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### Women Readers in the Novels of Virginia Woolf

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Women Readers in the Novels of Virginia Woolf  
(TITLE)

BY

Jill Monroe

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In her 1929 *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf states, "Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind" (76). She is, of course, speaking to the oppression that women have faced throughout history—the oppression that had kept women from receiving the same quality of education given to their fathers, brothers, and husbands. As Woolf suggests by alluding to the exclusion of women from libraries, reading plays a major role in that education. Kate Flint's *The Woman Reader: 1837-1914* examines the cultural anxieties regarding what and how women read. Throughout the Victorian and Edwardian eras, there was a constant fear that women would be consumed and corrupted by their reading material (especially the popular sensation fictions). She states that the reading woman was often depicted as "deaf and blind to all other stimuli in her immediate environment" (4). In other words, women were seen as incapable of separating themselves from the text or engaging in critical conversation with the book—they needed constant guidance about what to read, how to read it, and what to think about it. Although Flint's book stops with 1914, before Woolf's writing career takes off (her first novel was published in 1915), the attitudes Flint examines are precisely the attitudes that Woolf is responding to, not only in *A Room of One's Own* but in many of her essays and novels that feature women readers.

In 1981, Judith Fetterley responds to the problem of women's absorption in reading, asserting that women must be "resisting readers" in order to resist immasculation, or the process that teaches women to think like men and accept a male system of values (*The Resisting Reader* xx). According to Patrocinio Schweickart, immasculation "doubles [woman's] oppression" since it refuses to legitimize her experiences while perpetuating the idea that to be male is to be universal ("Reading Ourselves" 42). The resisting reader, in order to avoid

immascultation, reads with an awareness that allows her to refrain from becoming unquestioningly consumed by the text and the patriarchal system it serves.

Woolf, in illustrating that women are capable of reading without becoming absorbed and corrupted by the text, often depicts her female characters as what I call “distracted readers.” The distracted reader is easily sidetracked from her reading, often to examine her surroundings or to reflect on past events. One of Woolf’s best examples of a distracted reader is the narrator of her essay “Reading.” As she sits with a book in the library of an Elizabethan house, her attention drifts from her book to the view outside her window to thoughts of English tradition and history. At one point early in the essay, she begins thinking of centuries-worth of past writers:

If I looked down at my book I could see Keats and Pope behind him, and then Dryden and Sir Thomas Brown—hosts of them merging in the mass of Shakespeare, behind whom, if one peered long enough, some shapes of men in pilgrims’ dress emerged, Chaucer perhaps, and again—who was it? some uncouth poet scarcely able to syllable his words. (Woolf 142)

The narrator seems to seek a sense of unity by contemplating how one writer is influenced by another who was influenced by yet another, a cycle reaching as far back as she can imagine. This wandering of the narrator’s thoughts allows her to become “a space of tension where the literature of the past encounters the present, where the voices of the past enter into a dialogue with those of the present,” according to Christine Reynier in “The Obstinate Resistance of ‘Reading’ ” (80). The distracted reader often serves as such a space in Woolf’s novels, especially later in her career when the implications of the past encountering the present become more

political. Kate Flint also notes the political progression of Woolf's writing, stating, "although many of Woolf's responses to the act of reading remained constant throughout her career, the 1930s, bringing with them her greater involvement and interest in public politics, also saw a hardening of her attitudes" ("Reading Uncommonly" 188).

Woolf, who was all too familiar with the limitations of the patriarchal system and whose career was bookended by two world wars, was greatly influenced by the current events in her lifetime, whether that be the repressive treatment of women, the rise of fascism, or the effects of war. She takes on such issues as imperialism in *The Voyage Out*, shellshock in *Mrs. Dalloway*, and women's need for financial independence in *A Room of One's Own*, just to name a few. While, again, these influences can be seen even in her early works, Woolf's writing becomes progressively more political throughout the 1930s, a shift which can be seen in novels like *The Years* and *Between the Acts*, with the rise of Nazism and fascism, which Woolf, as a feminist and pacifist, detested. The act of reading becomes an especially important part of her political discourse, especially for women readers. For Woolf, distracted reading serves as a model of a female way of reading within the confines of a patriarchal society and also was a means of increasing awareness and opening dialogue about the state of the nation leading up to the Second World War.

