

Towards a Sociology of Virginia Woolf Criticism

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The critical literature on Virginia Woolf contains not only paeons of overstated praise but also a good deal of dismissiveness and contempt. Any serious attempt to denigrate a writer starts off well with a slur on originality, such as the one made by Leon Edel when he says 'The influence of James Joyce upon her is much more profound than is generally believed.'¹ In particular he claims that *'Mrs Dalloway's* structure seems largely to be modelled on the multiple-scened chapter in *Ulysses*² and that '... the painting of the sensibility tends to be Proustian.'³ John Rosenberg is equally at pains to establish Virginia Woolf as an inferior and derivative novelist, for he asserts that 'She followed Dorothy Richardson not only in her mode of writing, but also in the feminism of her novels ... she never adequately expressed her debt to Dorothy Richardson'.⁴

Joyce, Proust and Richardson are alleged to be the models from whom Virginia Woolf acquired her techniques, although Guiguet has refuted these claims with definitive chronological evidence.⁵ Guiguet himself prefers to relate both Virginia Woolf and this other group of writers to a 'common participation in an attitude of mind, a stock of ideas.'⁶ In this he endorses Auerbach's brilliant historical interpretation of Woolf's work⁷ - a work of criticism which soars above the petty and inadequate examples which I shall be discussing here. Before attempting to explain why Virginia Woolf criticism is so unsatisfactory, I shall try to describe some common aspects of the secondary literature on this writer.

As well as being unoriginal Virginia Woolf is thought by some of her critics to be severely constrained by her class and gender. Her work is said to be elitist, trivial, narrowly feminine in scope, and she is held not to have understood its technical significance. The charge of elitism, although equally applicable to the novels of E. M. Forster and Aldous Huxley, is frequently leveled at Virginia Woolf in her capacity as a member of 'Bloomsbury', with the implication that such membership by definition explains the texts. Elizabeth Hardwick states that 'The arrangements of Bloomsbury, shored up by stout logs of self-regard, are insular in the extreme', from which premise she follows through to the conclusion that Virginia Woolf is 'awful' (as are Forster and James) because '... it is bad taste for authors to come down so heavily on the lacks of the luckless and deprived.'⁸ Walter Allen similarly introduces into his critical evaluation his knowledge of Virginia Woolf's life and opinions, for he pronounces that 'Virginia Woolf is a novelist of very narrow limits. . (Her characters) tend to think and feel alike, to be the aesthetes of one set of sensations; they think and feel and express their

thoughts and feelings, in fact, exactly as Virginia Woolf herself does in such non-fiction works as *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown* and *A Room of One's Own*. They are distinguished by a discriminating intelligence and an acute self-consciousness which weave a close sieve through which the greater part of the common experiences of life will not pass.⁹

Although it is well known that Virginia Woolf was born into an established upper middle class literary intelligentsia,¹⁰ other writers of similar or wealthier background escape censure on these grounds. Indeed with Virginia Woolf this particular line of attack almost serves instead of a discussion of the text, as when Bradbury, in his *The Social Context of Modern English Literature* refers under the index entry for Virginia Woolf more frequently to 'Bloomsbury' than to the novels.¹¹ Judgments of this kind, in which the class position of an author is used as a means of establishing the supposedly self-evident limitations of his or her work, are merely a crude and inadequate response from conventional criticism to the challenge from a Marxist aesthetic.

References to Virginia Woolf's feminine limitations of mind are even more common, and are by definition, it would seem, pejorative. Bradbury writes that '... no one single novel of Virginia Woolf's seems to get beyond the feminine fragility of her sensibility..'¹² and he concludes that '... she not only tends to poeticise modernism, but also to feminise and domesticate it. . . . the essential form of her novels, whatever the complexities of their pattern, is always finally the domestic novel of sensibility; and hence, I think, there is something inescapably limited about the matter of consciousness with which she deals ...'¹³ Bradbury then turns with relief to Ford Madox Ford, whose 'panoramic' work he can wholeheartedly praise in contrast to that of Virginia Woolf. The judgement of her work as essentially *limited* (in Edel's words 'a scaling down of Joycean architectonics'),¹⁴ is again linked with her situation as a *woman* by the French critic Floris Delattre. After stating rather baldly that Woolf 'directly borrowed' her technique from James Joyce, Delattre mobilises a little charm to soften the blow: 'She also created monologue, she also created a "slice of interior life", but she reduced it to delicate proportions, more sharp and cursory, to which her feminine subtlety gave the tone.'¹⁵

