

Virginia Woolf

Edited by
Robin Majumdar and Allen Mclaurin

The Critical Heritage



VIRGINIA WOOLF: THE CRITICAL HERITAGE

THE CRITICAL HERITAGE SERIES

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VIRGINIA WOOLF

THE CRITICAL HERITAGE

Edited by

ROBIN MAJUMDAR & ALLEN MCLAURIN

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Publisher's Note

The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this reprint but points out that some imperfections in the original may be apparent.

General Editor's Preface

The reception given to a writer by his contemporaries and near-contemporaries is evidence of considerable value to the student of literature. On one side we learn a great deal about the state of criticism at large and in particular about the development of critical attitudes towards a single writer; at the same time, through private comments in letters, journals or marginalia, we gain an insight upon the tastes and literary thought of individual readers of the period. Evidence of this kind helps us to understand the writer's historical situation, the nature of his immediate reading-public, and his response to these pressures.

The separate volumes in the *Critical Heritage Series* present a record of this early criticism. Clearly, for many of the highly productive and lengthily reviewed nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers, there exists an enormous body of material; and in these cases the volume editors have made a selection of the most important views, significant for their intrinsic critical worth or for their representative quality—perhaps even registering incomprehension!

For earlier writers, notably pre-eighteenth century, the materials are much scarcer and the historical period has been extended, sometimes far beyond the writer's lifetime, in order to show the inception and growth of critical views which were initially slow to appear.

In each volume the documents are headed by an Introduction, discussing the material assembled and relating the early stages of the author's reception to what we have come to identify as the critical tradition. The volumes will make available much material which would otherwise be difficult of access and it is hoped that the modern reader will be thereby helped towards an informed understanding of the ways in which literature has been read and judged.

B.C.S.

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Introduction

I

Virginia Woolf's genius was proclaimed, certainly during her lifetime, and by some reviewers with the publication of her first novel. It is true that newspapers hail many writers each year as geniuses, but Virginia Woolf's writing gained not only swift, but also persistent and increasing attention and praise. It is partly a question of intelligent people recognising excellence, but there are other factors to be considered.

She was a daughter of Leslie Stephen, and most people in the literary world of the time would have known of this eminent Victorian man of letters, who was famous as a literary critic and compiler of the *Dictionary of National Biography*. (He was Vernon Whitford in Meredith's *The Egoist* before becoming Mr Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*.) And so, even in the mid-1930s Virginia was still, to some reviewers, 'Leslie Stephen's illustrious daughter'.

After her father's death, in 1904, Virginia Woolf was at the centre of a circle of friends which came to be known as the Bloomsbury Group. She gave much to, and gained a great deal from members of this group, especially Lytton Strachey and Roger Fry, whose researches, respectively into biography and the visual arts, were paralleled by her experiments in fiction. On the periphery of the circle was E. M. Forster, who was a well-known and highly regarded novelist before Virginia Woolf published her first novel. In addition to this, some members of the group had 'their hand on all the ropes'¹—the economist Maynard Keynes, for example. They owned, edited and contributed to various newspapers and journals, and so Virginia Woolf was assured of sympathetic private and public attention from intelligent and influential people. She herself had begun reviewing for the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1905, ten years before the publication of her first novel. Her reviews were anonymous, but when she came to publish her novels she could usually rely on a sympathetic notice there (although she frequently complained in her Diary that these reviews were never enthusiastic).

We cannot here go into the complex history of the Bloomsbury

Group, but we must take some account of it in assessing the reception of Virginia Woolf's work. She was undoubtedly helped by her friends, but this did not take the form of indiscriminating praise, as is sometimes imagined. And a negative feature of her connection with Bloomsbury was that she was often incidentally dispraised in a general attack on the Group, or on what it was believed to represent. Virginia Woolf was sometimes attacked by 'outsiders' in this way and defended, more damagingly perhaps, by her associates. There was some flattery, some exaggerated praise (natural enough among friends, but here occasionally made tedious by their ability to disseminate their opinions), but the evidence is here in this selection for the reader to judge whether Strachey, Forster, and MacCarthy, for example, surrounded Virginia Woolf with uncritical adulation.

This background did not ensure success, but it was a guarantee against failure through neglect. In considering her early career, it should not be overstressed—some reviewers of *The Voyage Out* and *Night and Day* stated explicitly that they had no knowledge of the writer, and in others this ignorance is implicit, for example in a reference to 'Miss Woolf'. Further, the attention and praise she received did not bring any commercial success for her books; it was only with her sixth novel *Orlando* (1928) that she became successful in this sense.

Virginia Woolf's writings were very varied: she wrote reviews, critical essays, 'feminist' tracts, short sketches and biography in addition to her novels. And some of her longer fictional works belong only dubiously to that genre: *Orlando* and *Flush* are 'novel-biography' and *The Waves*, as many reviewers pointed out, is near to poetry. (She disliked the term 'novel' but could not find a suitable alternative to describe her writing.) The critical response to her work reflects this diversity. Her writing was, with one or two exceptions, continuously experimental. She pared away character and plot and challenged accepted ideas of 'reality', and so with the publication of her third novel, *Jacob's Room*, she was widely regarded as a 'difficult' or 'highbrow' writer.

In a pamphlet written towards the end of her life Virginia Woolf described some of the features of twentieth-century reviewing. Modern reviews, she claimed, are produced more quickly, are shorter, and more numerous than in the preceding centuries. She concluded that they are worthless, being too quickly produced to have an eye on permanent standards, too short to be more than a summary, and so numerous that there is no 'opinion' of an author's work—'praise cancels blame, and

blame praise'.² Leonard Woolf is perhaps fairer in his dissenting note at the end of the pamphlet. He says that the honest reviewer does at least describe a book and estimate its quality, and if he comes across a real work of art he must 'descend or ascend for a short time into the regions of true criticism'. (Incidentally, *Reviewing* was itself reviewed in the *Times Literary Supplement*, the journal to which Virginia Woolf had contributed so copiously. Naturally enough, it did not like having its *raison d'être* questioned in this way.)³

In view of the often intelligent and sympathetic response to her work, which is evident in this selection, her remarks on reviewing are certainly too harsh. Her work was given very high praise and rarely condemned out of hand. Even the most hostile reviewer usually found at least one work excellent or one aspect praiseworthy (Arnold Bennett on *To the Lighthouse*, for example). There was, to use Virginia Woolf's terms, some 'gutting' (précis writing) and 'stamping' (opinion mongering) in these reviews, but there were also many good pieces of work. There are admirable reviews from E. M. Forster and Edwin Muir, and Conrad Aiken's discussion of *To the Lighthouse* is an example of an intelligent reviewer, himself a novelist and poet, judging a classic with reference, if not to 'eternal standards of literature', at least with a sense of a wider literary context and tradition. Perhaps because they are dealing with works of art, and were written by creative people, many of the reviews in this collection often do contain true criticism and are not simply of historical or sociological value. But we can follow here a debate which is of undoubted historical interest, that between Arnold Bennett and Virginia Woolf: a contention which is of some importance to our understanding of the development of the twentieth-century novel.

Virginia Woolf remarked that an author now has sixty reviews where in the nineteenth century he had perhaps six.⁴ She could certainly expect a great number for her later works, and the problem for the editors has been one of selection. In addition to reviews, longer critical articles and book-length studies were published about her work during her lifetime. The aim has been to give a representative cross-section of these writings, but greater emphasis has been placed on the views of those who were themselves interesting literary figures. The terminus date for the volume is 1941, the year of Virginia Woolf's death and of the posthumous publication of her last novel, *Between the Acts*.

An unusual feature in studying the response to Virginia Woolf's work is that we can read in *A Writer's Diary* her reactions to the reviews as

INTRODUCTION

they came out. Leonard Woolf's autobiography confirms the impression given by her Diary that she was extremely, indeed, morbidly sensitive to criticism.⁵ Criticism affected her peace of mind to the point of driving her near insanity, but did the reviews affect the course of her writing? Her own self-criticism was so sharp that the opinions of others were probably much less important in the development of her art: it was Virginia Woolf herself who described a certain aspect of *Mrs Dalloway* as 'tinselly'.⁶ She was tempted by the success of *Orlando* to repeat the performance, but resisted and produced an extremely innovatory novel, *The Waves*. She had a constant urge to experiment and experiment. Leonard Woolf believed that the one novel which was a response to criticism was *The Years*, her 'best-seller', but arguably her poorest novel; modern criticism has diverged sharply from the first reviews, which were generally very enthusiastic. *The Years* was written at a time when Virginia Woolf was under increasing attacks from those who wanted more 'solidity' and who believed that the appropriate response to the threatening political situation of the 1930s was writing which paid attention to the economic and social ills of society. This reversion to the matter and method of *Night and Day* (*The Years* was explicitly this) may have been a failure in nerve. In which case, perhaps the reverse effect operated in the writing of her other novels: the understanding and encouragement which she received at other points in her career gave her the courage to make it new with each succeeding work. After the popular success of *The Years*, she pushed herself and the novel to the limit, with *Between the Acts*.