Woolf's incorporation of distracted reading into her novels and her encouragement of political and social dialogue leads to the question of whether reading is a private or public act. Woolf comes down in favor of it being a public one. There are a number of ways that reading is a public act, and Woolf accounts for them in her writing, such as: reading in a public space (the narrator of *A Room of One's Own* reads in a library and the narrator of "An Unwritten Novel"

rides a train with a newspaper), reading to another person (Susan reads to her aunt in *The Voyage Out*), and discussing what one has read with another person (Mrs. Malone discusses a news article with her daughter Kitty in *The Years*). But the most important way that reading is a public act is due to the public consequences it can have. Even when reading in solitude, one can be (and ideally should be) inspired to think critically about one's world and the events taking place in it. From there, one might feel the desire to act, to work to create change. Woolf, writing with great social and political awareness, knew that reading could incite thought and action from both her audience and her characters. In this paper, I examine Woolf's depictions of women readers in three of her novels: *The Voyage Out*, *The Years*, and *Between the Acts*. Looking specifically at these three texts allows me to trace her treatment of her females characters' ways of reading throughout her career, and to see how Woolf gets more politically vocal through her novels, leading to her most urgent call for action in *Between the Acts*.

Woolf was aware from a young age of the power that novels could hold, since she spent much of her time reading in her father's library, thirsting for knowledge and an education like the one given to her brothers. Hermione Lee writes in *Virginia Woolf*, "Virginia was... 'gobbling' up Leslie's books almost faster than he approved. But she felt the need to keep pace with... [her siblings]" (141). Based on her appreciation for literature, it is no surprise that she would incorporate women readers into her novels from the start of her career. Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915), focuses on twenty-four-year-old Rachel Vinrace as she embarks on a trip to South America with her aunt and uncle. Rachel, who enjoys playing the piano and would rather read sheet music than anything else, is almost immediately set up as a character who

does not enjoy reading much: “She groped for knowledge in old books, and found it in repulsive chunks, but she did not naturally care for books” (35). In fact, she is so uninterested in books that she does not even care about the policing done by her aunts and father—the policing that Flint says was so common in Edwardian society—of what she reads. Despite her lack of interest, Rachel understands that books are a gateway to knowledge, which she craves. The image of her finding that knowledge in “chunks,” however, is an early clue that Rachel is a distracted reader.

Rachel is seen reading at various times during her voyage, making it appropriate to say her journey is as much a mental one, full of learning and self-discovery, as it is a physical one. Surrounded by fellow voyagers who attempt to influence her, Rachel receives various book suggestions during her travel. Rachel’s first reading suggestion comes from fellow *Euphrosyne* passenger Clarissa Dalloway. Upon learning that Rachel does not care for Jane Austen, Mrs. Dalloway, who claims she would “rather live without [the Brontës] than without Jane Austen” (58), presents Rachel with a copy of *Persuasion*. As the wife of a politician, Clarissa has very specific views of people’s roles in society. Men are the lawmakers, the scholars, the public officials; women are wives, mothers, and hostesses. A woman’s identity relies on serving others, and marriage is touted as a primary goal for her. Because Rachel is twenty-four years old and unmarried (and shows little interest in marriage), Clarissa’s recommendation of *Persuasion* is not solely for entertainment. Lending Rachel a novel that ends in several engagements is a way for Clarissa to push her traditional views on Rachel. Mr. Dalloway reinforces his wife’s suggestion for the same reasons. At one point he says to Rachel that part of his success is because, “I have been able to come home to my wife in the evening and to find



that she has spent her day in calling, music, play with the children, domestic duties” (65). By urging Rachel to read *Persuasion*, the Dalloways are advocating to her a very particular way of life and, in a sense, giving her a script to follow.

Clarissa, eager to get Rachel started on the book, begins reading it aloud to both Rachel and Richard, the latter of whom quickly drifts toward sleep. Clarissa constantly interrupts herself by interspersing her own commentary into the passage she is reading:

“ ‘Sir Walter Elliott, of Kellynch Hall, in Somersetshire, was a man who, for his own amusement, never took up any book but the *Baronetage*’ — don’t you know Sir Walter?— ‘There he found occupation for an idle hour, and consolation in a distressed one.’ She does write well, doesn’t she? ‘There —’ ” She read on in a light humorous voice.” (62)

Clarissa, for as much as she loves Austen and her novels, does not become absorbed in them. Making comments and asking Rachel questions (even though she does not seem to wait for answers) allow her to pull herself out of the text, never sinking too deeply into the story. As she reads, Clarissa remains aware of what happens around her, as indicated when her husband begins to snore, causing her to whisper, “Triumph” (63). She carries on reading in this self-interrupting fashion until another passenger comes looking for her (another interruption itself), causing her to give the book to Rachel and head off. Clarissa’s broken reading is, of course, not an indication of her resistance to the text, as Rachel’s will be. Rather, it is her way of attempting to engage Rachel in the novel, to provide commentary on the plot and demand Rachel’s attention. Since Clarissa sees herself as a representative of her and her husband’s values, she tries to act as Rachel’s guide through the text.

