

Introduction

*When their last house in London is bombed in the war . . . [Virginia Woolf] makes sure, first, of the twenty-four volumes of diaries.*¹

From her first tiny diary, written at age fourteen, Virginia Woolf personifies her diary as a living, breathing *life*. This explains her urgent rescue of her diary books from the rubble in 1940. It adds poignancy to her moves to upgrade her diaries in the last years of her life. The third and final stage of Woolf's diary life, from mid-1929 to her suicide in March 1941, shows the diary's late bloom. At the same time, we see there unfold—more clearly than any biographer has yet shown—her artistic *inner wars* as they interact with the ever-nearing *war without*.

By 1929, Woolf has become an established and famous writer; at age forty-seven, the author of books widely read and admired. But she is the author of another kind of book, as well: semiprivate diaries, which mark a writer's progress in years and skill, a very rare sort of book indeed. Woolf's diary first reached the public (tantalizingly abridged) in 1953. It belongs, all agree, among the world's great diaries. Diary scholar Anna Jackson even suggests that Woolf may be "the Shakespeare of the diary genre" (151). Woolf's nephew and biographer, Quentin Bell, calls her diary "a literary achievement equal to though very different from *The Waves* or *To the Lighthouse*, having the same accurate beauty of writing but also an immediacy such as one finds only in diaries" (*D* 1: xiii). Biographer Alexandra Harris writes of the "glittering and moving diaries" that offer "one of the most intricate records of a life ever made" (7, 151). These diary books, shared with only a few, are also the door to Woolf's public fiction and nonfiction.

In writing of the *three* stages of Woolf's diary career, I seek to counter the view—fostered by the six published diary volumes—that her diary-writing

breaks into two neat phases: her “apprentice” early diaries, from 1897 to 1909 (published in 1990 as *A Passionate Apprentice*), and her later diaries, from 1915 to 1941 (edited by Anne Olivier Bell and published in five volumes under the title *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*). Close reading of the thirty-eight diary books themselves reveals that Woolf’s diary-keeping evolves in three stages.

Woolf’s experimental first stage, from 1897 to mid-1918, covers her first thirteen diary books.² It begins when Woolf is fourteen and ends in her thirty-sixth year. The early diaries differ vastly from each other—a noteworthy fact in itself. Woolf tries out travel diaries, a natural history diary, journals with titled entries (and tables of contents), and even an occasional life diary. Here is fascinating *diary experiment*: these early diaries show how the young girl becomes the extraordinary public writer Virginia Woolf.

A crisis in November 1918, involving female support, propels Woolf toward a new audience and purpose for her diary and, with it, the start of her second diary stage: her mature, lean, modernist diaries of 1919–1929.³ Woolf creates “Old Virginia” and begins to mother herself.

The unexpected recurs in June 1929. Suddenly, halfway through the year, Woolf abandons her two-and-a-half-year experiment with a loose-leaf diary (meant to catch more “stray” or “loose” thoughts) and starts a new diary in a bound diary book. She says she does this to save her diary’s life. She seeks now the greater solidity and permanency of a bound diary book as she begins her “attack” on her most difficult work to date: *The Waves*. French diary theorist Philippe Lejeune calls diaries “life insurance” (189). Woolf now turns to a bound diary book for support, as if she senses danger ahead.

Her final diary stage, from 1929 to 1941, is distinguished by three traits. Most obviously, she increases her *number of entries per year* from that in her second, lean, modernist diary stage. Thirteen diary books cover that second stage (July 1918 through June 1929), with an average of forty entries per year. In the 1920s, Woolf pares the *periodic diary* about as far as it can go and still convey a life. Twelve diary books unfold across Woolf’s third diary stage. However, she now averages almost eighty-four entries per year—more than double the number of annual entries in the 1920s.

She also turns to more *morning* diary-writing than before. In 1919, diary-keeping fit nicely into Woolf’s “casual half hours after tea” (*D* 1: 266). In the 1930s, the diary becomes increasingly a morning prop, as well. A battle plays out across Woolf’s diaries: her fierce fight for freedom. As Woolf becomes caught in extended revision in the 1930s—of *The Waves* and, particularly, of

The Years and Roger Fry: *A Biography*—the diary becomes a welcome new and “free page.” There, she can fly free. She uses her diary as a morning prop but also as a bridge from (and to register) her inner artistic fights.

Woolf turns more often to her diary in her final diary stage, and she also turns more to *other diaries* than she does in her first two stages. She seems to need diaries more in her final years. Woolf was better read in Western diaries than any well-known diarist before her—and likely even since.⁴ She gravitated to diaries, I believe, to hear the natural human voice. This voice became more and more vital to her in the growing blare and welter of war. For Woolf, diaries represented not only *life* and its natural human voice but also life regularly renewed—in fact, life beyond death. The following pages will show how nineteen diaries, written by others, aided Woolf’s battles without and within and also that certain diaries, most unluckily, undermined her in her final years.

I hope also to add to the growing trend that sees Woolf’s whole body of work across the 1930s, to her death in 1941, as one interrelated, yet multiform, foray against tyranny and war.⁵ Woolf herself gave first impetus to this view in her repeated insistence in her diary that her 1931 public lecture “Professions for Women,” her novel *The Years* (1937), and her nonfiction antiwar volume *Three Guineas* (1938) were all part of the same work. The following pages will show that Woolf’s *diary* also played a key role in her magnum fight against war.

I hope these pages will also contribute to the current reassessment not only of Woolf’s own writing arc but also of the literary significance of the 1930s. For decades, as Valentine Cunningham notes, a “knee-jerk division” has been made between Modernism and the 1930s that “denies anything written in the 1930s ‘the highest literary merit’” (Joannou 195). This tack, of course, ignores the fact that *The Waves* was published in 1931. One doesn’t need to lower one’s view of Woolf’s 1920s modernist classics to recognize that she may have been on to something beyond in the 1930s, a larger project. “Oh yes, between 50 & 60 I think I shall write out some very singular books, if I live,” Woolf tells her diary in 1931. “I mean I think I am about to embody, at last, the exact shapes my brain holds” (*D* 4: 53). As we begin to see Woolf’s 1930s books—including her 1929–1941 diary books—as one huge, multiform, battle against the advancing war, we must re-figure our sense of her final years and may reach a new assessment of the 1930s’ literary strength.⁶

In the following pages, I trace Woolf’s movement as a diarist across her

final stage—something never as yet attempted in depth. I offer close readings of each of Woolf's twelve final diary books, treating each (1) as a work of art itself; (2) as it relates to her other diaries; and (3) as it intersects with her public works (letters and published essays, reviews, fiction, and nonfiction). This method lays bare Woolf's final development as a *diarist* and—an extra dividend—as a public writer, as well. Close study of Woolf's diaries also allows me to offer a new reading of her suicide, a reading based on her diaries.