Christine Reynier, *Virginia Woolf's Good Housekeeping Essays*

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In *Virginia Woolf's Good Housekeeping Essays*, published by Routledge in their 'Literary Texts and the Popular Marketplace' collection in 2019, Christine Reynier decides to take a series of six texts published by Woolf in the 1930s very seriously. It is very likely that few people apart from Woolf scholars will have heard of these essays, let alone read them, published in a second-rate magazine dedicated to fashion. Bringing them to our attention in a monograph enables the author to literally take them away from the margins of Woolf's oeuvre, where they have been confined. Ch. Reynier follows in the footsteps of a number of scholars who recently have decided to turn to lesser-known texts that used to be 'diminish[ed]' (1), in an attempt to qualify our appreciation of Woolf's oeuvre as a whole and maybe find new ideas that did not seem as central when only the canonical masterpieces were taken into account. Ch. Reynier chronicles the history of these articles’ publications, in 1931 and 1932, in order to reclassify the texts as essays, and therefore work out a way of including them in the rest of Woolf’s multifarious production. Woolf’s essays on London Life are therefore analysed as being situated at the intersection between ‘a feminist critique of patriarchal power structures and a Marxist analysis of the ideological formations of capitalism’ (Gualtieri, qd 2), as well as between the genre of the guidebook and the different arts of description: they are thus regarded as touching upon the arts of photography and architecture. In this book, Christine Reynier offers specific readings that enable her to recognise the great literary experimentalist behind the journalist, but she also probes for new understandings of Woolf’s ethics of writing, in particular how these essays function as sites of experiments in new ways of working out human relations, one of the central questions of modernism that has now become central in contemporary research. Woolf’s Modernism itself is not addressed and the monograph raises questions that are specific to Woolf’s scholars, especially regarding the place granted these essays in relation to her fictional experiments. However, the questions the book raises will also be interesting to people working on the circulation of journals and periodicals in the modernist era, as well as the relation between ethics and literature studies.

The book is divided into three sections. First, the author explores the intermediality of the essays, informed as they are by the art of description, of photography and architecture. The author thus shows how the essays manage to create a new way of sketching London by prolonging certain traditions and incorporating new ways of seeing. The second section is entitled the ‘Common Pool’: in it, Christine Reynier argues that the synthetic quality of the essays also reflects on the theoretical level as Woolf is, in those years, pursuing a democratic ideal that her sketch of London life promotes.
The last section eventually looks at the art of the essay itself in order to review the impact of these articles on Woolf's overall creativity, in the hope that they may invite us to reconsider the story of Woolf's essay writing – one that has become perhaps too linear. Christine Reynier questions the theoretical framework that is usually thought to have influenced Woolf so as to reconsider her dialogue with other philosophers.

The introduction of the book is extremely valuable for whoever would like to enter Woolf's essayistic work: revising the inclusion of the British author's articles within the critical framework of generic boundaries and poetics, Christine Reynier also dialogues with contemporary researchers such as Alice Wood, Elena Gualtieri and others. The author stresses Woolf's ambitious intentions as well as her strategy of borrowing from the style of other articles in the same publications. The questions of the readership and circulation are explored so as to define what Woolf might have intended when she wrote, including the financial aspects of a popular magazine that paid well (7). This however has led many to analyse the texts from a sociological point of view that leaves aside more aesthetic choices (9). The short introduction will therefore be useful as well in the metacritical approach it offers, especially for those interested in sponsoring new texts and destabilising the hierarchical structures of our current appreciation of the canon.

In the first part, Christine Reynier starts by analysing the general context in which these essays were published in order to understand how they function with the rest of Woolf's oeuvre, as well as her engagement at the time. The articles published in Good Housekeeping present themselves as belonging to the tradition of the London sketch (19-23) – a conservative approach that might not have been entirely looked down upon by the editors of a magazine with such a title. However, Reynier argues, when read as a sequence, the six articles reveal that this expected format is soon blended with 'new' ways of seeing the world, through architecture and the art of photography. If there are examples in which Woolf may well have acted as a 'naturalist writer' (21), it is a temptation that the description of the docks did force her out of. Indeed, Woolf's compliments to the London sketch may have been counterbalanced by her trying to fight off the concept of an England that is herself divided. The section starts with close analyses of ‘The Docks of London’ and ‘Oxford Street Tide’. Amongst the many pointed analyses, I would like to underline Ch. Reynier's perceptive association of Woolf to Forster and Richardson through the image of the tide that she welcomes as an agent of modernity (30). This does not lead to purely literary heritage and Christine Reynier always makes sure to link her analyses back to the context of production, and in this particular case, to the dangers of a consumerist world that the magazine somehow promoted. The economics of the 1930s beckons Woolf to look for other places to describe in London – places that are less central–, and thus achieve new ways of accounting for their beauty. For Christine Reynier is interested in the aesthetic logic behind the choice of places and the journalistic style. Quoting from Bennett's comments about the quality of women magazine's prose, she suggests that the narrative strategy which consists in eliminating the narrator (37) in order to reduce him or her to a presence effectively changes the naturalist mode of the flâneur. Thus, the author goes on to explore Woolf's art of description through a figure of speech, hypotyposis, which, it is argued, has been neglected in favour of ekphrasis. The point of this is for Reynier to show how Woolf connects 'the spectral with the visible, as the negative and positive are connected in photography' (49). Finally, the chapter on
architecture prolongs the argument towards the question of living together, the essay being formally speaking a place of intermediality and therefore of connection.

