

***Virginia Woolf: Walking in the Footsteps of Michel de Montaigne*, by Judith Allen, Cecil Woolf Publishers, London (ISBN 978 1 907286 24 7), 2012.**

This book is about passing on Michel de Montaigne's ideas to others. For her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, in 1903, Thoby gave Montaigne's essays to his sister, Virginia. She had 'hunted him 3 years', 'quite desperate' for a good translation (8). Woolf's lifelong intimacy with Montaigne is manifest throughout her work, especially in her own essays. Judith Allen has a long familiarity with both writers; she began her exploration of the relationship between Woolf and the writings of Montaigne as a mature graduate student in 1984. This text is 'a distillation of the many years of investigation that have followed' (23). Allen has condensed this work from a very deep well of scholarship. Excluding notes and bibliography the text is only 14 pages so, fittingly, we might consider this to be an essay.

The title *Walking in the Footsteps of Montaigne* suggests that this will be a book about pursuit, perhaps a biographical study seeking to elucidate some elusive aspect of this major Renaissance figure. This kind of tracking may imply that the writer is embarking on a dogged search, shadowing the target subject, with detective intentions. Another way of interpreting the idea of 'walking in someone's footsteps' is as an act of intellectual or spiritual homage. Allen's use of the words 'veneration' (8) to describe Woolf's attitude to Montaigne and 'pilgrimage' (20) to describe her own trip supports the idea that this monograph has a devotional dimension.

Allen frames her discussion with a personal expedition to Montaigne's tower in Bordeaux in June 2011. This quest unites Allen with Woolf; both have pursued Montaigne, physically (through France) and mentally (through their work). Both express 'sheer joy in finally being in his Tower' (7). A letter to Vita Sackville-West communicates Woolf's excitement and elation, her 'grammar gone' (8) at visiting his Tower.

Richard Holmes introduced the term 'footstepping' to describe a biographer following the traces of his subject to imagine how they might have lived and felt. Holmes loves the word *sentier*, (French for a track) because it 'hints at the notion of a line of smell or perfume, as "on the scent"'.<sup>1</sup> Allen's book has a 4 page glossy colour insert of 8 beautiful pictures helping us to sense Montaigne's place. One photograph shows 'the steps, worn in deep waves, up to the tower' as Woolf writes (7).<sup>2</sup> Just looking at the photograph creates an empathetic *frisson*, the kind we seek when visiting places of literary importance. The sensual and cerebral aspects of following Montaigne are both honoured here. We are literally 'footstepping' Montaigne, as Leonard and Virginia Woolf did in 1931, 1937 and 1938. This essay is a personal homage by a writer with a deep affinity with Montaigne and with Woolf.

The middle part of this essay demonstrates the aesthetic, philosophical and political empathy that Montaigne, Woolf (and Allen) share. This is not a comparative study but the connection between the two writers is made throughout. Allen shows how Woolf appropriates ideas and 'tips her hat to Montaigne's writings' (7). Both Woolf and Montaigne acknowledge numerous literary influences, both made reading notes, were avid book collectors and 'voracious readers' (9). Allen shows their use of 'multiple perspectives, varied voices, repetition, contradiction and, of course much equivocation' (10). She demonstrates Montaigne's interest in language, in analysing creativity and his presence, shared by Woolf, in anticipating reader-response theory, using the analogy of a tennis match, 'Speech belongs *half to the speaker, half to the listener*. The latter must prepare to receive it according to the motion it takes' (12).

Leonard Woolf recognised Montaigne as 'the first completely modern man in his intense awareness of and passionate interest in the individuality of himself and of other human beings' (8). Here Allen shows why Montaigne can be seen as a truly modern thinker by demonstrating the place of the provisional, uncertain and unstable in his work. She uses his famous statement embracing opposition, 'when someone opposes me, he arouses my attention, not my anger. I go to meet a man who contradicts me, who instructs me' (12). Allen perceives the 'essayistic' mode as 'always hybrid, "outside" and "marginal"' (20), combining 'resistance and freedom' (7). It is a form of dialogue rather than monologue; it refuses the unitary but, rather, relishes the 'clash of oppositional voices' (11). Allen shows how Montaigne and Woolf seek to 'resist doctrines, hierarchies, abstractions, stasis, and all totalising systems' (10). This essay is a very personal testimony to their influence.

Allen's approach, like Montaigne's, is fluent and intimate, often engagingly conversational but, concurrently, scholarly and dense with citation. Both Montaigne and Woolf are susceptible to free association and get sidetracked by digressions. Like Montaigne, Allen's style and mind 'alike go roaming' (9). Although this is a tightly written, controlled essay, the links between sections are not always well signposted. This lack of 'a firm footing' (16) is self-reflexive and entirely appropriate. Allen gets waylaid. There is a randomness in its progress which suggests her mind is roving over possibilities; she does not always finish or fix an idea. Towards the end of the essay, in square parenthesis, she adds an 'incomplete list' of things to be resisted. These are the ideas that have occupied Allen throughout her work: [Singular meanings. Hierarchies. Labels. Rigid

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Holmes, *Sidetracks: Explorations of a Romantic Biographer* (London: Vintage, 2001), ix.

<sup>2</sup> Allen adds italics for emphasis when she notes Woolf's 'playful' writing of the date of this letter to Ethel Smyth: "'April 24, perhaps. 1931 certainly'", 7.

definitions. Laws. Rules. Ceremonies. Binary oppositions. Purity. Smoothness, Polish. Civilized. Regimented. Marching. Stasis. Habit. Custom. Convention. Official story. Conformity. Answers. Silence.] (19)

Cecil Woolf's 'Bloomsbury Heritage' series publishes work that can be enjoyed by both specialist and 'common reader'. Number 63 is enjoyable, absorbing and richly resonant. It will *certainly* send readers back to Montaigne, Woolf and, *possibly*, Bordeaux too.

*Gill Lowe*