READ, RE-READ, AND UN-READ

VIRGINIA WOOLF’S CRITICAL PERSONA AND THE BIRTH OF FORM IN THE NOVEL

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Criticism can never be a science: it is, in the first place, much too personal, and in the second, it is concerned with values that science ignores. The touchstone is emotion, not reason…. All the critical twiddle-twaddle about style and form, all this pseudoscientific classifying… is mere impertinence and mostly dull jargon.

– D.H. Lawrence in an essay (1928)

I am made and remade continually. Different people draw different words from me.

– Virginia Woolf in her novel, The Waves (1931)
INTRODUCTION

Where do we find Virginia Woolf seated today? Her room is cluttered with books, journals, plays, and manifestos, all claiming to reflect a particular aspect of her life, literature, or legacy. Sometimes it seems like there is nothing more to say—or, at least, nothing more which needs to be said. Where could we possibly go looking for her now?

It is easy to see why over the past century or so Woolf has become a weathered fixture of English departments: her ideas on gender were radical, and her novels still make for profoundly enjoyable lectures and discussion; as the preeminent female modernist, Woolf’s books stay on syllabi, while her elitism and British snobbery keep critics on their toes. Regardless, both past and current narratives are as much inclined to draw words from Woolf, as they are Woolf from Woolf—that is, to remodel the person, definitely and incontestably. The difference, which Woolf understood well, tends to escape some of her commentators.

In the following chapters, I hope to honor the writings of this figure from history. I throw one more leaflet onto the already-paper-covered floor of her room, aware it will be no different from the rest except in its intent: to beckon in the literary theorists, who have long failed to view Woolf as one of their own. I am unsure if in my arguments I abide more by Woolf’s wishes or her words. I do not think she would welcome the label “theorist” but I use it uncomfortably and only because there is nothing better to describe her in connection to the unique and uncategorizable mode of writing I soon explore.

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Virginia Woolf is undoubtedly one of the great modern novelists. Yet it is possible that if she were writing today, Woolf would primarily be recognized as a critic (a celebrity staff writer of the New Yorker or Atlantic’s print edition perhaps), her thumb to the pulse of the literary and cultural phenomena of the day. Instead, Woolf’s contributions to criticism—how she challenged, personalized, and reimagined the genre of the literary essay—have largely been treated as supplemental to an analysis of her novels or as ammunition in a broader debate over the biographical and cultural context of her work. But in my view,
her essays teem with critical revelations which have been overlooked in the wake of her almost larger-than-life persona throughout the 20th and 21st century. Thus in this paper, I search Woolf’s essays for a methodology that others may have overlooked. I do this not with the intent of making Woolf into a highbrow Theorist of the novel, but rather into a humble theorist of the reader. I believe it would be inadequate to designate Woolf simply a critic, for a deeper look into the words and wisdom of her essays reveal a more ardent portrait. One which displays a writer animated by the chief literary questions of her day—namely those related to the nature of formalist thought and the origins of literary theory at the start of the 20th century.

As rendered in A Room Of One’s Own and other lectures and essays, Woolf (though well-educated) existed outside university circles and the fraternity of academics. This peripheral stance, coupled with the historical lack of canonized female voices in theory, means the writer’s contributions to the birth of theoretical discourse in England largely go unnoticed. Woolf is a compelling figure at this time though, for she both weighs in on the importance of the novel as a distinguished art form and engages with the then-embryonic field of theory without proposing to be a kind of specialist in this sphere of influence. She does not identify as a “theorist” herself, yet she gravitates towards the discipline’s most pressing debates.

We must keep in mind that in Woolf’s essays, she confronts criticism and theory as a delightfully curious onlooker, a cherisher of character, and as an advocate of a vivacious style of reading. These imaginative lenses afford her a unique awareness of the boundaries between art and artist; meaning and interpretation; form and function. Thus, in unlocking the proto-theoretical potential in Woolf’s work, we can reinvent the writer as one of the most veracious proponents of a rapport between critical and creative lenses. This dialogue in Woolf moreover emerges out of a life-long endeavor: to discover how one crafts a story that is alive to all parties—writer, character, and reader alike.

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A formalist tradition: Over the following chapters, I study the emergence of formalist thought in relation to Woolf’s critical canon. Her essays—though more creatively analytical than theoretical in their
approach—have a great deal to say about the implication of “form” in the novel. “Form” is an infamously vague word, one which Woolf first encounters while reviewing contemporaneous works of literary criticism.¹ The term, as I will soon discuss, is a central facet of many early theoretical thinkers’ conceptualizations of the novel. But even today, it is largely undefinable. And while Woolf poses no concrete solution, I hope to suggest that her insistent probing of “form” broadens our approach to literature, namely because the ideas ignited out of this tension prompts a radical intermingling of theory and storytelling. Established scholarship in theory developed at a time when the novel itself was becoming a preeminent mode of art, and broadly speaking, my argument revolves around this trinity of concurrences: the development of the novel, the debut of formalism, and the dynamics between author, text, and reader as expressed in Woolf’s critical canon. Overall, I carefully explore Woolf’s essays with the intent of repositioning the writer within a formalist (rather than modernist or feminist) tradition. I hope to do so crucially without imposing the theoretical limitations Woolf so opposes onto her own art. After all, this protoformalist lens may help reconcile the seemingly contradictory inclinations toward excitement or analysis within the reading (and re-reading) process.

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_Her Essays:_ Four years before asking friend Clive Bell to read over a draft of her first novel, _The Voyage Out_ (1915), Virginia Woolf wrote her first article, published in 1904, for a clerical women’s weekly titled _The Guardian_. A few months later, she was introduced to Bruce Richmond who had just become the editor of the _Times Literary Supplement (TLS)_ , a then-eight-page literary appendage to _The Times of London_.² Woolf at the age of twenty-two was asked to join the magazine, and soon began composing 1,500-word essays to be published in their print edition. She reviewed everything from guidebooks, to Thackeray’s novels, to “Professions for Women” while on the magazine’s payroll. Thus, we can trace the formation and fortification of Woolf’s critical voice by gauging her reactions to a range of novels and authors throughout her lifetime.

¹ Notably E.M. Forster’s _Aspects of the Novel_ and Percy Lubbock’s _A Craft of Fiction_; both of which I will discuss.  
By November 1905, Woolf had joined the ranks of Richmond’s most prized reviewers (which included T.S. Eliot, Henry James, and Edith Warton). She sometimes found the work disheartening—“[TLS] sends me one novel every week; which has to be read on Sunday, written on Monday, and printed on Friday. In America, as you know, they make sausage like that” (Wade 16), yet as much as she lamented about the routine, her excitement for criticism could not be contained. Even after becoming a successful novelist, Woolf never gave up essay-writing. The magazines and journals where her reviews were published (Woolf wrote for a variety of publications alongside TLS) had the benefit of being disseminated and consumed quickly, thus reaching a more expansive audience. Woolf, for all her life, felt a deep rooted allegiance to the readers of her work, imaging them as “busy people catching trains in the morning or…tired people coming home in the evening.” While we could fault Woolf for perhaps assuming a slightly pejorative tone, we must remember that her regard for the everyday reader was genuine. Over and over again, we see this figure placed at the forefront of her critical attentions, and this pattern certainly sets Woolf apart from many of her (male) contemporaries. After all, she saw the everyday reader as similar to herself—equally invested in, and enlivened by, the quest to uncover the nature of this new art form, the novel: “Obviously, there must be a process,” Woolf muses in a 1922 essay; “and it is at work always and in every novel.”

When we stop to ponder Woolf’s musings on literature (the respective reality/irreality of a novel, the universality of form, the role of the novelist etc…), we have stumbled upon a vast realm of critical reconnaissance which the writer dedicated much of her life to deciphering. Many of her essays confront these kinds of questions head on—“How should one read a Book?,” “The Modern Essay,” “The Art of Fiction,” “The Anatomy of Fiction,” “Craftsmanship,” “An Essay in Criticism.” The titles speak for themselves, while others begin with a specific author (“George Eliot,” “John Evelyn,” “Montaigne”) and branch out from there. Regardless, the sheer quantity, quality, and depth of her prose reflects a broader

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trend in the author’s literary career, one which suggests that this rich profusion of inquiry was innate to her persona as a writer and thinker of the early 20th century.
BACKGROUND

Woolf is well-revered for her influence on contemporary culture, politics, feminism, queer studies, and fiction writing. Though her stature as a novelist—in tandem with her very public life and death—has, as I suggest, deflected scholarly attention away from her contributions to the fields of protoformalist thought. “Formalism,” a generally vague and opaque word used to categorize the first movement in literary theory, arose at a time when Woolf was just beginning her inquiry into the nature of the novel. Woolf was prohibited from studying at the University of Cambridge because she was a woman, yet it was there that formalist thought first budded and blossomed in Britain. Woolf maintained what ties she could to the University, giving lectures at Girton College and exploring the libraries available to her. In 1929, the same year *A Room of One’s Own* was first printed, a Professor at Cambridge named I.A. Richards published *Practical Criticism*. The book presented an analysis of the experiments Richards had conducted among his pupils, its objective being to encourage literature students to dissect meaning from words on the page, rather than rely on some preconceived authoritative knowledge of a book or poem.

Originally a Pavlovian psychologist, Richards was well-versed in the power of observation, methodization, and experimentation—all of which he would then apply to the close-reading of a text. His efforts helped place literary studies “on a sound disciplinary footing” through an appeal to his scientific background; after making the transition to the English Department, Richards set out to produce one of the “most systematic defence[s] of poetry to be found in the English language.”

Contemporary critic Terry Eagleton (best known for his 1983 work, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*) deems Richards one of the earliest examples of “what we would call today a literary theorist” (Eagleton 87), namely because of the empirical methodology he applied to literature. Where the old, 19th century English critic would inquire into the value of a poem, a theorist like Richards “wants to know what we mean by a poem in the first place, and by what criteria we judge its success.”

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6 Eagleton, *Critical Revolutionaries*, 82.
half a century, theory dominated the literary scene inside academia, and regardless of its various iterations and movements (i.e., formalism, structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, new historicism etc...), it continues to garner much of its appeal through its refusal to “just admire” language. Theorists, after all, taught us how to “put some pressure on the words [we]’ve chosen.”

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From the array of essays I will soon draw from, it becomes clear that, no matter how much she enjoyed espousing her own opinions on the novel, she constantly reminds her readers (and herself) of the elusiveness and inadequacy of prescribing an objective methodology to fiction. “Far be it from us to hazard any theory as to the nature of art,” she wrote in an essay for TLS titled, “Hours in the Library;” all we can be certain of is “that all our pleasures those we got from the great artists are indisputably among the best; and more we may not know.”8 This is all to say that before we go digging for the proto-theoretical discourse buried in Woolf’s prose, we must keep in mind that these essays were initially and intentionally published as pieces of literary criticism. This may seem like an obvious point to make, but the relationship between “theory” and “criticism” is as convoluted for Woolf as it is relevant to a discussion of her rhetoric. It is a distinction the author herself did not probe, yet we can still discern some important attributes before going forward.

To get the most out of Woolf’s proto-theoretical musings, we must remember that theory, unlike criticism, is not necessarily concerned with practical application—it tends to speculate beyond issues of evaluation or judgment, touching on the nature or capacity of judgment itself. The 8th edition of A Handbook to Literature cites that “theory” has come to signify “a complex of literary, aesthetic, and cultural theory” (reusing the defined word in the definition), where “theoretical criticism” attempts to arrive at inclusive aesthetic tenets, all the while “operat[ing] at a high level of abstraction.”9 Confusing as

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it all is, I note these more “official” definitions so that we see in regards to language and style, it is decidedly unproductive to try and flush out where along the gradient of criticism a piece crosses into the threshold of theory.

So rather than concerning ourselves with specific labels, it helps to study the areas in which Richards and Woolf converge and diverge. While Richards performs pseudo-scientific studies on his students (and then mechanizes his findings—through coarse, dull language—into scholarship), Woolf writes outwards to her readers, asking for imaginative participation only. Instead of exposing literature’s pleasurable and emotional capacities in a formal dialect (like Richards), Woolf is invested in the pleasure and emotional engagement actively produced while studying and reading about literature. She still, like her Cambridge contemporaries, expounded general thoughts about the nature of judgment, form, and reader response, yet she moves away from formulating these observations out of concrete, replicative experiment and technique.

Thus, application and accessibility become key to understanding why Woolf’s writing is not conventionally “theoretical.” As the comparison between Richards and Woolf suggests, the inaccessibility of theory stems from its tendency to resonate among academics, or those with a high level of education. If we are to listen to Woolf and “identify ourselves with the reader and explore his dilemma first,”10 then criticism becomes the more inclusive enterprise. Thus, the intended audience (and by extension, association to the university) is the best mechanism to highlight the most glaring discrepancies between theory and criticism. Crucially though, Woolf’s writing challenges this binary. This is why we must reassess her criticism as theoretically-inclined, for it helps us move beyond a difference in discourse barricaded by “complex” structures and “abstract” language.

In the context of Woolf’s essays, the similarities between theory and criticism prove most integral. Both disciplines ask us to ponder: what is literature? We may approach this question through an evaluation of the causes of literature (i.e., language, the human psyche, and/or social, economic, and

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cultural forces), and we can also study its effects—how and why we continue to read. Woolf certainly deals with both. This leads us to speculate how the author proleptically pushes against the binary between criticism and theory, which was soon established with theory’s admission into academic and pedagogical institutions.

After an extensive study of her criticism, we notice that she touches upon many of the major themes and debates of both past and current theory. Thus turning back to her work allows us to move beyond the impasses of theory today, namely because she wrote at a moment (and in a manner) of openness and more literary fluidity and uncertainty. Moreover, Woolf’s vast archives also reveal a kind of prophetic anticipation of later questions in narratology and reader response theory. We must inspect these facets of her criticism in order to garner a more complete picture of the writer herself. This lens moreover paints a more comprehensive understanding of the legacy and nature of formalist thought, and by extension, the legacy of literary theory today.

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Chapter 1 introduces us to the twentieth century critic and writer Percy Lubbock, who (like his brief Wikipedia page suggests) is not given much attention in historical accounts of the inception of literary theory. But in order to honorably excavate Woolf’s relationship to form, Lubbock’s seminal piece of criticism/protoformalist thought, The Craft of Fiction (1921), is a necessary starting point.

Chapter 2 orbits around a specific essay of Woolf’s titled, “On Re-Reading Novels” (1922) where she sustains her most articulate attack on Lubbock’s polemic. Here I suggest that in her essay, Woolf positions The Craft of Fiction as a kind of theoretical springboard—bouncing off ideas about the role of the reader, the ingenuity of the novelist, and (most crucially) the relationship between form and fiction. Even though this essay is not viewed as part of any formal theoretical dialogue, I argue that the field would greatly benefit from the kind of expertise Woolf expounds here.

