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“‘From different books we must ask different qualities’: The Essay as Public or Private Space in the *Yale Review* and *Common Reader* versions of Virginia Woolf’s ‘How Should One Read a Book?’”

Xavier Le Brun, Université d’Angers

Lecturer (Maître de Conférences)

CIRPaLL

xavier.lebrun@univ-angers.fr

Abstract

The genesis and publication history of Virginia Woolf’s “How Should One Read a Book?”, whose final version appeared in *The Second Common Reader* in 1932, is by now well-established. Critics, including Andrew McNeillie and Beth Rigel Daugherty, have traced its inception in a lecture given by Woolf in 1926 and documented the successive revisions undergone by the text. In the wake of such studies, this paper focuses on the differences between the *Yale Review* and the *Common Reader* versions of “How Should One Read a Book?” to suggest that the change in medium – periodical vs. book-form essay – alters Woolf’s relationship to the subject she is writing about: reading books. Whereas in *The Common Reader*, Woolf is writing from *within* the field she explores (books and their various “classes”), *The Yale Review* essay approaches the same question from the perspective of the journal article. As I argue, a number of the differences between the two versions of the essay – including in the reading strategy devised by Woolf – are accountable to this change of perspective.

Résumé

La genèse de « How Should One Read a Book? », essai de Virginia Woolf dont la version finale est parue en 1932 dans le second volume du *Common Reader*, est désormais bien établie. La critique – on songe notamment aux travaux d’Andrew McNeillie et de Beth Rigel Daugherty – a identifié son point d’origine dans une conférence donnée par Woolf en 1926 et décrit les révisions successives qu’avait connues le texte. Dans le sillage de ces études, le présent article se propose d’examiner les différences entre la version de l’essai parue dans la *Yale Review* et celle du *Common Reader*, et ce afin de suggérer que le changement de médium ainsi impliqué (de la revue au recueil d’essais) modifie en profondeur la relation de l’auteur à son sujet, à savoir le processus de lecture. Tandis que dans le *Common Reader* le propos de

Woolf a pour cadre un livre, semblable à ceux dont elle traite, l'essai publié dans la *Yale Review*, dans la mesure où il répond à la logique propre au périodique, approche cette même question depuis un champ distinct. Ainsi que le suggère cet article, nombre de différences entre les deux versions, notamment en ce qui concerne la stratégie de lecture élaborée par Woolf, sont imputables à ce changement de perspective.

Keywords

Virginia Woolf, essay, "How Should One Read a Book?", *Common Reader*, periodicals, intimacy

Mots-clés

Virginia Woolf, essai, « How Should One Read a Book? », *Common Reader*, périodiques, intimité

Biographical notice

Xavier Le Brun is a Lecturer at the University of Angers and a member of the CIRPaLL (Centre Interdisciplinaire de Recherche sur les Patrimoines en Lettres et Langues). He specialises in modernist literature, short forms, self and interiority in the modernist period, and the interactions between philosophy and literature. He has published articles about Virginia Woolf and Malcolm Lowry in peer-reviewed journals such as *Études britanniques contemporaines*, the *Journal of the Short Story in English*, or *Image [&] Narrative*, and has contributed chapters to *Excavating Modernity: Physical, Temporal and Psychological Strata in Literature, 1900-1930* (Routledge, 2019) and *La littérature et la vie* (Classiques Garnier, 2018). He is associate editor of the *Journal of the Short Story in English*.

Included in the second volume of *The Common Reader*, Virginia Woolf's renowned collection of essays, "How Should One Read a Book?" counts among the oft commented non-fiction works of the author—a text whose deceptively and provokingly simple title seems to have sunk deep in the collective psyche of Woolf scholarship, to the point of lending itself to playful rewritings, as in chapter 2 of Randi Saloman's book on Virginia Woolf's "essayism," entitled "*The common reader, or how should one read an essay?*" The distinctive appeal exerted by this question—how should one read a book?—might have to do with the public image of Woolf herself, so often perceived as a highbrow aesthete or an "isolated invalid immured in the ivory tower of Bloomsbury" as Alex Zwerdling once jokingly put it (14). This legend, which "has little basis in fact" (14), as Zwerdling and others have demonstrated, stands in contrast with the disarmingly straightforward title of the essay: if *she* for one doesn't know—or, for that matter, only feels the need to raise the question—then who does?