II

We must distinguish between the critical acclaim which we see in the reviews and popular or commercial success. A sharp separation between them is especially noticeable in the case of Virginia Woolf's early work, as the publishing history shows.

Her first two novels were published by her half-brother Gerald Duckworth, and all her subsequent work, in Britain, by the Hogarth Press, which she and her husband set up in 1917. The Press was begun as a hobby, with Leonard and Virginia Woolf doing the printing by hand, but they began to send work to professional printers and gradually their press became a serious business. (An amusing picture of the Press, in 1928, from the office boy's point of view, is given in Richard Kennedy's

*A Boy at the Hogarth Press.*⁷) But for a serious account of the facts and figures relating to Virginia Woolf's work we must turn to Leonard Woolf's autobiography, which contains details of books sold and money earned. Such figures are important for the reasons he states: although they are rarely revealed, they play an important part in an artist's life. They also shed light on the literary profession in the twentieth century.

There was high praise for Virginia Woolf's first novel, but a small sale. The figures show how long it took for Virginia Woolf to reach a fairly wide public. By 1929 *The Voyage Out* (1915) had sold only 2,000 copies in Britain (USA figures not known), and *Night and Day* (1919) only 2,338 (plus 1,326 in the USA). *Jacob's Room* was the first of Virginia Woolf's novels to be published by the Hogarth Press, and this is an important factor in assessing its reception, for its unusual appearance set up a resistance prior to any consideration of its experimental content. This consideration first became evident with *Jacob's Room*, but it applies to later works as well. As Leonard Woolf points out, *Jacob's Room* was simply a typical case:⁸

The reception of *Jacob's Room* was characteristic. It was the first book for which we had a jacket designed by Vanessa. It is, I think, a very good jacket and today no bookseller would feel his hackles or his temperature rise at sight of it. But it did not represent a desirable female or even Jacob or his room, and it was what in 1923 many people would have called reproachfully post-impressionist. It was almost universally condemned by the booksellers, and several of the buyers laughed at it.

But the Woolfs were happy with a British sale of 1,413 in its first year. (Two impressions were published in the USA in 1923, of 1,500 and 1,000.) *Mrs Dalloway*, generally regarded as a difficult work, sold 2,236 in its first year (with three impressions in the USA, one of 2,000 and two of 1,500). *To the Lighthouse* was distinctly more successful than her previous books, selling 3,873 in Britain in its first year, and having three impressions in the USA, of 4,000, 1,500 and 2,100. But the real turning point in her career as a commercially successful writer was *Orlando*, which in Britain sold more in its first month than *To the Lighthouse* in a year, reaching a total of 21,135 in six months (8,104 in Britain, 13,031 in the USA). There was a levelling out with *The Waves*, but *Flush* was very popular, especially in Britain (possibly because it is a 'doggie' book—but this is pure speculation). In six months 18,739 were sold in Britain, 14,081 in the USA. *The Years*, an outright best-seller,

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was her most successful novel in terms of total sales, selling 43,909 copies in its first six months (13,005 in Britain, 30,904 in the USA). In Virginia Woolf's lifetime it was far ahead of her other works, but the following statistics give an idea of how things have changed. They refer to the sales made in 1964 alone: *Mrs Dalloway* 10,791, *To the Lighthouse* 31,451, *Orlando* 509 (out of print in USA), *The Waves*, 1,336, *The Years* 470 (out of print in USA).

On a personal level what the increase in sales during her lifetime meant for Virginia Woolf was that after *Orlando* (1928), she and her husband were always well-off. For an overall interpretation of these facts and figures we cannot do better than turn to Leonard Woolf:⁹

But the statistics of Virginia's earnings as a writer of books have from another point of view still greater interest and importance. They throw a curious light on the economics of a literary profession and on the economic effect of popular taste on a serious writer. *Orlando*, *Flush*, and *The Years* were immeasurably more successful than any of Virginia's other novels. *The Years*, much the most successful of them all, was, in my opinion, the worst book she ever wrote—at any rate, it cannot compare, as a work of art, or a work of genius, with *The Waves*, *To the Lighthouse*, or *Between the Acts*. *Orlando* is a highly original and amusing book and has some beautiful things in it, but is a *jeu d'esprit*, and so is *Flush*, a work of even lighter weight; these two books again cannot seriously be compared with her major novels. The corollary of all this is strange. Up to 1928, when Virginia was 46, she had published five novels; she had in the narrow circle of people who value great works of literature a high reputation as one of the most original contemporary novelists. Thus her books were always reviewed with the greatest seriousness in all papers which treat contemporary literature seriously. But no one would have called her a popular or even a successful novelist, and she could not possibly have lived upon the earnings from her books. In 1932 Mrs Leavis, rather a hostile critic, wrote:

The novels are in fact highbrow art. The reader who is not alive to the fact that *To the Lighthouse* is a beautifully constructed work of art will make nothing of the book. . . . *To the Lighthouse* is not a popular novel (though it has already taken its place as an important one), and it is necessary to enquire why the conditions of the age have made it inaccessible to a public whose ancestors have been competent readers of Sterne and Nashe (*Fiction and the Reading Public*, 223).

Mrs Leavis exaggerates. It is not true, as the subsequent history of *To the Lighthouse* shows, that the 'common reader' who does not bother his head about 'beautiful construction' or indeed works of art, can make nothing of the book. . . . But it is of course, true, . . . that up to 1928 Virginia, although widely recognized as an important novelist, was read by a small public. The fate of her

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books after 1928, however, points to a conclusion quite different from, and more interesting than, Mrs Leavis's. . . . Nearly all artists, from Beethoven downward, who have had something highly original to say and have been through periods in which the ordinary person has found him unintelligible or 'inaccessible' but eventually, in some cases suddenly, some gradually, he becomes intelligible and is everywhere accepted as a good or a great artist. In Virginia's case she had to write a bad book and two not very serious books before her best serious novels were widely understood and appreciated.

It must be borne in mind that many of the reviews which follow are from 'papers which treat contemporary literature seriously', and so we must not see their high praise for *To the Lighthouse* and their negligence towards *Flush* as a reflection of the taste of the reading public, which are perhaps better indicated in these facts and figures.

III

The Voyage Out

In his autobiography Leonard Woolf recalls how, after Virginia Woolf had rewritten the last chapters many times, he took the manuscript of *The Voyage Out* to her half-brother Gerald Duckworth who owned the publishing firm which bears his name.¹⁰ The novel was accepted in April 1913, Duckworth's reader, Edward Garnett, greeting the novel as evidence of an exciting new talent.¹¹ Garnett championed many new writers, and although his help may not have been necessary in getting *The Voyage Out* published, his enthusiastic reception was a good start to Virginia Woolf's career as a novelist. When the novel was eventually published Garnett wrote to W. H. Hudson in praise of it, but the latter was unimpressed (see No. 9).

Anxiety about the reception of her first novel may have been a factor in precipitating Virginia Woolf's mental breakdown which culminated in her attempted suicide in September 1913—she 'thought everyone would jeer at her'.¹² It was this illness which prevented the book from coming out until two years after it had been accepted for publication.¹³

The *Times Literary Supplement* review (No. 1) was typical in being very favourable. Virginia Woolf had contributed to the 'major journal' as she and Leonard Woolf called it, since 1905, and she regarded a review here as being important because of its wide readership and influence. This review emphasised the 'feminine' aspect of her writing, an elusive quality which many subsequent critics (and Virginia Woolf herself) tried to define.

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In general the reviews of *The Voyage Out* raised a number of issues which recurred in the reception of her later work. Her handling of moods, of individual perceptions, and her creation of small pictures was favourably noticed (Nos 6, 10, 11)—a talent which was, and is, recognised even by hostile critics. ‘Character creation’ and ‘form’ must figure in any serious discussion of the novel, and Virginia Woolf’s innovatory approach was to make these aspects contentious issues. In this, her first novel, her character portrayal was largely approved: her people were ‘brilliantly drawn’ (No. 1) and ‘Every one seems solid’ (No. 10); the *Saturday Review* thought that ‘The characters have all distinct personalities.’¹⁴ But W. H. Hudson (No. 9) thought her men were poor and E. M. Forster (No. 4) complained that her characters were not vivid, a criticism which he was to reiterate in many of his later comments on her work. Gerald Gould’s observation (No. 5) that her characters were ‘sophisticated and introspective’ is a comment on the limited range of Virginia Woolf’s characters, a limitation frequently noted, with growing hostility, in later reviews. (No. 6) found her characters’ talk ‘consciously eccentric’ at times, and for Gould they were quite simply ‘mad’. As he points out, it is not that such people do not exist—they do, but we are still struck by their ‘unreality’, an appropriately paradoxical employment of this slippery term. (‘Reality’ and ‘unreality’ occur inevitably in discussions of the novel, and as Virginia Woolf questioned accepted ideas of reality, the reception of her work displays some of the confusion which often lies behind these words, especially when employed as literary critical terms.) But Gould’s remark is perceptive if we compare the figure of St John Hirst with what we know of Lytton Strachey (a comparison made later by Leonard Woolf, J. K. Johnstone and Michael Holroyd). In spite of these criticisms there was comparatively widespread approval of her character-drawing which came perhaps from the fact that in this, her first novel, Virginia Woolf had not turned her back entirely on the conventional mode of creating character. But although she had not yet developed her ‘lyrical novel’ it is evident that she was beginning to look at people from unusual angles.