Many of Woolf’s essays straddle the boundary between criticism and theory. In Chapter 3, I investigate how our findings in “On Re-Reading Novels” translate to her other essays. Moreover, I foreground Woolf’s proto-theoretical ideology by embedding it into current debates on the state of
criticism and legacy of theory. To do this, I analyze Terry Eagleton’s recent publication, *Critical Revolutionaries: Five Critics Who Changed the Way We Read* published May 2022. In the book, Eagleton surveys five figures of the early to mid-twentieth century who, as he claims, radically reshaped traditional literary scholarship into something which was no longer isolated from society at large. Woolf is not included in Eagleton’s chosen five, and I provide an argument as to why she is just as “critically revolutionary” as the rest.
READ
Bearing form to fiction: Artistic precedent and theoretical transformation

Percy Lubbock: On the fringes of formalism

“It is trickier to say what form is when you move it from visual art into the realm of the novel. Is form akin to plot, for it constrains and organizes the characters? Or are the characters themselves the form, as they contain the thoughts, feelings, and morals of the story?”11 This is how one of the definitive reference books on literature begins its discussion of form. With more questions than answers, the nature of form remains as elusive today as it did when Percy Lubbock took up the term almost a century before. But who is Percy Lubbock? Born 1879 in Norfolk, England, Lubbock became, throughout the early half of the 20th century, a marginally noted essayist, critic and biographer. He was a good friend of Henry James and edited the writer’s letters after his death. Like Woolf, he worked as a critic for TLS. He also wrote a book titled The Craft of Fiction (1921), one of the first major works of literary criticism to study the novel as a form. It did not simply put forth an argument about fiction, but was crafted for fiction—to provide a rationale for the novel as a high art form.12 As one mid-20th-century scholar writes about The Craft of Fiction, it was “pioneer criticism…. Moralist and psychological critics have struck out other roads…. But in the end, those who are aware that fiction is an art…must come back to what is still the most authoritative exposition of that art.”13

Lubbock is not a canonical figure. Nor does he necessarily deserve to stand among the bards of poetry, drama, criticism, and fiction. His essays are imperfect, riddled with inconsistencies and incomplete thoughts; he adds nothing vastly original or radical to his field of criticism, yet I dedicate a chapter to him nonetheless. This is because Lubbock was one of the first British critics to stumble upon form, and then proceeded to take up its ambiguities with concern, care, and craftsmanship. Not only that,

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but Virginia Woolf proved deeply preoccupied by Lubbock’s controversial claims. Crucially though, there is not much written about him as a critical inspiration of Woolf’s. Yet if we want to fully understand Woolf in relation to form, reading, and literature, we must first turn to Lubbock. He seems to have lived in Woolf’s head through her critical career, hovering as a phantasmal shadow behind her collection of essays. Lubbock is alluded to in Woolf’s diaries, letters, and criticism; she mentions him by name in her 1920 essay, “The Letters of Henry James,” and also a 1927 essay “The Art of Fiction.” Yet Woolf’s most sustained attack comes in “On Re-Reading Novels” (1922), published just a year after The Craft of Fiction. In the next chapter I will focus on “On Re-Reading Novels,” but for now let us scrutinize how quietly profound Lubbock’s piece really was. He is a common reader who happened to spy one of theory’s most perturbing questions. Form—as elusive as it is ambiguous—is at the core of virtually all future theoretical and narratological criticism. The order was, perhaps, a bit too tall for Lubbock, but he nevertheless took on the task with a kindly composure, a critical eye, and a handful of vocabulary from visual art.

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In the period Percy Lubbock composed his The Craft of Fiction, England and America were in the midst of literary transformation. Romantic and realist genres were fading with the ascent of the Jamesian novel—a fiction of psychological and dramatic insight which attempted to align itself with high visual and poetic art. From James and other contemporaries sprang the modernist movement in literature, which concurrently gave rise to the formalist revolution in criticism. Lubbock’s polemic is not only representative of this transition between the realist and modernist stage, it also furnished the backbone of this theoretical approach to literature.

While designating a novel “realist” or “modernist” may ensnare us in an outdated understanding on what these novels aimed to accomplish,14 there was nevertheless a change in literature at the end of the 19th and start of the 20th century. At this time, we witness Lubbock reckoning with a shift in critical transforms.

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discourse from that of character, setting, and story—to consciousness, composition, and craft. Caught in this whirlwind, we may set out to uncover how Lubbock’s book is, in a sense, straddling past and present formulas, while at the same time, progressive in its approach to text regardless of the “era” it falls into.

_A methodology of form_

Contemporary critic Mark McGurl asserts that Lubbock’s _The Craft of Fiction_ is “essentially an expansion and codification of the narrative theory developed piecemeal across Henry James’ prefaces.” Lubbock’s book far from rejects James’ work, yet it would be an oversimplification to assume that _The Craft of Fiction_ merely reworks James’ claims. More appropriately, Lubbock amends James’ work to get to a more democratic and methodological approach to fiction. Looking at the titles of these critics’ works—James’ 1884 essay, “The Art of Fiction” and Lubbock’s _The Craft of Fiction_—the evolution from “art” to “craft” in itself reflects a larger shift in criticism from generalization to objectivity, from musings to methodology. This transformation also marks the embryonic development of literary theory. _The Craft of Fiction_, as a piece of formalist thought, initiates a dialogue on the form of a novel through a methodological, rather than purely evaluative lens. Though not to reach maturity until after I.A. Richards and the establishment of formalist scholarship, “form” and theory are, for perhaps the first time, harmonized within Lubbock’s polemic. At one point in the book, Lubbock rhetorically inquires: “Who is disposing the scattered facts, whose is this new point of view?” Here, readers witness Lubbock constructing the foundations of a new mode of formal analysis. Yet unable to ask, “through whom is this passage focalized?” Lubbock makes do with an appropriated toolbelt of language from visual art. So in spite of _The Craft of Fiction_’s imperfections, we must keep in mind that Lubbock puts forth an impassioned argument for an attention to form, one which even Woolf struggles to repudiate.

Before we examine Woolf’s more pressing anxieties over Lubbock’s formalist approach to the novel, we must understand why Lubbock adopts the methodology he does. In the opening refrain of his

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book, Lubbock paints form as a “shadowy and fantasmal” phenomenon—it is elusive, liminal and free; it unearths consciousness, composition, and craft rather than confining it. The critic simultaneously attempts to elevate and democratize the study of the novel through his book, and this dichotomy, though perhaps beckoning its own to reproof, wonderfully encapsulates one of the more pure, and uplifting reasons for why formalism was, and still is, a useful approach to the novel. In noticing the form of literature, readers are equipped to talk about a novel outside its relation to the canon and to genius. In other words, a novel may be judged through its fulfillment to itself, its author, and (perhaps most importantly to Woolf), its reader. These lenses can be seen as the early tenets of formalism, and distinguishes the field from its scholarly sibling—the history of criticism.

*Art and craft: Reframing Henry James*

Lubbock transformed James’ criticism mainly through two channels. First, the critic turned James’ narrative technique (i.e., that narrative “point of view” is bound to the character through which the story is focalized) into something which should be considered a qualitative (or formal) principle of fiction. Second, Lubbock more forcefully “borrowed” rhetoric from visual art.

To start with the former, James’ narrative perspective is noticeably singular in its intention. Yet he, in accordance with his era, envisions the narrator as an active tool in the novel where earlier figures, like Flaubert and Tolstoy (Lubbock’s other case studies) do not. An opposition to James’ more singular vision of narrative comes from Elaine Freedgood, as she notes that, “strong theories of narration and of realism give the Victorian novel critical permission to become a specifically diegetic (rather than dramatic and mimetic) genre.” “Form” for Lubbock was not a device to strip a book of its autonomy by codifying it in a genre. In fact, the word “genre” never appears once in Lubbock’s polemic. Thus, we can begin to see how the device existed outside of Freedgood’s sense of genre (and Barthes’ concern with “content”). This assertion seems justified when looking at Lubbock’s 1922 book. He notes that most novelists seem

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to betray, “a preference for one method or the other, for picture or for drama; one sees in a moment how
Fielding, Balzac, George Eliot, incline to the first, in their diverse manners, and Tolstoy (certainly Tolstoy,
in spite of his big range) or Dostoevsky to the second, the scenic way.” While this method of
partitioning authors based on their “form” (i.e., pictorial/diegetic versus dramatic/mimetic) is sanctioned
by Lubbock, we must understand that he constructs these binaries (the picture versus the drama) as a
means to elevate the study of the novel (versus the art of the novel). While we can scrutinize Lubbock’s
findings (this is, indeed, where future critics pushback most forcefully), the methods he uses are
admirable for their novelty.

The French structuralist Roland Barthes writes about “forms” as they “become autonomous
objects, meant to signify a property which is collective and protected, and this object is a trouble-saving
device.” While Freedgood disagrees with Barthes’ claim—arguing that form constricts
autonomy—Barthes’ more forgiving evocation nevertheless relies on equally theoretical discourse and
vocabulary. In Lubbock’s criticism, we witness one of the earliest pronouncements of
“form”—unencumbered by later decades of theoretical debate and manipulation. And while form in this
prenatal literary summoning is not perfectly explicated, its ambiguity and novelty certainly hold an
appealing charm.

Art and craft: A vocabulary to approach the novel

Let us now investigate the second key way in which Lubbock transformed James’ initial appraisal
of fiction-writing. The Craft of Fiction—similarly, but also more emphatically than “The Art of
Fiction”—redeploys vocabulary from visual art onto the literary landscape. Lubbock’s first appeal to
other art forms comes when he notes, “no doubt a lop-sided statue or an ill-composed painting is a plain
offence to the eye, however skilfully it may copy life.” Because we have an easy method of identifying

20 Roland Barthes, Writing Degree Zero, translated by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York, NY: Hill and
Wang, 2012), 27.
so-called “bad” visual art (i.e., we look at it and decide), Lubbock searches for an analogous framework with which readers can “visualize” problems with a novel, even if a text appears, on its surface, realistic and enjoyable. The “viewless art of literature,” as Lubbock calls it, must hold some innate “form, design, [and] composition.”22 Lubbock openly acknowledges that “visualize,” “composition,” and “form” are “[w]ords usurped from other arts;” yet the author also reminds his reader that there is nowhere else to turn: “we have no other language than that which has been devised for the material arts.”23 Lubbock’s book openly addresses the predicament that there is no “received nomenclature” for critics of literature to refer to, and “no connected argument, no definition of terms, no formulation of claims, not so much as any ground really cleared and prepared for discussion.”24 We see moments in the book when this lack of discourse hinders Lubbock’s own critical gaze,25 but also where they liberate it. With little precedent behind him, Lubbock is free to appropriate words from other art forms to create a ripe vocabulary for future critics who want to move past a “long indifference to…questions of theory.”26

Henry James and other late 19th and early 20th century critics were deeply invested in the notion of literary evaluation. While later branches of theory intentionally break from this tradition, formalism was still tied to an evaluation of a kind. In one of the foundational formalist texts, “The Intentional Fallacy” (1946), authors W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley write, “[w]e argued that the design and or intention of the author is neither available or desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art.”27 Beardsley and Wimsatt propose a strikingly new mode analysis void of authorial intention, yet their methods are nevertheless in service of a judgment of “success” of a piece of art. Thus, we may understand that in these early stages of formalism, the theoretical enterprise was still intimately linked to judgment—specifically in between texts and in the canon.

25 See chapter 6 where Lubbock discusses Emma Bovary’s “feeble” understanding of her surroundings. The Craft of Fiction, 86.
26 Lubbock, The Craft of Fiction, 98.
The Craft of Fiction, written about twenty years before “The Intentional Fallacy,” works through a similar evaluative lens—yet without access to the academic discourse we find in Beardsley and Wimsatt. Lubbock does not let this hinder his argument, and instead draws credibility from another source: Henry James. In his novels, James enacted a scenic and surveying method of narration in which perspective is entwined to the epistemological constraints of a particular character. Lubbock was a staunch admirer of the novelist, and embedded much of James’ arguments on narrative into his own writing. Yet The Craft of Fiction imbues these methods with a formalist edifice (i.e., judgment of “success” through form), and thus broadens and elevates James’ initial critique.

Working before the time of Gérard Genette and Barthes, we may see Lubbock’s initiative to frame his argument through a new, institutionalized vocabulary as generally modern, but also polarizing. Lubbock concedes to “usurping” his vocabulary from another discipline. And here we begin to see why Woolf holds an uneasiness towards Lubbock’s early formalist critique: his methods are indebted to an outside (and alien) art form, and are perhaps destabilized through this dependance.

Henry James does not explicitly acknowledge artistic vocabulary when explaining his methodology in “The Art of Fiction;” but with phrases such as, “Don’t think too much about optimism and pessimism; try and catch the colour of life itself,” we see how the novelist nevertheless relies on artistic discourse to flavor (but not necessarily inform) his commentary. In accordance with his discussion of “craft,” James looks to analogy to codify his claims:

The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does compete with life. When it ceases to compete as the canvas of the painter competes, it will have arrived at a very strange pass. It is not expected of the picture that it will make itself humble in order to be forgiven; and the analogy between the art of the painter and the art of the novelist is, so far as I am able to see, complete. Their inspiration is the same, their process (allowing for the different quality of the vehicle) is the

28 Meister, “The Living Handbook of Narratology.”
29 Henry James, “The Art of Fiction,” Longman’s magazine 4 (September 1884), 521.
same, their success is the same. They may learn from each other, they may explain and sustain each other. Their cause is the same, and the honour of one is the honour of another.\textsuperscript{30}

I’m not sure any future literary critic would be so bold as to deem a comparison of the artist and the novelist as “complete.” This excerpt, I believe, reminds us that James is a novelist/critic, and not a theorist/critic. “The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does compete with life”—perhaps true, though other writers might amend the refrain: Dr. Johnson may say it completes life, George Eliot that it compares with life, and Woolf that it complements. Regardless, the statement is highly contestable, and surely does more to express the nature of James’—rather than life’s—relationship to literature.

James is certainly preoccupied with garnering a “complete” analogy for literature, but he simply proposes an allegorical juxtaposition to visual art without giving much thought to the larger limitations it imposes. Ironically, James does not look to allegorize more closely associative writing art forms like poetry or drama, nor look to them for mirroring “completeness.” This perhaps can be explained by the hypothetical poet’s tendency towards imaginative irreality instead of a realistic portrayal of life. Yet James, regardless, might have been better off drawing from visual art a lexicon, instead of propping it up as a foolproof analogy. By virtue of living through more of the modernist movement,\textsuperscript{31} Lubbock is more cautious in finding an infallible analogy in visual art. He, rather prudently, only looks to its lexicon. Thus, Lubbock makes James’ polemic more relevant by adjusting its flawed evaluative and comparative tendencies.

\textit{Binaries in reading}

Woolf also, whilst critiquing \textit{The Craft of Fiction}, looks to update its argument for the upcoming generation: “Mr. Lubbock prudently carries his survey no further than the novels of Henry James. But already the years have mounted up. We may expect the novel to change and develop as it is explored by

\textsuperscript{30} James, “The Art of Fiction,” 503-504, italics added.

\textsuperscript{31} Thus Lubbock bore witness to the destabilizing effects of metaphor (i.e., in the hands of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound).
the most vigorous minds of a very complex age.”³² Actually, Lubbock does extend his survey beyond James (touching on Flaubert, Richardson, and others). But more crucially, we can view “On Re-Reading Novels” as Woolf’s attempt to refashion aspects of Lubbock’s polemic for this new age of novels. Nevertheless, Woolf still faults The Craft of Fiction for placing the critic-reader above the common reader, and her essay is just as much an attempt to reclaim the reading process for its true and more pure recipient. It is the “pressure of an audience,” and not the formalist critic (i.e., Lubbock), Woolf claims, who “will encourage the novelist to find out—and that all we ask of him—what it is that he means and how best to show it us.”³³ Yet if we look closer at these two texts, we notice that Lubbock and Woolf appear to be proponents of the same cause. First, we can see that Lubbock attempts to expand the role and importance of the reader by suggesting that they are tasked with the same moral responsibilities as the novelist. “The reader of a novel—by which I mean the critical reader—is himself a novelist…. The reader must therefore become, for his part, a novelist, never permitting himself to suppose that the creation of the book is solely the affair of the author.”³⁴ The author themself is not able to create a whole and complete image in the book, thus his purpose is more pressingly to create a whole and complete impression on the reader. Radical in its redrawing of the boundaries between author, text, and reader, Lubbock’s assertion helps us look past an inherent issue of the “critic” figure, namely their historical lack of concern for the real, human reader. Though Woolf feels Lubbock to be emblematic of this kind of pedantry, we must remember that The Craft of Fiction is very accommodating of the common reader. It wasn’t that Lubbock wanted to circumscribe his methods within academic or literary circles—theory was meant for everyone. He wanted the critic’s eye to be held by the many.