In the second part, Woolf is said to sponsor the vision of a democratic ideal. The chapter opens with a section dedicated to Woolf’s forefathers in fiction and theory, notably Hazlitt and Dickens, but Christine Reynier mainly focuses on Ruskin, before addressing her relationship with the contemporary debate embodied by Clive Bell. Secondly, the author revises the accepted vision of Woolf’s relationship with tradition. It is argued that Woolf does not seek to break away from traditional figures and the notions of heritage so much as to use them for some progress that the ‘empowering’ function of the essay exemplifies (93). Instead of seeing Woolf’s relationship with past tutelary figures in terms of disconnection, ‘Woolf’s desire to use territories that have already been used rather than colonise new ones may also read as a recycling move – an aesthetic choice that reflects on a way of life – as well as a political imperialist stance.’ (97) Here Christine Reynier draws on her analysis of short stories, especially in relation to the figure of the monk, in a thought-provoking analysis that shows the extent of her scholarly knowledge of Woolf’s work and her ability to draw on easily-overlooked figures to detect the conditions of an exploration that is far ranging. This logically leads to a vision of the writer herself, ‘as being both in a marginal position and within society, precariously positioned as an outsider within and insider without, a situation that reminds one of Maingueneau’s analysis of the position of the literary author in linguistic terms’. (105) This is the pivotal point of the argument and weaves back together the notions of recycling, humbleness, and poverty so as to show Woolf’s creative experimentations. Poverty is a state of the writer who is precarious and bare in his or her relation to reality. This reflects in Woolf’s use of the phrase ‘common pool’, which gives its title to this section of the book, and indicates that Woolf is looking for new ways of creating communality. (106) Christine Reynier follows in the footsteps of Benjamin to conclude on this aspect of Woolf’s aesthetic development.

In the third part, Christine Reynier intends to situate the essays within the canon of Woolf’s work by drawing bridges and links between them and other works she published. ‘Reading the Good Housekeeping essays as developing some form of theory has two consequences: first, it helps set the Good Housekeeping essays within the essayistic work of Woolf, rather than leaving them on its margins; second, it helps us understand what Woolf’s ‘humble theory’ consists in.’ (122) Woolf’s theory of writing is also that of reading. Many critics have stressed that for Woolf, reading is not limited to an act of interpreting, but is akin to the creative process of imagination which, like the author, is enmeshed in the context in which the texts are produced and consumed. Finally, Christine Reynier presents the Good Housekeeping essays as articles that constitute a laboratory of Woolf’s less humble writings, and she shows how they were to influence new methods and theories in the later 1930s, a period that follows the incredibly productive years of Woolf’s now classical work spanning from Jacob’s Room (1922) to The Waves (1931). The way in which Woolf writes about the presence of absence reverberates in other writings, particularly in ‘On Being Ill’ (1926). According to Ch. Reynier, Woolf’s work partakes of British philosophy, such as Sidgwick and her own father’s in The Science of Ethics (1882), to which she responds. Christine Reynier exposes what Stephen’s philosophical approach to ethics is, especially its links to the Utilitarian doctrine. Siding with her contemporaries, T. H. Huxley and G.E. Moore, Woolf shows the advantages of illness and thus contradicts the notion that health is necessarily a value worth defending. This is the occasion for a revised discussion of Moore’s
influence on the Bloomsbury group, which is often regarded as established rather than worth discussing.

The conclusion again draws on a parallel between Woolf and Benjamin and insists on the necessity to regard the essays in a sequence rather than as separate objects. ‘Both Woolf and Benjamin refuse to conceive of history as ‘an endless series of facts’, a reifying representation of history, according to Benjamin. Both object to history being a history of great men and a form of monumentalisation. (159) This book therefore enriches the current debate in Woolf’s studies about the place of some of her works and the necessity to look at largely disregarded, marginal texts. It provides readers with close analyses of the six texts that are interpreted with great care, and is linked to Christine Reynier’s previous work on Woolf’s shorter texts or fiction. More largely, it enables readers to connect some of the conclusions to the more general questions currently being raised about the links between Modernism and Benjamin, but also to approach Modernist texts as a dialogue with rather than a breach from prior texts that influenced authors beyond their claims.

NOTES


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