Whatever the explanation behind the title's enduring resonance in the minds of readers, it is commonly associated with the version of the essay published in *The Second Common Reader* (1932). Woolf's interrogation about reading, however, had already provided their titles to two earlier texts from which the 1932 essay evolved: a talk given at Hayes Court School in January 1926 and an essay published in *The Yale Review* in October of the same year. The complex process of revision which led from the talk to the book-form essay *via* the periodical essay has been meticulously traced by Beth Rigel Daugherty, who also published the draft of the Hayes Court talk. According to Daugherty, the differences between the three versions of "How Should One Read a Book?" have to do with their respective addressees: they "differ—in content, purpose, tone, and relationship with reader—because the *audiences* for these versions differ" ("Readin'" 160). Indeed, "[a]t Hayes Court, Woolf's audience consisted of young female students, who were *there*, real, and listening" while "[t]he *Yale Review* audience . . . was distant—new . . . American, unknown, academic" ("Readin'" 160). Finally, with the *Common Reader* version, Woolf "returned to a wider, more familiar audience," which according to Daugherty accounts for "the relaxed, personal tone" of this last version ("Readin'" 162).

Although this line of explanation, aligning textual revisions with changing audiences, feels particularly adequate in the case of Woolf's transformation of her lecture (intended for

young girls)¹ into an essay (published into a highbrow magazine),² it might not seem as satisfying when applied to the periodical and the book-form essays: in this particular case, the difference in readership can only lend itself to conjectures and broad distinctions (American vs. English, new vs. familiar). By the same token, Woolf's attitude to these supposedly contrasting audiences is a matter of guesswork, as when Daugherty conjectures that Woolf "*may* have associated [*The Yale Review*] with English universities, not a happy association for her" ("Readin'" 161; emphasis added). The respective media of publication of the two essays, however, do provide an objective difference: one appeared in a quarterly, the other in a collection put together by Woolf herself. Shouldn't their diverging rhetorical strategies, then, be ascribed to these diverging statuses—to the medium rather than the inferred audience? Reading the two versions of "How Should One Read a Book?" from this vantage point might have an additional interest: if the medium is to be accounted for the specificities of each text, their comparison could enlighten us as to the nature of the two sub-genres—the periodical and the book-form essay—as conceived by Woolf. "[S]hall we read them," then, "but read them in a different way," as Woolf herself suggests in *The Common Reader* (261)? Doing so, we would only echo this other observation—from the *Yale Review* essay this time—that "[f]rom different books we must ask different qualities" (*YR* 33).

Intimacy and the Book-Form Essay

Throughout the *Common Reader* version of "How Should One Read a Book?" Woolf presents the act of reading as involving intimacy with the author. "[O]ur relation with the poets and novelists is so intimate," she declares, "that we find the presence of another person intolerable" (*CRII* 268). Elsewhere, she warns her reader: "If you hang back, and reserve and criticise at first, you are preventing yourself from getting the fullest possible value from what you read. But if you open your mind as widely as possible, then signs and hints of almost imperceptible fineness . . . will bring you *into the presence of a human being unlike any other*" (*CRII* 259; emphasis added). This resonates with Christine Reynier's comments about the Woolfian short story, which she characterises as "a 'conversation' redefined as a form of encounter between the self and the other" (*Ethics* 79), and in particular between reader and

¹ At Hayes Court, Woolf's audience was "most likely between the ages of 8 and 18" (Daugherty, "'How Should One Read a Book?'" 130).

