



Journal of International Women's Studies

Volume 18 | Issue 2

Article 21

Jan-2017

Book Review: *Virginia Woolf: Essays on the Self*

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Recommended Citation

Sánchez Cuervo, Margarita Esther (2017). Book Review: *Virginia Woolf: Essays on the Self*. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 18(2), 280-283.

Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol18/iss2/21>

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Virginia Woolf: Essays on the Self, Joanna Kavenna, 2014. Notting Hill Editions: London. 187 pages. Woolf's picture and Biography, Index, Kavenna's Introduction, Notes included. £14.99, hardcover.

Reviewed by:
Margarita Esther Sánchez Cuervo¹

Virginia Woolf: Essays on the Self, by Joanna Kavenna, is the last printed collection of Virginia Woolf's essays. On this occasion, the theme of the book is the self which, as her author states in the introduction, "is central, in some way, to every essay" that she has selected. Virginia Woolf's essays have been compiled both during her lifetime and more or less continuously after her death. She was witness to the publication of *The Common Reader. First Series* (1925), and *The Common Reader. Second Series* (1932) by the Hogarth Press. Several posthumous books of essays were compiled by Woolf's husband, Leonard Woolf, also by the Hogarth Press. They were *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (1942), *The Moment and Other Essays* (1947), *The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays* (1950), and *Granite and Rainbow* (1958). Her husband is also responsible for the publication of *Collected Essays, 4 Volumes* (1966-67). Subsequent publications of Woolf's essays have been made, bearing in mind several topics for which she is more well-known, like literature, feminism and women's writing. In this line, collections like *On Women and Writing* (1979), edited by Michelle Barrett; *Selected Essays: Woman's Essays* (1992), and *Selected Essays: The Crowded Dance of Modern Life* (1993), edited by Rachel Bowlby; and *Killing the Angel in the House: Seven Essays* (1995), edited by Penguin Books, reflect these concerns. In a different vein, the book *The London Scene: Six Essays on London Life* (2006), shows Woolf's love for London; and *Selected Essays* (Oxford's World Classics) (2009), edited by David Bradshaw, is just another sample of some of her most famous texts. In addition to all these titles, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf. VI Volumes* (1987-2011), comprises all the essays that Woolf wrote from 1904 until she died in 1941. This final edition by Andrew McNeillie, who is responsible for the first four volumes, and Stuart Clarke, the editor of volumes 5 and 6, includes texts that had never been in book form before.

In *Essays on the Self*, Kavenna opposes our current interest in the self with Woolf's and other Modernist writers' preoccupation with the subjective self. With this topic in mind, Kavenna chooses a more or less known group of essays. For example, one of Woolf's visions of the self is analysed in "Modern Fiction," the famous essay that reflects her ideas about modernist literature and the dichotomy that she introduces between spiritualist and materialist writers. Woolf blames the method that is used in the creative practice of her time and that impedes writers their inner wish to venture beyond "life" and into "the dark places of psychology." Kavenna then focuses on

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another equally well-known essay, “Character in Fiction.” This text was first read to the Cambridge Heretics in 1924 and on 30 October 1924 it was published by the Hogarth Press as we know it today, “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown”. Likewise, the author of the collection equals the subjective quality that is absent in materialist writers with the self that allows a novelist to create real characters. With this purpose, she considers that male and female novelists try to reflect convincing characters such as those devised by Arnold Bennett. In this author’s opinion, only “real” characters may survive, but these characters do not represent, in Woolf’s opinion, “the spirit we live by, life itself.” Kavenna links the writer’s attempt to show the self with the reader’s subsequent effort to pursue it and “become him,” that is, the writer himself, in “How Should One Read a Book.” Likewise, in “A Letter to a Young Poet,” Woolf states that bad poetry is “the result of forgetting oneself.” However, poets must also write about other people when they have finished writing about self, or so she recommends to the young poet to whom she writes to in this essay.

A second group of essays is intent on a series of authors who, according to the author of the compilation, follow “the selective vision of the finite self” as it usually occurs with poets. One of these texts is on Coleridge, in the essay entitled “The Man at the Gate.” Woolf wonders in the last part of the essay whether the great poet “filled a very few pages with poems in which every word is exact and every image as clear as crystal.” Could this be proof of a true display of self? In the same line, Kavenna introduces the essay devoted to his daughter, “Sara Coleridge,” who is presented as continuation of his father. As the main proof-reader and editor of her father’s work, “she found that he was herself,” and that “she was him.” Another essay reviews the essayist William Hazlitt’s work. Kavenna affirms that “his essays are emphatically himself” because he tells us accurately what he thinks and what he feels. Finally, in the essay “The Humane Art”, about the letter writer Horace Walpole, it is worth mentioning Woolf’s justification for Walpole’s immortality: “For a self that goes on changing is a self that goes on living.” Kavenna’s words in the introduction of her book also echo this idea of Walpole speaking “not to the public at large but to the individual in private,” thus stressing that “he speaks as himself, he has no reason to do anything else.”

A celebrated essay which portrays some feminist issues is “Professions for Women”, in which Woolf argues that part of the occupation of the woman writer of her time was to kill the Angel in the House that tried to impede women’s artistic talent so as to lead them to more domestic pleasures. In the text, Kavenna says that “the selves of women were bound by a particular array of stymieing conventions, applied with reference only to their sex.” Indeed, Woolf refers to the Angel as a pernicious creature that must be destroyed because it “would have plucked the heart out” of her writing; in that sense, the Angel did entail the destruction of the essayist’s self that needed “a mind of [her] own” for expressing what she esteems to be “the truth about human relations, morality, sex.” “Professions for Women” serves as preamble for a last group of essays that is related with Woolf’s preoccupation with “traditions of power.” According to Kavenna, this concern oppresses women in texts like “Thoughts of Peace in an Air Raid,” wherein Woolf refers to women as “slaves who are trying to enslave.” In these texts, Woolf’s self is said to split into “warring fractions” as in “Evening over Sussex,” where the essayist makes reference to “an erratic and impulsive self” and a further conjunction of selves that must collect themselves; or in “The Sun and the Fish,” which shows her ponderings on the subject of an eclipse of the sun that befell in 1927. The book finishes with a brief extract from Woolf’s diary where Kavenna focuses on the artist’s utterance “I am I” as justification of her living and writing, thus trying to reinforce the emphasis on the self.

This being said, this collection of essays does not add anything new to Woolf's vast non-fiction corpus. Kavenna's uncovering of the self in Woolf's essays does not include other meaningful references like the one appearing in "A Terribly Sensitive Mind," the poignant review of Katherine Mansfield's diary that Woolf dedicated to her friend after her death. In her comment of Mansfield's work, the essayist remarks, for instance, that "the diary is so private and so instinctive that it allows another self to break off from their self that writes and to stand a little apart watching it write. The writing self was a queer self; sometimes nothing would induce it to write."

Whoever reads this series of essays hoping to find Woolf's elucidation of self will encounter instead a somewhat arbitrary selection of texts dealing with women's hard situation in the Victorian period, some of her influential ideas about modernist literature, the artist's supposedly true character and some more or less known reviews of some authors and their work. All in all, the awareness of self might not be present in readers' mind after reading these essays.

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