Rachel is significantly less enthused than Clarissa with *Persuasion*, a feeling which shows once she is left alone with a sleeping Richard Dalloway. After reading only one sentence, she stops to examine Richard, noting that he looks like a wrinkled coat at the end of a bed. Her attention remains focused on his sleeping figure as she suddenly thinks not of *Persuasion*, but of another book, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. The fact that Rachel's thoughts turn to "sisters and a dormouse and some canaries" (63) is interesting for three reasons. If distracted reading involves interruption, it is fitting that Rachel focuses on the dormouse and his story. In Lewis Carroll's dream-like novel, the scene in which the dormouse tells his tale about three sisters who live in a treacle well is full of interruption. Alice, not used to the highly illogical nature of Wonderland, repeatedly stops the dormouse to ask him questions. And when she is not demanding explanations, the Mad Hatter is insisting everyone move down a chair, and the dormouse is falling asleep while telling the story. Alice listening to the story of the sisters and the treacle well is like Rachel listening to Clarissa reading *Persuasion*, though Alice is a much more engaged listener, doing a lot of the interrupting herself, while in Rachel's case, all of the interruption comes from Clarissa.

More broadly, it seems pertinent that Rachel thinks of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* because Alice's situation echoes Rachel's. Having been raised primarily by two aunts after her mother's death, Rachel is now out of her sheltered environment and embarking on what will become her own adventure, which perhaps triggers her thoughts of Carroll's novel about a girl who falls down a rabbit hole and ends up in a strange fantasy world. Of course, Rachel has no idea of all that awaits her at this point—she has not yet even made plans to accompany her Aunt Helen and Uncle Ridley in South America—but, like Alice, she finds herself suddenly

surrounded by new people and new ideas. Even more significantly, it makes sense that Rachel would turn her mind to a story she finds less threatening if she feels pressured by the expectations the Dalloways are pushing on her via *Persuasion*. Naturally, Alice's story does not end in marriage; she is, after all, only a child. Although Alice faces terrors (edibles that make her grow or shrink, riddles that make no sense, a queen calling for decapitation), Rachel, like Alice's sister, can overlook the trauma of Alice's experience in favor of considering it the strange but amusing workings of a child's mind. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* then serves as more childlike reading material and, thus, a welcome alternative to the more "adult" *Persuasion*.

Rachel's thoughts of Alice's adventures are cut short when Richard wakes, surprised to find himself alone with the girl. When he asks her if she has been converted to a Jane Austen fan in the short time he was sleeping, Rachel admits she has hardly read a line. Richard responds with an admission that could nearly be the definition of Woolf's distracted reader: "That's what I find," he empathizes, "There are too many things to look at. I find nature very stimulating myself" (63-64). Although Mr. Dalloway's problems with reading sound like the kind of distracted reading Woolf is exploring in her female characters, he is quite hypocritical, which he had just demonstrated by claiming Jane Austen to be his favorite (or at least most tolerated) female writer, only to prove himself completely uninterested in her by falling asleep (a typical occurrence, according to Clarissa). Therefore, even if he claims to like Jane Austen, he does not feel it necessary for himself to actively read or listen to her novels. Like Clarissa, Richard sees Austen's novels as reinforcing traditional views of marriage and gender roles, which is why he considers her "incomparably the greatest female writer we possess" (62). He

does not need those values reinforced on himself, though, so he naps and lets his wife push them on Rachel via *Persuasion*. Of course, for as little attention as Rachel pays to the novel, she might as well be napping herself.

While Austen certainly does not capture Rachel's attention, there is one instance where she reads in a very enthralled manner, and that is when she reads Henrik Ibsen. Her love of modern texts, especially Ibsen's plays, is evident as she reads, her eyes "concentrated sternly upon the page," her breathing "slow but repressed," and her "whole body constrained" (123). This image is enormously different from the image of her reading (or attempting to read) Austen. She reads for two straight hours, as opposed to reading a few lines before closing the book. Of course, it makes sense that Rachel would be more involved in a book of her own choosing, as opposed to a book someone else, like Clarissa, has pushed on her. And after all, Ibsen and Austen write very different stories. In Ibsen's 1879 play *A Doll's House*, Nora leaves her husband after realizing that he loves her not for who she is as a person but for the role she plays as a dependent wife. This ending—a wife walking out on her husband—is vastly different from the endings found in Austen's novels. Consequently, Rachel's love of Ibsen further proves her resistance to marriage plots. She is far more interested in female characters like Nora, who challenge established social norms, than in women who happily attach themselves to the right man as the novel comes to an end.