² "*The Yale Review*, 'The Nation's Oldest Literary Quarterly,' began in 1819 as a theology journal and subsequently filled its pages with essays on politics, economics, and history until the early twentieth century when Laurence Stern[sic] biographer Wilbur Cross became the editor" (McHaney 35). *The Yale Review*, however, "was *not* a purely academic journal at the time [when Woolf published her essay] (in 1929, before the Crash, its circulation had reached 18,000 . . .)" (Daugherty, "Readin'" 161).

writer (105). For Woolf, to read is to become acquainted with an individual. If carried out in a spirit of benevolence and openness, it involves a communion of minds such as arises in close friendships.³ The book itself—the medium uniting reader and writer—does not provide knowledge or create meaning as much as it removes barriers, stripping down those who come together under its tutelage to the essence of personality. The book, in other words, is a set-up or a device—even an apparatus, to draw on the conceptual vocabulary successively developed by Foucault and Agamben⁴—used to create intimacy. Woolf’s famous declaration, 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” (2) rests on the same premiss of the book as tied up with intimacy—whether it be in the form of isolation from the world or connection with like-minded souls. In a metonymical interplay, the room provides the space needed for writing the book while the book turns into a room where reader and writer defy the limitations of distance to conjoin at will. Ultimately, the book and the room are one and the same, as in Woolf’s mind both come to embody the ideal of a private space within whose boundaries a form of kinship, or elective affinity, is made possible.

It is striking to notice how Woolf does literally transform the *Common Reader* version of her essay into such a room. As in the *Yale Review* version, the pretense is that reader and writer are standing in a library, with its windows open on a bucolic setting: “outside the donkey brays, the women gossip at the pump, the colts gallop across the fields” (*CR II* 258-259). The country-house library is apparently soon forgotten as Woolf cuts to the chase and distinguishes between different types of books and the experience of reading them. Then, a few pages into the essay, just as readers might have dropped the assumption altogether, the make-believe setting emerges again: “Is there not an open window on the right hand of the bookcase?” Woolf asks. “How delightful to stop reading and look out! How stimulating the scene is, in its unconsciousness, its irrelevance, its perpetual movement—the colts galloping round the field, the woman filling her pail at the well, the donkey throwing back his head and emitting his long, acrid moan” (*CR II* 263). Readers are thus brought back to the setting described at the outset of the essay, as again they will be further down (*CR II* 264). This, however, is only the case in *The Common Reader*, as such reminders are altogether absent from the *Yale Review* version, which never returns to the initial mention of the room. What the 1932 essay stresses that the earlier one doesn’t, therefore, is the sense of life going on outside, of the scene evolving as Woolf’s

³ Kate Flint goes as far as to suggest that for Woolf reading is “rivalled in its intensity and possessiveness only by sexual relationships” (198).

⁴ The French term *dispositif*, translated in English as “apparatus,” refers “to a set of practices, bodies of knowledge, measures, and institutions that aim to manage, govern, control, and orient—in a way that purports to be useful—the behaviors, gestures, and thoughts of human beings” (Agamben 12).

discussion unfolds: a sense of temporality emerges, the time of the essay becomes lived time. In the process, Woolf enacts her own claims about intimacy in reading: we are there, in this very room, listening to the author's voice. The changing view from the window, acting as a common point of reference, is Woolf's device to transport her reader to a shared space, one in which the discussion about books, far from a rigid account of the author's point of view on the matter,⁵ is revealed to be above all a mode of interpersonal contact.

Public Vs. Private Spaces

How then should we understand the absence of these passages—as well as of references to reading as involving intimacy—from the *Yale Review* version? I would suggest that these omissions are not simply to be treated as the symptom of a weaker or unpolished text but rather mark the periodical essay as essentially different, in the eyes of Woolf, from its book-form counterpart. Elena Gualtieri sees the Woolfian essay as linked to autobiography, albeit “a type of autobiography which she insisted was essentially non-narrative and presented the self as a conglomeration of moments of perception and reflection” (49). While this is certainly valid for both the book-form and periodical essays, it can be argued that defining Woolf's treatment of the latter in particular requires us to think in terms, not of other genres, but of private vs. public spaces. Indeed, while the *Common Reader* version of Woolf's essay functions as a space of intimacy, a room of their own for the reader and writer, the *Yale Review* version immediately deviates from the library and garden, instead foregrounding a variety of locations whose main common point is their status as *public* spaces.

