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Maria DiBattista: Imagining Virginia Woolf

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How many departments a person has: needing historians,
psychologists, poets &c. to interpret.

—V. Woolf, “Notes for Reading at Random”

The Figment of the Author

How should one read a book? Virginia Woolf first asked this question nearly a century ago, but the years have, if anything, made the question more, not less urgent. Books about how to read (a poem, a novel) periodically appear, as do books—*How Proust Can Change Your Life*, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, *The Little Chinese Seamstress*—chronicling the emotional and political benefits of reading. There are even books, like Pierre Bayard’s *How to Talk about Books You Haven’t Read*, that suggest how *not* to read a book and still get some benefit from it. Finally there are books that promise that *anyone* can become a reader, even the Queen of England, as happens in Alan Bennett’s droll fantasy, *The Uncommon Reader*, in which Her Majesty, to the surprise of her subjects and the chagrin of her retinue, develops a late-life passion for reading so voracious and ardent that Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, Marcel Proust, Nancy Mitford, and Jean Genet are devoured with equal and unmitigated pleasure.

These books, whatever their individual merits and degrees of seriousness, and whether or not we actually consult them, serve as important reminders of how valuable, and yet fragile, a human art reading continues to be. That reading enhances life is the recurring theme of these works, a view I share but do not directly comment upon in this book. Instead I concern myself with a slightly different and probably less creditable question, one less frequently asked but perhaps of more personal interest to us as readers, namely, how one should read an *author*? This question is generally raised, if at all, in literary biographies. Asking it here in a work of literary criticism may strike some readers as impertinent. After all, reading has its protocols like any other form of human encounter. One of the fundamental rules we are taught to observe in reading imaginative literature is not to treat the author like a character in his or her own work. We are instructed (often scolded) to respect the difference between an author and a narrator and not to mistake the person who speaks to us in an essay for the much less accountable person hunched over the page—or, now more likely, over the keyboard—who is wrestling with all the fiends who bedevil the makers of sentences.

Still, no matter how sophisticated we may be in separating the narrative or essayistic “I” from the author, we often find that our reading becomes so intense that this distinction becomes increasingly unimportant, a finery only pedants would insist we adhere to. We want, even yearn, to know who the author is and what he or she thinks about things. “What interests the reader,” writes Señor C, the writer impersonated by J. M. Coetzee in *Diary of a Bad Year*, is the quality of the author’s “opinions themselves—their variety, their power to startle, the ways in which they match or do not match the reputations of their authors.”¹ Even otherwise

disciplined academic critics routinely disregard such principled separation of author and writerly persona in fashioning adjectives out of proper nouns in order to designate a certain authorial “style” or way of looking at the world. Hence the untroubled, indeed often knowing and confident, way critics as well as common readers are inclined to invoke “signature styles”: heroic humanity is Homeric or Shakespearean; a lyric feeling is Miltonic or Wordsworthian; social canvasses are Balzacian or Dickensian; unfailing artistic intelligence is Flaubertian or Jamesian; psychological nightmares are Dostoevskian or Conradian; modern epics are Tolstoyan or Joycean. These coinages signal that we have identified something quintessential about a writer’s style or manner of interpreting and representing experience. To describe a style as Faulknerian or Beckettian or Nabokovian, to take other and equally apposite examples, conjures up a host of literary moods, dispositions, and temperaments that coalesce to form an imprint as distinctive as a genetic code. This imprint, a trace-code of the authorial DNA, is our primary way of distinguishing the focused person who writes from that “bundle of accidents and incoherence that sits down at breakfast,”² as Yeats somewhat comically described the writer of prose.

Yet however expert we become in deciphering the authorial code, we can never know the person who writes *directly* through her writing. This is an odder claim than it may initially appear, when you consider that the writer may divulge the most intimate secrets of her inner life through the very things she chooses to write about and by the way she writes about them. I want to make an even odder claim and insist that the person who writes never appears to us except as a figment of our imagination. This is what I mean by my title, “imagining” Virginia Woolf. I don’t mean by

this that I am making her up or attributing qualities to her that she may not indeed possess. Quite the opposite. It is Woolf who makes things up, who makes *herself* up—that is what it means, at a very fundamental level, to have an imagination and to use it in your writing. What I fabricate is an image of her that has slowly formed in my mind—a figment I call it—from the impressions, some more concrete than others, that I collect as I am reading her. This figment of the author may coexist with, but should never be mistaken for, the “figure of the author.” I suspect it matters little to most readers whether the author as a literary *figure* is dead or alive or temporarily missing in action. On the other hand, the figment, being a subjective creation and not a rhetorical or literary personification, has a different reality and possesses a different importance in the mind of the reader. The figment of the author that attends us in our reading tends to be evanescent, is often misconceived, but is never insubstantial in its impact upon us.