While Saussurean “binary oppositions” were not available to Lubbock in his day, I found The Craft of Fiction to grapple with three binaries of novel-writing which underpin the shifting facets of fiction: whole versus part, detachment versus intimacy, creation versus imagination. I believe that these facets in themselves suggest a shift in the intentions and ambitions of criticism. As we see in the

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transformation from Henry James’ style of criticism to Lubbock’s, there is a distinct awakening to various modes of analysis—a new consideration of the tools with which one approaches fiction writing. We have already touched on the whole versus part and detachment versus intimacy, so now let us tackle the third.

While Lubbock does not have access to a lexicon from narratology, he redeployes “creation” and “imagination” as words to capture the difference between visualizing a story for its structure and form (i.e., “creatively”) or plot and pleasure (i.e., “imaginatively”); Lubbock writes, “We know how to imagine a landscape or a conversation when he describes it, but to gather up all these sights and sounds into a compact fabric, round which the mind can wander freely…this is a task which does not achieve itself without design and deliberation on the part of the reader.”35 This gathering of scenes is deemed by Lubbock “a kind of ‘creative reading.’”36 This passage is compelling for several reasons. First, it exemplifies Lubbock’s views on the differing functions of “imagination” and “creativity” binary within the reading process; second, it suggests that “creative reading”37 is Lubbock’s term for reading with “form” and mind; and third, it supposes that the average reader—attuned to “design and deliberation”—is in fact the intended subject for which Lubbock hopes to impart his methodology.

“Is the author writing, at a given moment, with his attention upon the incidents of his tale, or is he regarding primarily the form and colour they assume in somebody's thought?”38 With this question, Lubbock supposes a new technique through which we can understand a writer’s process. Imagination and “story” no longer dominate our understanding of how a novel is made, even though they remain central to its essence. But we must also take into consideration the author’s form as both relevant and edifying. Unearthing form is thus an act of “creative reading.” A novelist, Lubbock argues, can draw upon the methods of “drama” or “pictorial description” to craft his story: “The only law that binds him throughout, whatever course he is pursuing, is the need to be consistent on some plan, to follow the principle he has adopted.”39 “Method,” then, is closely tied to the choice between a mimetic or diegetic retelling. Which

35 Lubbock, The Craft of Fiction, 16-17, italics added.
37 A term Lubbock acknowledges he borrows from Emerson.
38 Lubbock, The Craft of Fiction, 71.
does an author choose to employ at a certain moment, and why? This also accounts for a primary role of the reader: to look at where the author’s methods are “mingled and varied [between drama and picture] as the subject is developed.” This partitioning between “drama” and “pictorial description” is one of the places where Lubbock is most open to critique. Yet if we zoom out, we can see how he is using form to creatively and prophylactically adjust the reading experience.

*The birth of a free form: Lubbock to Woolf*

As literary theory took off in the latter half of the 20th century, we see more and more definitions of “form” take hold and shape discourse. Structural, linguistic, ontological—these iterations of “form” bring about a fresh wave of perspective, imbuing the word with a deeper, more complex chain of signifiers. Inevitably, those who would rather not place such emphasis on form also grew vocal, and their opposition includes a host of grievances which even Woolf could not have anticipated. Turning back to Freedgood, she warns us of the dangers in looking for a homogeneous form across a particular genre: “these forms make trouble, as we forget that we made them and their autonomy comes to guarantee our own autonomy as critics.” Freedgood is writing after the heyday of theory, and is invested in the over-prescriptive and damaging nature of codifying literature into “genres.” For Freedgood, “form” has taken on a highly signified and collective function—it is an encompassing and confining agent, an envelope instead of the paper, margins, and ink.

To look to a more forgiving portrait, Barthes notes that, “up until now we have looked at the text as a species of fruit with a kernel (an apricot, for example) the flesh being the form and the pit the content, it would be better to see it as an onion, a construction of layers (or levels, or systems) whose body contains, finally, no heart, no kernel, no secret, no irreducible principle….” Form for Barthes is mixed in with other components of the novel. It is more geared towards the end goal of a creative act

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42 i.e., a novel labeled as “realist” suddenly must bear signifiers such as “dense” and “diegetic” when they may not actually apply.
rather than a method or tool employed along the way. Yet if we are to return to the earliest evocation of form—when Lubbock co-opts the word from visual art—we note how the concept resembles Barthes’ evocation, but nevertheless holds a lighter and more positive connotation.

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Overall, Lubbock reimagines aspects of Henry James’ approach to fiction writing by more intentionally appropriating vocabulary from visual art, and by imbuing form with a more active and creative license. Woolf in her essay is keenly aware of how Lubbock co-opts “form,” writing, “This word ‘form,’ of course, comes from the visual arts;” she goes on to add her own pejorative spin, commenting, “and for our part we wish that he [Lubbock] could have seen his way to do without it.…”44 Woolf continues lightly ridiculing Lubbock, quoting from his book a passage where he differentiates between the “statue” and the “statue as a thing in itself.”45 This passage Woolf draws from, however, perhaps contains one of the clearest expounding on what form means to Lubbock. “With the book in this condition of a defined shape [i.e., finished], its form shows for what it is indeed—not an attribute, one of many and possibly not the most important, but the book itself, as the form of a statue is the statue itself.”46 The dichotomy between the “statue” and the “statue as a thing in itself” notably relies on a Kantian presupposition of art’s autonomous and objective capabilities. Thus, “form” does as well. And while neither Woolf nor Lubbock acknowledge the philosopher directly, Kant’s critique of aesthetic judgment echoes in the periphery of their criticism. Lubbock co-opts form from visual art, yet the term perhaps comes rigged with a host of signifiers the critic did not anticipate. To the more attuned ear of Woolf, “form” and “statue” carry a distant, sanitized, and hardened connotation. Unfortunately, Woolf then carries these attributes over to her opinions on Lubbock’s methods, and by extension, literary theory itself. Yet ever the diligent and sympathetic reader, Woolf leaves room for nuance as well. Her regard for her reader coupled with the clear enthusiasm with which she approaches her approbation suggests that form does indeed play a crucial role in her theory of fiction.

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Although Lubbock’s prose was not blessed with the same degree of lyricism as Woolf, *The Craft of Fiction* certainly has moments of “genius and ink.”47 Towards the end, Lubbock remarks that, “in one case the reader faces towards the story-teller and listens to him, in the other he turns towards the story and watches it.”48 Though not the most evocative excerpt I could have chosen, I believe the statement [feels] Woolfian in its style and sentiment: Lubbock has something profound he’d like to share, and he does so with a clever and animated quip. We can imagine the reader turning his head side to side, the author speaking in one ear and the text in the other. I can imagine Woolf painting a similar picture.

BE-READ
Bone and book, or the feeling of form in the novel

Lubbock, Woolf, and the battle over form

We have studied how Lubbock set the stage for the admission of “form” into discourse on fiction. Now we can turn to Woolf and ponder her reaction. She, too, noticed something odd in the countenance of form, and I believe that in order to illuminate her opinions on the matter, she used Lubbock’s book as a conduit—a kind-of critical diving board off which she could jump into the chief literary questions of her day. From Woolf’s surmising, we notice that the notion of “form” bothered and even irritated her. The Craft of Fiction was something then that Woolf could mold and mangle to satisfy that itch. Moreover, it allowed her to scrutinize proto-theoretical concepts which were almost exclusively dealt with inside academia. Since Woolf could not enter, she took the debate outside—and shared it with the rest of us.

One essay in particular bears the burden of undertaking. That piece is “On Re-Reading Novels,” first published by the Times Literary Supplement in July 1922. It is a short and seemingly insubstantial essay, yet there Woolf confronts Lubbock most rigorously, inspecting his preoccupation with “the form itself”—or the theoretical framework in which one “imprison[s]” a novel. Whimsical in style and astute in structure, “On Re-Reading Novels” positions Lubbock’s polemic as a kind-of prototype for a method of reading which she worries may consume (or infest) the attentions of readers. While other modernist writers such as E.M. Forster and Graham Greene also posed some pushback to The Craft of Fiction, Woolf’s appraisal proves most nuanced. Her rhetoric is visceral, but the resolution opaque: her critique of Lubbock’s method of applying “form” onto fiction agitates and excites her creative faculties, spurring a resounding interest in the cataclysm left in the wake of a detached—versus emotional—relationship to literature.

One recent (and rare) piece of criticism analyzing Woolf’s attitude towards Lubbock notes, “[Woolf’s] review…gives his work a singular, if not painful, pride of place in the emerging formalist movement…And yet, while making the dangers of early formalism graphically clear, Woolf sincerely
approved Lubbock’s foresight in pursuing a much-needed theory of the novel. For Woolf, Lubbock’s error lies not so much in his treatment of the novel, as in his treatment of the novel reader.”⁴⁹ I would like to amend the harsh review the scholar gives Woolf, and instead suggest that Woolf reimagines the capacity and capabilities of formalism with her individualized, and so-ever-special attention to the reader. As we work through “On Re-Reading Novels,” we notice something interesting happening—namely that the notion of form is no longer confined to Lubbock’s prose. Woolf, in her disavowal, transforms the notion to reflect a larger inquiry into, first, the epistemological differences between the novel and other art forms, and second, the role and function of the novel’s reader. So where Lubbock spurred a regard for form, his discussion of it in turn catalyzed Woolf’s descent into a new evocation of formalist novel theory.

But what in the language, imagery, and structure of “On Re-Reading Novels” brought about this change? And what new insights emerge then from this reckoning? To answer these questions, I delve into several concepts which the author herself addresses either directly or indirectly. I begin by assessing the essay’s engagement of the (I) “whole” of the novel, and then study its attitude towards Lubbock’s new stockpile of (II) vocabulary. From there I inspect Woolf’s explanation of a (III) reader’s first encounter with the novel before turning to the piece’s understanding of various (IV) horizons in the novel. This helps us gauge the truest evocation of (V) form before we finally uncover how this all informs the process of (VI) “re-reading.” Through an appraisal of these six concepts, we get an idea as to what Woolf is adding to our espousal of formalist thought. “On Re-Reading Novels” certainly challenges the literary paradigms of the day, as it helps us reimagine more thoughtfully the origins of theory in England.

“On Re-Reading Novels”

In the opening two paragraphs of “On Re-Reading Novels,” Woolf argues that the centuries-long dominance of poetry and drama has caused a crisis for the readers of the novel: “We have obviously got it

into our heads that there is a right way to read, and that one is to read straight through and grasp the book entire. The national habit has been formed by drama [and poetry].”50 She asserts that verse—long viewed as the superior art form—has not so much left readers ill-prepared to enter the sphere of the novel, but that it has caused readers to be unaware of how and why to approach it. Woolf does indeed believe there is a “right” way to read a book, but it does not come through “grasping” it entirely. But then how does one’s reading of poetry or a play differ from the novel? With this dilemma at the forefront of her mind, she dives into her critique of Lubbock’s The Craft of Fiction.

It is important to remember that when approaching Lubbock, Woolf always has in mind the interests of the reader. While plot and character certainly come to shape her thoughts on form in fiction, it is the common reader—and by extension the reading process itself—which remains at the heart of her endeavor.

Some months ago Mr. Percy Lubbock applied himself to answer some questions in The Craft of Fiction, a book which is likely to have much influence upon readers, and may perhaps eventually reach the critics and writers. To say that it is the best book on the subject is probably true; but it is more to the point to say that it is the only one. He has attempted a task which has never been properly attempted, and has tentatively explored a field of inquiry which it is astonishing to find almost untitled. The subject is vast and the book short, but it will be our fault, not Mr. Lubbock’s, if we talk as vaguely about novels in the future as we have done in the past.51

It is uncanny how well Woolf manages to situate Lubbock and his polemic historically and thematically. True, Lubbock was one of (if not the) first to explore “form” and fiction. But his work today remains largely forgotten, namely because it has been overshadowed by more exhaustive, assertive, and institutionalized writings on the matter. Even so, this introductory remark does more than just shed light

onto Lubbock’s posture among his contemporaries; it more broadly encapsulates the current state of theoretical criticism dwelt in.

However, what is missing from this remark also reveals a great deal. Woolf talks about how The Craft of Fiction is the “best book on the subject,” yet does not directly identify what that “subject” is. We suppose she means “the craft of fiction,” but this “field of inquiry” (as she calls it later) remains largely ambiguous. Woolf herself cannot pin down the exact countenance or genre of The Craft of Fiction. Thus, this excerpt epitomizes Woolf’s cryptic and conflicting attitude towards Lubbock, as she seems to praise the text for undertaking a task “which has never been properly attempted” or “tilled,” all the while chastising its author (“it will be our fault, not Mr. Lubbock’s, if we talk as vaguely about novels in the future as we have done in the past”). It seems as though Woolf scolds Lubbock for attempting to expound a subject which she herself would be willing to let rest in obscurity. But as she puts it in a different essay, “to read a novel is a difficult and complex art.” Woolf cannot help herself—she must pose an answer to Lubbock now that he has hauled “form” out from the abyss and up to the surface of novelistic discourse. This also serves as a useful paradigm for Woolf’s engagement with literary theory more generally: she perhaps would have preferred if these types of questions to remain dormant, but now that they are out in the open (permeating in and from the university), Woolf must make her opinions known.

Of course, any kind of contributions to novelistic discourse had to be confined to her essays, as publishing in academic journals was not an option. Printed then in TLS and noteworthy magazines, these bouts of theoretical inquiry were nestled in publications for general readership. I would argue the unorthodox mode through which Woolf’s “theory” was disseminated adds an entirely new dimension to her work, for the assumptions and methodologies Woolf proposes are all of a sudden accessible to, and inclusive of, the common reader. It is not just that essays like “On Re-Reading Novels” discuss literature in relation to the everyday person—they equip readers with a vocabulary, methodology, and form by which they may break into the lofted rafters of theory. Thus, to approach meaningfully Woolf’s

relationship to form, *The Craft of Fiction* was a useful and necessary rhetorical catapult: Lubbock exposed Woolf to a compelling (albeit flawed) argument on form—one ripe for harvesting her own reprobation; he introduced Woolf to fundamentals of formalist thought, where she was then able to cultivate her own unique crop.

Going forward, I will explore how Woolf in “On Re-Reading Novels” catalyzes a rapport between critical and theoretical modes of writing. Here we encounter a rich liminality which imbues a vitality and authority into these disciplines as independent, but nonetheless harmonizing dialogic experiences.

I. The whole

“To glance at a book, though the phrase is so often in our mouths, is in fact an impossibility.”

This sentiment, uttered by Lubbock, is subtly taken up by Woolf and placed in the context of a novel’s relation to poetry. In the opening two paragraphs of her essay, Woolf paints a scenario in which a common reader is faced with a dilemma: the reader wants to “read finally” a novel so that he may do it justice.

Yet as with these “fat Victorian volumes,” a complete read-through cannot be achieved in one sitting. At some point, a reader must put down the book, only to return in a different armchair on another day. Thus, “On Re-Reading Novels” begins with more than just a sketch of a first reading. It begins with a first encounter, or a first reaction, to the daunting, dense edifice of the book itself.

As we enter into Woolf’s essay, the first issue she seems to take up is time—or how the temporal framework of novel-reading inhibits its smooth consumption in comparison to poetry or a play. Woolf is moreover particularly attuned to the notion of the “whole” of the text as it relates to the time it takes to read. Like in Lubbock and James, Woolf’s literary criticism cannot escape the scaffolding poetry and drama built around the artistic process. “If we have an hour to spend we feel that we lay it out to better

advantage with Keats than with Macaulay.” These art forms linger above the novel not only as elevated, more noble modes of art, but also as models by which a reader may unconsciously regulate his consumption of all other forms of art. Woolf suggests this tricks readers into believing verse is “the senior branch of the service.” She moreover attributes this custom to a faulty conception of the whole: poetry and drama, Woolf warns us, has produced a “national habit” which concludes the right way to read is to “grasp the book entire.”