A number of reviewers thought that the form or construction of the novel was a weak point (e.g. Nos 3, 5, 9). The *New York Times* reviewer emphasised this weakness when the novel was first published in America (it did not appear there until May 1920). He found the lack of a clear story-line disappointing: ‘As for the story itself, it is painfully lacking, both in coherency and narrative interest. . . . These people all

talk smartly, and one rather wonders what it is all about, for it does not seem to get anywhere in particular.¹⁵ Like a number of English reviewers (e.g. Nos. 6, 7), he thought it overloaded with detail; a fault, according to the *Sunday Times*, often associated with a first attempt in fiction.¹⁶ For some reviewers of the period, form was identified with plot, or quite simply with story, but Forster (No. 4) understood that Virginia Woolf was seeking unity by a path other than the usual one of 'plot'. (In fact she had decided many years before that 'plots don't matter'¹⁷; but in her reply to Strachey (No. 12) she admits the validity of some of these strictures on the form of the novel.)

The comedy, irony and satire in the novel were praised, although (No. 5) found much of it merely caustic. Virginia Woolf perhaps had this element in mind when she re-read the novel in 1920, and feared that she might be remembered simply as the author of cheap witticisms.¹⁸

Most reviewers admired Virginia Woolf's handling of Rachel's illness in those last chapters which she rewrote many times (Nos 1, 5, 6, 11). This remark in *Country Life* was typical: 'No reader will ever forget her description of a girl's bewildered falling into the depths of love or of the unbelievable approach of death.'¹⁹ Forster's comparison of these chapters with Jules Romains' *Mort de quelqu'un* prefigured many later commentaries in which comparisons were made not only to this work of Romains but more generally to *unanimiste* ideas.²⁰ Even hostile reviewers (Nos 3, 7) praised the close of the novel, just as future reviewers were to praise the Septimus scenes in *Mrs Dalloway*: that is to say, those parts of the novels written with an obvious intensity and based on Virginia Woolf's disturbing psychological experiences. Perhaps because it was dangerous for her to explore these areas she turned away from these final pages of *The Voyage Out*, which we can now, with her other novels in mind call 'typical', and wrote *Night and Day*, a different *kind* of novel.

In his letter to Virginia Woolf (No. 11), written nearly a year after the publication of the novel, Lytton Strachey touched on some of the themes which we have seen in these first reviews. He followed No. 10 in seeing a Tolstoyan solidity in the novel; and the witty, ironical, 'unvictorian' element naturally appealed to the future author of *Eminent Victorians*. He would no doubt have been amused at the fact that one reviewer (No. 1) found the novel 'shocking' (though successfully so), and by another's condemnation of the 'coarseness' of its language (No. 7). These comments indicate how remote from us is the world in

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which Virginia Woolf set out on her journey as a novelist, a world of prudery and restraint from which she and other members of the Bloomsbury Group were trying to escape. Yet they were products of that world, and Virginia Woolf herself found 'vulgarisms' and 'crudities' in the novel when she re-read it. But it is partly because of the questioning and experiment of Bloomsbury that the modern reader would find it difficult to discover anything 'shocking' or 'coarse' in *The Voyage Out*. Strachey qualified his enthusiastic praise by noting that there was no 'dominant idea', a lack of that Jamesian 'subject' which No. 6 had mentioned. Virginia Woolf acknowledged the fairness of Strachey's criticism in her reply (No. 12) and tried to explain what she had attempted to do in the novel.

TWO EXPERIMENTAL SKETCHES:

'THE MARK ON THE WALL' (1917) AND 'KEW GARDENS' (1919)

'The Mark on the Wall' appeared with a story by Leonard Woolf in a volume entitled *Two Stories*, the first publication of the Hogarth Press, which Leonard and Virginia set up as a hobby. They did the printing and binding themselves and the book was sold by private subscription to friends and acquaintances.²¹ No review copies were sent out, but the volume was well received by their friends. In a letter to Leonard Woolf, Lytton Strachey said that he considered Virginia's story a work of genius: "The liquidity of the style fills me with envy: really some of the sentences!—How on earth does she make the English language float and float? And then the wonderful way in which the modern point of view is suggested. Tiens!"²² Virginia Woolf wrote to her brother-in-law Clive Bell to thank him for his praise of "The Mark on the Wall", saying that he was 'the first person who ever thought I'd write well'.²³ (The letters which form Appendix D of the first volume of Quentin Bell's biography of Virginia Woolf indicate that Clive Bell played an important part in the first stages of the writing of *The Voyage Out*.) One of the features of the reception of her work was the private and public support of her friends. For example, as early as February 1918, when she had published only *The Voyage Out* and 'The Mark on the Wall', Clive Bell in a preface to a collection of his essays was prepared to assert that Virginia Woolf, Hardy and Conrad were 'our three best novelists'.²⁴

Some months later Katherine Mansfield (whose 'Prelude' was the second Hogarth publication) wrote to Virginia Woolf saying how

much she liked 'The Mark on the Wall'.²⁵ They both admired, and were probably influenced by Chekhov, whose translated works were in vogue at this time. Katherine Mansfield approved of Virginia Woolf's Chekhov review²⁶ and expressed admiration for her essay 'Modern Novels'.²⁷ This leader article in the *Times Literary Supplement* was reprinted in *The Common Reader* with the title 'Modern Fiction'. It was referred to and quoted by many subsequent reviewers of Virginia Woolf's work, the passage about life being a luminous halo rather than a series of gig-lamps being especially popular.

Virginia Woolf's next publication was 'Kew Gardens', and this time the Hogarth Press did send a review copy to the *Times Literary Supplement*. The importance of a favourable review such as this (No. 13) can be gathered from Leonard Woolf's description of the flood of orders which they received after it appeared.²⁸ The sketch was also reviewed (together with 'The Mark on the Wall') by E. M. Forster (No. 14). Her work now contained sufficient number of 'experimental' aspects for Roger Fry to 'hold it up to the light', as Virginia Woolf in her biography of him said he did with all literature. He saw a new pattern—one similar to that created by contemporary visual artists (see No. 15). In December of that year Fry planned to collaborate with Charles Vildrac, the French *Unanimiste* poet on a translation of one of these sketches.²⁹

Night and Day: A 'TRADITIONAL' NOVEL?

In her Diary Virginia Woolf recorded the despatch of her personal copies of the novel to her friends.³⁰ She waited anxiously for their comments, particularly those of Lytton Strachey and E. M. Forster. Clive Bell wrote 'No doubt a work of the highest genius'³¹—but it is clear from her Diary that Virginia Woolf did not respect his judgment. Lytton Strachey was enthusiastic but it appears from her reply to his letter, that he would have liked more sex in the novel:³²

Ah, how delightful to be praised by you! I tell myself that of course you're always too generous about me, and one ought to discount it, but I can't bring myself to. I enjoy every word. I don't suppose there's anything in the way of praise that means more to me than yours. There are myriads of things I want to ask you; about the male characters for instance. Do they convince? Then was Rodney's change of heart sufficiently prepared for to be credible? It came into my head on the spur of the moment that he was in love with Cassandra, and afterwards it seemed a little violent. I take your point about the

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tupping and had meant to introduce a little in that line, but somehow it seemed out of the picture—still, I regret it. . . . I only wanted to say how happy your letter had made me,—dialogue was what I was after in this book—so I'm glad you hit on that; I mean it was one of the things—there are so many million others!—but I can't help thinking it's the problem, if one is to write novels at all, which is a moot point.

To his sister Philippa, Lytton Strachey wrote, 'I think Mrs Hilbery is a chef d'oeuvre' and in a letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell he declared that it was not a book to read, but to re-read.³³ All her friends seemed to be unanimous in their praise, but then E. M. Forster wrote 'I like it less than *The Voyage Out*', and she valued his opinion 'as much as anybody's'.³⁴ Then the *TLS* arrived with high praise, and intelligent too, she thought (No. 17). And so Virginia Woolf records her changing moods at the reception of her novel—now elated by praise, now cast down by adverse criticism. A few days after writing his critical letter, Forster dined with the Woolfs, and explained why he preferred *The Voyage Out*. Virginia Woolf recorded their conversation in her *Diary*:³⁵

The doubt about Morgan and *N. and D.* is removed; I understand why he likes it less than *V. O.*; and, in understanding, see that it is not a criticism to discourage. Perhaps intelligent criticism never is. All the same, I shirk writing it out, because I write so much criticism. What he said amounted to this: *N. and D.* is a strictly formal and classical work; that being so one requires, or he requires, a far greater degree of lovability in the characters than in a book like *V. O.*, which is vague and universal. None of the characters in *N. and D.* is lovable. He did not care how they sorted themselves out. Neither did he care for the characters in *V. O.*, but there he felt no need to care for them. Otherwise, he admired practically everything; his blame does not consist in saying that *N. and D.* is less remarkable than t'other. O and beauties it has in plenty—in fact, I see no reason to be depressed on his account.

