

The Value of

VIRGINIA WOOLF

MADELYN DETLOFF



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Miami University



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The Value of Virginia Woolf

In *The Value of Virginia Woolf*, Madelyn Detloff explores the writings of Virginia Woolf, from her early texts to her challenging and inventive novels. Detloff demonstrates why Woolf has enduring value for our own time, both as a defender of modernist experimentation and as a novelist of innovation and poetic vision who also exhibits moments of intense insight and philosophical depth. A famously enigmatic figure, Woolf produced literary works that offer different rewards to different readers. *The Value of Virginia Woolf* examines not only the significance of her most celebrated fiction, but also the interplay of precision and freedom, beauty and wit, voice and language that give Woolf's writings their perennial appeal.

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Introduction

On Value

One cannot speak of value without implicitly or explicitly speaking of values. Barbara Herrnstein Smith made this point eloquently clear in her meticulous study of the “double discourse” of value, *Contingencies of Value*.¹ “On the one hand,” Smith explains, “there is the discourse of economic theory: money, commerce, technology, industry, production and consumption, workers and consumers; on the other hand, there is the discourse of aesthetic axiology: culture, art, genius, creation and appreciation, artists and connoisseurs.”² These two “hands” may use different yardsticks for measuring what is worth one’s time, money, effort, or attention, but both participate in the same complex, dynamic system of evaluation – a system that is social and interdependent, rather than presocial or transcendent. Arguing that “All value is radically contingent, being neither a fixed attribute, an inherent quality, or an objective property of things but, rather, an effect of multiple, continuously changing, and continuously interacting variables,” Smith eschews the notion of intrinsic aesthetic value (a value that inheres in things, in works), and claims, rather, that value is conferred through communal processes – that is, through the *work* of valuing.³

This work goes unnoticed when there is a high degree of agreement in a community. When there is less consensus in a community about particular practices, inclinations, or forms, cultural artifacts that align with those practices, inclinations, or forms will be regarded as matters of personal preference: some people prefer Beethoven to Bach, Beyoncé to Taylor Swift, blue to green.⁴ When there is general agreement in a community – say, that Beethoven’s music is worthy of more regard than Taylor Swift’s, or that a Michelangelo fresco is worth preserving while a spray-painted wall in Los Angeles can (and, some

would say, should) be targeted for removal – the preference for Beethoven or Michelangelo will seem to be intrinsic to the music or the painting, rather than the result of unacknowledged, perhaps unconscious, communal decision-making. For Smith, “Here, as elsewhere, a *co-incident of contingencies among individual subjects who interact as members of some community will operate for them as noncontingency and be interpreted by them accordingly.*”⁵ To claim that value is contingent is not to say is that all things are equal – Bansky=Beethoven=Beyoncé – but rather to acknowledge that aesthetic value operates much more like exchange value than many of us would like to admit, accruing over years, even millennia, through “complex interrelations among human needs, technological production, and cultural practices” that are recursively reinforced, according to Smith, through “a continuous process of mutual modification between our desires and our universe.”⁶ In other words, cultural capital begets cultural capital in much the same way that capital begets more capital.

This knowledge can make one regard cynically any claim about the value of the work of a particular author, artist, or composer, but only if the social, interdependent aspect of valuing is seen as debasing or corrupting. We could, instead, consider the contingency of aesthetic value as a powerful heuristic for illuminating a culture’s ideals, unspoken preferences (for better or worse), and hierarchies of worth. These preferences, ideals, and hierarchies are, unlike allegedly transcendent measures of value, open to reflection, contestation, and recursive remaking. Melba Cuddy-Keane highlights the generative potential of Smith’s dynamic theory of value, arguing that Smith’s theory “takes us beyond confrontations of differing values to an analysis of the way value operates by alerting us both to the institutional production of value and to the ‘*countermechanisms*’ within the community for challenging, contradicting, and subverting normative claims.”⁷ The history of Woolf’s reception over the past seventy-five years (a history that includes the propensity to conflate Woolf with her characters) illustrates the power and potential of the collective process of reflecting, contesting, and remaking.⁸

I will touch on Woolf's reception history briefly in my final chapter. Here, following the insights opened up by Smith's *Contingencies of Value*, I offer a few hypotheses that guide my thinking throughout this book. First, creative works that incite the process of reflection, contestation, and remaking are immensely valuable for the cultural self-awareness they inspire. Second, Virginia Woolf's work provides particularly apt examples of creative writing that stimulates this type of reflection, contestation, and remaking. And third, questions of literary value, like questions of moral value, need not (and, ideally, should not) be relegated to traditionalists, conservatives, or the elite. Progressives, nontraditionalists, and common people have a stake in how values are shaped and disseminated, and thus should exercise a voice (beyond iconoclasm) in the communal deliberations that go into the work of valuing.