Woolf worries about this tendency to devalue the novel in light of verse’s accessibility. Poetry and drama appear more consumable because the reader can engage with the “whole” in an unbroken span of time. They can be digested in one sitting. Then one can return to a poem or play again and again, and with each new viewing, a fresh wave of judgment and feeling arises. As she puts it in her essay, “Hamlet may change; we know, indeed, Hamlet will change; but tonight Hamlet is ours. And for that reason, too, we hesitate before reading [a novel] again. Tonight, [the novel] will not be ours.” Woolf realizes the temporal difficulties facing the consumption of the novel, for as she describes it, one may read Hamlet in the four hours between dinner and bedtime but could not attempt the same with Harry Richmond or Vanity Fair; when sitting down to read the novel, a reader “[breaks] off a tantalizing fragment” and “days may pass before you can add to it.” Surprisingly, both Woolf and Lubbock agree that novelists must find a way to recalibrate this hierarchy.

For Lubbock, the solution still lies in appealing to the “whole.” He suggests we can still attain some conception of it by zooming out and squinting down at the novel from above: “So far from losing ourselves in the world of the novel, we must hold it away from us, see it all in detachment, and use the whole of it to make the image we seek, the book itself.” While he admits that it is “difficult to treat a large and stirring piece of fiction in this way,” Lubbock believes that our focusing mechanism is

ultimately form. It brings clarity to a large, expansive edifice, allowing the novel to remain on the same elevated artistic plane as verse. Yet Lubbock acknowledges there are shortcomings to his method: “the form of a novel…is something that none of us, perhaps, has ever really contemplated. It is revealed little by little, page by page, and it is withdrawn as fast as it is revealed; as a whole, complete and perfect, it could only exist in a more tenacious memory than most of us have to rely on.” We need form to envision the whole; we need the whole because “fine taste and keen perception are of no use to us if we cannot retain the image of the book; and the image escapes and evades us like a cloud.” Here, unfortunately, the “whole” will remain as elusive and unstable as a cloud largely because Lubbock cannot partition the “whole” from “form.” Yet turning back to Woolf, she contemplates the “whole” in a decidedly different manner—annexing it to time instead. But what is gained by this affiliation? By breaking the bond between the “whole” and form?

Each time we finish a chapter and put a book down for the evening, we also put on hold the story’s suspense and, by extension, our catharsis. Not only that, but we pause our suspension of disbelief, accepting that some of the plot or characters’ names will be forgotten…. Imagine if the same was true of poetry? A quarter through Prufrock, we must put down the poem—the experience would be ruined! Novels by nature defy a start-to-finish cycle—there is no complete synthesis of voices into a final, authoritative Hegelian absolute; the pleasure we get from them does not come from completeness or conclusion, thus must be found elsewhere.

Woolf wants to help readers find the hidden benefits of novel-reading which poetry, drama, and even visual art cannot lay claim to. Since the novel cannot boast of a “whole” and complete relationship with a reader based on time, “On Re-Reading Novels” radically points to other outlets through which readers can still derive elevated enjoyment and meaning. Moreover, by dissociating form from the

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65 See section III: “The Reading process.”
whole, Woolf crucially does not insist on form being the materializing mechanism of a novel. Freed from these confines (and from Lubbock), it can take on a host of new, and more ambient associations.

II. Vocabulary

When an esteemed essayist reviews your work, it is never good to hear that your chosen vocabulary has been deemed “baby language.” While Woolf did not write this with malice, the effect is, nevertheless, slightly demeaning. The vocabulary and imagery Lubbock selected to convey his notion of form was naturally equivocal, and thus central to the rich ambiguities the text ignited. Yet rather unfairly Woolf pounces on these nuances—sometimes explaining them and sometimes condemning them: “But until Mr. Lubbock pierced through the flesh and made us look at the skeleton [of a novel] we were almost ready to believe that nothing was needed but genius and ink.” She was an undoubtedly more gifted essayist, outdoing Lubbock in her more vivid, evocative, and seductive prose-style. The many instances where Woolf uses her verbal dexterity to overpower her opponent has the effect of impressing readers, but also of blinding the writer—namely from the nuggets of truth hidden in Lubbock’s prose.

“Now as Mr. Lubbock laments, the criticism of fiction is in its infancy, and its language, though not all of one syllable, is baby language.” Belittling Lubbock’s attempt to draw from visual art the necessary tools, Woolf perhaps fails to see that, “baby language” is better than no language—at least infancy implies the possibility of growth. We may speak of “of youth, and of maternity,” Woolf writes about the “art of fiction,” acknowledging the field’s novelty. She recognizes it is in need of a way to expound its ideas and idiosyncrasies. Thus, a closer examination of the vocabulary Woolf employs in “On Re-Reading Novels” suggests that she, too, struggled to find language suited to her argument. And while Woolf enjoys playfully scrutinizing Lubbock’s choice of jargon (i.e., “form”), a comment made a little while later in the essay has the effect of eroding some of her previous contempt.

“The question [of form] is not one of words only. It goes deeper than that, into the very process of reading itself. Here we have Mr. Lubbock telling us that the book itself is equivalent to its form.”70 The last sentence is Woolf presenting us with Lubbock’s argument. And while later on down the page she will imply that “the very patness” (i.e., suitability) of form calls into question its validity (“it fits a little [too] loosely,” she writes), Woolf’s attempted disapprobation ultimately has her fumbling: “We do not raise the question [of form] in order to stickle for accuracy where most words are provisional, many metaphorical, and some on trial for the first time.”71 She herself cannot come up with a better term, nor provide a convincing defense as to why it is under interrogation. For as we will see again and again, many of the rebuttals Woolf poses in “On Re-Reading Novels” end up reimagining and even strengthening Lubbock’s initial claims. After all, to suggest “form” is the “reading process itself”—that does not close the debate, but opens up a whole new array of signifiers.

Thus, in Woolf’s mild attack on Lubbock’s choice vocabulary, the tinges of her tightly veiled thesis begins to show. Just as she and Lubbock struggle to render rhetorically their understanding of form, so both authors also struggle with the liminality of form’s countenance in the novel. In Woolf’s rendering, form is solid, “visualized,” and “bone”-like; but it is also invisible, “alien,” and actualized in “process of reading itself.”72 This paradoxical, and all the while elusive, nature of form ultimately conveys that it cannot be resolved in a simple reprobation—more must be said on its function and effects. Woolf will certainly answer the call.

III. The reading process

“Both in writing and in reading it is the emotion that must come first.”73 Woolf had specific ideas for what our engagement with literature should look like. And as we now are accustomed to seeing, emotion is at the forefront of her mind and method. In “On Re-Reading Novels,” there is a clear expounding of how we can achieve an emotional connection to a text. She makes her thoughts known

specifically in the context of a first reading. Ironically, her argument in the context of re-reading is susceptible to greater scrutiny. But before we tackle Woolf’s striking response to the title of her essay, we must begin with a more straightforward task: on reading a novel.

To clearly explain to her readers what it is that “bothers us in Mr. Lubbock’s use of the word form,” Woolf “read[s] a story” for the first time with us, setting down her “impressions” as she goes along.\(^74\) This process perhaps evokes E. D. Hirsch’s partition of “meaning” versus “interpretation,” as Woolf goes on to separate a novel’s plot points from the impressions they evoke. For her experiment, she chooses Flaubert’s novella “Un Coeur Simple” (1887): “The title gives us our bearings, and the first words direct our attention to Madame Aubain’s faithful servant Félicité. And now the impressions begin to arrive…we accept them, but we do not use them. We lay them aside in reserve.”\(^75\) After about a page of summarizing, Woolf reaches the end of the story; she concludes that now, “all the observations which we have put aside now come out and range themselves according to the directions we have received.”\(^76\) Put another way, we thus have a mental and emotional timeline of the story which correlates to the unfolding of the events.

When thinking about reading a novel for the first time, what Woolf designates as “impressions” are chiefly the plot-points of a story entwined with the reader’s emotional reaction to them—“we read on, noting the pity, the irony, hastily observing relations and contracts, but stressing nothing.”\(^77\) To Woolf, a reader’s impressions are triggered by a novel’s “temptations,” a term Woolf attaches a unique array of signifiers to.

The essay outlines the two modes in which “temptation” is manifested in the novel: through “identification” and “comparison.”\(^78\) These two focal points, if evoked properly, makes a novel alive and ever interesting to a reader. The former, “identification,” arises when we see ourselves in “this person or with that [scene]” and the latter, (“comparison”), comes when “[w]e compare the world of fiction with the

\(^{76}\) Woolf, “On Re-Reading Novels,” 103.
Important to note is that these “temptations” are what elevate the novel as an art form; they are what allow fiction to compete with poetry and drama; they are Woolf’s solution to the problem of the temporal “whole.” Temptations leave us with “a single satisfaction,” and create “a whole which remains in our minds as the book itself,” ensuring we pick up a new novel where we left off the night before.

“On Re-Reading Novels” was not overly sympathetic to Lubbock when he adopted language from visual art, yet we will be kinder to Woolf in her efforts to craft new terminology. While “temptation” is probably not the most effective or clear word, Woolf’s methods are sound. Thus, we can see this as her attempt to take up theoretical concerns of the novel despite not having access to a formal or established vocabulary. Her formulations are, after all, praiseworthy. Looking past the clunky language, there is no epistemological error in Woolf’s conception of “temptation.”

The only push back I raise is to Woolf placing “identification” and “comparison” in opposition to form. Temptations are by nature ephemeral—they slip in and out of our working consciousnesses, spurring a spree of emotions. Woolf asserts that form disrupts this natural ebb and flow of emotion because it “is something lasting that we can lay hands on;” form forces us to “read at an arm’s length from the distractions [i.e., temptations] we have named.” Woolf paints form as solid and enduring—a glaring blockage or barricade separating the reader from the text. But in the same essay that Woolf raises these objections, she also admits the author requires something more from the reader—namely that we familiarize ourselves with some structural components: “we must receive impressions, but we must relate them to each other as the author intended; and we can only do his bidding by making ourselves acquainted with his method”—by making ourselves acquainted with his form.

Here we land at the crossroads of Woolf and Lubbock’s criticism. Yes, Woolf is right to critique Lubbock: in our first reading, an attention to form can skew an emotional engagement with the text; it can

impel us to concede an intimacy between the reader-text horizon for one which prioritizes authorial intention. While Woolf is right to point out this shortcoming in *The Craft of Fiction*, she nevertheless misses a crucial component of Lubbock’s methodology: that an attention to form is not confined to a first reading. One of the most exciting and appealing aspects of “On Re-Reading Novels” Woolf sometimes forgets that her methods extend beyond the confines she tries to place them in. This is a perfect example of when she thinks that she has form pinned down, but its liminality nevertheless invites an array of alternative applications. A wonderful effect of Lubbock’s *The Craft of Fiction* is that its ambiguities open up and encourage an array of interpretations which are inadvertently co-opted by Woolf’s prose when she takes on Lubbock’s notion of form. Ironically, it is in her rebuke that she reimagines “form” in a more enduring and pragmatic light.

*IV. Horizons*

As noted in the section above, Woolf defends and safeguards the reader-text horizon. She notes that, “whenever Mr. Lubbock talks of form it is as if something were interposed between us and the book as we know it. We feel the presence of an alien substance which requires to be visualized imposing itself upon emotions which we feel naturally.”\(^83\) From “On Re-Reading Novels,” we quickly gauge how uncomfortable form makes Woolf feel. And this mistrust chiefly stems from her viewing form as a dividing agent—a barricade between reader and text. Not only that, but Woolf specifically points to its impact on one’s “emotions,” painting a binary where a visible, tangible form is at odds with the more ephemeral emotions. From Woolf’s rhetoric, “form” is *not* something which muddles, contaminates, or corrupts emotions—it is its own solid but separate substance.

Thus, one of the more quietly subversive tactics of “On Re-Reading Novels” is revealed here, as Woolf deploys novelistic language and imagery to characterize “form” as emotion’s antagonist. Where Lubbock gives us “statue” or “building,”\(^84\) Woolf prefers “bone” and “alien substance.”\(^85\) Where *The Craft*

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of Fiction employs structural analogies to help the reader visualize a novel’s form, Woolf encourages readers to associate it with a plethora of more grotesque images. Both authors want to make the polemic more palatable to the general public, yet the differences are more than just stylistic. Woolf intent is more agonistic—anything dividing the book from its reader deserves reprobation in her eyes.

When the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin muses on the “simultaneous triple-directedness”\(^86\) of an author’s discourse, he means that a novel’s hero does not passively go through the story gravitating towards his own life and referential capabilities. The story—and the novel itself—is neither finished nor finalized because its hero (and the novel itself) is constantly acting in response to, and in anticipation of, another’s voice and judgment (i.e, the imagined audience).\(^87\) Notably, Bakhtin asserts that the reader also plays an active role in the conception of the novel: the reader “reacts to [this discourse], responds to it, is drawn into its game; it is capable of agitating and irritating, almost like the personal address of a living person.”\(^88\) While Bakhtin frames his argument in the context of a Dostoevsky novel, the point made here is transferable to any novel that may be regarded as “dialogic”—or carrying on a continual dialogue with other works of literature and other authors in and outside of itself. A dialogic novel does not merely respond to or correct a previous work (residing solely in the realm of “influence”), rather, the current work also informs the previous work, altering it continuously through reciprocal communication. As T.S. Eliot put it in his Tradition and the Individual Talent, “the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.”\(^89\)

Yet how does this aside aid our understanding of Woolf’s criticism? Well, in a very technical and verbose manner, Bakhtin is ultimately celebrating a novelist’s awareness and recognition of the reader function. By banishing from one’s “discourse all epic and lyrical tones,”\(^90\) the modern novel allows for greater reader participation. Despite Bakhtin’s shaky allegiance to Russian formalism, the critic ultimately

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adds to our understanding of Woolf’s stance towards the horizons in a novel because he acknowledges the existence—and importance—of the reader’s gaze. The reader, for both Bakhtin and Woolf, is more than just a passive receiver, they are an active informer and shaper of the material at hand. This lens makes the novel into something more malleable, unburdening it from needing to present a final or absolute moral truth.

Woolf would prefer that the novel be spared from Bakhtin’s theoretical dissection (as she would from Lubbock’s), but this aside helps us see that her general aversion to form and theory comes from a belief that these two facets disrupt the reading process by obstructing the reader; however, many of these barriers fall away once we realize Bakhtin’s musings (i.e., his notion of the dialogic novel) reiterate and, in fact, strengthen many of Woolf’s claims. Woolf thinks of form as the “visible” and visceral manifestation of separation between horizons. If we look for form (or are told to look for form) then our emotional intimacy with a book is lost. But Woolf fails to grasp how both she and these other semi-formalist thinkers want the same thing: to make novels accessible and enjoyable for the common reader. I would like to suggest then that Woolf misinterprets form’s disruptive capabilities. Rather than treating it as an affront to the intimacy between reader and text, we can actually view it as enhancing the emotional aspect of reading. As we will soon explore, form can act as a structural guide bringing text and reader into even closer collusion.

V. Form

Now let us dive into Woolf’s fixation on the ever-enigmatic nature of form. “On Re-Reading Novels” certainly presents a complicated, if not overly negative image of “form.” Yet I would like to suggest that in her admonishment, she inadvertently imbues the term with a more ambient, transient, and liminal capability—revealing it to be part of a process rather than a structure. Woolf’s methodology in the essay is teeming with ambiguities, and even some inconsistencies. But it is in these ambiguities and inconsistencies that form is able to take on such a rich countenance going forward. After all, the term is
explored with the care and wit of one deeply invested in the consciousness of the common reader. Thus we may find buried in Woolf’s essay a compelling case for unearthing and discussing form in the novel.

