may be the result of an 'unconscious need' (137). The 1909 life diary strikes her, for example, 'as an act of self-assertion and self-definition. A complex rather than simple regression occurs' (136). She identifies the country as a feminine space in apposition to the masculine locus of London. Woolf's literal travelling is read as metaphorical. She assesses the 1903 diary as 'pivotal' and in it '[t]he whole diary elides London—surely a step required' (120). Her analysis of the 1906 New Forest diary is set against Woolf's ambivalent relationship with her sister's fiancé, Clive Bell. Lounsberry says that a 'psychological reading...seems inescapable' (96). She goes on to argue that Woolf seeks the 'country-in-London' in her diaries. In 1907, rejecting traditional routes through London, on an expedition through Golders Green and Hampstead, Woolf 'defies hedge and fences' (98) preferring to be a bold, free traveller. Solitary Sussex walks by night, in 1907, 'show Woolf's further embrace of the unconscious begun in Cornwall in 1905'.

Although admitting that '[o]ne can never gauge a book's precise impact on its readers' (15), hypothetical expressions are numerous here: 'might explain'; 'might have recalled'; 'could'; 'perhaps'; 'likely'; 'One cannot say for certain' (32); '[h]e may have planted in her mind' (39); 'may have caught Woolf's fancy and lodged in her mind' (150); 'they might have refreshed and fortified her' (152). Very often rhetorical questions are use to introduce a tentative interpretation: 'One wonders if...' (*passim*); '[c]ould this be the genesis of Mistress Joan Martyn? (91); Rosamond Merridew 'might be read as Virginia's projection of herself in 1906 of herself in middle age' (92); 'surely it is noteworthy that...' (124). Lounsberry uses the distancing device of the first person plural:

'we note too' (44); 'we see' (67); 'we should not be surprised' (126). There is occasional intervention through use of the first person; this tends to be when observations are less contentious, for instance: 'I find her consciously seeking in her diary her own view, voice, and form' (127). Sometimes her interrogative style appears to be genuine rather than rhetorical. There is a sense of unease and frustration when she is trying to interpret certain knotty clues: 'We wish she would say more' (170) or '[s]everal scenarios seem possible' (164). Lounsberry is clearly engrossed by Woolf's creative process and, occasionally, even takes an editorial role such when she writes, with reference to the 1905 Cornwall diary, that '"The Ghost Diary" should be the title' of Virginia Stephen's fifth journal' (82). Lounsberry's imaginative style contributes to the elucidation of the text so a '"row of sea gulls" might be the Stephen children sitting on the skirts of the wave. Birds will symbolize the young writer as the Cornwall diary unfolds' (83). Lounsberry uses the trope of unknown territory again when she writes of 'the young writer's intent to chart unmarked waters and find richness in her misty dappled terrain' (85).

Setting out her aims for the book Lounsberry uses Hermione Lee's phrase that Woolf's mind was 'full of echoes' (5). This densely referenced study seeks to recall the many voices resonating in Woolf's writing. The most illuminating aspect of this book is the sensitive comparative work undertaken on the eclectic selection of diarists Woolf read: 'Emerson, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Stendhal, the Goncourt brothers, de Maupassant, Jules Renard, André Gide, Jonathan Swift, Boswell, Burney, Scott, William Allingham, Dorothy Wordsworth, Mary Berry, George Eliot, Mary Coleridge, Katharine Bradley, and Edith Cooper ("Michael Field"), Beatrice Webb, and Katherine Mansfield' (3) among others. The analysis of 'diary parents' Burney and Scott as models for the very young writer is especially absorbing and Lounsberry interpolates helpful mini-essays on more obscure diarists such as Lady Dorothy Nevill, Lady Charlotte Bury and Mary (Seton) Berry. Although, in places, the connections made between writers and Woolf seem tenuous or serendipitous, Lounsberry's scholarship is to be commended. There is excellent work on the materiality of the diaries; she clearly distinguishes between them physically and this is of value to those who are unable to access the volumes themselves. This book is most likely to appeal to those with previous knowledge of Woolf and to those with interested in diary theory but the biographical details will also be of interest to non-specialists. The writer's deep commitment to Woolf's work is manifest by her introductory description of the diary as 'heart-stopping, boundary-stretching', serving 'as a doorway to her fiction and non-fiction' (1).

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