Aside from admiring Ibsen's portrayal of women, Rachel also uses his plays to motivate critical thinking and questioning. When she finishes her reading, she asks, "What I want to know...is this: What is the truth? What's the truth of it all?" (123). She is described as asking "partly as herself and partly as the heroine of the play she had just read," but, regardless, she

comes out of the text asking questions. It cannot be said, therefore, that even in her most engrossed state of reading, Rachel is dangerously absorbed in her book, unquestioning and unreflecting as the upholders of Edwardian society thought women readers to be.

The most telling scene for Rachel as a distracted reader comes when she reads Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, which is recommended and provided to her by St. John Hirst. Hirst, who disdains women, hopes to see if Rachel is capable of appreciating the "immaculate" Gibbon, whom he considers "the test" (154). His motive for recommending Gibbon is to make a judgment not only on Rachel's intelligence but on her dedication and obedience to a patriarchal system that praises both traditional gender roles and empire. Rachel is initially enraged at Hirst, though she does not fully understand why—she can only exclaim, "Damn that man...Damn his insolence!" (155),—but she decides to take his suggestion regardless.

Having an hour to spare one afternoon, Rachel wanders the land around the villa in which she is staying in search of a perfect spot to read Gibbon's history of the Roman Empire. Although she excitedly flips open her book, feeling that to read "would be a surprising experience" (174), she barely makes it through one paragraph about generals, invaders, and barbarians before her mind begins to drift, turning to thoughts of the words' beauty and vividness rather than the actual content of the book. In "The Decline and Fall of Rachel Vinrace," Emily Wittman argues that "Rachel's attempt to read *Decline and Fall* measures her commitment to empire, class, and gender roles" (*Woolf and the Art of Exploration*, 161). If Gibbon is Hirst's test to gauge Rachel's commitment to these ideals, then Rachel has failed the test. However unintentionally, she refuses to become engrossed in the traditionally masculine

world of conquest and battle, and she does not give much attention to the book's overtones of militarism and imperialism.

Instead of getting immersed in the text, Rachel uses it as a springboard to start asking profound questions. She questions the nature of love, in particular. After her initial excitement that reading Gibbon could lead her to all knowledge, Rachel recognizes that the root of her elation is in Hirst and Hewet. She is reluctant to let her thoughts remain on them, but is unable to escape where her mind leads:

Unconsciously, she had been walking faster and faster, her body trying to outrun her mind...She was no longer able to juggle with several ideas, but must deal with the most persistent, and a kind of melancholy replaced her excitement. She sank down on to the earth clasping her knees together, and looking blankly in front of her..."What is it to be in love?" she demanded. (175)

This moment represents the peak of Rachel's ambivalence toward love and marriage. The fact that it happens just after Rachel reads Gibbon is significant. She becomes Christine Reynier's idea of a "space of tension," where conflicting ideas encounter one another, where Austen's depictions of love encounter Gibbon's description of imperial, patriarchal power. It is this meeting and merging of ideas that eventually leads to Rachel and Hewet's engagement, which in turn leads to Rachel's death—a death that Susan Friedman believes occurs because Rachel is not resistant enough and is sickened by her own engagement. I disagree, however. I do not see Rachel's death so much as a lack of resistance as it is the result of a suffocating environment. From the beginning, Rachel is resistant toward the marriage plot, but as an English, Edwardian woman, she is limited in what she can do with her life. She dies not of her

own fault but because she does not have the space to fully resist the values reflected in Austen and Gibbon.

Unlike Rachel, who meets with an unfortunate end, Sara Pargiter in *The Years* provides a more positive model of reading. In her 1937 novel, which follows the Pargiter family from 1880 to the mid-1930s, Woolf creates one of her most detailed scenes of distracted reading. In the “1907” section of the novel, Sara Pargiter sits in bed reading Sophocles’ *Antigone*. Before taking *Antigone* off her shelf, however, Sara at first notices a different book that is lying on her bed. She does not pay much attention to this faded brown book, though, as she watches a party going on a few houses down through her bedroom window. The dance music floating through the air and the “shadows twirling across the blind” make it “impossible to read” (*The Years* 132). After a while, though, Sara becomes irritated and bored with the music and decides to give reading a try. After putting away the brown book, thinking it too “dull,” she grabs a different book—*Antigone*.