It seemed to Virginia Woolf that there was no critical consensus about the work: 'So all critics split off, and the wretched author who tries to keep control of them is torn asunder.'³⁶

There was high praise for *Night and Day* but generally less enthusiasm than for *The Voyage Out*, and most subsequent criticism has followed this pattern. Looking back, three months after the publication of *Night and Day*,³⁷ Virginia Woolf came to understand why people preferred *The Voyage Out*, but at the time these early criticisms caused her some agitation. She was particularly upset by Katherine Mansfield's review (No. 18).

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Ford Madox Ford's³⁸ article (No. 16) was a rare instance of an attempt to establish an agreed critical vocabulary for talking about the novel. He made an interesting distinction between 'novel' and 'romance', and used *Night and Day* to illustrate the latter category, because of its inclusiveness and lack of form. But he has chosen a singularly difficult novel for his purpose, for *Night and Day* seems to be a mixture of 'novel' and 'romance' as he defines them, and is possibly an attempt to combine the elements of 'inclusiveness' and 'design' which he isolates. Indeed, the majority of critics at the time stressed the classical or 'novel' elements in it. And so, for Forster, it was a classical novel which yet has beautiful elements, rather than a 'romance' which makes no attempt to achieve form. The *London Mercury* reviewer³⁹ emphasised the wealth of minute details in the novel—a romance characteristic—and yet he discerned a structure holding the novel together. It was therefore in the 'older tradition' of the novel as a work of art—precisely the opposite conclusion from that of Ford. It is clear, as well, that this reviewer saw this traditional aspect as something praiseworthy, not simply a neutral classification. For Katherine Mansfield, also, an element of evaluation is involved, but for her 'traditional' had pejorative connotations: in view of her friendship with Virginia Woolf she went as far as she dared in saying that the novel was a step backwards (No. 18).

What is clear amidst this confusion is that probably the novel did result from a somewhat confused intention—a conclusion borne out by Virginia Woolf herself when she declared many years later that she was attempting to do in *The Years* what she had not 'dared' to do in *Night and Day*.⁴⁰

The Voyage Out was published in the USA in May 1920, and *Night and Day* four months later. Reviewing the books together the *Bookman* (New York) reviewer could see the similarities as well as the differences between the two works (No. 20).

ON THE TRACK OF REAL DISCOVERIES: *Monday or Tuesday*

Virginia Woolf collected 'A Mark on the Wall', 'Kew Gardens', 'An Unwritten Novel' and five previously unpublished sketches into a volume entitled *Monday or Tuesday*, which was published 'prematurely' on 7 April 1921.⁴¹ This confusion in the launching of the book Virginia Woolf recorded in her *Diary*:⁴²

My book out (prematurely) and nipped, a damp firework. Now the solid grain of fact is that Ralph sent my book out to *The Times* for review without date of publication in it. Thus a short notice is scrambled through to be in 'on Monday at latest', put in an obscure place, rather scrappy, complimentary enough, but quite unintelligent. I mean by that they don't see that I'm after something interesting.

The *Times Literary Supplement* review (No. 21) also indicates that there were some technical problems in the production of the volume. Doran, the American publishers of *Night and Day*, had refused the book, and things seemed gloomy. But she looked forward to the private criticism of her friends—the 'real test'. Public criticism by a friend, Desmond MacCarthy (No. 22), made her feel 'important'⁴³ and then a few days later she recorded her delight at Strachey's praise of 'String Quartet', and Roger Fry's declaration that she was 'on the track of real discoveries'.⁴⁴ A sentence in the *British Weekly* caught her eye: 'Virginia Woolf in the opinion of some good judges is the ablest of women writers in fiction.'⁴⁵ This appeared in a review of Leonard Woolf's translation of Chekhov, and so the sheer gratuitousness of the praise perhaps added piquancy. To her surprise, T. S. Eliot added his praise.⁴⁶ The book was accepted for publication in America by Harcourt Brace and appeared in November 1921. She had pleased the people whose judgment mattered to her, and so was not too upset when Leonard Woolf reported an unfavourable review of the American edition in the *Dial*, although she had hoped for praise in 'that august quarter'.⁴⁷ The *TLS* (No. 21) and *Dial* (No. 23) mark the poles of reaction to her work. Virginia Woolf was unfair to the *TLS* review, for it is a perceptive discussion of the non-representational nature of her writings, and makes an interesting comparison with parallel developments in the visual arts. The *Dial* saw her work as merely 'arty' and 'vague'.

'IMPRESSIONISM': *Jacob's Room*

This was the first large-scale work to be published by the Hogarth Press and Virginia Woolf was spared what was to her the pain of submitting her novel to Duckworth.⁴⁸ There was an auspicious beginning to the reception of the novel, as Harcourt Brace wrote in glowing terms early in October and said they would be delighted to publish it in America.⁴⁹ Pre-publication praise came from Lytton Strachey (No. 24), and she was pleased, although she thought him a little extravagant, as her reply shows (No. 25). The editor of the *TLS*

rang up to ask if the publication date could be brought forward⁵⁰ and its review did appear a day before the planned publication date (No. 26). A *TLS* review was important, according to Virginia Woolf, not because it was the most intelligent, but because it was the most read (we saw earlier the dramatic effect of the *TLS* review on the sales of 'Kew Gardens'). Although she called this review 'tepid'⁵¹, it seems intelligent and reasonably enthusiastic, stressing the adventurousness of her method. These reviews help us to recapture the sense of strangeness which many readers felt when faced with Virginia Woolf's experimental work for the first time, but not all welcomed her innovations.

The *Daily News* (No. 27) headed its piece 'Middle Aged Sensualists', and Virginia Woolf with typical and delightful exaggeration managed to make this worse, if that were possible, by transforming it in her *Diary* into 'elderly sensualist'.⁵² She felt that the *Pall Mall Gazette* (No. 28) had dismissed her as 'negligeable'. This review was entitled 'An Impressionist' and it is this element which most reviewers point to, usually with some praise, but often with the qualification that impressionism is not enough to make a good novel. A parallel to this was the comparison with poetry. Despite its disjointed appearance, the novel was felt to have a number of local successes—vivid glimpses, snapshots or vignettes. But most reviewers regretted the lack of plot, structure and solid characters. The American edition was published in February 1923, and the *Nation* (New York) reviewer followed many of the British reviews in discussing the novel in terms of Impressionism, but for him it was a complete failure (No. 35).

There were comparisons with Joyce and Dorothy Richardson and a sense that there was a growing 'school' of stream-of-consciousness writers. Middleton Murry (No. 34) remarked on the widening gap between these *avant-garde* writers and the general public, which still wanted a story. Virginia Woolf was to worry continually in the following years about Murry's implication that *Jacob's Room* was an 'impasse'. From this time she was generally thought of as a 'difficult' or 'high-brow' writer. Even T. S. Eliot thought the novel required very careful reading, but he believed that she had successfully bridged the gap between her first novels and the experimental prose of *Monday or Tuesday*.⁵³ However, as Siegfried Sassoon pointed out in a letter to her, if read 'visually' the novel need not be too difficult: 'Your novel gave me an immense apprehension of your subtlety of intellect. But I was able to follow your meaning—instantly—every time, because you visualise everything you write.'⁵⁴

Virginia Woolf's only answer to the suggestion that she had reached an 'impasse' could be, and was to be, another novel, *Mrs Dalloway*. But another criticism was to draw her out in a different way. This was Arnold Bennett's article (No. 36), and her reply, the essays in which she confronted Mr Bennett with Mrs Brown.

'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown'

In June 1923, a few months after Bennett's article appeared, Virginia Woolf recorded in her Diary her intention to reply to his criticism that she 'can't create or didn't in *Jacob's Room*, characters that survive'.⁵⁵ This reply (No. 37), the first and less well-known version of 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', was first published in America and appeared a fortnight later in the *Nation and Athenaeum*. There followed in the columns of this periodical an interesting debate about the essay, with articles by the novelist J. D. Beresford, Logan Pearsall Smith, a 'man of letters' and friend of the Woolfs, and Michael Sadleir, the novelist and writer on Victorian literature. Their comments perhaps encouraged her to expand and elaborate on certain themes and to alter the emphases in her later essay. Beresford (No. 38) stressed the 'change in human nature' which novelists had reflected—a central theme in Virginia Woolf's second version. Smith's opinion was of some importance to her⁵⁶ and his views were probably carefully noted. Perhaps his article (No. 39) incited her to extend the scope of her essay to include more foreign aspects. He emphasised the idea of cultural relativity, and, more important still, the role of convention in the creation of character. His occasionally flippant tone masks some interesting insights into the nature of fictional character. Looking at the first version of 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', together with these replies and the famous final version of the essay, gives us an idea of how this latter was not a 'private manifesto'⁵⁷ but the product of a stimulating milieu.

