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A Review by Wagoner of *Virginia Woolf's Modernist Path: Her Middle Diaries & the Diaries She Read*, by Barbara Lounsberry

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Barbara Lounsberry, *Virginia Woolf's Modernist Path: Her Middle Diaries & the Diaries She Read*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2016.

Reviewed by Elizabeth A. Wagoner

1. The scope and influence of literary Modernism continues to expand, and current scholarship includes not only studies of Modernism within its time period in literary history, but increasingly the force Modernism exerts on innovations in contemporary literature. Barbara Lounsberry's new book, *Virginia Woolf's Modernist Path: Her Middle Diaries & the Diaries She Read*, the second volume in her ongoing study of the diaries of Virginia Woolf, breaks open at the molecular level the complex and thrilling confluence of currents that fed Woolf's writing, as well as an examination of how she used formal experimentation in her diaries to create innovative new strategies that were deployed in her public writing. This volume will be of interest to scholars in many areas, as it delivers detailed explication of the ways Woolf's shifting practices as a diarist resulted in some of the most important formal innovations of Modernist literature.

2. Barbara Lounsberry's expertise in both life writing and Virginia Woolf's fiction and nonfiction converge in this study, resulting in illuminating connections between diary theory and Woolf's innovations. In each of the nine chapters of this study, she is able to define and closely examine Woolf's shifts in method, voice, and style as this golden age of her diaries unfolds. The novel approach Lounsberry takes is in studying the influences of other diarists upon Woolf's creative life and output.

3. As Lounsberry charts new areas in Woolf's middle diaries, it is impossible to ignore her breathtaking style. Every sentence shines, foregrounding in clear prose each revelation, leading to another skillfully crafted layer of her study. Rarely is a study such as this so delicious to read—it would be unwise to read this book without an accompanying notebook and pencil with which to jot down the fruitful questions and ideas it will be sure to inspire.

4. Lounsberry uses an innovative method for her close readings of Virginia Woolf's diaries, unearthing previously unexamined strands of influence between the diaries she read prolifically and her formal experimentation. First, each of Woolf's middle diaries is closely examined as a work of art itself, next in relation to the other diaries, then in how these connect to her public

literary work, and finally the investigation of how the diaries she read influenced both form and content of her writings (8).

5. Each of the nine chapters in this volume covers just a year or two of Woolf's thirteen middle diaries, beginning with 1918's Second Hogarth House Diary and the crisis that led to shifts in former divisions of purpose for her diaries and concluding with Woolf confronting difficult choices that would determine the shape of her art once more in the 1928 and 1929 Diaries. Lounsberry connects each development during this second stage with the diaries Woolf was reading, including the diaries of Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, W.N.P. Barbellion's *Journal of a Disappointed Man*, John Evelyn's Diary, Alie Badenhorst's Boer War Diary, James Boswell's *Journal of a Tour to Corsica*, Anne Chalmers' *Journals*, Lady Anne Clifford's *Diary*, Jonathan Swift's *Journal to Stella*, Beatrice Webb, Thomas Cobden-Sanderson, Benjamin Robert Haydon's *Journals*, and Katherine Mansfield's 1927 *Journal*. Overall, this second stage of Woolf's diary writing includes a heady array of formal experiments in her diary writing, and Lounsberry's excellent chapters illustrate how these developments are nourished by this prolific reading of the diaries of others.

6. This study identifies several changes in Woolf's concept of her diary that equipped her to begin to use the diary in much more creatively fruitful ways, connecting this with Woolf's climb toward some of her greatest formal achievements in fiction. These shifts in how Woolf used the diary as a format begin to change in 1918. Lounsberry writes that "[Woolf's] experimental first diary period, from 1897 to 1918, harbors her greatest number of entries per year. In her second diary stage Woolf strips the periodic diary down—presses it about as far as it can go and still convey a life"(2).

7. In Lounsberry identifies the mechanism facilitating Woolf's formal experiments in these middle diaries—Woolf's realization that the diary itself is a method for formal experimentation that could yield a great deal of new ideas to apply in her public writings.

Here, as Woolf reflects upon the flexibility of Byron's *Don Juan* cantos as a form, she realizes that "the rapid, spontaneous diary style she has been using [is] a method in itself (with artistic advantages) and her sense of the open-ended stretch of a diary—like that of endless cantos—as an 'elastic shape' of great allure"(12).

8. One technique that Woolf was interested in and experimented with during this time period was the loose-leaf diary. This is a choice of format with far-reaching implications for the kinds of narratives she could compose. A bound book is designed to be used by writers as well as readers in hierarchical and sequential ways. Entries occur in a fixed order, and once one entry is complete, it cannot be revised. A loose-leaf diary would enable Woolf to escape the strictures of sequentiality and linearity, instead experimenting with fragments, enabling rearrangements of these pieces to many different ends.

9. Another key change explored in Lounsberry's study is the significant shift in audience for Woolf's diary writing—a shift from Woolf relying on external female mentors—her Hampstead mentors—to becoming her own mentor, an important move that Lounsberry argues marks a

growing confidence in her own process. “Woolf will now parent herself. Elderly Virginia signifies a new—and potentially public—audience for Woolf’s diary prose and gives the diary new purpose and scope”(22).

10. This will most appeal to scholars of Woolf, Diary Studies, and Modernism, though it has broad-ranging appeal, offering a banquet of ideas about diary writing, creative writing as a process, formal experimentation, and women’s studies. This study is a treasure, the well-wrought sentences gems to be turned over and over in the mind, each facet cause for lengthy contemplation, from details on Woolf’s writing life, her experiments, and her use of the form of the diary to work out ideas for her fiction as well as support her writing psyche.



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