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THE READER'S ART: VIRGINIA WOOLF AS LITERARY CRITIC

by

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In Memory of William Van O'Connor

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INTRODUCTION

Any study of Virginia Woolf's criticism must begin by pointing to the obvious but striking contrast between her stature as a novelist and her reputation as a literary critic. Though Mrs. Woolf's fiction has received extensive treatment, one finds only scattered comments or, at best, short summary chapters on her essays; there is still no published, book-length study of Mrs. Woolf as a literary critic. (1) Though she is known primarily as a novelist, Mrs. Woolf began writing reviews and criticism before she published her first works of fiction, and she continued to write criticism and take seriously her role as a literary critic throughout her writing career.

During her lifetime she collected essays for two volumes: The Common Reader, first series, 1925; and The Common Reader, second series, 1932. These have been supplemented by a series of posthumous volumes edited by her husband, Leonard Woolf: The Death of The Moth, 1942; The Moment and Other Essays, 1947; The Captain's Death Bed, 1950. Though Mr. Woolf announced, in the Editor's note to The Captain's Death Bed, that this would be the last posthumous collection of essays, another volume did appear in 1958, entitled Granite and Rainbow. And in 1965 another collection of Mrs. Woolf's essays, Contemporary Writers, was published. This collection, edited by the French critic Jean Guiguet, was an attempt to bring together, as Mr. Guiguet explains in his preface, the unpublished essays and reviews on contemporary fiction. Aside from these collected essays, I have been able to consult a great many uncollected articles in the various newspapers and magazines to which Mrs. Woolf was a steady contributor. (2) Finally, there is the critical material, some of it integral to this study, contained in the feminist book, A Room of One's Own; the literary biography, Orlando; and the published portion of Mrs. Woolf's Diary, which is predominantly concerned with her writing in particular and literature in general.

Mrs. Woolf's uncertain status as a critic can hardly be due, then, to her lack of productivity or to a dearth of material available for study. Louis Kronenberger provides a clue, perhaps, to this anomalous situation in an essay on 'Virginia Woolf as Critic', when he remarks on the relatively slight attention which E. M. Forster and David Daiches (3) pay to Mrs. Woolf's criticism in terms of her total achievement.

The fact is easily explained. Virginia Woolf nowhere altered the face of criticism as she did the face of the novel, she extended no critical frontiers, she attracted no critical disciples. All the same, Mr. Forster's and Mr. Daiches' relative allotment of space may not be posterity's, for Mrs. Woolf forged her criticism into something quite as distinctive as her novels, and the best of it may well survive everything else she wrote except To The Lighthouse and Mrs. Dalloway, and may conceivably survive them. (4)

But Mr. Kronenberger's explanation does not tell the entire story. Both favorable and unfavorable comments on Mrs. Woolf's criticism seem to be based on a similar image of her as an occasional essayist and impressionist, as a literary portrait painter and miniaturist; or as an antiquarian rummaging through the

attics of a rather charming but peripheral past. Commentators on Mrs. Woolf's essays seem to be in general agreement as to the real nature or function of literary criticism, and it is against this criterion that Mrs. Woolf is measured as a critic and found wanting. Thus, Horace Gregory, in trying to praise her as an essayist, dismisses her as a literary critic.

In her essays she was mistress of what often has been called an 'outmoded' form, and if one admits that the familiar essay was among the vehicles of her genius, one need not concern one's self too deeply over the question of her ability in literary criticism. She was not, I believe, vastly disturbed by problems of the intellect She exerted an influence in literary matters because of her gifts and her intelligence, and because her artistry embraced the arts of persuasion and charm. It is only when her criticism appears to be incidental to the portrait of a literary figure that it becomes convincing to the eye, and when the portrait is lacking, and when the criticism takes the form of a set argument, the illumination fades, and we hear only the ringing of small bells. (5)

Diana Trilling follows suit in raising the familiar charge of aestheticism and subjectivity in order to judge Mrs. Woolf's essays severely, though in vague critical terms.