It was Woolf who alerted me to the inevitability of these figments and of their power to shadow and ultimately affect our intellectual and emotional relation to what we are reading. The first concrete piece of advice she gives the reader in “How Should One Read a Book?” is to try to become the author, but then, in a reversal that becomes more and more typical of her as she becomes so confident in her own opinions that she can afford to qualify and, when necessary, disregard them, she admits her inability to follow her own advice:

We may stress the value of sympathy; we may try to sink our own identity as we read. But we know that we cannot sympathise wholly or immerse ourselves wholly; there is always a demon in us who whispers, “I hate, I love,” and we

cannot silence him. Indeed, it is precisely because we hate and we love that our relation with the poets and novelists is so intimate that we find the presence of another person intolerable. And even if the results are abhorrent and our judgments are wrong, still our taste, the nerve of sensation that sends shocks through us, is our chief illuminant; we learn through feeling; we cannot suppress our own idiosyncrasy without impoverishing it.³

The demon who whispers to us, I hate and I love, is the guardian (or fallen) angel who prevents our total imaginative surrender to the spell of the author. Writing, we might say, is a spell worked by the figure of the author. The demon of reading works a counterenchantment, beguiling us with a *figment* of the author, a figment that originates in our own mind and whose existence is registered by the many excitations, some minimal, some thrilling in their force, that we feel along the “nerve of sensation” that is most exposed when we read.

Along this nerve, I suspect, pass those sensations that constitute what Roland Barthes identified—and heralded—as the pleasures of the text. Notable among the pleasures Barthes recommended (and seemed to enjoy) was “the amicable return of the author.” Of course, Barthes was careful to explain that

the author who returns is not the one identified by our institutions (history and courses in literature, philosophy and church discourse); he is not even the biographical hero. The author who leaves his text and comes into our life has no unity; he is a mere plural of “charms,” the site of a few tenuous details, the source of vivid novelistic glimmerings,

a discontinuous chant of amiabilities, in which we nevertheless read death more certainly than in the epic of fate; he is not a (civil, moral) person, he is a body.⁴

I am interested, like Barthes, in the author who leaves his text and comes into our life. I share Barthes's view that this author has no unity but appears to us as a plural and often discontinuous being. But I do not agree with Barthes's determination that the author is not an imaginable person. The author who returns *is* more than a body, if less than a civil, moral person. To put it somewhat differently, the body of the author who comes into our life is a figment with distinguishing features and characteristics that produce in our mind's eye that mirage called personality. The author is a plural being, then, but her plurality is not exhausted by her charms or amiabilities; it extends to her ability to imagine herself not as a single person, but as many persons; not as one body, but as anybody, somebody, even nobody (whose official and ennobled form Woolf recognized under the name of Anon, the nameless poet who sings our common lot).

What follows is an experiment in critical biography that takes as its subject a literary personality, Virginia Woolf, who exists only intermittently in the pages of her writing. Because it is a *critical* biography, this book will not satisfy a reader who might be curious about the kind of person Virginia Woolf really was. I do not talk about her private feelings for her family or her friends or her enemies, sift through details of her sexual life, such as it was, or speculate on the sources and nature of her periodic madness. Those questions are addressed in traditional biography, of which Hermione Lee's *Virginia Woolf* is the most complete as well as compelling version we are likely to have.⁵

What a critical biography offers is something at once less and more personally satisfying—an attempt to portray the person captured in the writing itself. The first book on Woolf, written by her friend and admiring contemporary Winifred Holtby, presented itself as a “critical memoir.”⁶ Holtby could call on what she knew of Woolf as a living person in interpreting, as she did with great subtlety, the work that was then so fresh, at times puzzling, to contemporary audiences. However “intimate” my knowledge of Woolf may seem to me at any given moment, I have no objective personal knowledge of her to communicate.