My third hypothesis was tested most acutely in my first years of teaching at a state university with a student demographic drawn largely from working poor families in East and Central Los Angeles. I was teaching a graduate seminar on literary and cultural theory, which was populated by a dozen high school teachers working toward their MA degree in order to meet the standards for a raise within the Los Angeles Unified School District, and another half-dozen students who held jobs in other areas and who indicated that they were enrolled in the course in order to cultivate their self-professed appreciation for literature. We read two theories of culture that elicited strong responses from both sets of students: John Guillory's *Cultural Capital* and Raymond Williams's "Culture is Ordinary."

Guillory argues that literature has served as a marker of "cultural capital" disseminated by institutions (schools) that reproduce and perpetuate unequal class relations. For Guillory,

canon formation is best understood as a problem in the constitution and distribution of cultural capital, or more specifically, a problem of access to the means of literary production and consumption. The "means" in question are provided by the school, which regulates and thus distributes cultural capital unequally. The largest context for analyzing the school as an institution is therefore the reproduction of the social order, with all of its various inequities.⁹

This argument resonated strongly with many of my high-school-teaching students, who were routinely exhausted and frequently frustrated by the unequal, inadequately funded, sometimes outright corrupt working conditions in which they labored to teach those for whom the reproduction of class often meant the perpetuation of poverty and inequality. Although good students, many were nevertheless mistrustful of the university, which, while no Harvard or Princeton, still credentialed and thereby served as gatekeeper of what counted as mastery of knowledge about literature and language. That mistrust extended to the less tangible institution I represented – the institution of literary studies – which was widely suspected by these front-line teachers to be the refuge of privileged dilettantes with little knowledge of life on the outskirts of power.

Meanwhile, the half dozen other students in the class (many of whom hailed from the same neighborhoods where my high-school-teaching students worked) gravitated strongly toward Williams's defense of culture as a common birthright. They found in literature a means of expanding their horizons and enriching their experiences of the world. This group felt validated by Williams's viewpoint that "culture is ordinary," shaped and reshaped by ordinary individuals, like themselves, who possess deep, situated knowledge deriving from their place of origin and from their relations with others in that place:

Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings. Every human society expresses these in institutions, and in arts and learning. The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment under the pressures of experience, contact, and discovery, writing themselves into the land. The growing society is there, yet it is also made and remade in every individual mind.¹⁰

For these students – who were not unaware of the cultural imperialism and unequal distribution of cultural capital that my more skeptical high-school-teaching students deftly critiqued – literature provided the opportunity to study the contours of "ordinary common meanings" and to engage in what Williams calls "the special processes of discovery and creative effort."¹¹ Literature was not, for these students, a dead product of an alien culture to be valorized and then

regurgitated on tests (formal and informal) that would open doors for a select few. It represented, instead, a means of expanding one's thought, of participating in the "active debate and amendment" endemic to any cultural formation, whether in the hills of East LA or Williams's Welsh pastureland.

As a young instructor, I was struck forcefully by the realization that both assessments of the value of literature – that of the jaded skeptics and that of the enthusiastic aficionados – were simultaneously valid. This paradox creates the ideal conditions for incubating a debilitating form of cognitive dissonance that plagues many teachers of literature. Fortunately for me, soon after the Williams-versus-Guillory debate, I received the antidote to that particular malady through an encounter with an undergraduate student in my sophomore-level writing and literature course. The student – I'll call her Maria – walked into my cramped, shared office on the tenth floor of one of the high-rise buildings on our campus. She wanted to talk about the first assignment for the class, an analysis of one of Grimm's fairy tales. I admit that I was already somewhat exasperated: I had too little time and too many assignments to grade before my next class to chat (idly, I thought) about the meaning of the red shoes, or the blue beard, weeks before the assignment was due. I asked Maria to open her book (Schilb and Clifford's 1600-page anthology, *Making Literature Matter*) to the tale in question. When it was clear that she did not have the text with her, my exasperation erupted into a self-important mini-lecture on the importance of being prepared for office hours. "I'm sorry I don't have my book," said Maria. "There's a bus strike and I had to ride my bike here. I'll bring it next time." For those who are not familiar with Los Angeles, the prospect of riding a bus any distance through the city, which is not known for its public transportation system, is already daunting. To ride a bicycle several miles through the traffic-jammed streets of central Los Angeles in order to talk with a professor about writing and literature was a form of active resistance to the social, economic, and institutional forces that make "claiming an education" (to quote Adrienne Rich) an act of determined will.¹²