And as we try to understand why someone so rich in appreciation was so little capable of a true appreciation of greatness, we are inevitably returned to the subjective bases of Mrs. Woolf's literary attitudes Art, Mrs. Woolf felt, must be freed from its dependence on material fact: it must not suffer to be tied to the common fate of ordinary human beings; it must create and celebrate a beauty which is larger than 'reality'. (6)

But Mrs. Trilling's own language is rather tenuous and subjective. In what way is Virginia Woolf 'so little capable of a true appreciation of greatness . . .'? And where exactly does she 'celebrate a beauty larger than 'reality''? Mrs. Trilling goes on in her review of Virginia Woolf's essays to make the familiar charge that she was a 'commentator' on literature rather than a 'critic', and one again has the uneasy feeling that Mrs. Woolf is being dismissed out of hand, without a real hearing or reading, on the basis of some general agreement about the negative nature of impressionist criticism, as well as, one suspects, from simple prejudice toward her as a Bloomsbury literary figure. From the premises held by Horace Gregory and Diana Trilling, then, one moves quite easily to the academic conclusions of Mark Schorer about the importance of Virginia Woolf as a literary critic.

What one reads is no less a portion of one's experience than any other activity; of present point is the fact that Virginia Woolf approached her reading, in her criticism, as she approached the whole experience in her novels: with aggressive curiosity, a refined sensibility, but an exaggerated sense of the relevance of impression . . . What is lacking, finally, is the sense of value. (7)

Once again, the critical terminology is strange. One might accept the notion that Mrs. Woolf exaggerated the 'relevance of impression', but what does Mr. Schorer mean by Mrs. Woolf's lack of a 'sense of value'? In retrospect, we can see the new-critical bias behind this kind of judgment, but the unfortunate fact is that this classification of Mrs. Woolf as a certain kind of critic enters the vague but fixed realm of literary history where prejudices die hard and preconceptions stubbornly live on.

Sympathetic and unsympathetic readers alike have been unwilling to approach the large number of Mrs. Woolf's collected and uncollected essays with anything

resembling an overall plan; nor do they seem to believe that any form or design exists beneath the surface of these separate essays. It is a curious fact, and Mr. Kronenberger's point confirms it, that few readers have reflected on the question of a significant relation between Virginia Woolf as a consciously experimental novelist and as a persistent writer of critical essays. Where reviewers of her work have made this connection, it has been in terms of her reaction against the Edwardian naturalists, Wells, Bennett, and Galsworthy, based on her two famous essays, 'Modern Fiction' and 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown'. It will be seen that so limited an application of her essays on fiction leads to an equally limited view of her novels and novelistic intentions.

In turning to the matter of her criticism in general, it is the purpose of this study to reveal an overall design that is discoverable if the essays are viewed from a clearer and more consistent 'perspective' -- a favorite critical term with Mrs. Woolf -- than has normally been accorded them. Since most of Mrs. Woolf's essays are fugitive pieces or were originally reviews -- though some of the most important criticism, it will be seen, derives from deliberately conceived critical essays -- it is necessary to approach the subject inductively, to trace certain dominant themes that will reveal an underlying form or controlling aesthetic in her criticism. To this end, I have divided my discussion into four chapters, subsuming minor points or critical themes under the larger headings in order to provide what I believe is a valid account of her critical ideas as well as a clearer insight into a critical position that has been somewhat blurred by commentators whose evidence has been limited to certain essays and whose conclusions, therefore, have been inevitably summary.

In Chapter One, The Critic and the Nature of Reality, I have arranged the essays in chronological or historical order, (8) so that Mrs. Woolf's experimental interests may be traced against a traditional framework to reveal her as an artist-critic, conscious of the necessity to create from the reality of the present while conserving the literary values of the past. The image of Virginia Woolf as an artist-critic, whose essays stem from and serve her demands as a practicing writer, is dominant throughout this discussion; but it will be seen that the creative interest behind the essays, while contributing to the unity of her critical thinking, does not detract from the catholicity of her taste nor from the value of her criticism in and for itself.

