

UNiversitas: Journal of Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity

Volume 10
Number 1 *Forum Theme 1: Cornerstone, Forum
Theme 2: Shakespeare Alive Cluster, & Theme
3: The State of Higher Education Cluster*

Article 22

3-2015

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Recommended Citation

Marler, Regina (2015) "A Review by Regina Marler for *Becoming Virginia Woolf: Her Early Diaries and the Diaries She Read*, by Barbara Lounsberry," *UNiversitas: Journal of Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity*: Vol. 10 : No. 1 , Article 22.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/universitas/vol10/iss1/22>

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A Review by Regina Marler for *Becoming Virginia Woolf: Her Early Diaries and the Diaries She Read*, by Barbara Lounsberry

Part of the journal section “Reviews and Responses”

Barbara Lounsberry, "*Becoming Virginia Woolf: Her Early Diaries and the Diaries She Read*" (Gainesville: UP Florida, 2014).

Reviewed by Regina Marler

1. Very rarely, when bending the head over some worthy academic volume, perhaps with a title something like, *Post-postmodernisms of Cross-colonial Language Theories* or *(Mal)contents: Forematter Errata in Eighteenth Century Rural Sermons*, a revelation strikes the reader around page fifteen: “My God, I am actually going to enjoy this.” Some of us have experienced this jolt of pleasure and intellectual communion but few realize that it can occur even when the author has, unaccountably, snatched one of the best titles from a handwritten shortlist the reader has kept taped near her desk for her own current work-in-progress. Such, I can report, is the excellence of Barbara Lounsberry’s new study, *Becoming Virginia Woolf*. Though it forces me back on my second-best effort, *Virginia Woolf: Title TK*, I freely yield the field to Professor Lounsberry’s readable, insightful, and beautifully-informed examination of Woolf’s early diaries.
2. At this point in every review of a Woolfian or Bloomsbury-related book, the critic is obliged to mention that this is a crowded arena, both in the popular and academic realms. Anyone bored by Woolf or still disapproving of her in a Leavisite or Lewisite vein, or condemning her as a snob or lamenting that she did not entirely strip herself of every prejudice of her age, unlike us, can consider him or herself heard and acknowledged. Many other studies have tried to illuminate Woolf’s life or work through her thirty-eight volumes of diaries (excerpts from which appeared in 1953, edited by Leonard Woolf, as *A Writer’s Diary*, and the full set, edited by Anne Olivier Bell, in five volumes from 1977 to 1984) and several have put these amazing diaries in context with those of other women writers and modernists. See especially Elizabeth Podnieks’s *Daily Modernism: The Literary Diaries of Virginia Woolf, Antonia White, Elizabeth Smart, and Anais Nin* and the work of Harriet Blodgett, both cited by Lounsberry. The diaries have been scrutinized from countless angles and admired for their swift, clear prose and the unparalleled richness of Woolf’s descriptions. Lounsberry quotes W. H. Auden’s conviction that he had “never read any book that conveyed more truthfully what a writer’s life is like, what are its worries, its rewards, its day-by-day routine.” (9)
3. What is new, as Lounsberry points out, is her attempt “to understand the diary as a *diary*: Woolf’s development as a diarist and her place among, and legacy to, the worldwide community of diarists she so greatly valued and admired.” (1) Her close reading of the early “experimental” diaries, as she terms

them—Virginia’s first twelve diaries, which date from 1897, when all four Stephen siblings began diaries in January (Virginia, fourteen that year, seems the only one to finish hers) to mid-1918—is sensitive and invaluable, and will not only send the reader back to Woolf’s diaries but to the diaries that the young writer read and loved.