The second version of the essay was first given as a lecture to the Cambridge Heretics on 18 May 1924. T. S. Eliot asked her for something for his *Criterion* and she suggested this paper, but warned him that it was intended for an undergraduate audience. Nevertheless it appeared in that journal in July, with the title 'Character in Fiction'. Frank Swinnerton discussed it in his 'Londoner' feature in the *New York Bookman* (No. 40). It was then published as a booklet by the Hogarth Press with the title of the early version, 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', and was reviewed by Edwin Muir (No. 41) and 'Feiron Morris' (Mrs T. S. Eliot) (No. 42). But its reception is much more diffuse than

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this, for the essay became a key document, not only in the assessment of Virginia Woolf's work, but in relation to twentieth-century fiction generally. It played a part in the decline of Bennett's reputation, although more recently there have been attempts to see the argument from his point of view.⁵⁸

The Common Reader (First Series)

Eight days after it was published, Virginia Woolf lamented over the critical silence which greeted the publication *The Common Reader*. Then a friend reported a review in the *Star* which mocked at Vanessa Bell's cover. The reviewer had written:⁵⁹

What means this flaunting of crude art, this almost reverent attempt to copy the early paint-brush effects of a child? I think it is a curiously accurate reflection on the misguided effort of the author in her criticism of contemporary writers to vindicate crude literary art against the cultivated and polished literary art.

(That is to say, rating Joyce higher than Wells, Bennett and Galsworthy.) But he praised her for discussing authors other than the 'safely dead'. The *TLS* (No. 44) gave her what she called 'sober and sensible praise', and she complained that she was never given a really enthusiastic review there. She contrasted this with the very complimentary review in the *Manchester Guardian* (No. 45). This reviewer made it clear that he had previously not greatly cared for Virginia Woolf's work, which bears out Leonard Woolf's comment that many people who did not like her novels thought her a remarkable critic of literature.⁶⁰ She was pleased to receive a letter from Mrs Hardy saying that Thomas Hardy had enjoyed the book.⁶¹ In July, reviews appeared in the *Calendar* (No. 46) and the *Criterion* (No. 47), which made serious attempts to 'place' Virginia Woolf's criticism respectively in its social and its philosophical context.

Mrs Dalloway

Quentin Bell in his *Biography* describes the correspondence which took place between Virginia Woolf and Jacques Raverat some eight months before the publication of *Mrs Dalloway*.⁶² Raverat discussed the way in which a painter can achieve the effect of 'simultaneity' and Virginia Woolf described how she wished to achieve the 'splash' effect of a painter in her use of language, rather than the strictly linear 'railway-line' type of sentence of Bennett and Galsworthy. She accorded

Raverat the rare privilege of reading the novel in manuscript and was cheered by his enthusiasm.

But the public reception of the novel began badly, with Virginia Woolf noting unfavourable reviews in the *Western Mail*⁶³ and the *Scotsman*.⁶⁴ Both reviewers were disturbed that the novel was not split into chapters (the *Western Mail* review was headed 'A Long, Long Chapter'). It seems that the 'common reader' in the provinces needed 'resting places'. The lack of action and the commonplace nature of the characters was criticised. For the *Western Mail* the novel was simply a 'bewildering jumble', but the *Scotsman* was more discriminating, praising the Septimus-Lucrezia scenes. But both reviews bear out Murry's earlier remark about the growing distance between writers like Virginia Woolf and the reading public.

For the first time, her work was published simultaneously in Britain and America. A review by the British novelist Richard Hughes (No. 48) was a good beginning to the reception of the novel in the United States. His comparison with Cézanne is especially interesting, when we bear in mind the 'painterly' aspect of writing which Virginia Woolf discussed with Raverat. *Mrs Dalloway* was also highly praised in the Boston *Christian Science Monitor*, which described it as 'a work of art, a thing of beauty'.⁶⁵ In Britain, the *TLS* admired her persistent experimentation (No. 49). And so a month after its publication, there had been sufficient favourable notice and a good enough sale ('More of *Dalloway* has been sold this month than of *Jacob* in a year', she noted in her Diary) for her to face with equanimity the pointed remarks of Lytton Strachey, whose criticism she always noted carefully. She reported his remarks in her Diary (No. 52) and her own comments indicate that she was a harsh critic of her own work. The *Calendar*, following its policy, attempted to place the novel in its social context (No. 53). E. M. Forster had privately praised the novel, and now published a full-scale assessment of Virginia Woolf's achievement to date (No. 54). The reviews of Muir (No. 55), Carew (No. 56) and Bennett (No. 58) revolve once again around the problem of character in fiction.

To the Lighthouse

To the Lighthouse was published in May 1927, but the central section, 'Time Passes', had already appeared in France in the previous December, translated by Charles Mauron. Roger Fry wrote to the translator's wife, in connection with this translation:⁶⁶

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Good Lord, how difficult she is to translate, but I think Charles has managed to keep the atmosphere marvellously. To tell the truth I do not think this piece is quite of her best vintage. I have noticed one peculiarity. She is so splendid as soon as a character is involved—for example the old *concierge* is superb—but when she tries to give her impression of inanimate objects, she exaggerates, she underlines, she poeticises just a little bit.

The problem of this central section was raised again in the reviews. The *TLS* (No. 60) declared that 'this transitional part of the book is not its strongest part.' Writing her Diary 'under the damp cloud' of this review, Virginia Woolf expressed her anxiety lest the Time Passes section be pronounced 'soft, shallow, insipid, sentimental.'⁶⁷ But many readers were to disagree with Fry and the *TLS*. Writing to Virginia Woolf a few days later Lady Ottoline Morrell picked out this second section for special praise,⁶⁸ and for the *New York Times* reviewer it was a 'magnificent interlude' (No. 61).

Virginia Woolf received letters of praise from Vanessa Bell⁶⁹ and Roger Fry.⁷⁰ Lytton Strachey liked the novel better than *Mrs Dalloway* but was disturbed by the lack of copulation in the book (he had criticised *Night and Day* for the same reason). The final result, he thought, was little more than an arabesque, though an exquisite one.⁷¹

In general the novel was very favourably received even by normally hostile critics—a pattern of response seen in much subsequent criticism. (For example, F. R. Leavis, writing in 1930, described it as a work expressing the finest consciousness of the age, fit to rank with 'The Waste Land' and *Ulysses*.)⁷² The characters were thought to be more fully and firmly drawn than in her previous work and the novel's construction attracted appreciation. The fleeting impressions which had been individually admired in *Mrs Dalloway* and *Jacob's Room* were here felt to be better organised. But there was still little concession to the demand for plot or story, and some reviewers found fault with this.

To the Lighthouse received high praise from other novelists. Hugh Walpole recorded the influence which the novel had on him when he was writing his novel *Hans Frost* (published two years later, in 1929): 'This will be a simple mild book but not imbecile . . . writing, I fear, rather in Virginia Woolf's manner. How can I help it when she is such a darling and *To the Lighthouse* the best of all the works yet?', and later he declared that 'Virginia Woolf has perhaps liberated me.'⁷³ He it was who presented to Virginia Woolf the Femina Vie Heureuse Prize awarded for the novel in May 1928. Despite her very tart remarks in

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her Diary about his speech on that occasion, they became friends. He was later to write 'I think Virginia has shown me—especially in *To the Lighthouse* and *Orlando*—how to get over a little of my sententiousness and sentimentality. I think both *Hans Frost* and *Herries* show the beginning of this change and I must develop it farther without surrendering too *much* to her influence.'⁷⁴ Ford Madox Ford described *To the Lighthouse* as 'the only piece of British writing that has really excited my craftsman's mind—the only piece since the decline and death of Conrad'.⁷⁵ Even Arnold Bennett, normally an unfriendly reviewer, considered it a good novel (No. 63).

What evoked this larger enthusiasm was a more tangible quality in Virginia Woolf's presentation of life and of human beings—a greater sense of external reality. In this novel the outer and inner worlds are brought much nearer together than in her previous books. Aldous Huxley's complaint about its over-refinement and remoteness, a familiar response to her other works, was an untypical reaction to this novel:⁷⁶

Have you read a novel called *The Man Within* by Graham Greene? I think it's most remarkable. . . . Much better (between ourselves, for it's frightful heresy!) than Virginia's *To the Lighthouse* which I'm now rather belatedly reading. It's the difference between something full and something empty; between a writer who has a close physical contact with reality and one who is a thousand miles away and only has a telescope to look, remotely, at the world.