The traditional-experimental theme in Mrs. Woolf's essays is related to her historical conception of reality -- a conception at the heart of her criticism and fiction -- so that the chapter on the idea of reality serves as a logical introduction to this entire study. Mrs. Woolf's conception of reality leads to her concern for a literary form adequate to the modern sensibility, and thus to her essays on the novel which are analyzed in the second chapter, The Novelist as Critic. In Chapter Two, I have again arranged the essays in historical sequence, so that the idea of reality (the writer's historical perspective) leads to the question of form in the novel (the writer's perspective from a structural standpoint). By reviewing the essays in a certain sequence, we can observe Mrs. Woolf's own critical survey of the novel; and, aside from the valuable criticism of novels and novelists, we can see the importance of her traditional-experimental views for her conception of the novel form and for her own creative program. Mrs. Woolf's approach to the modern novel and to her own fiction is more traditional or conservative than has generally been recognized. Even her crucial interest in a possible balancing of prose and poetry in fiction is incorporated into a more conservative theory of a new synthesis for the modern novel; and her own fiction may be seen as a more comprehensive and even realistic progress toward this synthesis rather than, as critics have described her creative history, an increasingly subjective evolution that reached its zenith with The Waves and declined steadily thereafter in vain attempts to repeat her earlier performances.

Mrs. Woolf's interest in biography can also be seen as a function of her work as a novelist of sensibility; and her feminist book, A Room of One's Own,

by considering the problem of women in fiction, reaches conclusions about character and the modern novel which throw light on the views discussed in Chapter Two.

Chapter Three, *The Critic as Critic*, deals with Mrs. Woolf's own theories of the nature and function of criticism and the critic. The first two chapters trace certain dominant themes, and while Mrs. Woolf's critical approach is also revealed by such analysis, it remains necessary to record her own aesthetic views before we can conclude this study with a clear conception of her critical position. In the preface to her first *Common Reader*, she explains her title and epigraph, taken from Dr. Johnson's 'Life of Gray', in place of a statement of purpose. Her description is deliberately casual and informal, but she provides a structure and point of view for her essays by adding that the common reader does wish to create from his reading 'some kind of whole -- a portrait of a man, a sketch of an age, a theory of the art of writing'. (9) It should be evident from this study that her self-portrait as common reader is deceptively simple. It will be seen, in Chapter Three, that her own essays on reading soon transform the image of common reader into a more stereoscopic view of the reader as serious critic.

We come then to Chapter Four, which serves to conclude the entire study by comparing the stereotyped image of Virginia Woolf as critic, created by various commentators, with the image we have succeeded in drawing by means of a more extensive and intensive analysis of her work. It is a concluding view that may hopefully provide a necessary corrective to the repeated reference to Mrs. Woolf as the impressionist *par excellence*; without, at the same time, doing disservice to her own positive contribution to a modern critical position. In this way, she is presented as a critic whose method is a much-needed *via media* between the extremes of what T. S. Eliot has termed 'understanding' and 'appreciation'. (10) Mrs. Woolf insists throughout her essays upon a necessary and creative balance between reason and emotion, sense and sensibility, the individual critic and the impersonal method. Allen Tate, in the preface to a new collection of his essays, emphasizes the present need to preserve the critic's point of view, which alone can lead to the highest and most genuine kind of literary criticism.

A critical skeptic cannot entirely imagine the use of a criticism in which the critic takes the deistic part of absentee expositor. To take this role is to pretend that a method can accomplish what the responsible intelligence is alone able to do. The act of criticism is analogous to the peripety of tragedy; it is a crisis of recognition always, and at times also of reversal, in which the whole person is involved. The literary critic is committed, like everybody else, to a particular stance, at a moment in time; he is governed by a point of view that method will not quite succeed in dispensing with. After the natural sciences began to influence literary criticism, scholars held that a point of view without method led inevitably to impressionism. This need not follow; it is obvious why I prefer to think that it need not . . . I should like to think that criticism has been written, and may be again, from a mere point of view, such as I suppose myself to be possessed by. (11)

As a result of this study, I hope to provide the reader with (1) a clearer insight into the value of Virginia Woolf's criticism; and (2) a more comprehensive and valuable approach to her fiction by way of her critical essays.