I shut up. I sat down. I opened my own book and placed it in Maria's hands. We turned to the tale and got down to the business of

discussing the story and, true to the book's title, making literature matter. To this day, whenever I feel cynical about the importance of literature or the value of teaching it, I remind myself of the hubris that prompted my initial reaction to Maria. Cynicism is a double-edged weapon: it can help to combat complacency about the value of any work, especially work associated with elite culture, but that cynicism can also abet rationalizing narratives about why access to the arts and humanities is (supposedly) not necessary for those who hail from nonelite classes and cultures.

Virginia Woolf herself expressed ambivalence about the complicity of "traditional" or "high" culture in systems of dominance and power in her works – notably (but not exclusively) in *Three Guineas*, where, in a hypothetical address to the honorary treasurer of a women's college fund, she wonders publicly whether she ought to send a guinea to "rebuild the college on the old lines," or to build a new, "adventurous" and idealistic college – or use the guinea to "buy rags and petrol and Bryant & Mays matches and burn the college to the ground?"¹³ The fantasy of burning down all the old edifices of higher education and starting from scratch receives serious play in Woolf's hypothetical address, but ultimately she favors pragmatism over destruction because she considers material self-sufficiency necessary (but not sufficient) for "intellectual liberty" or "freedom from unreal loyalties" (TG 36, 78). This freedom, or "disinterestedness," was for her key to cultivating the habits of critical thinking that would allow one to counter the negative impact of "memory and tradition," whether in the form of cultural imperialism or the dominant educational system's reproduction of class and gender relations (TG 18). But material self-sufficiency, for those who were not born into money, depends on employment, which in most cases depends on adequate education. Graduates of her hypothetical women's college would need to obtain employment in order to earn the modicum of financial self-sufficiency that would free them from dependence on patriarchal forces (in the form of financial dependence on fathers and husbands or brothers). Hence, intellectual freedom depends on material circumstances derived from involvement in institutions that tend to compromise intellectual freedom. This is a persistent circle for Woolf

(perhaps why *Three Guineas* is peppered with variations on the refrain “here we go round the mulberry tree”), but not necessarily a vicious one (TG 72). Despite her ambivalence about the reproduction of problematic ideologies through cultural production, Woolf maintains a belief in literature’s capacity to humanize us, to make us less power-hungry and more capable of rational coexistence and conviviality.¹⁴

For Woolf, the tension between cynicism and belief sparks a generative paradox that cycles like an *ouroboros*, a snake perpetually eating its own tail: dominant culture influences literary and artistic culture, which in turn tends to reinforce dominant cultural values – but literary and artistic creations also nurture the capacity to think and create for oneself, a capacity that can be employed by those hailing from nondominant cultures to shift or change the cultural values of the dominant. This paradox produces much of the ambivalence that resonates throughout *Three Guineas*, which ultimately asks its implicit audience, the “daughters of educated men,” to ante in to the system ambivalently – that is, to gain just enough access to the cycle of cultural production to influence it for the better while maintaining the critical distance of an “outsider” (TG 6; 126).