Conrad Aiken's review (No. 65) raises an issue which was to dominate much critical thought in later years: the idea that Virginia Woolf deals with only a narrow area of human experience, that hers was a small and sheltered world. Aiken's perceptive discussion is one of the best written during Virginia Woolf's lifetime. He maintains that Virginia Woolf's novels shut out the fiercer experiences of life and have an 'odd and delicious air of parochialism'. But is a limited range of this kind an absolute limitation in the value of a writer? Certainly, Virginia Woolf wrote about the kind of intellectual and sophisticated people she knew best. But Aiken rightly points out that the test should be how far she succeeds in making her world and its inhabitants real to us. He emphasises Virginia Woolf's success in making possible the imaginative identification between the reader and the world she has created for her characters: 'We feel the minute texture of their lives with their own vivid senses . . . and ultimately we know them as well, as terribly, as we know ourselves.'

Orlando

Virginia Woolf considered *Orlando* to be something of a freak⁷⁷ and explained, 'I expect I began *Orlando* as a joke and went on with it seriously.'⁷⁸ One of the first problems the book met with was that Virginia Woolf in fun had called it a 'biography', and this caused difficulties with the booksellers. They insisted that it should go on the biography shelf rather than the novel shelf, and they ordered only small quantities because, as they explained, 'no one wants biography'. But the book was to sell very well, either in spite of—or because of—being called a biography. Indeed, in terms of sales it marks the turning-point of Virginia Woolf's career as a successful novelist.⁷⁹ One imagines that today the bookseller's attitude would be the reverse, and perhaps Virginia Woolf's 'novel-biography' marks a stage in the increasing popularity of biography. But in view of Lytton Strachey's success, it is surprising that the booksellers should have thought that 'no one wants biography'.

Another possible factor in the book's success, as Quentin Bell points out in his biography, was the sexual theme, which had been given a certain topicality by *The Well of Loneliness* case. This novel, which deals with lesbianism, was banned in spite of protests by a number of prominent people, including Virginia Woolf herself. Appropriately enough, when *Orlando* was published Virginia Woolf was out of the country on holiday with the hero-heroine of the book, Vita Sackville-West. The first review she noted on her return was that of J. C. Squire (No. 71), but his 'barking', as she called it, was soon counteracted by Hugh Walpole, and by Rebecca West, who thought *Orlando* a 'poetic masterpiece of the first rank'.⁸⁰ Walpole's review was one of the oddest she received, for he archly refused to name the author or the title of the book he was reviewing—confidently leaving that for posterity to determine.⁸¹

There was a sharp division in the favourable reviews between those who took it in the spirit in which it was begun, as a fantasy or *jeu d'esprit*, and those for whom it was an important step forward in Virginia Woolf's development, and even in the form of the novel.

Desmond MacCarthy's review (No. 70) is significant for a number of reasons. Although he often reviewed Virginia Woolf's work, this is his most extended piece of criticism. It shows clearly his reservations about the stream-of-consciousness novel, and although he thought *Orlando* was her best and most characteristic work, it is clear from his remarks about the place of character in the novel that he did not see her as a

novelist of the first rank. Here we have a clear indication that the Bloomsbury Group was not a mutual admiration society.

For Squire (No. 71) and Bennett (No. 73a) the book was simply a 'pleasant trifle' and a 'high-brow lark'. Aldous Huxley commented in a letter to D. H. Lawrence: 'A tiresome book by Virginia Woolf—*Orlando*—which is so terribly literary and *fantaisiste* that nothing is left in it at all. It's almost the most highly exhausted vacuum I've ever known.'⁸² Storm Jameson's criticism was typical (No. 77). She granted that Virginia Woolf was a fine stylist, but found something missing—there was a lack of humanity in her work.

About a month after it was published Virginia Woolf recorded her own assessment of the work:⁸³

I mean the situation is, this *Orlando* is of course a very quick brilliant book. Yes, but I did not try to explore. And must I always explore? Yes I think so still. Because my reaction is not the usual. Nor can I even after all these years run it off lightly. *Orlando* taught me how to write a direct sentence; taught me continuity and narrative and how to keep the realities at bay. But I purposely avoided of course any other difficulty. I never got down to my depths and made shapes square up, as I did in the *Lighthouse*.

Well but *Orlando* was the outcome of a perfectly definite indeed overmastering, impulse. I want fun. I want fantasy. I want (and this was serious) to give things their caricature value.

But the success of *Orlando* was so great that Virginia Woolf was tempted to repeat the performance—the great temptation for a popular writer, but one which, as her next novel was to show, she successfully resisted.

A Room of One's Own

Virginia Woolf often tried to predict the reception of her books, and the day before *A Room of One's Own* was published she wrote:⁸⁴

I will here sum up my impressions before publishing *A Room of One's Own*. It is a little ominous that Morgan won't review it. It makes me suspect that there is a shrill feminine tone in it which my intimate friends will dislike. I forecast, then, that I shall get no criticism, except of the evasive jocular kind, from Lytton, Roger and Morgan; the press will be kind and talk of its charm and sprightliness; also I shall be attacked for a feminist and hinted at for a Sapphist; Sybil will ask me to luncheon; I shall get a good many letters from young women. I am afraid it will not be taken seriously. Mrs Woolf is so accomplished a writer that all she says makes easy reading . . . this very feminine logic . . . a book to put in the hands of girls. I doubt that I mind very much.

This was only partly fulfilled. She added a note a few months later to

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say that E. M. Forster 'wrote yesterday, 3 Dec. and said he very much liked it'. A week after its publication she reported that it was selling well and that she had received 'unexpected letters'.

Most reviewers, including Arnold Bennett (No. 81) noted that it was only superficially a feminist tract. It is a difficult book to categorise as there is no single line of argument: as the *TLS* put it, the essay is 'delightfully peripatetic' (No. 79). But reviewers recognised that its main theme was women and writing.

There were manifestations of the kind fearfully predicted by Virginia Woolf. For example, William Plomer wrote to Leonard Woolf: 'Virginia has a fervent admirer here, who is very excited about *A Room of One's Own*, and will I hope write and communicate her enthusiasm. Her name is Irene Hadjilazaro . . . hard-boiled and hard hitting, feminist, alpinist and amazon.'⁸⁵ But generally the reviewers were fairer to her argument than she imagined they would be. They emphasised the 'androgynous vision', the balance between the masculine and feminine points of view in the book. M. E. Kelsey related this central idea to the rest of Virginia Woolf's fiction and her article prefigures many recent studies along these lines (No. 82).

In the 1930s, however, there was a growing feeling that Virginia Woolf was remote from social reality; her idea of 'five hundred pounds a year and a room of one's own' as ideal conditions for a writer indicated to many people a grave limitation in her thinking, and symbolised the inadequacies of the class she was believed to represent.

The Waves

Virginia Woolf predicted that the reviewers would not be able to 'find anything very new to say' about *The Waves*.⁸⁶ She welcomed the long and outspoken review in the *TLS* (No. 83) but found it odd that the reviewer should praise the characters 'when she had meant to have none'.⁸⁷ There was even, for the first time, a note in *The Times* itself. In view of this and other favourable reviews, she felt that the novel had been better received than any of her books.⁸⁸

The most immediately striking feature of the novel for readers then, as now, was its extreme stylisation. Virginia Woolf's employment of soliloquies throughout the novel was frequently disliked. It was seen as a 'trick' (No. 92) and a 'desire for novelty' (No. 93) and one reviewer declared that the 'form attracts too much attention and gives little reward'.⁸⁹ It was an embarrassment to otherwise sympathetic critics:

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Storm Jameson, for example, (No. 90) thought it an undergraduate scheme, but fortunately of no importance in assessing the real value of the novel. But there were some reviewers who thought that the method had advantages as well as drawbacks. Louis Kronenberger's article (No. 89) shows understanding and judgment. He sought to understand why the form was chosen and tried to estimate its relationship to the stream-of-consciousness method. His discussion is more helpful than seeing the use of soliloquies as a trick, or, like (No. 84), as an extreme form of the internal monologue as developed by Joyce. Most reviewers believed that Virginia Woolf chose her method in order to allow scope for prose-poetry and symbolism, and most allowed that she attained local successes in this direction. But although she was generally regarded as a fine writer, a remarkable stylist, the familiar objections were raised to her remoteness from life.

Some reviewers, both favourable and unfavourable, had a feeling that the novel was nearing the void—there was a sense of emptiness lying behind it (see Nos 83, 93). This underlying desolation was also sensed by Edwin Muir (No. 94), but he believed that Virginia Woolf had achieved a tragic catharsis of this emotion, and that by means of simple monologues she had come to grips with the immediate and essential truths of experience.