4. Lounsberry identifies five important British diaries that awakened and influenced Virginia Stephen—those of Sir Walter Scott, Fanny Burney, the Eton schoolmaster William Cory, and Samuel Pepys, as well as Boswell’s *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson* (at the time she read Boswell’s account of this journey, it was thought that the rest of his papers and diaries had been destroyed at his death). “Like all influences,” she remarks, “the diaries the teenager reads prompt, foster, dispose, nourish, and embolden her in certain ways; more than anything, they set her in motion.” (11) (Lounsberry makes a good case, incidentally, that Woolf chiefly valued Fanny Burney’s diaries, rather than her novels, and that this is one reason why she appears to give short shrift to Burney in *A Room of One’s Own*.) In addition, Lounsberry has traced sixty-one other diaries that Woolf read over the course of her lifetime, arguing for “the crucial role of other diaries in Woolf’s creative life. Woolf was more steeped in diary literature than any other well-known diarist before her—and likely even since.” (3)

5. Fifteen key diaries are explored in these pages, and their echoes show up in Woolf’s published work, as well, along with remarks, observations, and hints from her diaries: “One feels on a treasure hunt, for again and again one meets passages that turn up transformed in Woolf’s later published works.” (4-5) Lounsberry is good at unearthing this treasure. In Virginia’s readings of Mary (Seton) Berry and Mary Coleridge, for example, she spies “the whole kernel of *A Room of One’s Own*.” (163) She devotes a long section to Mary Coleridge’s diary, for example, in part because of all that Virginia Stephen had in common with S.T. Coleridge’s great-great niece (they both adored Scott, took classes at King’s College in London, traveled to the same cities in Italy, and celebrated the same qualities: “change and range” (159)) but also because her 1905 novel, *The Shadow on the Wall*, seems to have inspired Woolf’s short story, “The Mark on the Wall.”

6. “The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn” comes in for lengthy discussion, since this early story draws directly on Virginia Stephen’s diary practice and her interest in life-writing, as well as on her readings of the Paston letters. Lounsberry notes, too, the few early occasions in which Virginia expanded diary entries into essays for publication. Entry thirteen in her 1905 Cornwall journal became “A Walk By Night,” which appeared later that year in *The Guardian*, a religious journal with a women’s supplement, edited by Margaret Lyttelton, a friend of Virginia’s close friend, Violet Dickinson. (86) This was among Virginia’s first publications.

7. Lounsberry’s readings of young Virginia’s diaries never overreach, even when it comes to the 1899 Warboys journal, with its elaborate tropes, private jokes, and set pieces like “TERRIBLE TRAGEDY IN A DUCKPOND” that have invited some far-fetched interpretations over the years. She follows references forward and back in time, quoting, for example, Woolf’s elation in 1929 when news spreads that Boswell’s papers have been discovered in Ireland: “Think! There are 18 volumes of Boswell’s diaries now to be published. With any luck I shall live to read them. I feel as if some dead person were said to be living after all.”^[1] A year later, Woolf was approached to write a biography of Boswell.

Although the money would have been welcome, she declined, and felt thrilled to have “paid for the power to go to Rodmell and only think of *The Waves* by refusing this offer.”^[2]

8. This may sound like faint praise, but one of the most satisfying elements of this book is Lounsberry’s gift for summation. (She is professor emerita of non-fiction writing at the University of Northern Iowa, and writes on the craft of non-fiction.) Lounsberry never exactly repeats herself, but after ranging widely in her primary and secondary source material, and engaging with both Woolf and her critics, she delivers neat episodic capsules of meaning at the close of each section, rounded at both ends, like eggs. They are models of contemporary prose. For example, about Woolf’s earliest success as a diarist, Lounsberry writes,

The 1915 diary supplies our first glimpse of Virginia Woolf the full-blown diarist, the Woolf employing Scott’s (and Pepys’s) ‘loose, free & easy’ style to pass from inner to outer world and from the sinking of the *Formidable* to the sacking of Lizzy the maid. Narratives start; people swiftly appear; threads of a rich tapestry are taken up and brandished with amused attention. A world comes alive—as in a novel. One suspects Woolf does not know at this moment what she has started. (173)

9. Judging from the dates of some mentioned interviews, Lounsberry has been at work on this study for many years. “I hope I have shown that *each* of her early diaries attempts something new,” she modestly claims (99). This is the least of Lounsberry’s achievements in this essential work of Woolfian archaeology, connection, and appreciation.

[1] Virginia Woolf, *Diary* (NY: Harcourt, Brace), vol. 3: 237-8.

[2] *Ibid*, 295.



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