Noticing, if not naming, Woolf’s generative paradox, Cuddy-Keane calls Woolf a “democratic highbrow,” unpacking the etymology of the term “highbrow” (and its corollaries “lowbrow” and “middlebrow”) and disarticulating it from earlier concepts of the “elite” and the “masses.” Citing Williams extensively in her exegesis, Cuddy-Keane argues that intellectual endeavors need not be relegated to the elite classes if “we open ourselves up to new configurations” of culture, where “high” culture is not associated exclusively with elite classes, and the activities and preferences of the working classes not automatically associated with “low” or “mass” culture. These “new configurations” could be made more viable with greater access to education for the entire population and not just the wealthy elites. Thus, Cuddy-Keane asks,

Are intellectual readers necessarily elite readers if the required knowledge and skills can be made available to all? Is there any reason why intellectual reading cannot be popular, in the sense of arising from a grass-roots, common readers’ need? Why should reading for entertainment and relaxation – the

currently prevailing sense of popular – not be seen as complementary to reading for mental stimulation, allowing diverse kinds of reading practice peacefully to coexist?¹⁵

The debate between the “brows” that Cuddy-Keane examines so aptly has morphed in the twenty-first century, but it is far from obsolete. For Woolf’s contemporary, Q. D. Leavis, print journalism (in the form of newspapers and magazines) was the bane of the reading public. When that public did read books, they tended to read what we today call “genre fiction.” In her 1939 study, Leavis noted that public libraries (for her a barometer of the reading habits of the “lowbrow” majority) seldom stocked

what is considered by the critical minority to be the significant work in fiction – the novels of D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, T. F. Powys, and E. M. Forster. Apart from the fact that three out of the five are held by the majority to be indecent, a fact suggestive in itself, four out of the five would convey very little, if anything, to the merely literate.¹⁶

Citing the popularity of detective fiction and “thrillers” in both public and subscription libraries, Leavis goes so far as to contend that “the reading habit is now often a form of the drug habit.”¹⁷

Seventy years later, electronic media are similarly regarded, ostensibly enfeebling the intellectual and cognitive capacities of the next generation. A 2009 *Guardian* headline, for example, cautions that “Facebook and Bebo Risk ‘Infantilising’ the Human Mind.”¹⁸ One hears echoes of the news clippings Woolf routinely satirized in the *Guardian* description of “Lady Greenfield, professor of synaptic pharmacology” informing the House of Lords that social media “are devoid of cohesive narrative and long-term significance. As a consequence, the mid-21st century mind might almost be infantilised, characterised by short attention spans, sensationalism, inability to empathise and a shaky sense of identity.” Lady Greenfield’s forewarning, like Leavis’s anxiety over readers’ addiction to genre fiction, may yet go the way of Wordsworth’s 1800 admonition against “frantic novels, sickly and stupid German tragedies” or Matthew Arnold’s lament that “Wragg is in custody,” for other evidence suggests that the next generations, despite their gadgets and apps, are reading as many, if not more, books than their predecessors.¹⁹ The Pew Research

Center, for example, has found that “Millennials are quite similar to their elders when it comes to the amount of book reading they do, but young adults are more likely to have read a book in the past 12 months.”²⁰ The media format changes, but the central questions remain constant: What do creatively assembled words do *to* and *for* their readership? What should they do? And how do they best do that?

Woolf herself was a proponent of new media (film, photography, the penny post) and was far less dismissive of “lowbrow” tastes than many of her peers. She wrote for mass print periodicals such as *Good Housekeeping*, *The New York Herald Tribune*, *The Atlantic*, and *The New Republic* without compunction. She was concerned about access to education and championed the public library.²¹ Her letters suggest that she had more faith in the intellectual ability of her readers than some of her critics did. Her complaint was not with the masses, but rather with the bourgeoisie (“middlebrows”) who (in her view) did not evolve new standards of aesthetic value, but clung instead to old standards for the sake of keeping up appearances:

[W]hen we have earned enough to live on, then we live. When the middlebrows, on the contrary, have earned enough to live on, they go on earning enough to buy – what are the things that middlebrows always buy? Queen Anne furniture (faked, but none the less expensive); first editions of dead writers – always the worst; pictures, or reproductions from pictures, by dead painters; houses in what is called “the Georgian style” – but never anything new, never a picture by a living painter, or a chair by a living carpenter, or books by living writers, for to buy living art requires living taste.²²

The middlebrow is, if we follow Woolf’s logic, both alienated from the labor of cultural production (producing not to make an artistic work, but rather to “make” money) and estranged from the products of cultural labor (purchasing “fakes” and reproductions, rather than real artifacts from living artists). In contrast, Woolf emphasizes the “natural” cultural competence of the lowbrow:

how can you let the middlebrows teach *you* how to write? – you, who write so beautifully when you write naturally, that I would give both my hands to write as you do – for which reason I never attempt it, but do my best to learn the art of writing as a highbrow should. And again, I press on, brandishing a muffin on the point of a tea spoon, how dare the middlebrows teach *you* how to read – Shakespeare for instance? All you have to do is read him.²³