There was still talk of the 'difficulty' of her writing, but it seemed that since *Mrs Dalloway* 'the provinces' had caught up, and appeared to Virginia Woolf to be unanimous in praise of *The Waves*.⁹⁰

VIRGINIA WOOLF IN ACADEME

In 1932 two book-length studies of Virginia Woolf's work appeared, Winifred Holtby's *Virginia Woolf* and Floris Delattre's *Le Roman psychologique de Virginia Woolf*. A chapter from the latter had been published in the previous December (No. 96), outlining the central thesis of the book. Many critics had previously hinted at the similarities between Virginia Woolf's work and the philosophy of Bergson: this was the first detailed analysis.

Virginia Woolf was now an 'important' writer, on the syllabus of English literature courses. She was the subject of academic lectures in France, and in more distant parts: in December 1930 William Plomer wrote: 'A Japanese professor, once a "colleague" of mine, writes to me with the news that he is "taking up Virginia Woolf for this term at the university"—the book is *Jacob's Room* and the University is the

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University of Tokyo. As they used to do a great deal of Stevenson and Barrie, the news is certainly excellent.⁹¹

At this time, following the pioneering work of I. A. Richards, there was a growing tendency in academic circles to emphasise the close analysis of literary texts. This approach was to become a restricting dogma in later years, but at the time was useful antidote to belle-lettrism and vagueness in literary criticism. Nos 97a and b are examples of the new approach. These articles have the merit of isolating certain elements in Virginia Woolf's style, though we may disagree with the overall conclusions. But the value of this close critical method can be seen if we contrast these discussions with an extreme example of current reviewing which appeared at about the same time.⁹² In this review 'Ernle' wrote a sentence each about the two books being reviewed (one of which was *The Waves*), and devoted the remaining twenty-five pages of his article to reminiscences of his boyhood.

ISOLATION: 1932-7

During these years Virginia Woolf published no major work. The second *Common Reader* was received well enough, but the *TLS* noted 'a shade less gaiety in this volume'⁹³ and a lack of the kind of comment on contemporary literature which was to be found in the first series. *Flush*, published in 1933, Virginia Woolf herself did not take seriously, nor did the reviewers, as the titles of two of the reviews suggest: 'Brown Beauty'⁹⁴ and 'A Storyteller's Holiday'.⁹⁵ It was the kind of novel that Noel Coward would, and did, admire.⁹⁶ But it was a commercial success, especially in Britain.

In general the comments in the years following the publication of *Flush* until the publication of *The Years* in 1937, were unfavourable to her work. The death of her friends Lytton Strachey (in 1932) and Roger Fry (in 1934) increased her sense of isolation. This did not come from any lack of contact with the new generation of writers, for through John Lehmann, himself a poet, who helped to run the Hogarth Press, Virginia Woolf met Isherwood, Spender, and others. However, their attitude towards each other must have been equivocal. It was not that she held right-wing views: through Leonard Woolf she had had a long association with left-wing politics, but these younger writers were uneasy with some of her ideas, as Auden and Isherwood indicated in *The Dog Beneath the Skin* (1935). The Chorus warns:⁹⁷

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Do not speak of a change of heart, meaning five hundred
a year and a room of one's own,
As if that were all that is necessary.

We can gather Virginia Woolf's uneasiness about them from her article 'The Leaning Tower' (a lecture given to the Sussex WEA in 1940).

Nevertheless, Stephen Spender was prepared to spring to her defence when she was attacked by Wyndham Lewis in *Men Without Art* (see Nos 102a, b, c). To call this an attack 'from the Right' would be to ascribe to Lewis a consistent political ideology, which he never had. Perhaps this made him a more dangerous 'enemy' (as he styled himself): his attack could not be subsumed under any anaesthetising label, as perhaps 'left-wing attacks' could be. Further, it came from a man of intelligence and polemic ability, a satirist whose power Virginia Woolf recognised. Because of the caution of Lewis's publisher, who feared libel actions, she was spared from reading his next attack, in *The Roaring Queen* (first published in 1973). There, she is lampooned in the figure of Rhoda Hyman. Shodbutt is Arnold Bennett:⁹⁸

Grinning into the Intense Inane, this most egregious of bogus Jane Austens sat over there anyway and ignored Shodbutt—as modestly and with a startled surprise she received the congratulations slavishly offered her for having recently awarded *herself*, out of hand, the Diploma that was in her keeping for the Year's Cleverest Literary Larceny.

Lewis worried Virginia Woolf in a way that Frank Swinnerton, for example, could not (No. 104). Swinnerton had always been a hostile reviewer but she found a category for him which rendered him harmless—he was a member of her 'underworld'—a Grub Street literary hack.

Although she was friendly with members of the intellectual left wing, and, in the instance above, defended by one of them, other socialist interpreters of literature and culture found her reliance on or exploration of 'sensibility' insufficient in the face of the growing political storm. Nos 103a, b, c, are a representative selection from this school of thought. She felt the pressure of the times sufficiently to write for the *Daily Worker* an article entitled 'Why Art To-Day Follows Politics', but it was a far from orthodox contribution.

A BEST SELLER: *The Years*

No book cost Virginia Woolf as much pain to write: a pain which she

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recalled when reading the early reviews, which seemed to her unbelievably favourable, as she had expected the novel to fail. *The Years* is in some ways a typical best-seller, enjoying a big sale and much critical acclaim when first published, but now neglected and very much less popular both with critics and the buying public. The early reviews might help us to understand something of this phenomenon.

Virginia Woolf welcomed the review in the *TLS* (No. 107), but felt that it emphasised too much the 'death song' aspect and the 'impressionism' in the novel; she thought de Selincourt in the *Observer* was nearer the mark. A week after publication she was able to record that the majority of reviewers had acclaimed it as a masterpiece.⁹⁹ But then came Edwin Muir's review (No. 112). He had been a consistent admirer of her previous work, but now saw *The Years* as a step backwards from her greatest achievement, *The Waves*. The novel was published in America early in April and Virginia Woolf with delight saw it rise to the top of the best-seller chart in the *New York Herald Tribune*.

As usual, most of the reviewers, whether favourable or hostile, admired the novel on a detailed level: the 'cubes of live experience' (No. 108), the clarity of the little scenes, and the sense impressions which become symbols were praised. The *relative* success of this novel in comparison with her other works is simply explained: as No. 108 pointed out, it is easier to read than *The Waves*. But why was it an absolute best-seller? The *Time and Tide* reviewer (No. 106) hints that perhaps it was written to show that the author could write a traditional novel, a family saga. This idea was supported by Leonard Woolf, who believed that this was the only novel which Virginia Woolf might have written as an answer to her critics.¹⁰⁰ Many reviewers mentioned the family saga or 'cavalcade' aspect of the novel, often with the qualification that *The Years* goes beyond the usual formula. But evidently there were sufficient points in common with this kind of writing to appeal to the book-buyer. The novel was enthusiastically received by two writers well qualified to assess this aspect of the work. Howard Spring (No. 109) was to become a very popular novelist, and David Garnett (No. 111) had already produced a best-seller. Their reviews help to explain the book's appeal.

But Garnett was one of the reviewers who criticised the form of the novel. He found the deliberate repetitions irritating, agreeing with the *Scrutiny* critic (No. 116) who described the repetitive pattern as 'artful'. It is this element which Muir was pointing to (No. 112) when he complained that we *feel* the pattern too much. Like the *Scrutiny*

reviewer he preferred the last section of the novel, dealing with the Present Day, but he thought there was a lack of continuity in the novel as a whole.

The characters, being more traditionally portrayed than in any of her novels since *Night and Day*, were more widely admired than usual, but there were exceptions. *Scrutiny* still found her people to be 'phantoms', and the American critic J. W. Beach believed that 'they fade out of the mind as individuals, to get confused with one another. . . . This is notably true in *The Years*.'¹⁰¹

The uncertainty of the times in which the novel was first read can be seen in the need felt by Garnett (No. III) and the *Time and Tide* reviewer (No. 106) to defend the novel against possible attacks from 'class-conscious propagandists' and the 'strict communist'. This atmosphere can be indicated by the physical context of Spring's review (No. 109)—and here one gains something from looking at the newspapers themselves, which can be only hinted at in a series of excerpts. Spring's review is sandwiched between an advertisement for spectacles designed to be worn with a gas-mask and a review which quotes Dean Inge's opinion, 'I do not believe that either Germany or Italy could finance a great war. Germany is in such a plight financially that I have grave doubts whether the Hitler regime can last out the year; and Italy is not in a much better case.' Perhaps this is the best context for Inge's comment in the next day's paper: 'Take all the best-known names in fiction and drama—Shaw, Wells, Galsworthy, Arnold Bennett, Aldous Huxley, Virginia Woolf, Forster and other writers of note. Would it be going too far to say that human nature, as depicted in their works is a drab, ignoble thing?'¹⁰²

Three Guineas

In this atmosphere *Three Guineas* was written and published. Quentin Bell recalls his own feelings when he first read the book:¹⁰³

What really seemed wrong with the book—and I am speaking here of my own reactions at the time—was the attempt to involve a discussion of women's rights with the far more agonising and immediate question of what we were to do in order to meet the ever-growing menace of Fascism and war. The connection between the two questions seemed tenuous and the positive suggestions wholly inadequate.

