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Source: *Moveable Type*, Vol.13, 'Ambience' (2021)

DOI: 10.14324/111.1755-4527.120

MoveableType is a Graduate, Peer-Reviewed Journal based in the Department of English at UCL.

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Virginia Woolf and Zadie Smith's Idea of the Ambient Essay

Rhonda Mayne

Intimations. By Zadie Smith, 2020. xpp. £5.99. Penguin Random House.

ISBN 9780241492383

Following the devastating global crisis of the First World War, Virginia Woolf noted in 'The Modern Essay' (1919), that 'the essay is alive; there is no reason to despair'.¹ Just over one hundred years later, in the middle of another global crisis, Zadie Smith's collection of essays, *Intimations* (2020), reassures us once again of the ongoing social significance of the essay and the continued existence of readerships happy to receive it in newspapers, magazines and books. While the short essays in Smith's collection lack the size of the late-Victorian essays Woolf would have feasted on, they, much like Smith's earlier collections: *Feel Free: Essays* (2018) and *Changing my Mind: Occasional Essays* (2009), do not lack sonority. Operating as a collection of ambient essays, that is essays immersed in the 'here and now' and taking place in the shared world of the everyday, Smith's collection finds its counterpart in the Woolfian essay. These ambient texts produced by Woolf and Smith are not simply situated in a world of voices outside the self, but also encompassed /enveloped by porous boundaries, and enter into dialogue with uncontrollable external circumstances, thereby facilitating reflections on the socio-political environs of the wider world.

According to Woolf, an essayist's most delicate possession is her 'personality' or voice. Writing as a novelist, essayist and philosopher, Smith's voice,

¹ Virginia Woolf, 'The Modern Essay' (1919), *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, 6 volumes, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth Press, 1994), 4, (216-227), p.220.

understandably strained at times, resonantly reflects on our experiences of multinational lockdowns, death-dealing viruses and the untimely passing of millions of people. She depicts the idea of the pandemic as a ‘global humbling’ which offers the chance of a social and political reset.² In an essay collection which reflects on several disparate topics, from the strictly devised suffering of Mel Gibson to imaginary springtime peonies, Smith delivers perhaps her most profound social commentary when exploring links between the virus and various forms of social inequality. In ‘The American Exception’, she investigates the longing for our old lives despite the reality of what those old lives might mean for millions of Americans in terms of racism, disparity, corrupt policing, and lack of, or no, healthcare (11-16). Smith is concerned with American ‘private interests’, the connections between wealth and health, and the lack of healthcare for society’s most vulnerable residents. The book is peppered with prescient insights, for example, ‘plagues ... were long ago relegated to history in the American imagination’ and the ‘supposed democratic nature of the plague – the way in which it can strike all registered voters equally’, which were notable in the early days of the Covid pandemic and have since been robustly examined. Nevertheless, Smith’s insights can also be read as aligning with the title of the book, *Intimations*, meaning ‘notification’, which connotes the idea of the essays as a digital series of short, yet significant, communiqués (11-13).³ What emerges is a rallying cry for robust social and political change. Indeed, Smith’s declaration that ‘only new thinking can lead to a new dawn’, infers that the essay can

² Zadie Smith, *Intimations* (United Kingdom: Penguin Random House, 2020), p.6. Subsequent quotations will be cited parenthetically in the text.

³ ‘intimation’, *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, Oxford University Press, <www.oed.com/view/Entry/98510>, web, [accessed on 2/2/2021].

be a catalyst for authentic change, a stand Virginia Woolf's observation that 'reading has changed the world and continues to change it', rigorously supports.⁴

However, Smith does not only offer the reader the world as *she* finds it. Her manifold reflections are supported by the voices of her neighbours in both British and American contexts. Transcribed into the essays, these voices, for example, Barbara, the 'woman with a little dog', work to establish the idea that the feelings and thoughts provoked by the pandemic can be relieved by the practicable assistance provided by literature (45, 50). For New Yorker Barbara, it is the books which she reads that enable her to take the chaos and bewilderment of this 'overwhelming season of death' and pour it into a supportive world of her own devising (4, 7). The external voices of Smith's neighbours not only underpin her compilation of essays but encourage readers to engage with literature as a valid method of deciphering pandemic conditions.

An excellent essayist, according to Virginia Woolf, is one who 'knows how to write' and 'makes the best of change', and on both counts Smith's book fulfils the brief.⁵ These essays build on Smith's previous work and engage with our season of global crisis in an imaginative, distinct and truthful manner. The writer foregoes a static engagement with the pandemic and each essay is stitched to the back of Smith's central conviction that the virus directly exposes multiple ongoing forms of inequality both at home and beyond. True to say, some of the ideas struggle to pass into words and the mention of Heraclitus or Kierkegaard's parable 'The Dog Kennel by the Palace' add little to the work beyond suggesting its wider implications (6, 7). Nevertheless, Smith's other concepts are realised with meticulous precision and fly

⁴ Virginia Woolf, 'The Love of Reading' (1931), *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Stuart N. Clarke, 6 vols (Boston: Harcourt, 2009), vol.5: p.274.

⁵ Virginia Woolf, 'The Modern Essay', pp.216, 220.

forward with a vigorous tailwind at their back. The collection will take a prominent place among the books published during 2020 dealing with poverty, racism and inequality, and if our handling of the virus lays bare the worst parts of our disreputable selves, then the form of the ambient essay still holds the potential to gesture to the prospect of a vibrant, thoroughly different, future.