First, let us study the specific grievances Woolf outlines. As we know, she believes that a sustained connection to a novel arises out of emotional engagement alone. Form breaks up this process by exposing and flaunting the author’s methods; it also places a misguided trust in the “whole.” A novel can never be “whole” for Woolf, and she wishes we stop insisting that a complete envisioning enhances its consumption and experience.

Then we have another qualm, namely that form is solid. It is a visualized, skeletal structure which barricades a reader from the free-flow emotions exhaled by a text. When Lubbock talks of form, he is discussing the space interposed between the diegetic world of the text, and its material existence as a piece of art. Woolf takes issue with this partitioning of “fiction” as separate from “the book itself,” and equates Lubbock’s notion of “form” to the way in which “the flesh, the finery, even a smile and witchery together with the umbrellas and brown paper parcels which she [the character] on her long and toilsome journey, dissolves and disappears. The skeleton alone remains.”91 In this passage we find a preoccupation with the dimensional, breathing edifice of character—akin to the Mrs. Browns of Woolf’s essay “Character in Fiction.” For the essayist, this imagined skinning of a text is the consequence of unearthing the methodology of narrative—an attention to form strips from the reading process “temptations,” and also the “shock” factor.92 These are the two most important values which Woolf sees as being lost in Lubbock’s formalism.

Woolf goes on to describe Lubbock’s methods as “surprising” and “shocking,” stating, “our old familiar friend [the story itself] has vanished; but after all, there is something satisfactory in bone. One can grasp it.”93 Unearthing form thus rids the text/being of the systems and arteries which make it a breathing, living, enjoyable enterprise—something a reader can engage with emotionally. With this anthropomorphization of the text, Woolf illustrates that when we try to force fiction to fit within a

theoretical framework, we lose that which makes its imaginative world so alluring. To pick apart a novel is to strip the color from its characters and the plausibility of its reality. Woolf asserts that Lubbock’s conception of “form” effectively kills the text while exalting the author—the inverse of what Barthes would have us do. In asserting that a formulaic approach to a text ignites a deterioration of its imaginative capacities. Overall, Woolf puts forth such an eloquent and engaging argument that we are almost ready to believe the subject is closed. But when we look deeper, and re-read her essays, a new perspective emerges.

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From arguments like the one presented in “Character in Fiction” (a lecture originally titled, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown”), we know Woolf wished the fiction of her day to espouse the real, dynamic person—not just a ventriloquized “character,” a sweeping of “human nature,” or the “soul” of mankind (as she accuses the British, French, and Russian novelists of, respectively).94 While we can [celebrate] or refute these claims as we like, Woolf, I think, does well in categorizing this new modern novel as chiefly being interested in “a character imposing itself upon another person.”95 This other “person” is not, in the context of Woolf’s essay, another character; “person” refers to the novelists and the reader. Woolf continues: “I believe that all novels, that is to say, deal with character, and that it is to express character—not to preach doctrines, sing songs, or celebrate the glories of the British Empire, that the form of the novel, so clumsy, verbose, and undramatic, so rich, elastic, and alive, has been evolved.”96

There are several important things to note about this except. First among them is that it is unclear if when using the word “form,” Woolf is referring to the kind of internal structure Lubbock concerns himself with, or if she uses it metonymically—to express generally the genre of the novel (i.e., in comparison to other forms of art, like poetry, drama etc.)? This question certainly highlights the inadequacies of such vague and appropriated language. Nevertheless, we can use its nuances to our advantage. The second important thing to note is that “Character in Fiction” was written two years after

95 Woolf, Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown, 9.
96 Woolf, Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown, 9-10, italics added.
“On Re-Reading Novels.” This means that Woolf’s frustrations with form were already materialized on the page and in her mind. Her 1927 essay “The Art of Fiction” features Lubbock as well, signifying to us that the case of “form” was far from closed for Woolf even after her 1922 essay. This is all to say that when Woolf writes about the form (i.e., art form) of the novel, we can assume it to dialogically affect her notion of a structural form as well. Thus, from an inspection of several essays, a new, reimagined notion of form starts to take shape. “[S]o clumsy, verbose, and undramatic, so rich, elastic, and alive”—this is how Woolf also imagines form. She could not foresee the ramifications of her discourse, yet this more ambient and enriched evocation of the term proves invaluable to a synthesis between form and emotion, which I will elucidate later in the chapter.

VI. The re-reading process

To re-read a novel is common practice. Yet in early formalist scholarship, the notion of “re-reading” is notably marginalized, perhaps because of Richards’ (and others) hyper-focus on one’s first, fresh encounter with a text. While later criticism of the 1960s and 70s began to pay more attention to re-reading, an analysis of its methods and effects is largely missing from earlier theoretical inquiry. With this in mind, we may find “On Re-Reading Novels” to play a pivotal role in reshaping the legacy of early formalist thought.

Briefly jumping back to Woolf’s walk-through of Flaubert’s “Un Coeur Simple,” she notes towards the end that, “on a second reading we are able to use our observations from the start, and they are much more precise; but they are still controlled by these moments of understanding [i.e., temptations].” These “moments of understanding,” or initial emotional temptations, are still relevant as we approach our second, third, and fourth readings of a novel. By allowing these temptations to change as we read again, readers emerge each time with a fresh array of feelings. After all, “to snatch an emotion and luxuriate in it and tire of it and throw it away is as dissipating in literature as in life.” According to Woolf, “there is no

limit to be put upon the intoxicating effects of Meredith and Dickens and Dostoevsky, of Scott and Charlotte Brontë.” But we only have so much time, so how do we decide what we keep, and what to never come back to? Woolf suggests that if we are to read a text a second time, “we must somehow discriminate. [And] Emotion is our material.” Here we see that, instead of calling on form or plot or even critical expertise, Woolf wants “emotion” to be our chief “material” in choosing what is worth re-reading.

But why does Woolf go off on this extenuating tangent only to conclude that our emotions help us decide what to read again? Well, she quietly asserts that this is precisely what helps define the novel as a decisive art form: unlike “some new play or poem,” a sustained connection to a novel cannot rely on the critic “at whose command we cheerfully revise our views.” Emotional investment is the principal way one can really judge whether or not to return to a book, and thus the lofty critic is sent packing.

And here we arrive at another reason why Woolf wishes we sent Lubbock packing. Rather than bowing down to emotion, “Mr. Lubbock,” asks that the novel “submit to examination” instead. What is this examination? Of course, it is form. Then the book becomes no grander than poetry, for its value on second glance is similarly subjected to an outside force:

In other words, by concentrating on the novelist’s method [i.e., form], Mr. Lubbock draws our attention to the solid and enduring thing to which we can hold fast when we attack a novel for a second time. Here is something to which we can turn and turn again, and with each clearer view of it our understanding of the whole becomes more definite. Here is something removed (as far as may be) from the influence of our fluctuating and private emotions. The novelist’s method is simply his device for expressing his emotion; but if we discover how that effect is produced we shall undoubtedly deepen the impression…. That is the conclusion to which Mr. Lubbock

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certainly brings us by means of an argument which is all at once fascinating and strangely unfamiliar.102

Given the eponymous title of her piece, we would expect the notion of “second reading” to come up more frequently than it actually does. The term in its various iterations—“second reading,” “second time”—is rather sparingly evoked (only five times). Above is the one, big explication it gets. Moreover, the term never appears in identical phrasing to the title (i.e., as “re-reading”). This missing word prompts us reconsider Woolf’s intent: is this an unconscious error, or does the essay really only care about attacking Lubbock? But if we are to think more about the notion of re-reading in this essay than Woolf does, perhaps we see how it (re-reading) benefits from an attention to form.

In this excerpt, we can pick out an array of insight on form and the nature of reading. Woolf makes clear it is the supposedly visible and “solid” aspect of form which she so opposes. But Woolf is wrong to assert that the term holds such a material countenance. I would suggest that the limited lexicon available to Lubbock when he imagined his conception of “form” led Woolf to interpret it as a rupturing agent when it is, in fact, not at all. If we look more closely at Woolf’s argument, form and emotion, especially in a re-reading, do not have to exist in a binary opposition. She imbues her criticism with such emotional depth that it transcends the kind of binaries old-school formalist and other theoretical discourses rely on to justify a belief in art existing autonomously.103 Woolf in her essay is able to ultimately harmonize “form” with feeling, namely because she subconsciously imbues it with a lighter, more ambient capability. It is material—but not dense and distracting; it is part of the corporal function of a novel—but not as its internal skeleton.

A close study of “On Re-Reading Novels” thus reveals two certainties: first, that Woolf never gives us an clear code on how emotion is retained in a re-reading (though she gives us a detailed one for a

103 We think of Beardsley, Wimsatt, Barthes, and Foucault partitioning of the “meaning” of a work from the “intentions” of the author; Hirsch differentiating between meaning and significance, Iser separating reading from interpretation, Richards asking that we see “close reading” as an antidote to too much intentionalism; even the New Critics fall victim, asking that we be interested in the Poem, not poetry.
first reading), and second, that Lubbock never designates an attention to form as exclusively confined to a
*first reading*. So in synthesizing Lubbock’s ambiguities with Woolf’s attention to emotion, a wholly new
and rich methodology emerges. In focusing on the ambient and liminal capabilities of form, we now may
understand it as part of a *process* rather than a structure.

*An ambient form*

Like Woolf mentioned earlier in the essay, “*Hamlet* may change” with each new reading, but the
drama (or piece of verse) is nevertheless whole—and “ours” because it is so. This phrasing paints an
interesting image in the reader’s head, for Woolf maps our own consciousness onto the text in order to
suggest that *it* changes over time instead of our *interpretation* of it.

This notion not only breaks down Hirsch’s infamous binary between “meaning” and
“significance” it moves formalist thought into a new realm completely. Let us also remember that Woolf
makes this wonderful claim about a piece of verse (*Hamlet*)—the consumption of drama is, as mentioned
before, inherently different from that of the novel. And here we reach the crux of Woolf’s opinion on the
nature of re-reading a novel: that it must still facilitate an internal emotional change even if it cannot be
experienced “whole.” This is the essential dilemma facing the novel, that its continual engagement with
readers is fractured temporally. Yet there are still means by which a reader can achieve a similar (if not
greater) emotive, enjoyable, and evolving relationship with the novel. And this is through understanding
form as ambient and transient (impermanent in the reader’s mind, slipping in and out of their
consciousness as needed).

We now come to understand that Woolf is not supplying us with a faulty or misguided approach
form. Rather, she miscalculates its power and potential. “*On Re-Reading Novels*” ultimately asks us to
see “form” as enhancing the re-reading process and as not disparate from emotional engagement. From
here, a wholly new dialogic emerges.
While Woolf tends to disparage Lubbock more than she praises him, towards the end of her piece we see her temperament softening: “Let us look not at each story separately, but at the method of story-telling—the use, that is, of each of these processes—which runs through them all.”104 This is Woolf telling us that she will try to pay attention to the “craftsmanship” that went into the novel when reading it again. While Woolf notes that when seeking out form, “the view is difficult” and “the light is bad,”105 she concedes even so that, from the “vantage” of form, “the art of fiction can be seen, not clearly indeed, but in proportion.”106 Although it took several pages, we readers of Woolf have finally stumbled upon one of her critical treasures: she softly admits that, though dim, the light emanating from “form” sheds a new clarity onto why we come to novels. She is not implying that we first come to them for form, but her rhetoric suggests that in a second reading, an attention to it can, indeed, illuminate.

And now at last (so we seem to see) the novel is a form distinct from any other. It will not burden itself with other people’s relics. It will choose to say whatever it says best. Flaubert will take for his subject an old maid and a stuffed parrot. Henry James will find all he needs round a tea-table in a drawing-room. The nightingales and roses are banished—or at least the nightingale sounds strange against the traffic, and the roses in the light of the arc lamps are not quite so red. There are new combinations of old material, and the novel, when it is used for the sake of its qualities and not for the sake of its defects, enforces fresh aspects of the perennial story.107

Before our eyes, form has transformed into something dim, “not-clear,” and “not a burden.” While this is pejorative language in a sense, these phrases crucially imbue the term with a more ambient, transient capability. They also come closer to what we saw Woolf characterize form as in “Character in Fiction”: “so clumsy, verbose, and undramatic, so rich, elastic, and alive.”

And perhaps most compellingly, Woolf’s discussion of form is all of a sudden joined to a beautiful piece of prose. The imagery and language here are exceptional, and we readers are briefly transported through the lyricism of the passage. Throughout most all of “On Re-Reading Novels,” Woolf refrained from inserting sustained bouts of stylistically vibrant prose. But now that she has, perhaps subconsciously, located an accord between form and feeling—between craft and catharsis—the critic settles back into the language of a great novelist, where she is most comfortable and complete.

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Initially Woolf tries to contort Lubbock’s notion of form into a kind of clunky, mechanical distraction—it is the visible, excess cartilage of a novel which should remain hidden, though serving its function nevertheless. Yet she cannot contain herself to a succinct appraisal of Lubbock’s polemic; Woolf continues her musings beyond the scope of his work, taking up “form” and using it as the basis for a rich and excitingly new approach to the craft and consumption of the novel.

In a preface to a compilation of Woolf’s TLS essays, author and academic Ali Smith claims that Lubbock’s work is an “ostensible” guise under which Woolf can propagate her own opinions on the nature of fiction. “The real focus of ‘On Re-reading Novels’” writes Smith, “is the beginnings of the critical attempt towards a fuller understanding of the novel as form.” Smith notes that Woolf wrote her piece when ideas about the “shape of the novel” were coming to redefine the norms and standards of fiction (largely spurred by a complete published edition of Joyce’s Ulysses in 1922). Whether Woolf likes it or not, the resounding echo from “On Re-Reading Novels” remains the pervasiveness of form. When Woolf laments, “emotion is our material,” what in fact she really ends up saying is that there can be materialized emotion. Form is exactly this—not bone or skeleton or statue. Form thus becomes the emotional centrifuge of the author-text-reader dynamic, for in it all three horizons are expressed and edified.

Finally, by continuing the conversation on the nature of form in the novel beyond Lubbock’s own polemic, Woolf exposes a fresh capacity to the term—one which remains more widely applicable and relevant to the common reader and the common critic. “The novelists themselves have done little to open

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our eyes. They have praised the genius and blamed the ink,” writes Woolf.\textsuperscript{109} She is a novelist herself, but her focus has always been (unselfishly) on the character and the reader. Moreover, she approaches us in this essay as a reader herself. Overall, by valuing the \textit{emotional resonance of reading} harmonized with an \textit{inadvertent appreciation of form as ambient and transient}, Woolf proposes a wholly new and rich methodology for the novel. Once we understand the unique, though unintended, ramifications of Woolf’s study of form, we then see how her criticism reinvigorates our understanding of formalism, and more broadly, the complicated and at times problematic legacy of theory.

What’s in a critic?

The twentieth century has been classified as an age of criticism. Now almost a quarter into the next one, how can we characterize its countenance today? And what can Woolf contribute to this discussion? In his 1989 work, Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History, Joseph North acknowledges that the scholar deviates from the critic through their respective technical competence—the latter analyses culture while the former intervenes and acts in it. Yet thirty years later, the disparities between criticism and scholarship—between criticism and theory—prove more interwoven and convoluted. The nuances of critical writing has been taken up by a host of figures recently, and some notable contributions include: The Critic as Amateur (2020), John Guillory’s Professing Criticism (2022), and Terry Eagleton’s Critical Revolutionaries: Five Critics Who Changed the Way We Read (2022). Guillory’s work surveys the “structures of professionalism” as they intersect with criticism, while Eagleton’s book takes a more biographical approach, studying five trailblazing writers of the early 20th century.