Outside the circle of Virginia Woolf's family and friends, who kept rather silent, the book was received quite favourably. She was pleased

with the big splash in the *TLS* (No. 117) and with the *Time and Tide* review (No. 118). She described the reception as 'the mildest childbirth I have ever had'—a significant metaphor which casts light on her extreme reaction to adverse criticism of her work. But in this instance even Q. D. Leavis's attack (No. 122) did not upset her too much.

In general, there was little analysis in the reviews. The *New Statesman* reviewer (No. 120) pointed out that like *A Room of One's Own* it was a difficult book to talk about. This reviewer dismissed as 'quibblers' those who might feel inclined to find fault with the details of the argument. In fact, a large proportion of most of the reviews was taken up by attempts simply to précis the argument. (Perhaps the 'plotless' nature of Virginia Woolf's novels prevented, to a surprising extent, the parallel gambit of retelling the story in the novel reviews.) But there, one could at least invoke Proust or Joyce or Sterne. Here, the reviewers had to go further back, to Aristophanes—she was the 'new Lysistrata' (see Nos 117, 120). The *Observer* reviewer (No. 119), perhaps in desperation, called up the spirit of Matthew Arnold to help him fill his two columns.

Graham Greene had a temperamental dislike of Virginia Woolf's work. He was to write a few months later that she 'skims with high-minded elegance the surface'.¹⁰⁴ Aldous Huxley was quite right in seeing their work as polar opposites (see above, p. 20). But Greene's attitude was ambivalent, in a manner shared by many critics of her work. In his review of *Three Guineas* (No. 121) he described her brain as being like a vulgarised sea-shell, and yet the product of that same brain is a 'clear brilliant essay'.

Q. D. Leavis's article (No. 122) states directly what the *TLS* had only hinted at—that this book was written for a special, privileged class of women. Virginia Woolf no doubt gained some emotional satisfaction by impugning Q. D. Leavis's motives, but many of the points in her article are, despite this and the *New Statesman*'s pre-emptive remarks, much more than mere 'quibbles'.

Roger Fry

Roger Fry was a close friend of Virginia Woolf and a central member of the Bloomsbury Group. His ideas had an important influence on her work: one of the constant themes of these reviews is the comparison between her writing and visual art. This cross-fertilisation owed much to her friendship with Fry. Reviews of biographies usually concentrate on the subject rather than the biographer, and this was the case here, but the interest of the reviews of *Roger Fry* in relation to Virginia

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Woolf is that they cast light on a figure who was important in her life and in the development of her art, and they also show the attitudes towards Bloomsbury and its values at this time. The passing remarks on Virginia Woolf's ability as a biographer were generally favourable, but the style and method was felt to be quite untypical, being rather sober and careful.

The reviews of E. M. Forster (No. 123) and Herbert Read (No. 124) show contrasting attitudes towards the Bloomsbury Group. Read thought that its members unduly emphasised the rational side of life and neglected intuition and instinct. Forster would perhaps not disagree with the terms, but for him 'liberalism' and 'intellect', which Bloomsbury and Fry embodied, were wholly laudable values.

Forster raised the question of what such a man's work, or the ideals of Bloomsbury, or Virginia Woolf's biography could 'mean' at such a time. What could they do against the Nazis? His answer is surely correct: nothing. But his qualifying remark expresses a sentiment shared by many writers during this difficult time: these things are 'part of a larger battle'.

VIRGINIA WOOLF'S DEATH

Virginia Woolf's death brought obituary notes and reminiscences from many friends. A list of their names would give an impression of the central position which Virginia Woolf occupied in the literary life of England. There were tributes from her own and from the younger generation of writers and artists (e.g. T. S. Eliot (No. 126), V. Sackville-West, Hugh Walpole (No. 127), Duncan Grant, Stephen Spender (No. 125), David Garnett, Christopher Isherwood, and many others). E. M. Forster's Rede Lecture delivered on 29 May 1941 was a tribute to his friend and also—something which is difficult on such occasions—an attempt to assess her work objectively. Forster continued a criticism which runs throughout his review of her work: 'She could seldom so portray a character that it was remembered afterwards on its own account.'¹⁰⁵ He stated quite bluntly that 'she was a snob' but concluded:¹⁰⁶

Virginia Woolf got through an immense amount of work, she gave acute pleasure in new ways, she pushed the light of the English language a little further against the darkness. Those are the facts. The epitaph of such an artist cannot be written by the vulgar-minded or by the lugubrious. They will try, indeed they have already tried, but their words make no sense. It is wiser, it is

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safer, to regard her career as a triumphant one. She triumphed over what are primly called 'difficulties', and she also triumphed in the positive sense; she brought in the spoils. And sometimes it is as a row of little silver cups that I see her work gleaming. 'These trophies', the inscription runs, 'were won by the mind from matter, its enemy and its friend.'

Despite Forster's warning, Virginia Woolf's death marked the beginning of those unfortunate reminiscences about her 'intricate face' and 'intellectual bone structure' and so on. At the time these were understandable attempts to give a sense of the person behind the writer, but many subsequent comments of this sort tended to draw attention towards trivial aspects of her life and away from her real achievement.

Between the Acts

This novel, which Virginia Woolf did not revise finally, was published a few months after her death. Reviewers naturally took the opportunity to survey her achievement, and these reviews give us a picture of the critical reception of her work shortly after her death. Both friendly and hostile reviewers found this last novel typical, in its experimental form, its poetry, and, on the negative side, in its remoteness. The threat of war is in the background of the novel and it was published at a very dark time in the war. The American critic Malcolm Cowley (No. 133) believed that this prevented a true judgment of the work, but most of the reviews testify to the determination on the part of literary people at the time to preserve at least a memory of absolute values amid the pressure of war and its pervasive propaganda.

Most reviewers saw it as an imperfect book. For David Cecil (No. 128) this was a formal deficiency—a mistaken attempt to combine two conventions which do not blend. But others saw in it a more general shortcoming: as the *TLS* put it, in an otherwise sympathetic review: 'She shrank instinctively from forms of goodness and beauty other than those she had absorbed into her private vision' (No. 129). Edwin Muir was in a minority in thinking that the flaws were of such a kind that they could have been corrected by revision (No. 131).

B. G. Brooks (No. 135) placed *Between the Acts* in a survey of Virginia Woolf's work as a whole, and his article is also an early attempt to see her work in relation to the artistic and intellectual history of her time.

VIRGINIA WOOLF IN FRANCE

The French reception of Virginia Woolf's work is important because

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of the number and quality of the reviews and articles dealing with her work which appeared during her lifetime. She met and corresponded with a number of French intellectuals such as J.-E. Blanche, Charles Mauron, and Jacques Raverat. Her work was admired by many more artists, writers and critics who were themselves of some importance in the French literary world. In both French and English reviews her work was compared with that of French writers, especially Proust, Jules Romains, Giraudoux and Bergson. The parallels between her writings and the philosophy of Bergson were examined in detail in one of the first books to be devoted to her work, Floris Delattre's *Le Roman psychologique de Virginia Woolf*, which was published in 1932.

A foreign novel often has two receptions—one of the original and another of the translation. In Virginia Woolf's case, the translations were not made in chronological order (for example, her first novel was the last to be translated). A translation reaches a wider audience than the original, and those of *Mrs Dalloway* in 1929 and *The Waves* in 1937 were regarded as important literary events in France and they received many interesting reviews.

French surveys of the contemporary English novel written in the early and mid-1920s speak of Virginia Woolf as an 'impressionist' writer, a description which was to be applied, in a modified form, in many subsequent articles and reviews. Abel Chevally began this trend. He wrote of the 'infinite number of minute, precise shaded strokes' in the first two novels. *The Voyage Out* and more especially *Night and Day* were constructed in such a way 'that one might say they were made by the same methods as the pictures of our great impressionists'.¹⁰⁷ Another critic believed she belonged to a fairly well defined 'impressionist movement' in the English novel and spoke of the kaleidoscopic rapidity with which she registers impressions.¹⁰⁸ (The kaleidoscope image was favoured by many early reviewers, both English and French.) In a popular survey of contemporary English literature her method was described as the juxtaposition of slight strokes—pure impressionism.¹⁰⁹ This writer pointed out at the beginning of his study that many English writers have had their French 'champions': Browning and Conrad in Gide, Joyce and Samuel Butler in Valéry Larbaud, and so on. In the years to follow, Virginia Woolf was to find a number of illustrious commentators, for example, the novelists Edmond Jaloux, André Maurois and Marguerite Yourcenar, the painter J.-E. Blanche, the critics Floris Delattre and J.-J. Mayoux, and many others.

While writing *Mrs Dalloway* Virginia Woolf corresponded with