It seems significant that Sara should end up reading this particular play. She does not actively decide *Antigone* is what she wants to read. Rather, after putting away the brown book that had been lying on her bed, “she reached her hand above her head and took down another book from the shelf of battered books without looking at it” (134). From this passage, it is clear that there is no particular reason other than chance that she ends up with *Antigone*. Furthermore, her lack of attention to the book she selects indicates a lack of investment in the overall experience, which becomes even more apparent when she opens the book. Sara takes in its physical nature, seemingly more interested in the book’s materiality than anything else. She notices how it cracks since she has never opened it before. She then spends time

examining the title page, which states the book is a translation done by her cousin Edward, causing her to remember the hot afternoon when he had given her the book, declaring, “my wasted youth, my wasted youth” (135). Sara’s focus on the book as a physical object rather than just a story emphasizes her ability to distance herself from what she reads. She holds no premeditated purpose for reading.

Even without a purpose—such as a feeling of closeness with the title character—Sara’s similarity with Antigone indicates a deeper level of meaning in her selection than might typically be given to a book chosen at random. For example, both characters have sisters whom they are close to, but who follow more traditional roles and do what is expected of them. In Sara’s case, her sister, Maggie, takes on the domestic responsibilities of marriage and motherhood, while Sara does not. Antigone’s sister, Ismeme, refuses, out of fear, to go against her uncle’s authority and help Antigone bury Polynices. The differences between the sisters only help emphasize Sara and Antigone’s biggest similarity. Both are outsiders within their families. While the other Pargiters love Sara (she certainly does not face the same level of adversity that Antigone does), they frequently treat her almost as a child. She is poetic and whimsical, often speaking aloud the thoughts in her head. She falls asleep in unusual places at unusual times. Simply put, Sara is different from her relatives. Antigone, too, is an outsider in her family. Acting alone, she challenges Creon’s authority when she buries her brother. Because Creon is not only her uncle but also the ruler of Thebes, his demands are society’s rules. In that sense, Antigone goes against societal norms, much as Sara goes against her society’s norms when she speaks her mind or does not marry. Sara herself draws a parallel between her and Antigone when, after skimming the section where Antigone is buried alive,



Sara lies flat under her blankets and covers her face with her pillow, mimicking the tragic heroine's entombment. Symbolically, Antigone's burial represents her loss against authority, which she accepts since she believes her cause is worth the punishment. Likewise, Sara "entombing" herself under the blankets represents the oppression she faces as a woman and as someone with a limp. But like Antigone, she is willing to act in ways that defy that oppression.

Once Sara opens her book, a couple outside catches her attention. Sara takes a moment to watch the lone couple in the garden (one might say she briefly foregoes reading her book for watching the couple), curious about what they are saying to one another. Since she cannot hear them over the music, she makes up her own story of what is being said, imagining the man to be telling his companion that he has found a fragment of his broken heart in the grass. As she turns back to her book, Sara skips through the pages: "At first she read a line or two at random; then, from the litter of broken words, scenes rose, quickly, inaccurately, as she skipped" (135). Her reading is scattered and even impatient. The further she reads, the more she moves back and forth between the book and the party. When reading the scene where Antigone is seized, Sara's attention is split:

There was a roar of laughter from the garden. She looked up. Where did they take her? she asked. The garden was full of people. She could not hear a word that they were saying. The figures were moving in and out. "To the estimable court of the respected ruler?" she murmured, picking up a word or two at random, for she was still looking out into the garden. (136)

She is curious about Antigone's fate, but not so curious that she is thumbing madly through the pages, anxious to discover where the play's heroine has been taken. Instead, she lets herself be

distracted by the movement and the noise outside. She navigates a line between the world of the book and the world of the party, which allows her to resist absorption into either of those worlds and, instead, lets her think critically about them. Through Sara's observations, the party can be seen as a traditional, structured mating ritual. She pays a lot of attention to the couple in the garden and the way the man seems to be courting his companion. And when Sara's sister, Maggie, returns from a party later that night, Sara is very curious to know which man Maggie sat next to. Essentially, Sara uses the play as a tool that allows her to critique the party and the conventional values it represents, even going so far as to question her own sister's role in perpetuating such values.