Quite tellingly, the first of these locations which in *The Yale Review* tend to replace the intimacy of the reading room is “the Zoölogical Gardens” (YR 33). A transition thus occurs from the view outside the library windows, “opening on a garden, so that we can hear the trees rustling, the gardener talking, the donkey braying, the old women gossiping at the pump” (YR 32), to another kind of garden, only this time one that is marked by its public status. The mention of the Zoological Gardens comes as Woolf compares the different sorts of books with different animals: “The tortoise is bald and shiny; the tiger has a thick coat of yellow fur. So books too differ: one has its fur, the other has its baldness” (YR 33). In *The Common Reader*,

⁵ Woolf is careful to stress the lack of closure surrounding her argument—as well as the readers' own agency in reaching a satisfactory (and personal) opinion on the subject—declaring in the first paragraph of the *Common Reader* essay, “Even if I could answer the question for myself, the answer would apply only to me and not to 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” (CRII 258).

Woolf also briefly equates books to animals, albeit not quite in the same context: the comparison occurs in relation not to private reading but to the occupation of professional critics, for whom “books pass in review like the procession of animals in a shooting gallery, and the critic has only one second in which to load and aim and shoot and may well be pardoned if he mistakes rabbits for tigers, eagles for barndoor fowls, or misses altogether and wastes his shot upon some peaceful cow grazing in a further field” (*CRII* 270). The shooting gallery where, in *The Common Reader*, Woolf derisively pictures critics plying their trade in a “hit-or-miss” fashion, is a public location, but it is certainly not the one Woolf advocates for herself and her own (common) readers. By contrast, the Zoological Gardens of *The Yale Review* indeed serve as the backdrop for private reading, thus replacing the intimacy of the country-house library.

But the zoo only represents the first step in this process, as the *Yale Review* essay then proceeds to compare reading with a visit to another, slightly less pleasant, public space: the courthouse. “To read a book well,” Woolf suggests, “one should read it as if one were writing it. Begin not by sitting on the bench among the judges but by standing in the dock with the criminal. Be his fellow worker, become his accomplice” (*YR* 34). This passage of course has its equivalent in *The Common Reader*, but the courthouse itself recedes in the background as references to the bench and the dock are omitted, and intimacy once again is foregrounded: “Do not dictate to your author; try to become him. Be his fellow-worker and accomplice” (*CRII* 259). On the one hand Woolf describes a public trial, on the other a personal, almost symbiotic relationship—a change reflected by the transition from the definite article (“*the* criminal”) to a possessive pronoun (“*your* author”). Another example of Woolf’s shift from public to private spaces as she revised the essay for *The Common Reader* occurs as she discusses non-fiction—biographies, letters and memoirs—and how these testimonies of the past take us from one point of English and European history to another. In the 1932 essay, where this passage is much more developed, reading biographies is described as sauntering from the doorstep of one great author to the garden of another, calling on them as we would on our oldest friends:

Walpole introduces us to such a swarm of new acquaintances, there are so many houses to visit and bells to ring that we may well hesitate for a moment, on the Miss Berrys’ doorstep, for example, when behold, up comes Thackeray; he is the friend of the woman whom Walpole loved; so that merely by going from friend to friend, from garden to garden, from house to house, we have passed from one end of English literature to another and wake to find ourselves here

again in the present, if we can so differentiate this moment from all that have gone before. (*CR* 262)