NOTES

(1) Some of the standard books on Virginia Woolf (Winifred Holtby, *Virginia Woolf* (London, 1932); David Daiches, *Virginia Woolf* (New Directions, 1942);

Bernard Blackstone, Virginia Woolf: A Commentary (N. Y., 1949); Dorothy Brewster, Virginia Woolf (London, 1963); Jean Guiguet, Virginia Woolf and Her Works, trans. Jean Stewart (London, 1965)) devote short chapters to Mrs. Woolf's criticism, but their conclusions reflect the necessarily sketchy approach to the essays and a concentration on the well-known collected pieces.

(2) Mr. Woolf states in his Editor's Note to Granite and Rainbow that this new collection is due to the discovery by Miss B. L. Kirkpatrick and Dr. Mary Lyon of long neglected and nearly forgotten essays by Mrs. Woolf. He mentions in particular the long essay 'Phases of Fiction', which originally appeared in The Bookman, 1929, and whose importance induced Mr. Woolf to publish another book in order to include this essay. Mr. Woolf informed me in a letter that the essay was originally intended as a book on the novel (as part of the Hogarth series, which includes Edwin Muir's Structure of the Novel) but was never completed.

Though I have a long bibliography of uncollected essays and reviews, Miss Kirkpatrick's comprehensive study, A Bibliography of Virginia Woolf, Revised Edition (London, 1967), has a chronological listing of Mrs. Woolf's contributions to periodicals and newspapers which makes any other listing unnecessary. Virginia Woolf's essays have also recently been issued in a collected edition: Collected Essays, 4 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1967).

I have based my study on Virginia Woolf's published essays. Recent critics have made extensive use of the manuscripts in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library for their work on Mrs. Woolf's novels. I have consulted some of the notebooks in the Berg Collection containing early versions of Mrs. Woolf's essays, but these notebooks do not contribute significantly to a study of Virginia Woolf's criticism. New light may be thrown on some of the essays when scholars are permitted (by Professor Quentin Bell) to examine the twenty-seven volumes of Mrs. Woolf's Diaries recently acquired by the Berg Collection. Professor Bell's Virginia Woolf: A Biography, Vols. I and II (London: The Hogarth Press, 1972), provides some valuable background material relating to the essays and some insights into Mrs. Woolf's criticism, despite the deliberate attempt to write a strictly historical biography.

(3) In Forster's published Rede Lecture on Virginia Woolf (now included in Two Cheers for Democracy (London, 1951) and in the Daiches book, cited above.

(4) Louis Kronenberger, The Republic of Letters (N. Y., 1955), 244-45.

(5) Horace Gregory, 'On Virginia Woolf and Her Appeal to the Common Reader', in The Shield of Achilles (N. Y., 1944), 192.

(6) Diana Trilling, 'Virginia Woolf's Special Realm', The New York Times Book Review, March 21, 1948, p. 28. It is interesting to note that nearly twenty years later, in the same New York Times Book Review, Donald Hall dismisses Virginia Woolf not only as a critic, but going beyond Mrs. Trilling, even as an essayist. That Mr. Hall's extraordinary review covers Mrs. Woolf's collected essays, newly published in four volumes (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967), makes his assessment all the more irresponsible.

(7) Mark Schorer, 'Virginia Woolf', The Yale Review, 32 (December, 1942), 379.

(8) By a chronological or historical order, I mean an arrangement in terms of literary history and not according to the chronology of Mrs. Woolf's own writing. I do refer, where relevant, to shifts in her critical thinking, usually in relation to her development as a novelist or as a reviewer-critic. In order to bring her critical thinking into sharper focus, I have taken a more comprehensive view, which I believe is more valid and rewarding in terms of her critical method and in the light of certain stereotyped images of her as a critic.

(9) Virginia Woolf, 'The Common Reader', in The Common Reader, first series, 1925 (London, 1951), 11.

(10) T. S. Eliot, 'The Frontiers of Criticism', in On Poetry and Poets (London, 1957). This essay is discussed in Chapter Four.

(11) Allen Tate, 'Preface' to The Man of Letters in the Modern World: Selected Essays, 1928-1955 (New York: Meridian Books, 1955), 7.