

***Virginia Woolf's Modernist Path: Her Middle Diaries and the Diaries She Read*, by Barbara Lounsberry, University Press of Florida, Gainesville (ISBN 978 0 8130 6295 2), 2016, US\$79.95**

This volume is the second of a projected three-volume edition by Barbara Lounsberry, in which the diaries of Virginia Woolf are opened up to close scrutiny and analysed alongside the diaries of other writers she was reading during a given period. The first volume, published in 2014, covers up to mid-1918.¹ This second volume carries on where the first volume left off, with a focus on 'her mature, spare, modernist diaries, 1918 to 1929' (9). It traces Woolf's development as diarist during the years when she produced some of her finest work, as well as revealing how her reading of other people's diaries affected her own creativity. For Lounsberry, during this middle period others' diaries encourage Woolf 'to explore her soul' (3), while at the same time encouraging her experimentation with her own diary style: 'Woolf's diary—more than any of her other works—reveals that she was always a modernist in the sense of making her work "new"' (4). As the book reveals, Woolf's habit of diary-writing allows her to 'experiment semiprivately with nonlinear narration, to search beyond the accepted patterns of order and significance' (5) and thus to forge her modernist path. Indeed, Lounsberry's reading of fourteen key diaries between 1918 and 1929 shows the way in which the personal writing of others aided Woolf's literary experimentation.

The text, divided chronologically into chapters, is further subdivided into sections addressing each diary—either her own or one she read. For the scholar, such a layout facilitates access to specific material, and is one of the welcome features of this volume. As an example, Chapter 1 focuses on Woolf's diaries written during 1918 and 1919, when she was living at Hogarth House in Richmond, and then at Monks House in Rodmell. Lounsberry reveals how, during this period, Woolf's diaries become trusted confidantes, offering her a safe place to explore feelings and ideas—about her depression, for example, or thoughts on her work in progress—that she does not feel comfortable sharing with the wider world.

The diaries are all described physically (size, colour, etc.—a bonus for scholars who can't always obtain access to the originals), as here, in the description of Woolf's 1919 diary:

She chooses a large diary book—10 ¾ inches long and 8 ½ inches wide—with a dark gray paper cover, the same color as her second 1918 Hogarth diary ... Back home in Richmond, she prepares the book's white unlined pages as if each is a canvas. She draws a red vertical line one inch from the left edge of each page. To the line's left she will write her diary date ... (22)

The focus on the physical in Lounsberry's description brings the materiality of Woolf's diary-writing into sharp relief throughout the volume. She also notes the number of entries in each diary, and offers reasons for any notable gaps. For example, Woolf's 1919 diary, which she began on 20 January, contains sixty-six entries up to the end of the year. One notable gap of forty-three days signals the move to Monks House; on 7 September, Woolf writes: 'I suppose this is the first day upon which I could easily sit down & write in my long suffering & by this time I hope tolerant diary' (27).

Written with an 'Elderly Virginia' in mind, Woolf's own fascination with her diary entries invites her to read and reread them with a critical eye, while at the same time recognising their value, as here in this entry for 20 April:

[It] is my belief that the habit of writing thus for my own eye only is good practise. It loosens the ligaments. Never mind the misses and stumbles. Going at such a pace as I do I must make the most direct & instant shots

¹For a review, see Dell.

at my object, & thus have to lay hands on words, choose them, & shoot them with no more pause than is needed to put my pen in the ink. (28)

Thus, for Lounsberry, the 1919 diary offers Woolf's 'fullest expression of her mature diary goals' (27).

The 1921 diary is of particular significance, for Woolf's entries are overshadowed by her premonitions of ill health, her diary thus becoming 'a treatment center for literary distress of several sorts' (51). During this year, Woolf works too hard at the Hogarth Press, and her habitual rest time following afternoon tea is now given over to Russian lessons in preparation for her translation collaborations. It almost seems inevitable that physical and mental exhaustion will follow. In the pages of her diary the recording of her dangerous bouts of hypersensitivity acts as a sort of self-medication: 'I must hurriedly note more symptoms of the disease, so that I can turn back here & medicine myself next time' (54).

In 1924, Woolf's diary is witness to the writing of one of her most celebrated novels, *Mrs. Dalloway*; indeed, in her last entry in this diary, she feels confident in asserting 'I do feel fairly sure that I am grazing as near as I can to my own ideas, & getting a tolerable shape for them. I think there is less & less wastage' (99). In other entries, Woolf cautions herself against being too self-congratulatory, but again it is through the pages of these diaries that she is able to at least acknowledge the various psychological complications which make up her complex psyche. Rereading such entries offers Woolf therapeutic benefits, as she comes to terms with the stresses and strains of daily life, which affect her wellbeing.

