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– Introduction –

Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) wrote scintillating prose on a variety of themes, but I have chosen to focus this selection on the 'self'. So the question I should immediately answer is why? Why not choose the rights of women or the revolutions of modernity or the phases of the novel? Why start grappling with the finite and possibly illusory self? Why drag Woolf in as well? What is the self? What does it mean? Whose definition? The self of the artist, or their social self? The self of the individual coerced by ordinance, the self behind the mask? Yet where does mask end and self begin? One self, or an inestimable quantity? Shifting, or indivisible?

The essays in this collection are, of course, not merely concerned with the self. Woolf does also discuss the rights of women, the revolutions of modernity, the past, present and future of the novel. She is eloquent on social inequality and the agony of war. She is a robust literary antiquarian, she rakes through the past in search of treasure. She is transfixed, as well, by the aesthetic contests of the present, the dynamic incompleteness of her era. She fights with local demons, she mocks those who mock her, and generally prevails.

The essays I have chosen were written between 1919 when Woolf was 37 and 1940 when she was 58. During this time, Woolf changed, many times over, her opinions changed, her circumstances too; she was not a fixed entity, reiterating a rigid and immaculate position each time she picked up her pen.

Yet, in answer to my self-imposed question: the question of the self is central, in some way, to every essay in this collection. Woolf is transfixed by the nature of the finite self ('Who am I?' 'Who is everybody else?') and how individual experience might be discerned and relayed. This individual self is anyone, everyone, and yet each self is utterly distinct. Each self exists once on earth, in one moment of collision with everything around – Reality, Society, the beauty, ecstasy and tragedy of ordinary life. Each one of us speaks of 'myself' and 'yourself', distinguishing the lone self from a bewildering array of other selves. Yet, as Woolf acknowledges, this is also the enterprise of any writer: to discern the self in a crowded room, to isolate a single vantage point, to communicate this vantage point to others. How to express the perceptions of this self, in received language, within the baggy old conventions of the novel, and yet without sacrificing any trace of authenticity or personal realism? – this is the dilemma of any writer who is not enslaved by choice or compulsion to an overarching ideology. The originality of the self is the one certain route to originality in art; the self, undisguised and unbridled, is inevitably distinctive.

Yet 'the self', the belief in a composite entity to which we might attach this term, is a kind of ideology, as Woolf also realises. Seventy years after Woolf's death, this notion of the Self has been incorporated into a quasi-religion of the predominantly secular West. Though the immortal self has faded into the shadows, the physical self is enhanced and perfected through exercise and dieting; the inner self (with continuing Cartesianism) by psychoanalysis. The self is venerated in 'selfies' and 'self-help'; in the professional self-revealing of celebrity selves. The Herculean battles of this self are fodder for books, films, twitter feeds and blogs. The Internet is full of the cries of competing selves. Express/promote yourself, runs the mantra. And in the last two decades we have come to know a new version of the self: the incorporeal cyber-self, the self of the virtual realm, which moves freely through the great expansion into nowhere. Meanwhile, some of our contemporary sciences, neuroscience preeminent among them, seek to understand the self in terms of bodily 'matter', to map the boundaries of the self with fMRI scans of the brain. Thus develops an intriguing dissonance, in which the self is even, at times, dismissed as nothing more than a sad illusion of the brain. This theory of the self as self-deluding non-self is intrinsically self-annihilating: if the self is an illusion then the conclusions of this self are also an illusion, so the conclusions of the illusory self that it is an illusion, must themselves be an illusion. 'Orts, scraps and fragments,'

as Woolf wrote in *Between the Acts*, her final novel.

When Woolf was writing these essays, the self was undergoing particular analysis and redefinition. 'God is dead,' Nietzsche cried, and the eternal self languished as well. Not everyone was a devout Nietzschean, of course. Earlier, Descartes had readjusted the Christian self, refashioning the old relationship of soul-body as the Cartesian mind-body dialectic. With the Freudian self, the binaries of Cartesianism or Christianity are adjusted again and the self becomes a conscious and unconscious entity, afflicted by sublimated impulses and traumas. Jung proposed a combined Ur-self, the collective unconscious, a shared transtemporal intimation of reality. The modernists are now famous for their preoccupation with the waking dream of the self, expressed in prose as a 'stream of consciousness' – a free-flow of often surprisingly lucid phrases, to represent the fleeting thoughts of the self. Knut Hamsun, Anton Chekhov, Marcel Proust, Robert Musil, James Joyce, Katherine Mansfield, D. H. Lawrence, T. S. Eliot and Woolf turned inwards, to the inner self; they lifted the social mask of their characters, or imagined they might.

For Woolf, and for novelists in general, and for humans in general, the subjective self is a mystery that cannot be solved by the subjective self. To embark on such analysis is to recede perpetually – the self, viewing the self, viewing the self – to be afflicted by the grammar of madness. Yet, if the self is an illusion, it

is an illusion experienced by each one of us, and is, therefore, an ironic empirical reality, if only to the experiencing individual. With this in mind, Woolf sets herself against a particular theory of reality, which she calls 'materialism,' and which she associates with the generation above her and the century behind her. In the opening essay, 'Modern Fiction', Woolf explains that something is not right. The writer is

> . . . constrained . . . by some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant who has him in thrall, to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest . . . The tyrant is obeyed; the novel is done to a turn . . . Is life like this? Must novels be like this?

No! cries Woolf. She calls for the writer to be 'a free man and not a slave . . . [to] base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention'. In a 1924 essay, 'Character in Fiction', Woolf mocks the confident creation of taxonomies: 'On or about December 1910 human character changed.' This is a provocation, but she wants to distinguish her enterprise from pseudo-objectivism in general, the belief that there is one all-encompassing reality which may be agreed upon by collective observation of the material world. The mere accretion of physical detail can no longer adequately set a scene or explain a character, she adds. The self, with all its vivid yet intangible impressions, is the only reality she cares to consider. At the time, the novelist Arnold Bennett (1867-1931) had recently proposed

that the younger novelists could not create 'real' characters. 'I ask myself,' Woolf writes, 'what is reality? And who are the judges of reality? A character may be real to Mr Bennett and quite unreal to me.' Bennett and his peers have

> developed a technique of novel-writing which suits their purpose; they have made tools and established conventions which do their business. But those tools are not our tools, and that business is not our business. For us those conventions are ruin, those tools are death.

Woolf's generation of authors, she adds, must find new protocols, to express the experiential reality of the self. 'Character in Fiction' ends with a passionate appeal to the reader, to support this sketchy, half-formed enterprise, to understand it:

> In the course of your daily life this past week you . . . have overheard scraps of talk that filled you with amazement. You have gone to bed at night bewildered by the complexity of your feelings. In one day thousands of ideas have coursed through your brains; thousands of emotions have met, collided, and disappeared in astonishing disorder. Nevertheless, you allow the writers to palm off upon you a version of all this . . . which has no likeness to that surprising apparition whatsoever . . .

Authors must communicate the true experience of the self; they must not 'palm' readers off with fainting mendacious pseudo-realities which only exist in novels.