Woolf's suggestion that a lowbrow doesn't need professional teaching in order to understand Shakespeare echoes her own advice to female students at Hayes Court School in "How Should One Read a Book?": "The only advice, indeed, that one person can give to another about reading is to take no advice, to follow your own instincts, to use your own reason, to come to your own conclusions."²⁴

If I were to follow Woolf's advice to the letter, I would have to end this volume here; instead, endeavoring to follow her example rather than her advice, I lay out the evidence and ask my readers to "come to your own conclusions" about how and why an aesthetically complex and intellectually challenging artist such as Woolf still matters in the age of tweets and apps and Instagrams. To contemplate this question opens up a more fundamental conversation about why and how the life of the mind still matters. This pursuit is no less trivial today than it was seventy-three years ago when Woolf, in her last novel, *Between the Acts* (written between 1938 and 1941, some very dark years in European history), depicted a community coming together to rebuild "Civilization . . . in ruins . . . by human effort" in the course of an ordinary village pageant.²⁵ The notion of "civilization" carries with it so much baggage of ethnocentric hubris, colonialist exploitation, cultural elitism, and plain old snobbery that one hesitates to recuperate the term for use in a more expansive sense, to describe the development of *civitas* – responsibility to a community or, more colloquially, civics. Yet Woolf herself did not retreat from grappling with value-laden concepts in insightful and often unexpected ways, refashioning the "master's tools" (to paraphrase Audre Lorde) in the service of "mak[ing] happiness" – what the ancient Greeks called *eudemonia* – rather than making conquest over others.²⁶ Describing the moment of frozen dread one feels when bombers are directly overhead during an air raid, Woolf contends that:

Directly that fear passes, the mind reaches out and instinctively revives itself by trying to create. Since the room is dark it can create only from memory. It reaches out to the memory of other Augusts – in Bayreuth, listening to Wagner; in Rome, walking over the Campagna; in London. Friends' voices come back. Scraps of poetry return. Each of those thoughts, even in memory, was far more positive, reviving, healing and creative than the dull dread made of fear and hate. Therefore if we are to compensate the young man

for the loss of his glory and of his gun, we must give him access to the creative feelings. We must make happiness. We must free him from the machine. We must bring him out of his prison into the open air.²⁷

“Creative feelings,” in this scenario, are civilizing, connective (“friends’ voices come back”), restorative, and liberating. “Open air” is a persistent motif in Woolf’s work, signifying liberation from the constraints of parochial thinking, acquisitive materialism, and moribund allegiance to tradition for tradition’s sake. For Woolf, the poet or artist teases open (and in some cases cracks open) the fissures in the hard shell of *habitus* (what we might call normativity or ideology) that deadens our perceptions and makes us susceptible to lockstep thinking. Given the perilous consequences of lockstep thinking – the dehumanization of others; the uncritical valorization of conquest, sacrifice, and violence; the insatiable desire to convert others to one’s preferred way of life; the premium on acquisitive rather than communal good – it is not too hyperbolic to suggest that creative thinking is essential to the survival of human civilization, if we imagine civilization as the cultivation of the conditions necessary for human flourishing, for happiness in its nonutilitarian guise. Woolf’s work, when read as a whole, shows us why and how the generative life of the mind matters. The task of this book, then, is to trace, through her fiction and critical prose, how Woolf proffers this challenge and lays bare this responsibility for her readers.

This task is not a straightforward one because, as Woolf herself noted in her 1937 BBC broadcast on “Craftsmanship,” words are anything but useful; or – to extrapolate from her argument – when we insist on the bare utility of words, we strip them of their power. The power of words lies in their complexity, their polyvalence, and their simultaneous historicity and mutability.²⁸ To pin down the value of Woolf’s words – suggesting, for example, that complex fiction such as Woolf’s stimulates neurological responses that enhance our capacity for pattern recognition, empathy, or invention – would be to reduce the power of fiction (Woolf’s chosen craft with words) to a utility that belies the more complex and less easily described effects that literature (or the arts and humanities in general) has on a reader or a culture of readers. Words are powerful, Woolf argues in “Craftsmanship,”