Although Sara did not actively decide on *Antigone*, it is known, as stated earlier, that the book was given to her by her cousin Edward, which is made clear when she twice repeats the content of the title page: "The Antigone of Sophocles, done into English verse by Edward Pargiter" (135). If Edward had a specific reason for presenting Sara with his translation of *Antigone*, it is not stated. Perhaps he felt his imaginative cousin would enjoy the story of the strong-willed Antigone. What is seen, however, is Edward's own reading of the play twenty-seven years before Sara's. In the novel's "1880" section, Edward, then an Oxford student, studies several books one rainy night, one of which is later revealed to be *Antigone*. Though a little hesitant at first, he jumps into the text:

He read; and made a note; then he read again. All sounds were blotted out. He saw nothing but the Greek in front of him. But as he read, his brain gradually warmed; he was conscious of something quickening and tightening in his forehead. He caught phrase after phrase exactly, firmly, more exactly, he noted, making a brief note in the

margin, than the night before...His own dexterity in catching the phrase plumb in the middle gave him a thrill of excitement. There it was, clean and entire. But he must be precise; exact; even his little scribbled notes must be clear as print. (49-50)

Edward reads very differently from Sara. Sara is constantly distracted by music, while “all sounds were blotted out” for Edward. His attention is far more focused on the text; it is all that he sees. He does not select words at random, but reads phrase after phrase. He is scholarly, jotting down notes here and there, and concentrated to the point where his brows are furrowed, his body is tense and, when finished, he feels as though he has run a race. Edward’s manner of reading illustrates his drive to succeed in his studies. He even emulates his father when reading: “He held the glass to the light in imitation of his father. Then he sipped. He set the glass on the table in front of him. He turned again to the *Antigone*. He read; then he sipped, then he read; then he sipped again” (51). Edward’s imitating Colonel Pargiter subtly indicates an underlying pressure to do well and follow a certain trajectory that comes with being at university. This pressure is ultimately what causes Edward and Sara’s differences in reading. Edward reads with an intensity that reflects his place in the academic institution as someone who will publish the books that shape readers’ understanding of English history and life. Meanwhile, as a woman, Sara is excluded from the academic world. She reads in a very fragmented way, not allowing the books to shape her but using pieces of text to think about her social position in life—the position of an outsider.

In *The Years*’ “1911,” section, Sara’s older cousin Eleanor decides to read one evening before bed. In a move similar to Sara’s randomly selecting *Antigone*, Eleanor grabs a book without looking to see what it is. However, Eleanor has more of an opinion about what she

ends up with: "She hoped it was *Ruff's Tour*, or *The Diary of a Nobody*; but it was Dante and she was too lazy to change it" (212). Even though Eleanor is not motivated to put back the Dante and select another book, the fact she has an opinion on the matter suggests she had wanted to get something particular from her reading. Thus, when she begins reading Dante, she is already less invested than she would have been with *Ruff's Tour* or *The Diary of a Nobody*. Like Sara, she reads "a few lines, here and there" (212), but she does not get far due to both her lack of investment and her rusty Italian.

One passage captures Eleanor's interest, though. Since she cannot understand the Italian, she reads the English translation: "For by so many more there are who say 'ours' / So much the more of good doth each possess" (212). Eleanor is unable to comprehend the full meaning, partially because as she reads, "her mind...was watching the moths on the ceiling, and listening to the call of the owl as it looped from tree to tree with its liquid cry" (213). The distraction of the moths and the owl keeps Eleanor from focusing closely on the text and, in fact, causes her to close the book and start pondering her future. But even though she does not think too long on its meaning, it is not surprising that she would be attracted to a passage that insists the more people think of themselves as part of a community, the more good they possess. After all, Eleanor is a charitable woman, who in her earlier life worked to improve housing for the poor. Her distraction by the moths also plays into the idea of a communal oneness. To Eleanor, the moths are more than some other species; there is something human-like about them. As she watches them, their fluttering about seems to represent human experience: "Things can't go on for ever, she thought. Things pass, things change, she thought, looking up at the ceiling. And where are we going? Where? Where?...The moths were dashing

round the ceiling” (213). The parallel between people and moths indicate Eleanor’s desire and ability to see connections in the world. In her moment of distracted reading, she finds a sense of wholeness and unity with even the most unlikely source.