Here as in other passages from the *Common Reader* essay, the relationship with authors is presented as embodied: far from being limited to an intellectual process, the act of reading implies a degree of physical presence, an immersion within the flesh of the (written) world. As Catherine Bernard remarks, it is “caught in the flux of impressions and sensations” (“Introduction” 11). At the heart of such embodied reading is the *presence* of the other—Walpole, the Miss Berrys, Thackeray—and the immediate familiarity that comes with attending to their works. Instead of daunting, remote figures from the past, the authors evoked by Woolf are “a swarm of new acquaintances” to be introduced to. Once again, and in keeping with the friendly footing developed between reader and writer, the symbolical spaces circumscribing the reading process are essentially private, even domestic, as they include admittance into the authors’ own lodgings. By contrast, in *The Yale Review*, Woolf had associated biographies and other non-fiction texts with a very different setting, namely “alleys and bye-streets” (*YR* 38), thus strengthening the association between reading and public spaces developed in the earlier text.

Woolf’s Mechanics of the Periodical Essay

It is by now apparent that Woolf’s later essay, published not in a periodical but in her own collection, almost systematically substitutes the paradigm of intimacy for that of the public space. Moreover, as we have seen for *The Common Reader*, Woolf is not content with establishing intimacy as an extended metaphor for reading: through the device of the changing view onto the garden she *creates* a symbolical space that conforms to her descriptions of reading as enabling proximity. We may thus reasonably wonder whether the *Yale Review* essay functions in the same way and actually mirrors the public spaces it represents. The first hint as to this possibility is the situation of the essay within a journal. Admittedly, *The Yale Review* was not a lowbrow publication and readers did not encounter “How Should One Read a Book?” in between advertisements and “articles on French and British fashion” (Reynier, *Good Housekeeping Essays* 6) as they did for instance the six essays Woolf published in *Good Housekeeping* magazine and which Christine Reynier has recently analysed. Nonetheless, the place of the essay in a journal—as opposed to a collection of texts, all of them authored by the same person—necessarily calls into question Woolf’s ideal of intimacy. Placed between a poem (“The Victory,” by John Hall Wheelock) and a text by American author and journalist Don

Marquis (“Men Who Make the Newspapers”), the *Yale Review* “How Should One Read a Book?” opens onto other discourses and perforce engages in a form of polyphony that is by definition absent from *The Common Reader*. Far from the intimacy of the private reading room Woolf recreates in her collection, the periodical essay functions as a public space where heterogeneous discourses impinge on the author’s own voice, as readers saunter not from garden to garden, but from article to article, and enter Woolf’s own text laden with foreign ideas and sounds.

Another element that identifies the *Yale Review* essay as a public space, in and of itself, is the degree of impersonality in the relation to the reader: instead of the second-person pronoun—introduced as early as the second sentence in *The Common Reader*, where Woolf instigates a sense of reciprocity and community—impersonal constructions are favoured; for instance, “one may well ask oneself” (YR 32). As Beth Rigel Daugherty remarks, “[i]n both the Hayes Court draft and the *Second Common Reader* essay, Woolf works to establish a relationship with the reader; in the *Yale Review* essay, she works to distance herself” (“Readin’” 165). While the lack of conversational tone certainly makes the 1926 essay a less enjoyable read—Daugherty even calling it “pompous” and “an artificial writing exercise” (“Readin’” 164)—I would suggest that the distancing at work in it, far from a mere shortcoming, is the sign of Woolf’s adaptation to the public space paradigm which she so strongly identifies with the periodical essay. The impersonality is the refusal of a dual relationship that would not befit the polyphonic space of the journal. Readers thus go through the *Yale Review* piece much as one walks through a park or a public square, that is without stopping to settle and start feeling at home. But then, on this square, or in this park, a public speaker might well happen to be saying something about books and how to read them—not talking to any of the passers-by *personally*, not asking them to sit together in a library by the window, but still dealing out her ideas to whoever might take an interest and maybe stop to listen for a while.