Broadly speaking, these contemporary texts analyze the evolution of criticism unfolding between 1900 and the end of the second World War largely with the intent of understanding (and predicting) the conditions which afflict the field today. Guillory talks of the current “deformed [nature] the discipline,” while Eagleton asks why literary criticism is “in danger of being neglected” when it had previously worked to emancipate language “from the purely instrumental ends to which a crass technological society had harnessed it.”

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113 Guillory, *Professing Criticism*, 77.
This “emancipation” Eagleton speaks of took place whilst Virginia Woolf was writing. Before this, 19th century audiences had a high, “peculiarly Victorian standard of culture by which to judge [criticism],” as Woolf notes in one of her essays.115 Growing access to magazines, papers, and knowledge beckoned the critic off his aloof pedestal, while at the universities, traditional literary scholarship no longer remained “largely insulated from society at large.”116 These shifting paradigms resembled, as Woolf coined it, “something like the progress of history.”117

This new, “great critic” figure of the 1920s did not derive expertise and allure only from circumspect pedantry; rather they held a unique, personal authority such that, according to Woolf, “it must have surprised readers accustomed to exhortation, information, and denunciation to find themselves familiarly addressed by a voice which seemed to belong to a man no larger than themselves.”118 While Eagleton and Guillory reflexively diagnose such innovations in criticism, Woolf spotted the shift while it was taking place—probably because she was spearheading much of the change. I believe Woolf to be one of the best examples and activists of this reimagined essayist who “brought personality into literature.”119 Yet contemporary critics Guillory and Eagleton (when mentioning Woolf at all) tend to paint her as a byproduct rather than an impetus or inventor.

In this final chapter, I bring Woolf's critical persona to the forefront of today’s discussion of literary criticism. I believe she not only provides a sturdy antidote to the ailing effects outlined in Guillory and Eagleton’s texts, but she also stresses a similar moral and aesthetic defense of criticism as explored in the essays complied in The Critic as Amateur (which spends the most time contemplating how criticism can succeed—and indeed thrive—in our modern, technological framework). Finally, in exploring Woolf’s essays as critically revolutionary to both past and present readers, we are able to repair and revitalize our study of literature for the common reader of tomorrow.

116 Eagleton, Critical Revolutionaries, 3.
A Sixth Pedestal: Terry Eagleton and the five formalists

In the Introduction to Eagleton’s *Critical Revolutionaries*, the author makes clear his chosen five critics are anything but conventional. Enter T.S. Eliot, I.A. Richards, William Empson, F. R. Leavis, and Raymond Williams. Besides sustaining close ties to the University of Cambridge, all men contributed to the transformation of literary studies by celebrating a “close reading” of texts, by foregrounding the New Critics movement in the US, and by positioning English studies as the remedy “to what seemed the impoverishment of both life and language” at the start of the 20th century. Their works epitomize formalist thought to varying degrees, and all were, in some sense, formulating or fortifying a new, theoretical interrogation of literature.

There are only two ways in which Woolf fails to align with the five critics of Eagleton’s book: first, she is not a man, and second, she is not widely considered or studied as a literary theorist. We could excuse the former in regards to Eagleton’s brief surveying of Queenie Roth (i.e., Q.D. Leavis), who was a Ph.D. student of Richards’ and wrote a renowned history of publishing. Yet it is more difficult to look past the book’s disregard for Woolf’s canon of literary essays which—outside the enjoyment they provide—are certainly read more widely today than perhaps all of the other figures’ work combined.

I am not the only one who suggests Eagleton is in need of a sixth pedestal. Reviewing *Critical Revolutionaries* for The New York Review in 2022, critic Michael Gorra also acknowledges Woolf’s pivotal role in early 20th century literary criticism. He notes towards the end of his review that her connection to Cambridge was far more sustained than Eliot’s, and during their lifetimes, she only “did not have his influence, on academic criticism in particular.”

But if Woolf could not sustain an audience inside the university, she nevertheless propels her “common” criticism to such a height that we cannot ignore its effect. She writes, “He [the common reader] reads for his own pleasure rather than to impart knowledge or correct the opinions of others.”

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121 Gorra, “Corrections of Taste.”
implores the critic reading her work to do the same. “Above all, [the common reader] is guided by an instinct to create for himself, out of whatever odds and ends he can come by, some kind of whole—a portrait of a man, a sketch of an age, a theory of the art of writing.”123 When we think of constructing a “sketch of an age” or a “theory” of art—these are big questions which may seem better left to the minds of “professionals.” These are not easy concepts to confront, and Woolf knows that. But when you have been excluded from the debate, the act of simply posing a response can be as liberating as any final conclusion. Woolf reminds us then that highfalutin questions of culture or theory do not exclusively reside in the domain of the critic. Instead the critic’s role is to gently encourage the reader to take up these queries on their own. The inversion of responsibility for Woolf is less about upending an age-old binary, but to suggest that the critic and reader function need to become more closely associated.

In 1929 when Richards, Empson and the others were writing in the cloistered halls of Cambridge, Woolf—still barred from Trinity Library—published *A Room of One’s Own*, her novel/memoir/manifesto about “the relation of women to the institutions of English literature and to the whole of the social world around them.”124 As we can see, Woolf did not shy away from these big questions. A truly radical publication for its time, the book in many ways laid the foundations for future feminist and queer scholarship of the 60s and 70s, which in turn facilitated a shift in literary theory from that of “logogenesis” and “psychogenesis,” to “sociogenesis”—prioritizing the cultural, social, and economic forces on the production of literature. Thus, *A Room of One’s Own* helped to conceive a field of study which then reflexively institutionalized scholarship on its own subject. This is part of the text’s “dialogic” capabilities, as Woolf’s book has a rippling effect across genres, modes of writing, and forms of scholarship. As Gorra puts it, “paradigms shift, and the past and present remake each other.”125 Because his piece is a work of criticism meant for general readership, the author avoids theoretical jargon and any kind of Bakhtinian rhetoric. But the rippling is, in effect, what he is noticing.

124 Gorra, “Corrections of Taste.”
125 Gorra, “Corrections of Taste.”
I would also argue that the covert theory buried in Gorra leaves open the possibility of another paradigm shift—one Eagleton does not grasp but that Gorra’s article would like us to contemplate.

“Corrections of Taste” ends by asserting that none of Critical Revolutionaries’ chosen figures “can match the free intelligence of [Woolf’s] prose,” and that not even T.S Eliot’s essays are as widely read today. “She too was a revolutionary,” Gorra concludes; A Room of One’s Own is not only “the most important work of literary criticism to have emerged from Cambridge, but the most necessary of its century in English.”126

Critical Revolutionaries celebrates five male scholars’ radical ideas, rhetoric, theories. Gorra’s interjection to include Woolf in the lineup is based on her ideas too—but specifically those on the relation of women to the social atmosphere of their time. His review perhaps does Woolf a disservice then by not recognizing how her ideas bear critically outside of a feminist tradition as well. In the article’s closing remarks, Gorra paints “revolutionary” as a hallmark of identity rather than morality. But only in the case of Woolf. Her critical persona is treated as revolutionary rather than the work itself.

Of course I deal with Woolf’s persona as well. But only the semi-fictionalized persona which I see emanating from the configuration of her prose. More importantly, I would like us to see Woolf’s criticism as revolutionary—but revolutionary for what it argues and proposes on the page. Thus “free intelligence” in accordance to Woolf takes on a countenance even Gorra does not anticipate. It is not just that her writing style is introspective and inviting; her essays themselves request a kind of free intelligence from readers so that they may apply, critique, and build off of the very assertions she makes. I suggest that her criticism carries with it the intuition and influence of theoretical inquiry without the barrier of obtuse rhetoric and an unengaging prose-style. Thus, to get the most out of our reading of Woolf’s essays, we must undo—or “un-read”—our preconceived notions of what criticism and theory can accomplish, as both are subjected to a rhetorical upheaval under her care.

This is all to say that we, as products of a literary institution deeply shaped by Richards et. al., must pay more attention to Woolf’s essays exactly because they pay attention to us. As I will argue, she

126 Gorra, “Corrections of Taste.”
proleptically creates her own field of intelligence—one that re-orders hierarchies and undoes binaries symptomatic of all types of writing. With this in mind, let us explore how Woolf’s criticism (unbeknownst to her and many others) authorizes a kind of systemic change from within.

Aspects of a disembodied prose-style

In a chapter on the great Marxist critic Raymond Williams, Eagleton notes that Williams held an intense “aversion to Virginia Woolf” because he saw her fiction as painting a world in which reality has been “stripped away, leaving only an isolated, disembodied consciousness.”127 Eagleton mentions that Williams judged Woolf’s art before she became a “feminist icon,” and that there is “no distaste for feminism implicit in his critique of her art.”128 This is the only extended reference Woolf gets in Eagleton’s book. Yet with full awareness of Woolf’s trailblazing effects on feminist discourse, Eagleton repeats Williams’ error.

Williams not only distrusted the “disembodied” nature of Woolf’s prose; it may seem unrelated, he also expressed a distrust of theory, which strikes him as “too remote from lived experience.”129 Williams saw theory as “closed, static, absolute,” acting in opposition to the “changing, diverse and open-ended” nature of reality.130 Woolf celebrates the disembodied effect of her prose and contrasts it to the corporal rigidity of “form” in her approbation of Lubbock’s work. Yet as we learn from an examination of her essays, Woolf’s nuanced approach to theory actually transforms the discipline into a more open-ended, diverse, and ambient fixture. As we will explore soon, Woolf’s invigorated approach to theory may not mirror “reality,” but it does engage with it more dynamically and democratically.

We locate this disembodied effect certainly in the stream-of-consciousness narration emblematic of Woolf’s fiction. The effect is less transparent in her essays, though it still permeates throughout in the very intentional choice of metaphor, image, and language she adopts. This is nowhere more apparent than

127 Eagleton, Critical Revolutionaries, 290-291.
128 Eagleton, Critical Revolutionaries, 291.
129 Eagleton, Critical Revolutionaries, 302.
130 Eagleton, Critical Revolutionaries, 302-303.
in her 1927 essay “The Art of Fiction,” which also deals with a study of a literary critic’s work. Here, Woolf reviews E.M. Forster’s *Aspects of the Novel* (1927). From her engagement with Lubbock, we may assume that Woolf held a grudge against all critics pursuing an overarching method to approach fiction. But Woolf paints a surprisingly positive appraisal of *Aspects of the Novel*. Why is this so? And what can it teach us retrospectively about her relationship to Lubbock?

As we know, Woolf associates *The Craft of Fiction* with a closed mode of analysis reliant on a rigid understanding of form. But she does not apply the same hardened language to all those who attempt to craft a “theory” of the novel. Perhaps more lenient because he is a fellow novelist, Woolf adopts an imaginative vocabulary when critiquing Forster’s work: “As Mr. Forster passes lightly on his way…. Never raising his voice above the speaking level, [he] has the art of saying things which sink airily enough into the mind to stay there and unfurl;” Forster “lays down no laws; the novel somehow seems to him too soft a substance to be carved like the other arts.”

Well, Forster actually does lay down some laws, Woolf is just choosing not to characterize them as such. In *Aspects of the Novel*, he outlines seven universal aspects, or laws, of fiction: “story, characters, plot, fantasy, prophecy, pattern, and rhythm.”

Ironically, Woolf does not seem to mind Forster’s appeal to a formal partitioning of a text. And I believe that her somewhat arbitrary approval of Forster’s formal analysis (over Lubbock’s) comes from the manner in which he communicated his methods. He, like Woolf, could also be said to have a “disembodied” critical prose-style. Thus as we saw with Lubbock, Woolf has no substantive rebuttal to a formal/theoretical examination of a novel; her doubt is surface level and attached to one’s writing style.

Woolf goes on to praise Forster’s methodology, citing that, “He is not a scholar; he refuses to be a pseudo-scholar;” “He is not going to theorize about fiction except incidentally.” The language Woolf employs to appraise the book suggests that she is open to dissecting a novel when the autopsy is performed by someone outside the university, “inadvertently” interested in theory, and who does not care

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to mirror reality. This sounds a lot like Woolf to me. While Lubbock and Forster’s conclusions and methods are different, structurally they are the same—both attempt in their books to uncover the inner workings of fiction. It may seem like an obvious similarity (after all, both willingly assume the title, literary “critic”), but Woolf favors one because of the attitude and style through which he (Forster) approaches criticism. Moreover, where Lubbock liberally borrows from artistic discourse and, at times, fumbles with its application, Forster renounces a vocabulary supplicated from another art form: “I have chosen the title ‘Aspects’ because it is unscientific and vague, because it leaves us the maximum freedom.”134 It is excerpts like these that should signal to us Woolf’s approval. Forster does not care to come across as a scholarly authority. And if you can disavow formal constructions all the while producing a formal argument—that to Woolf is key. But it is also very hard to do.

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“Nobody knows anything about the laws of fiction; or what its relation is to life; or to what effects it can lend itself. We can only trust our instincts,” Woolf writes. “It is unnecessary to dwell upon [fiction’s] aesthetic functions because they are so feeble that they can safely be ignored.”135 Williams casts out theoretical inquiry as “too remote,” abandoning it to the winds of abstraction. Woolf, sensing an untapped potential, reels theory back in, drawing it close to her. Conjoined to “instinct” and disentangled from “laws” and “aesthetic function,” a theoretical examination of literature under Woolf’s care is free to assume any countenance its perceiver so desires. Of course, Woolf must recognize that on some level her criticism is engaged in a kind of aesthetic enquiry. To say that aesthetics can be safely “ignored” is an oversimplification on her part, yet it gets across a larger thematic point. Namely, that there is something in lovers of literature which compel them to unearth the “form” (Lubbock) or “aspect” (Forster) of a novel even if the method of this uncovering (i.e., formalist criticism or theory) does not yield salutary or pleasurable results. To understand the inner workings, trends, themes, and structures of literature, one needs a formal kind of criticism. We want to know why the thing we love (i.e., literature) works so well,

134 Forster, Aspects of the Novel, 24.
and this universal question affects all generations, past and present. It is also one which Woolf engages with more animatedly and fervently than most.

This dilemma—between loving literature and formulating about it—is, in effect, literary criticism’s paradox and liberator. “Theories then are dangerous things,” Woolf writes in “The Leaning Tower” (1940), her essay on literary influence: “All the same we must risk making this afternoon.”136 Here, Woolf goes against her previous admonishment of the genre/nature of theoretical inquiry most visible in her critique of Lubbock. She continues, “we must commit ourselves to the belief that there is some force, influence, outer pressure which is strong enough to stamp itself upon a whole group of different writers…. But let us always remember—influences are infinitely numerous.”137 She writes this in the context of her own theory on the nature of “influence,” yet the general and disembodied nature of her language makes the messaging easily transferable to a discussion on theory more generally across Woolf’s canon.

*The common critic*

Circling back briefly to the notion of Woolf’s “free intelligence,” this can be taken quite literally, namely in the fact that Woolf did not pay for a university education. The University—as both a microcosm of academic aloofness and as a sponsor of profound exploration—remains a constant (and at times controversial) fixture throughout Eagleton’s *Critical Revolutionaries*. In the Introduction, Eagleton notes that “Cambridge English” (a term he employs liberally throughout the book) was the byproduct of synthesizing two revolutionary projects into one department: “practical criticism” and a “concern for the social and intellectual context of literature.”138 In each of Eagleton’s five chapters, Cambridge comes across as both key to unlocking new literary ideas, but also as an obstacle—keeping these findings from seeping into general culture and practices. It is important to remember that the university does not bear

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down on Woolf’s criticism in the same manner. Her writing is “free” in the sense that it does not carry the weight of academia’s influence and legacy.