In seeing connections, Eleanor is like Lucy Swithin in *Between the Acts* (1941). One of the earliest moments of reading in Woolf’s final novel comes when Lucy is awoken by singing birds “attacking the dawn like so many choir boys attacking an iced cake” (*Between the Acts* 8). Much like Sara in *The Years*, Lucy reads when noise outside her window keeps her from sleep. “Forced to listen, she had stretched for her favourite reading—an Outline of History” (8). Lucy’s choice of reading material is indicative of her character. She selects a book that does not have a concentrated plot and is not character-driven. Rather, it is a comprehensive work that sacrifices depth for breadth. The fact that Lucy’s favorite reading reaches so extensively into the past implies Lucy’s desire to see connections throughout history, to visualize the past in such a way that connects it with the present:

[Lucy] spent the hours between three and five thinking of rhododendron forests in Piccadilly; when the entire continent, not then, she understood, divided by a channel, was all one; populated, she understood, by elephant-bodied, seal-necked, heaving, surging, slowly writhing, and, she supposed, barking monsters; the iguanodon, the mammoth, and the mastodon, from whom presumably, she thought, jerking the window open, we descend. (9)

In many ways, this scene of Lucy reading echoes the essay “Reading,” in which the narrator is also sitting by a window with her book. Both women imagine the land’s history, attempting to draw links between past and present (Lucy thinks of the mastodon and how all its descendants

presumably lead to humankind; the narrator of “Reading,” thinks of centuries-worth of poets whose influences can be traced in each other’s works), and both Lucy and the narrator mix their physical reading of the text with moments of day-dreaming. In “Reading Uncommonly,” Kate Flint argues that “it is, indeed, hard to tell where, for Woolf, intelligent reading stops and day-dreaming, or the exercise of the imagination, takes over” (191). In Lucy’s case, the “exercise of her imagination” is seen in her “exaggerated repetition of words relating to her own processes of cogitation [that] emphasize quite how readily she strays for the neat linearity of the historical ‘outline’” (Flint 191). Like Rachel reading Gibbon and Sara reading Sophocles, Lucy situates herself outside the text. While she lets the text influence the direction of her thoughts, she uses her own creativity to bring what she is reading to life. In fact, she becomes more absorbed by her own imagination than by what the book actually says.

Lucy proves how invested she is in her thoughts when her reading is interrupted by a maid bringing morning tea:

It took her five seconds in actual time, in mind time ever so much longer, to separate Grace herself, with blue china on a tray, from the leather-covered grunting monster who was about, as the door opened, to demolish a whole tree in the green steaming undergrowth of the primeval forest...She felt on her face the divided glance that was half meant for a beast in a swamp, half for a maid in a print frock and white apron.

*(Between the Acts 9)*

For a moment, past and present, imagination and reality are perfectly unified in Lucy’s mind. As Flint puts it, “Creativity does not stop with mental re-creation of characters or settings, but the reader may carry the atmosphere of a book, its distinguishing marks of vision, into his or

her comprehension of the world outside their window” (“Reading Uncommonly” 192). When Grace enters the room, Lucy is unable to quickly separate herself from the world she has just imagined; consequently, Grace becomes a part of that world, taking on features of the old “monsters” that once inhabited the land.

Not much later, in a scene that mirrors Grace’s interruption of Lucy’s reading, Lucy interrupts another woman’s reading. Isa Oliver, who takes up her father-in-law’s copy of *The Times*, reads a horrifying account of a girl being raped by military troopers. At first, Isa is fairly inattentive to the story, picking out words and phrases and thinking the broken images “fantastic” and “romantic” (20). But as she gets further into the account, the image becomes more and more vivid—and upsetting—as she recreates the scene in her mind:

That was real; so real that on the mahogany door panels she saw the Arch in Whitehall; through the Arch the barrack room; in the barrack room the bed, and on the bed the girl was screaming and hitting him about the face, when the door (for in fact it was a door) opened and in came Mrs. Swithin carrying a hammer. (20)

Like Lucy, Isa reads with such strong visualization that her surroundings suddenly become the setting of what she is reading. She finds herself outside her own world and dropped into the world of the news story, forced back to reality only when Lucy enters the room. According to Karin Westman, “Isa has failed to be a productive or orderly reader of *The Times*” and as a result of her daydreaming, “[she] resists the interpellative hail of its pages” (“‘For Her Generation The Newspaper Was a Book’ ” 9). Rather than focusing on the voice of the paper, Isa focuses on the voice of the girl. Her reading of the story is reflective as she witnesses, through her own recreation of the events, the girl’s traumatic experience and then thinks about

it throughout the day. For example, while listening to Bartholomew and Lucy discuss the potential weather's effect on the upcoming pageant, Isa thinks that she has heard this conversation every year, only this year she can hear the girl's screams underneath the dialogue. By reading about the girl's rape, Isa becomes more aware of the various power struggles around her, especially the struggles women face in being oppressed by men. In that sense, she exemplifies what Kate Flint says in "Reading Uncommonly":

Woolf...understood reading's power to break through the constricting, isolating bounds in which an individual could feel herself trapped, but the effect of this power was usually perceived...as establishing and strengthening the reader's sense of shared identity with the struggle and aspirations of other women. (195)

Isa's creative manner of reading, with all its day-dreaming, and her "shared identity" with the girl in *The Times* open her to a critical awareness about her own powerlessness in relation to patriarchy.