Not a critical memoir, then, but a biography. And because it is a critical and not a conventional biography, it avoids the paradox that, as Terry Eagleton has noted, plagues traditional biography. As Eagleton explains the paradox, we read biographies

to savor the shape and texture of an individual life, yet few literary forms are more predictable. Everyone has to be born and almost everyone has to be educated, oppressed by parents, plagued by siblings, and launched into the world; they then enter upon social and sexual relationships of their own, produce children and finally expire. The structure of biography is biology. For all its tribute to the individual spirit, it is our animal life than underpins it.⁷

The structure of a critical biography, on the other hand, is nonbiological; the author’s imaginative personality, not her animal life, underpins it. The subject of this biography is not the historical person who was born in 1882 and died in 1941. The subject is Virginia Woolf, the figment who exists as much in the minds of her readers as in the pages of her books. Hers is a curious kind

of existence, one dependent on readers and critics with sufficient imagination to acknowledge she is there and sufficient curiosity to wonder what she is like. That wonder is increased when we discover, which we shortly do, that a writer like Woolf possesses and communicates not a single, but a multiple personality. I do not approach this multiple personality as a pathological condition, that is, as a more public and controlled form of the madness that periodically overwhelmed her. I take what many may consider an even more perverse position: I treat her multiple or plural personalities as the highest achievement of her disciplined art.

These various personalities take on life and definition as the figment of the author that I—the reader—create in my own mind. The figment of the author is conceived in the corners of the mind where the demon of reading lurks, inviting us to play with the feelings our reading has aroused. It is a form of play Woolf would have approved, I am sure, since it was she who taught me its rules, so different from the principles I was officially taught in school. To encounter this figment, to describe and trace the apparitions it takes in the mind, is the purpose of this book.

I confess here that I did not at first realize that I was dealing with a figment of my own making until, writing the essay that now takes the title of “The Adventurer,” I began to see connections between essays written for different occasions on ostensibly different topics. Although each essay analyzed different aspects of Woolf’s writing, my remarks were determined less by a definite critical “approach” or “method” than by Woolf’s own literary personality as it appeared to me at the time. In putting these essays together, I not only brought the figment, somewhat blurred

in individual pieces, into collective and high definition: I also came to face my own “demon” who, refusing to be silenced, plagues but also enriches my life as a reader. This demon has largely been ignored by academic criticism, but it still insists on being heard, no matter how impersonal or detached we think we are while reading.

The demon of reading is the demon in us who is interested not in universal truths, but in particular personalities. Aldous Huxley was one of the moderns who, like Woolf, detected and appreciated the presence of this demon. “People will cease to be interested in unknowable absolutes,” he predicted,

but they will never lose interest in their own personalities. True, that “personality as a whole,” in whose interest the sexual impulse is to be restrained and turned into love, is strictly speaking, a mythological figure. Consisting, as we do, of a vast colony of souls—souls of individual cells, of organs, of groups of organs, hunger-souls, sex-souls, power souls, herd-souls, of those multifarious activities of which our consciousness (the Soul with a large S) is only very imperfectly and indirectly aware—we are not in position to know the real nature of our personality whole. The only thing we can do is to hazard a hypothesis to create a mythological figure, call it Human Personality, and hope that circumstances will not by destroying us, prove our imaginative guesswork too hopelessly wrong. But myth for myth, Human Personality is preferable to God. We do at least know something of Human Personality, whereas of God we know nothing and, knowing nothing, are at liberty to invent as freely as we like.⁸

Huxley and Woolf, writers of quite different talents, nevertheless share the modern view that we are not “in position to know the real nature of our personality whole.” Getting to know our personality and the personality of others is compromised, Huxley implies, by our constitutional inability to be “in position” to look at ourselves and at others straight on. We see through a glass not only darkly, but obliquely, through the slanted perspectives of hate and love and all the various grades of feeling in between. We can never peer directly into our own consciousness and see ourselves as we really are; how much less can we know of the personality of others. Yet we have the option—Woolf might even call it the opportunity—to create out of what we do know of those “multifarious activities of our consciousness” a rather genial myth of Personality.

No one took better advantage of that liberty to invent Human Personality than Woolf herself. She projected herself into the characters of her novels. She developed a new kind of narrator—anonymous, without settled opinions, apparent prejudices, or any moral truths to convey, completely at ease in flitting in and out of the minds of her characters; a narrator unafraid to react—with laughter or with alarm, tenderness or mockery—to the way her characters behave; in short, a narrator who was willing to appear inconsistent, even perplexed in her effort to deal honestly with the feelings, however mixed or changeable or difficult, that Life, at any give moment, demands. She wrote essays and tracts in which she submerged her own voice in that of an assumed identity—Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael in *A Room of One's Own*—to profess her most personal views about writing, sex, feminism, literature, and power.

This book identifies the most dominant of Woolf's various personalities and attempts to forge them into a Whole. This attempt at unification, inspired by the demon of reading, was, of course, doomed from the start. But, then, I was not in the position when I first began reading Woolf so many years ago to perceive, much less appreciate, the extent to which Woolf's writerly personality contained Multitudes. Even now, I can confidently identify and describe only five of them.