To carry out…a reader’s duty [one] needs such imagination, insight, and learning that it is hard to conceive any one mind sufficiently endowed…. Would it not be wiser, then, to remit this part of reading and to allow the critics, the gowned and furred authorities of the library, to decide the question of the book’s absolute value for us? Yet how impossible!139

“Imagination, insight, and learning”—the words which Woolf would have us use to appraise a reader’s “duty” ring similar to the attributes she evokes when discussing a reimagined understanding of “form.” Form, as we investigated in the previous chapter, has the capacity to work alongside emotion to create the ideal reading (and re-reading) experience. Woolf, musing on the critic figure, reminds us that “it is hard to conceive of any one mind sufficiently endowed” with the capacity to act as arbiter and judge of great literature. Speaking, of course, to the general reader, Woolf wants her audience to consider other voices outside of the critic to turn to for an evaluation of a text. If, as she tells us, we want to cast aside this pompous, “gowned” figure, we are nevertheless in need of an authority to help navigate “one of the most arduous and exhausting of occupations”—reading.140

The male critics of the early half of the 20th century galvanized “the value of one’s own independent judgment,” and as Gorra notes, enacted a shift where “evaluation and interpretation…replaced a set of earlier models.”141 Yet we should remember that Woolf’s reimagined conception of form also asks for an adherence to individualized thought and opinion. So rather than wearily shifting through heavy and complexly worded academia journals, Woolf, in her more accessible critical essays, helps us find “value” that is meaningful and informed, but that is also our own.

140 Woolf, “How Should One Read a Book?,” 258.
141 Gorra, “Corrections of Taste.”
Woolf wants her common readers to become common critics with the intent, it seems, to make her own task obsolete: “the only advice…that one person can give another about reading is to take no advice, to follow your own instincts, to use your own reason, to come to your own conclusions.”142 Of course, Woolf does not intend to disavow the profession of the critic completely; she just wants to make us aware of alternative sources of wisdom. If we peer intently into Woolf’s literary-minded works, we see how “form” and “emotion [are] our material,”143 for Woolf fashions them into the blueprints of a new critical guidebook. Crucially, this guidebook can be used by all.

Turning to a specific essay titled, “How Should One Read a Book?” (1926) we find Woolf remarking that, “We must remain readers; we shall not put on the further glory that belongs to those rare beings who are also critics. But still we have our responsibilities as readers and even our importance. The standards we raise and the judgments we pass steal into the air and become part of the atmosphere which writers breathe as they work.”144 Perhaps to mitigate accusations of pretentiousness, Woolf aligns herself with the reader, asserting that it is they who hold the most power in the reader-author-text-critic dynamic. The reader—unlike the estranged author, aloof critic, and disembodied text—has power to continuously shape and evolve the work beyond its diegetic conditions. The reader, in effect, creates and protects the dialogism of the novel, and it is their “judgment” which defines past and future perceptions (and generations) of literature.

Not only does Woolf fashion herself, at times, as the eponymous common reader, she also dives into the consciousness of the hapless novelist in search of a critic who appreciates their craft: “If behind the erratic gunfire of the press the author felt that there was another kind of criticism, the opinion of people reading for the love of reading, slowly and unprofessionally, and judging with great sympathy and yet with great severity, might this not improve the quality of his [the novelist’s] work?”145 Now entering the mindset of the novelist, Woolf creates a scenario in which the critic pulls off his mask, revealing to us

142 Woolf, “How Should One Read a Book?,” 258.
144 Woolf, “How Should One Read a Book?,” 269.
he was the common reader all along. This style of criticism is embodied by Samuel Johnson (or even Montaigne), but Woolf wants readers to know she is the true epitome of this personal, sympathetic, and ultimately more valuable mode of criticism.

It is easy to dismiss the self-referential nature of Woolf’s argument, yet I would interject that, first, Woolf needs a healthy dose of hubris to match the inflated presumptuousness of her male contemporaries, and that second, the flexible, porous boundaries she constructs between author, critic, and reader ultimately do act in service of the most important (and numerous) part of the equation: the reader itself.

Continuing to think broadly about the canon of Woolf’s essays, we observe that her criticism prioritizes the reader’s response. In the 1920s and 30s when she was writing, this was becoming a fairly modern and innovative practice, but not one which would not be cemented in university circles until Wolfgang Iser. This point further demonstrates the respective radicalism of Woolf’s criticism. Her preemptive awareness of reader response theory is also clear in the titles of her two-volume collection of essays on the nature of reading: The Common Reader and The Common Reader II. Simple but to the point, these titles encapsulate more than just the targeted audience; they represent a guiding voice and morality. The essays themselves propose an ethic which insists literary writing exist for the everyday reader, or not at all.

We see this kind of morality at play in Woolf’s insistence that just because her audience is “common” and her subject “emotion,” one should not discount her discourse as any less salient than that produced by her Cambridge affiliates. Richards, Leavis, Empson, Eliot, Williams, and Eagleton would be wise to consider Woolf (and her cherished reader figure) as more central to English criticism, theorizing, and reading. Even while scolding the “gowned and furred” critic figure as full of “aesthetic waffle” (to use one of Eagleton’s more amusing phrasings), Woolf is perhaps unaware of how she simultaneously


147 Woolf, “How Should One Read a Book?,” 258.
reinvents the notion of the critic figure in and through her own discourse. So even if Eagleton does not deem Woolf a critical revolutionary, her work shows us that—on her own terms—she was quite the revolutionary critic.

*The common theorist*

Woolf, as it turns out, was not just an exceptional critic; she was also, as I attempt to argue, quite the revolutionary theorist. “Theory” though is a convoluted term. And “Literary theory” is no more descriptive. But as Woolf reminds us, it is in the “nature” of words “not to express one simple statement but a thousand possibilities.”148 This quote would certainly work as an epigraph to a book on Bakhtin, as it simply states one of the core tenets of the Russian Theorist’s *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981): that language is inherently “dialogic,” meaning no word relates to its object in one singular way.149 Woolf’s conception of the “dialogism” of language is perhaps easier to digest, even if she herself did not coin the term. Here we apprehend how Woolf anticipates theoretical discourse, and in doing so, subverts the insular and agonistic conformation of the field. As we see, she openly grapples with major questions of theory and even outside a discussion of form, she is an admirable proto-theoretical thinker. Eagleton, thinking about the early formalist movement in England, writes that its thinkers wanted to get to the bottom of “what we mean by a poem in the first place, and by what criteria we judge its success.”150 Woolf throughout her essays exhibits a similar perceptiveness to the systems and faculties which go into shaping our understanding and evaluation of literature. Openly grappling with major questions of theory, she in one work asks, “How far, we must ask ourselves, is a book influenced by its writer’s life—how far is it safe to let the man interpret the writer?…. *We must answer them for ourselves,* for nothing can be more fatal than to be guided by the preferences of others in a matter so personal.”151

150 Eagleton, *Critical Revolutionaries*, 82.
151 Woolf, “How Should One Read a Book?,” 263, italics added.
The passage quoted above comes from “How Should One Read a Book?.” Like the excerpt, the language and syntax of the title is simple—almost elementary. But Woolf does not need a fancy, verbose prose to convey her point. This is the genius of her work. Simple language and simple thoughts means ideas are free to permeate our minds more readily, thus meaning and value can be found more readily.

“How far...is a book influenced by its writer’s life—how far is it safe to let the man interpret the writer?” Without any precursory pomp, Woolf, unbeknownst to her, muses on a foundational theoretical concern: do the author and their intention matter? Her essay asks us to join her quest and examine how one should handle questions of intention in relation to an evaluation of a text. Woolf’s inquiry predates Barthes’ musing on the “death of the author,” and we cannot help but notice how she takes up the same theoretical considerations with a more profound clarity. The excerpt is just one of many which showcases an admirable literary thinker—one on par with the great French theorist. Barthes wrote his book on the subject in 1967. Woolf in 1926. She was, in every sense, ahead of her time.

Looking again at the excerpt, the word “safe” prompts us to stop and reflect, as Woolf seems to anticipate a danger in acquiescing a reader’s urge to judge the writer instead of their work. On a [paratextual/larger] level, Woolf asks us not to judge her, the writer, too quickly as well. Phrased in the form of a question rather than a direct assertion, this excerpt shows that—even outside debates on form—Woolf proves an admirable protoformalist thinker. Yet instead of deriving opinions from inside academia, she crafted her theories from outside the insular intellectual communities of the early 20th century. Not only that, but this personal and introspective stance comes, I believe, with the prospect of more expansive impact today.

Woolf does not ask Barthes or Derrida to answer the question of authorial intention for her. Unlike the formalist thinkers of Eagleton’s book, Woolf makes it her mission to give readers of criticism—not just poems or novels—back their agency. She wants them to determine their own critical method with as little pedagogic intervention as possible.

Overall, it is not the theorist’s eye Woolf disavows, but the academic dogma in which theory was, and perhaps still is, irrevocably entwined. But if we are to place theory in the care of a receptive and
observant critic—then we may sit and watch it transform. In this regard, Woolf flips inside-out the conventional concentric circles or hierarchies of literary writing in English studies. We must remember that in Eagleton’s book (and in the minds of most students), theory is the most closed off and most esoteric circle. Then comes academia which is a bit broader and more encompassing. Finally reaching out wider we get criticism, which tends to comply with the public eye. Woolf inverts the standard paradigm, stretching theory out beyond its usual confines, and into the realm of radical accessibility (changing the nature of academic and critical writing in the process). So under Woolf’s supervision, theory becomes a personal affair, an intimate affair, a common affair.

*A theory of one’s own*

We have now found bouts of theoretical inspection mingled throughout Woolf’s essays. But there is also a unique kind of introspection (on form, functionality, theory and so on) to be found in one of her most genre-bending works, *A Room of One’s Own*. As noted above, Gorra points to this text as essential to western society’s “social experience,” and for this reason, labels it the “most important work” of literary criticism to come out of Cambridge. 152 I agree that the book is certainly one of the most indispensable, but I want to inspect further how the text’s radicalism shines through in its form, paratextual layers, and perplexing narrative structure.

To look beyond a monologic reading which has dominated scholarship of the text, we must first unearth the complex structure of Woolf’s argument, as she de-emphasises her own narratorial and personal authority in a complex procedure of shifting perspectives and various focalizing frames. Like in many of her essays, Woolf begins be demonstrating how she—Virginia Woolf—is not an expert on the topic at hand: “I should never be able to fulfill what is, I understand, the first duty of a lecturer—to hand you after an hour’s discourse a nugget of truth…. All I could do was to offer you an opinion upon one minor point—a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.” 153 Here, Woolf

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152 Gorra, “Corrections of Taste.”
plays a clever game: she tells us she will not be able to hand us a “nugget of truth,” but then in the next sentence presents that very ounce of truth which we were previously told does not exist. Since Woolf’s claim on women’s role in fiction is pragmatically summed up in this assertion (and the title), we have to believe that there is a larger, more elusive argument which will unfold later on.

Immediately then we are introduced to Woolf as lecturer, and this “nugget” of truth certainly holds haunting continence over the remainder of the text. As we continue into the depths of A Room of One’s Own, the setting, focalizer, and subject matter evolve. Thus we are inclined to forget that the book is, indeed, entirely framed in this non-fiction, lecture-style narrative. Crucially, unlike traditional critical essays or books, Woolf’s theoretical ideas are not so much expressed in the content and messaging of the work, but in the form itself. Yes, it is traditional to find theoretical inquiry in Woolf’s assessment on the role women play in building a future Modernist aesthetic; however, given the unique format of the text it would be wrong to study these claims as purely a product of content, and not form. For I believe it is form which shapes, evolves, and strengthens the theoretical claims of A Room of One’s Own.

After this long, winding opening paragraph, the narrative voice shifts. Woolf-the-lecturer remains an omni-present narrator, but the focalization is passed off to a first-person “I” figure that is not Woolf, but a stock character of the universal female author. The second paragraph begins: “Here then was I (call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please—it is not a matter of any importance) sitting on the banks of a river a week or two ago in fine October weather, lost in thought.” Woolf, A Room of One’s Own, 5. Chapters 1 and 2 go on to flush out the systematic disadvantages female writers face in lack of educational resources and texts which place their stories at the center. These chapters are also shaped by this new narrator—the fictional “Mary”—though Woolf (the author) continues to playfully flex her puppetry skills: chapter 2 begins, “The scene, if I may ask you to follow me, was now changed.” Woolf, A Room of One’s Own, 25. We assume this is Woolf’s lecture voice protruding through Mary’s first-person focalization, though we cannot say for certain.

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154 Woolf, A Room of One’s Own, 5.
155 Woolf, A Room of One’s Own, 25.
Our “Mary” figure returns in the sixth and final chapter, here musing about a new Modernist aesthetic: “Perhaps to think, as I had been thinking these two days, of one sex as distinct from the other is an effort. It interferes with the unity of the mind.” In these last few pages, Mary’s narrative persists, but it also slowly bleeds back into the lecturer’s more authoritative commentary. Nevertheless, a distinct breakage or turn is not identifiable. A Room of One’s Own thus consists of an ever-oscillating double voice: one where Woolf the non-fiction narrator lectures on the role of Women in Fiction, and a second one where the fictional narrator, “Mary,” walks us through her personal quest to find female voices in the libraries of Oxbridge and London. From here it is clear the text makes unique use of frame narrative, a literary technique that places a story (or stories) under the framework of a larger story or narrative. In the case of A Room of One’s Own, the framed narrative represents the structural manifestation of novelistic discourse, meaning Woolf does not place her argument in the context of a fully fictional/novelistic world, yet still desires a kind of dialogism which comes about through a mixing and melding of various character voices and opinions. For Woolf, the double frame facilitates a dialogue which is inherently unresolved, mainly because the two narrative voices do not reside on the same textual plane. Woolf and Mary may never meet, but they are nevertheless familiar with each others’ plight.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 of A Room of One’s Own appear less concerned with the fictional side of events, and instead opt for a more analytical approach with third-person interjections like, “One could have sworn…” and “with Mrs. Behn we turn a very important corner” (akin to the style we find in Woolf’s essays); however, an overlaying of voices remains present. According to critic Kathleen Wall, readings of A Room of One’s Own tend to view Woolf’s inclusion of a fictitious narrative as, first, a clever ruse to disavow a writer’s patriarchal authority, or second, as an attempt to construct a truly feminine textual space; critics thus “have tended to see the fiction as affecting her rhetoric, not her argument, which they continue to view as coherent. Any contradictions in the text have been viewed as a dialectic between

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156 Woolf, A Room of One’s Own, 84.
158 Woolf, A Room of One’s Own, 56.
content and form rather than a dialogue between various narrative levels and voices.”¹⁵⁹ I would like to expand on Wall’s insight and suggest that, while the fiction certainly does affect Woolf’s argument, it also transforms the work as a whole into a manifestation (or embodiment) of theoretical discourse dismembered from a higher authority (i.e., the university). After all, the narrator figure of A Room of One’s Own (and of almost any piece of commentary) is supposed to hold some kind of critical authority. Yet not Woolf. Through a succession of focalizers (who are convolutedly close to the narrator herself), any kind of true authority is eroded. We are left with a complete democratization of the critical gaze, or a dialogized mode of criticism.

Like Woolf’s essays, A Room of One’s Own is created for the eyes of common readers and one could, if they so desired, read these works purely with the intention of enjoying Woolf’s engaging and provocative prose-style. To marry the pleasurable capabilities of writing with a host of theoretical and critical conjectures—this is the true hallmark of Woolf’s genius. Yet I do not believe this aspect is seen or studied enough. In A Room of One’s Own and the essays, one can choose to read for enjoyment, choose to read for criticism, or choose to read for theory. To amalgamate all of this in one text is something not seen before. And to me, it crafts a kind of “dialogized criticism,” for the text prompts us to reflect on the critical apparatus itself instead of simply viewing it as a fiction to enter.