Because the private vs. public space logic establishes two different ways of inhabiting the text, it also influences Woolf’s treatment of her examples and how she depicts reading in general. In both essays, a comparison is drawn between Defoe, Jane Austen and Thomas Hardy so as to insist on the necessity of judging each work according to its own coherence, and not by criteria that suit another kind of work. In *The Common Reader*, reading Defoe, Austen or Hardy is like “living in a different world” each time. Defoe’s world is “a plain high road” where facts prevail; Austen’s is “the drawing-room, and people talking, and by the many mirrors of their talk revealing their characters”; and Hardy’s is “[t]he moors,” where one comes face to face

with “Nature and destiny” (*CRH* 260). These worlds we enter alone, in an intimate movement of fusion with the writer’s mind, so that here as well the logic of privacy prevails. Above all, Woolf insists on the consistency each of these realms demonstrates: “The maker of each is careful to observe the laws of his own perspective, and however great a strain they may put upon us they will never confuse us, as lesser writers so frequently do, by introducing two different kinds of reality into the same book” (*CRH* 260). Homogeneous in nature, closed upon themselves, great novels are akin to private spaces modelled according to their maker’s tastes and character.

This in itself is an interesting reversal of the perspective embraced in *The Yale Review*, where Woolf did not so much set each fictional world against the others as she imagined a common starting point for them—an anecdote each writer is made to recount in his or her own specific voice. “[L]et us imagine,” she asks “how differently Defoe, Jane Austen, and Thomas Hardy would describe the same incident—this meeting a beggar in the street” (*YR* 34). The anecdote thus serves as a backdrop against which to probe the respective consistency of the three writers’ styles. Although the resulting account of the differences between them does not differ in any essential way from the *Common Reader*’s, the strategy employed reveals an entirely different mindset, as the fictional worlds, no longer sealed off from one another, are shown to communicate by way of their mutual origin: the impersonal scene of the beggar in the street, which does not belong to any of the discussed writers’ oeuvre. In the public space of the periodical essay, we do not come to Defoe, Austen or Hardy, we are not admitted into the privacy of their respective worlds. Instead, the three of them are displaced onto a public scene (represented by the common scenario) which they have to accommodate to their own idiosyncratic visions. For instance, in a novel by Thomas Hardy, “[t]he street will be transformed into a vast and sombre heath; the man or woman will take on some of the size and indistinctness of a statue” (*YR* 36). Hardy’s vision is conveyed, but only after Hardy himself has been transported out of his own realm and made to adapt to the “public,” impersonal vignette shared by the different writers.

It is significant that Woolf, in *The Common Reader*, immediately associates the novels of Defoe, Austen and Hardy with a given location or geographic space, respectively the “plain high road,” the drawing room and the heath. Books, for her, are like places; they are roamed or trodden in an embodied kind of reading. The spatial or architectural metaphor is also regularly called upon when comparing or appraising books. Once we have read them, she writes in *The Common Reader*, we are able to “see the shape from start to finish; it is a barn, a pigsty, or a

cathedral. Now then we can compare book with book as we compare building with building” (*CRII* 267)—a statement which calls to mind this other observation, from *A Room of Own’s Own*, about the novel: “it is a structure leaving a shape on the mind’s eye, built now in squares, now pagoda shaped, now throwing out wings and arcades, now solidly compact and domed like the Cathedral of Saint Sofia at Constantinople” (60). Each novel, each book comes with its corresponding “archetypal space,” whose characteristics reflect those of the literary work. It is this metaphoric language, so consistently expressed in Woolf’s texts, and enacted in her craft, which enables us to recognise two kinds of spaces in the two versions of “How Should One Read a Book?”, the public vs. the private space; the park, or square vs. the library and garden—a distinction which in turn reflects the diverging aims of the periodical and the book-form essay. In picturing these two different shapes, in inhabiting the two essays according to their own logic, are we not merely taking our cue from Woolf herself, and from different books asking different qualities?

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