As noted earlier, Woolf's diaries are counterbalanced in this book by sections in each chapter commenting on the published diaries she was reading, and their influences on her. Lounsberry's meticulous research reveals that between 1918 and 1929 Woolf consumed the personal writing of Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, W. N. P. Barbellion, John Evelyn, Anton Chekhov, Alie Baden Horst, James Boswell, Anne Chalmers, Stendhal, Lady Anne Clifford, Jonathan Swift, Beatrice Webb, Thomas Cobden-Sanderson and Benjamin Robert Haydon. They represent an eclectic selection and reveal Woolf's wide and varied literary tastes. In reading such works, as Lounsberry affirms, Woolf finds some similarities of experience to latch onto. In reading Beatrice Webb's memoirs, *My Apprenticeship*, in 1926, for example, Woolf senses she is in the presence of someone from whom she can learn a great deal: 'She taps a great stream of thought' (154). The contents of Jonathan Swift's *Journal to Stella*, written as journal-letters between 1710 and 1713, uncannily replicate issues in Woolf's own life in 1925. Swift's letters were written as conversations, a technique which she herself prized, both in her own diary and in her non-fiction more generally. Such an affirmation did much to bolster her own writing practices. In addition, Swift found that in these journal-letters he was surreptitiously able to praise himself, in casually noting the praise he had received from others. As Lounsberry confirms, both writers 'relish the conversational mode in their journals—although Swift uses it much more playfully than Woolf—and both use their journals to fortify themselves with praise' (132).

In addition to the authors listed above, she also read, on its publication in 1927, the published journal of her old literary sparring partner, Katherine Mansfield. On 5 August 1927, Woolf wrote to Vita Sackville-West: 'I've been reading Katherine Mansfield with a mixture of sentiment and horror ... What odd friends I've had—you and she' (191). In truth, Mansfield never took to diary-keeping as Woolf did. John Middleton Murry, Mansfield's husband, was the only editor of her personal papers until his death in 1957, producing a variety of edited volumes purporting to be either Mansfield's *Journal* (1927), her *Scrapbook* (1939) or her *Definitive Journal* (1954). The very misleading impression given was that Mansfield had assiduously kept such things as a journal or a scrapbook during her lifetime and that Murry had simply published what she had written. Philip Waldron notes:

The [manuscript] material consists of four diaries which, like most diaries, are copious in early January but quickly peter out; some thirty notebooks and exercise books; and several hundred loose sheets of paper. There is no evidence whatsoever that Mansfield ever had publication in mind. (Waldron 11)

Murry took this material, stitched and edited it together, all the time removing anything unsavoury, until he had recreated his own version of Katherine Mansfield—saintly and ethereal. Thus, the *Journal* that Woolf read in 1927 is, as Lounsberry points out, ‘astonishingly unreliable and self-serving ... for it projects an image of a pure soul, a saintly suffering mystic, that in the full spread of her notebooks and papers proves simple, sentimental, and false’ (191). But how was Woolf to know that, in fact, Mansfield’s diary had far more in common with the fictive diaries she read, such as Barbellion’s *Journal of a Disappointed Man*, which she read in 1920?

Nevertheless, in her review of the *Journal*, ‘A Terribly Sensitive Mind’, Woolf was generous in her praise of Mansfield the writer: ‘No one felt more seriously the importance of writing than she did’, and perhaps, reflecting on the less-than-perfect contents of her own diaries, she admits that in Mansfield’s *Journal* ‘[t]here is no literary gossip; no vanity; no jealousy ... Although during her last years she must have been aware of her success she makes no allusion to it’ (202). Lounsberry notes several places in Mansfield’s *Journal* which Woolf may have used as inspiration for her own creativity, one example being Mansfield’s description of one of her doctors, Dr Hudson, who Lounsberry believes may have been the real-life model for Professor von X in *A Room of One’s Own*. However, perhaps the most important of these borrowings can be seen in two entries: in 1918, Mansfield writes, as part of her ‘Eternal Question’, ‘I haven’t a place to write in or on’, and in 1921 she reiterates this essential need with ‘But I bitterly long for a little private room where I can work undisturbed’ (204). *A Room of One’s Own*, then, for Lounsberry, could very well be ‘Woolf’s private gift to Katherine Mansfield’ (204).

Lounsberry notes in her introduction that during the period delineated by this book diary-writing became ‘a way of life for Woolf. If a diary is life insurance, Woolf’s policy in her middle stage deliver[ed] high returns’ (8). This volume and its two companions cannot—and should not—replace a reading of Woolf’s own published diaries, but as a comprehensive mapping of Woolf’s personal writing, as well as the literary influences which shaped such writing, they represent a magnificent feat of scholarship, and deserve shelf-space in every Woolf scholar’s library.

Gerri Kimber

Works Cited

- Dell, Marion. Review: *Becoming Virginia Woolf: Her Early Diaries and the Diaries She Read*, by Barbara Lounsberry. *Virginia Woolf Bulletin* No. 49 (May 2015):73–7.
- Waldron, Philip. ‘Katherine Mansfield’s *Journal*’. *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 20:1 (January 1974): 11–18.
- Woolf, Virginia. ‘A Terribly Sensitive Mind’. *E4*. 446–9.