The story in *The Times*, while perhaps the most traumatizing, is not the only moment in *Between the Acts* where characters are forced to think critically about their world. A major focus of the novel is the community's annual pageant, which concludes with a play written by the pageant's coordinator, Miss La Trobe. Miss La Trobe is Woolf's ultimate outsider: a "sturdy, thick set," (58) woman, rumored to be a lesbian, and suspected of not being "purely English," (57) nor "altogether a lady" (58). As with Sara Pargiter, being an outsider allows Miss La Trobe to harness her creativity, which she uses to create her play that spans centuries-worth of English history, from the Elizabethan age to the novel's present of 1939. Neither Miss La Trobe nor her audience are readers in the typical sense, but they are, in a way, "reading" the play. For



Woolf, scenes of reading very frequently involve visual components, as she often depicts the reader looking out the window or sitting in a garden. In the case of Miss La Trobe's audience, they are forced to look at themselves, their neighbors, and their surroundings. In the final act, the cast takes the stage one last time, carrying mirrors, tin cans, bits of glass, and scraps of silver, reflecting the spectators back to themselves:

Out they leapt, jerked, skipped. Flashing, dazzling, dancing, jumping. Now old Bart...he was caught. Now Manresa. Here a nose...There a skirt...Then trousers only...Now perhaps a face...Ourselves? But that's cruel. To snap us as we are, before we've had time to assume...And only, too, in parts...That's what's so distorting and upsetting and utterly unfair. (*Between the Acts* 184)

Most of the play's viewers are unsettled by this unexpected conclusion, but it has achieved what Miss La Trobe set out to do. Everyone is forced to question the purpose of the mirrors; they are made to consider their own role in the play. To quote Edward Barnaby, "What begins as a typical pageant...concludes with various Brechtian subversions...[La Trobe] spurs the audience to shrug off the complacency of spectatorship and take an active role in visualizing its own identity and pursuing its own historical legacy" ("The Realist Novel as Meta-Spectacle" 48). Miss La Trobe's Brechtian approach to theater is highly effective. Bertolt Brecht's epic theater seeks to educate its audience about the world around them. Walter Benjamin says of epic theater, "The truly important thing is to discover the conditions of life...This discovery of conditions takes place through the interruption of happenings" (*Illuminations* 150). In *Between the Acts*, the mirrors interrupt an otherwise traditional pageant. It is no longer about England's past but about its present, and in order to illustrate the present, Miss La Trobe could not simply

create a few characters to be portrayed by community villagers. She had to enmesh her viewers and make them think about the roles they play in the world. Ultimately, she is successful. While not everyone understands Miss La Trobe's intention, the play gets them talking and asking questions, considering possible meanings.

Like Miss La Trobe, Woolf uses her work to inspire action. Her depictions of women readers show reading as an essentially public act, primarily because of the public consequences it can have. Over the course of her career, Woolf becomes progressively more political in her writing, a progression that is reflected in characters like Rachel Vinrace, Sara and Eleanor Pargiter, Isa Oliver, and Miss La Trobe. Rachel, with her resistance to messages of imperialism and male domination, shows that matters of the nation were already heavy on Woolf's mind at the start of her career. Such issues only become more evident in Woolf's novels the more time goes by. By the mid to late 1930s, the growing concern about fascism's rise and the potential for another world war are obvious in her writing and her characters. Sara Pargiter's embrace of her outsider status in *The Years* gives her the autonomy to critique her society and act more freely within the patriarchy that she lives. For Isa, reading *The Times* causes her to analyze male brutality and the institutionalized nature of male dominance over women and to recognize it in her own life. In Woolf's most politically-engaged work, Miss La Trobe uses her play to make a statement about the need for personal and social reflection—a statement, I argue, Woolf is making with *Between the Acts* as a whole. Readers of Woolf's novel, like "readers" of Miss La Trobe's play, are encouraged to develop a critical awareness of the events, people, and ideas shaping the world. Only through that critical awareness can we be active participants of life rather than mere spectators.

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