We may briefly think back to a little quip Woolf makes in “On Re-Reading Novels.” She writes that, “Hamlet may change” with each reading, “and indeed it does.”¹⁶⁰ With the phrasing, Woolf suggests that a reader’s interpretation is transposed from the mind directly onto the text itself. The text changes, not the mind. While first and foremost a rhetorical technique, the phrase also speaks volumes to the nature of textual interpretation in Woolf’s canon. Interestingly, the same thing, I think, could be said about A Room of One’s Own: it has—or perhaps was built with—the capacity to change.

“From [writing] I reach what I may call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this;

¹⁵⁹ Wall, “Frame Narratives,” 184, italics added.
that the whole world is a work of art; the we are parts of the work of art.” If we are to briefly scale down this “philosophy” to the microcosm of a text or essay, perhaps this “hidden pattern” is not so different from Woolf’s conception of form. For as we remember, “form” is key to deciding what mode of reading one would like to take up. Woolf’s discourse holds in it a kind of “philosophy” itself, especially when considering that this oscillation between various reading lenses is in service of the reader figure. After all, it is up to the reader to decide which “goggles” (i.e., the pleasurable, critical, or theoretical) they want to try on each time they pick up one of Woolf’s works.

In harmonizing form with fiction, criticism, and theoretical inquest, these various modes of analysis work in a mutually affirming partnership which centers reader engagement. Here, we witness (and hopefully embrace) the innovative and wonderfully strange genre-bending beauty of Woolf’s work.

If we are to treat the frame narrative form of A Room of One’s Own as just as integral to the morals and messaging of the text, we can then understand the work to stretch beyond its traditional function as a piece of feminist literature. The book, instead of remaining “a dialectic between content and form” (Wall 184) becomes a radical exploration of rhetorical dialogism, not just between various narrative planes, but also between the new critic and the old.

Thus, the narrative frame becomes more than just a structural tool; it is a type of form—one which we can humor and tolerate in our first reading, but certainly cannot ignore in our second. For only in the process of re-reading can Woolf’s inventive manipulation of form be revealed (and fully comprehended). Form is innate in the book’s messaging and it generates a continual ambiguity; this thus makes the work into one of the most unique expositions of fiction, theory, and criticism interwoven as one. So when Gorra remarks that A Room of One’s Own is one of the most “important” and “necessary” works of literary criticism of the century, he is certainly right—but for the wrong reasons. It is not just about the text’s exploration of “women” in “relation to social institutions”—this restricted lens diminishes

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the expansiveness of the text. Rather, Woolf’s manipulation of framed narrative and narrative levels challenges conventional applications of form by demonstrating its infinite applicabilities.

“My own suggestion is a little fantastic, I admit; I prefer, therefore, to put it in the form of fiction,” Woolf writes towards the end of A Room of One’s Own.162 For me, this book best highlights the benefits of an attention to form/formalist thought. It shows how the nuances of language (i.e, close reading) can, indeed, be coupled with commentary that goes beyond the confines of the text: after all, Woolf manipulates the formal structures of this text with the chief objective of making it into a vehicle which can “be brought critically to bear on social existence as a whole.”163 She is attuned to history, but also imposed on this book an authentic imagination and lived experience that other critical writers at the time lacked.

The university and the universal

Literary criticism today, Eagleton’s suggests, is “in danger of being neglected” because the discipline no longer contributes to the development of a “free, unspecialised, disinterested intelligence.”164 The argument here is that literature teaches one to draw fine distinctions, to discriminate between closely related meanings, and to entertain several conflicting ideas at once.165 When criticism is devalued (or recedes back into the wells of academia) then our culture’s critical thinking abilities are neglected as well. Eagleton believes he has found a possible solution in introducing Richards, Leavis, and the others to today’s generation of literary critics.

Staying true to his Marxist teachings, Eagleton highlights these figures’ diverse upbringings.166 And only after establishing class difference does Eagleton delve into his subjects’ commonalities: aside from all playing shareholder roles in the founding of “formalism,” they also either taught or had deep ties

162 Woolf, A Room of One’s Own, 94, italics added.
163 Eagleton, Critical Revolutionaries, 249.
164 Eagleton, Critical Revolutionaries, 249.
165 Gorra, “Corrections of Taste.”
166 “Most literary critics, like most academics, hail from the middle class; but of the five figures discussed in this book, only one, I.A. Richards, fits this description.” Critical Revolutionaries, 8.
to Cambridge’s English department, like Eagleton himself. Eliot, Richards, Empson, Leavis, and Williams were also all “public intellectuals rather than cloistered academics”; they “took a keen interest in Eastern thought,” and all except one “were creative writers.” 167 In summary, they were unconventional academics. They were theorists and critics, but active players in a shifting cultural paradigm. It is also no accident then that the attributes listed above coincide with contemporary codes of social respectability. In accordance with the book’s cover-art (where soviet-style caricatures raise their firsts, galvanizing the next generation of readers to join their cause), Eagleton hoped, it seems, to find a sympathetic audience in those who identify with liberal politics of the day, but nevertheless scoff at these socialist forefathers turning a blind eye to racial and gendered modes of discrimination. Eagleton demonstrates his chosen critics’ receptive-ness to modern culture by highlighting their interdisciplinary standings: Richards came from “Mental and Moral Sciences,” Leavis from history, Eliot from philosophy, Empson from mathematics; and after a long career with the English Department, Williams moved to “cultural studies,” a subject which Eagleton notes he “helped to invent.” 168 The book dwells on these matters to convey to a young student why classical criticism or traditional theory is relevant today. These critics (he highlights Williams in particular) actually helped construct a quality of analysis which does not just accommodate—but celebrates—race, class, and gender as integral to academic inquiry. Empson and Leavis had staunchly opposing critical views, but when Empson demonstrates how “ambiguity” ensures a literary text is “never reducible to a final interpretation,” 169 and Leavis how defining a literary tradition should be based on “the essence of the language,” 170 both, Eagleton suggests, are working to deconstruct a closed canon which sustained itself on principles of Victorian elitism rather than independent, rhetorical and literary value.

167 Eagleton, Critical Revolutionaries, 9, 8, 8.
168 Eagleton, Critical Revolutionaries, 4.
Thus, *Critical Revolutionaries* cares about how each figures’ influence extends beyond academia. This lens is applied not just to appease today’s cultural norms; Eagleton’s argument in many ways hinges on these critics’ ability to transcend the enigmatic intellectualism of universities and professorships both in their time and today. The book conveys that the new, rigorously analytical and evaluative approach to literary studies (pioneered first by Richards) provides fresh contrast to the “genteel amateureism” of 19th century upper-class critique.\(^{171}\) “Value,” as Eagleton notes, “was no longer a matter of taste.”\(^{172}\) This also begs the question: what determines “value” today?

This brings us, I think, right back to the first sentence of *Critical Revolutionaries*: that the tradition of literary criticism “is in danger of being neglected.” Guillory’s book addresses a similar skepticism, as both contemporary critics ask why it is that the field faces such scrutiny if (as both authors suggest) the critical revolution of the 1920s “involved learning to trust—to insist on—the value of one’s own independent judgment rather than relying on some constituted authority.”\(^{173}\) Does this not mean that “the value of one’s own independent judgment” is in danger of being neglected today as well? I think the question looms large in Eagleton’s work.

I believe Eagleton worries we have reverted back in some ways, thus the need to re-instill some literary objectivity. We can do this by looking back to the criticism of a century ago, giving some thought again to the formalist-style methods of these Cambridge critics. Eagleton I think certainly paints a convincing ultimatum—one where English studies of the early 20th century “could either take the pressure of social change or consign itself to irrelevance.”\(^{174}\) Of course, these five men chose the latter, but buried in this sentiment is the indictment that the same warning could be issued to today’s literature departments. Eagleton’s book, along with other recent publications like *Professing Criticism* suggest that we students and teachers of English must not only be “more alive to the general culture,” but also “more troubled by the place of literary studies within it.”\(^{175}\)

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173 Gorra, “Corrections of Taste.”
Revolutionary in name only

Even though today Richards’ methods of close reading are effectively implemented in high schools around the globe, his (and the other thinkers’) loftier ideas still remain circumscribed in academic circles. Eagleton is frank about this uneasy paradigm. In the opening remarks, the book concedes that the critics, “all shared a certain elitism;” however, Critical Revolutionaries asks us not to judge too hastily; the book is quick to brush past social privilege in favor of more discursive qualities. In this regard, we sense its underlying message:

Soon to be canceled, cut, or censored out of English curricula, these five men—Critical Revolutionaries hopes to prove—can indeed withstand twenty-first century social scrutiny. With care and credibility Eagleton paints a fresh and de-tarnished portrait of these antiquated figures. His assumption is not that they are unflawed, but that any contestation should be reserved for their critical judgment—not their privileged identities. For Eliot, Empson, and the others emit a more radical flare than their tweed jackets and tortoiseshell glasses suggest.

One review of Eagleton’s book notes that the author discusses the critical writings of these five men with “forensic but generous attention”—much in the same empirical manner Richards would have us close-read a poem. And here we can start to see perhaps the greatest flaw in Eagleton’s work: it is not that the book is closeted as conservative, narrow in its objective, or too invested in a group of “old, dead white men.” It is that Eagleton’s discourse so closely resembles the critics he admires that he ends up repeating—rather than amending—the reasons they have been sidelined in the first place.

Yes, it is true that Eagleton’s high estimation of his fraternity of five “does not depend purely on their politics” but rather “on their conceptions of literature and their practice of criticism.” But this argument is, in effect, how the author attempts to make his book palatable to today’s generation sitting in English classrooms. And while Richards, Empson, Eliot, Leavis, and Williams certainly were radical in

176 Eagleton, Critical Revolutionaries, 4.
177 Nolan, “Terry Eagleton, Critical Revolutionaries.”
178 Nolan, “Terry Eagleton, Critical Revolutionaries.”
their literary assessments, the sustained paradigm of “Cambridge English” should in itself signal an elitism still entwined in the legacies of these critics. Instead of coupling these figures’ exhilarating ideas about literary criticism with the hindsight of a twenty-first century observer, *Critical Revolutionaries* seems to only have eyes for those who could walk, unhindered and uninterrupted, through the courts of Trinity into Wren Library. Yet there is, I believe, someone not too removed from Eagleton’s criterion who could—if he would let her though—invigorate his case.

If we momentarily think back to the reign of Richards and his contemporaries, there is another writer whose work displayed a similar admonishment of old-guard “impressionistic prattle.” This person also had a close association to Cambridge, was a “public intellectual rather than cloistered academic,” and was, as we are probably most aware, a wonderful “creative writer.” Who, if I am to push the point a little further, was perhaps most “alive to the general culture” while also preoccupied “with the place of literary studies within it”? My response would be, of course, Virginia Woolf. The writer certainly feels like the missed opportunity of Eagleton’s book and today’s discourse on criticism, as she provides the very antidote to their unaddressed and unanswered questions.
CONCLUSION

An obvious rebuttal to my paper would be to suggest that Virginia Woolf does not want to be a theorist—so why make her into one. Her work does not exhibit the methodological and logical consistency we have come to expect from theory, and her essays can contradict each other, as they are not unified by a cohesive moral or aesthetic code. So perhaps it is better to let her criticism rest as enjoyable and lightly provocative bits of prose.

To this I would say that theoretically-inclined criticism as a discipline and as a diagnostic device maintains a hold on Woolf’s legacy whether we like it or not. After all, the author cannot stop reminding her readers why our analysis of art and the novel holds a relevancy beyond the classroom. To look at a phrase Gorra writes about T.S. Eliot: “through a mixture of bluff and persuasion,” the poet-critic got his readers to share his tastes. Woolf is no different. Her essays may prove a tad inconsistent while leveraging some holed and gap-y claims. But I suggest that on a formal level, they come very close to mirroring the type of inquiry being done in Cambridge’s English Department during her lifetime. But thank goodness she was not actually there, as her criticism would then not contain such a radical reworking of theoretical expectations.

Woolf, I believe, was the path not taken in theory. In my paper, I hope to have communicated that her writing not so much redefined theory, but reimagined its applications and audience. This criticism created a bespoke formalist avenue inclined to mold to the reader’s countenance. In this regard, Woolf was “prepared to take on the whole of the cultural and academic Establishment” to retrieve English studies from those who had tainted and trivialized it. That includes Eagleton and his five, for they are partially responsible for narrowing the scope of theory.

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179 Gorra, “Corrections of Taste.”
180 Eagleton, Critical Revolutionaries, 255.
Today, the practice of “literary theory” has taken on slightly antiquated connotations while literary criticism is under scrutiny for becoming too tightly wound to academic jargon and pretentiousness.\(^1\) Moreover, Woolf’s own stature in academia wavers under her admittance in highbrow intellectual circles operating at the heart of a colonial enterprise. By shifting the focus in Woolf studies to align more with the writer’s contributions to issues of form and reader response, we may perhaps stumble upon an antidote to both Woolf and theory’s tainted relevance today. Literary criticism is a wonderful thing. It requires diligence and systemic conceptualization from its author, all the while maintaining an enthusiasm and respect for an espousal of the arts. And too see Woolf’s criticism as dialogic and proto-theoretical—this only enhances its modern-day versatility.

We must also remember that Woolf’s “outsider” position benefits theory as well. The discipline is in need of a reinvigorated canon of voices if it wants to match the current trends in literature departments. For students—more than ever before—care about why and how a text is relevant outside its aesthetic function and, by extension, academia. How does a poem challenge hegemonic structures or the patriarchy? Where can we find marginalized voices, and amplify them? Why does art still matter in our data driven, AI-infused world? While neither Woolf nor literary theory hold all the answers, I argue that Woolf teaches theory to accommodate and celebrate this kind of inquiry.

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Virginia Woolf’s most renowned biographer, Hermione Lee, wrote that Woolf “wanted to avoid all categories.” As I have stated before, I have openly defied these wishes by attempting to illuminate the flickerings of the theorist and formalist found within. I hope Woolf would forgive my efforts, as I know her work—exemplified in her essays and A Room of One’s Own—ultimately resists many of the academic and cultural categories she is conventionally prescribed to. A common category is certainly gender. As Elaine Showalter once put it, “feminist criticism cannot go around forever in men’s ill-fitting hand-me-downs.”\(^2\) And while I have so far neglected to bring gender into my argument, I believe that

\(^1\) See John Guillory’s new book, Professing Criticism (2022).
readers may now see how under the surface, Woolf as pioneering a distinct, feminist discourse of theory permeates throughout. This is, after all, another way we can mine her legacy for new, untapped potential. To see Woolf as a protoformalist thus facilitates an understanding of the ever-providing, ever-democratizing nature of her work.

“If, then, this is true—that books are of very different types, and that to read them rightly we have to bend our imaginations powerfully, first one way, then another—it is clear that reading is one of the most arduous and exhausting of occupations.”183 Books are of all different types, but Woolf reveals that all different types can also be found in just one book. Her writings, as I have posited, actively dismantle the boundaries between criticism, fiction, memoir, and theory. In melding all these “genres,” she makes them accessible (and hopefully replicable) to her readers. Regardless, this task of reading is certainly “one of the most arduous and exhausting of occupations.” And I would argue this is precisely because it is—at least when prescribed by Woolf—available to all. With literature’s profound accessibility, the entrance fee becomes the meager price of imaginative fortitude. Nothing more. “The windows…are open; the blinds are drawn up.” All are welcome.

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AFTERWORD

I don’t know if an afterword is appropriate for a thesis, but given that I take up Woolf’s melding of genres, I hope we can let this one pass. Thank you to whoever read, kind of read, or (dutifully) re-read this work. The latter exclusively applies to Professor Lee.

All I want to say is that I did have a lot of fun writing this, and I appreciate everyone who took the time to peruse through a piece that means so much to me. Immediately after you write a hundred or so pages on something, you feel like you can do anything. So definitely write a thesis, definitely read a Woolf essay (no need to just jump into the novels), and definitely study English. It’s a recipe for success.