It is no coincidence that charges of derivativeness and unoriginality are coupled with references to the fact that the author in question was a woman, and the extension of these prejudices is simply that Virginia Woolf did not fully understand what she was doing in her work. A mindless, whimsical, eccentric female is conjured up in Walter Allen's remark that '... when one thinks in the abstract of a typical Virginia Woolf character one seems to see a tiny figure on tiptoe eagerly grasping a butterfly net alert to snare the significant, the transcending moment as it flies.'¹⁶ This tiny figure has a tiny mind to match, and G. S. Fraser goes so far as to say that 'I doubt, from her own writings whether Mrs Woolf was any more capable of following an abstract

philosophical argument than Clarissa Dalloway.¹⁷ Even Daiches, in many respects an admirer of Woolf, writes in the same vein that Joyce went the whole way in rejecting the normative and involved himself in an immense paradox; Virginia Woolf went only halfway (probably without being conscious that she was going in that direction at all) and stopped at subutilisation.¹⁸

In addition to this it has been argued that the work itself has no real content. Woolf's ' novels are held to lack any grip on the concrete, historical, fabric of society - indeed A.J. P. Taylor has pronounced that they are 'irrelevant for the historian.'¹⁹ The combination of her class position and gender have resulted in a fatal distance from the processes of social life and production. Bradbury comments that ' ... for Virginia Woolf consciousness is intuitive and poetic rather than subterranean and mythopoeic; it is the creative energy of the self ... The flux has no marked social origin.'²⁰ This view of Woolf as an ahistorical writer is put forward very clearly (and perhaps misleadingly, since the author purports to recognise Woolf as a feminist) by Elizabeth Hardwick in a recent essay.²¹ Hardwick declares that 'Exegesis about Virginia Woolf is a trap; the fictions are circular and the critic spins in a drum of tautology. The novels are beautiful ... And yet in a sense her novels aren't interesting ... I was immensely moved by (*The Waves*) when I read it recently and yet I cannot think of anything to say about it except that it is wonderful. The people are not characters, there is no plot in the usual sense. What can you bring to bear: verisimilitude - to what? You can merely say over and over that it is very good, very beautiful, that when you were reading it you were happy.'²²

Although tribute of a kind, Hardwick's response is not what Woolf would have wanted or deserves, and the inarticulateness demonstrated in this passage may tell us more about the critic than the novelist. For *The Waves* is not merely 'wonderful'; it contains a sustained critique of patriarchy, of social stratification, of the family and relationships between men and women, of our conception of personality, as well as discussion of the role and function of the artist in society. In this respect it is comparable with Virginia Woolf's other novels, many of which, as I shall outline below, deal with similar themes. Far from these books having no social historical content, in their subject matter they correspond with the works of Forster, Huxley, Eliot and other contemporaries.

There are however certain inconsistencies and contradictions in Virginia Woolf's thought, and to some extent these are the source of the critical attitudes to which I have pointed. Such contradictions are certainly evident in the critical literature, as in the following examples. Malcolm Bradbury, in his essay on Virginia Woolf,²³ appears at times to contradict his dismissive approach to his subject. Although grudging in tone and qualified by riders, he lets the occasional acknowledgement through - that '*Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown* and *Modern Fiction*) add up

to an important general plea for a new timbre in the novel.²⁴ More importantly he admits that 'After reading Auerbach's chapter on her, it would be impossible not to grant that she was deeply and seriously involved in a revolution in the novel ..'²⁵ In his closing words he ignores this admission, and concludes '... a fiction that refines the tradition but does not *make* a tradition on which successors can draw.'²⁶ Hardwick contradicts herself in the reverse manner, for having charged Woolf with a-historicity in the body of her essay she concludes by claiming for her precisely this quality. Indeed she even asserts that '... only a great conception could have made history out of the pageant on the lawn in *Between the Acts*. This novel and *The Waste Land* are the most powerful literary images we have of the movements of life and cultures, the dying of the past in the dying of a day, the shift from one order to another in an overheard conversation.'²⁷ A simple explanation may exist for such inconsistencies, and particularly in Bradbury's case it is not difficult to point to possible motivations (an evident sexism, some rather crude class prejudice, and the awkward fact that Woolf's novels stand as chronological refutation of his theory about the rise and fall of modernism) for his attitudes. Nevertheless it is interesting to note that the same writer has generated a very wide range of interpretations of her work, with aesthetes, feminists, literary critics and Marxists all presenting totally different pictures of one subject. This difference lies only partly in the inevitably partisan accounts of such groups, and is partly to be found in the internal contradictions within the subject itself. In order to illustrate this I shall now turn to the themes and subject matter of Virginia Woolf's novels and the world view expressed in them.

In common with other writers of the period Virginia Woolf expressed in her work a very hostile reaction to the World War. Three of her characters are killed by the war, and in the case of Septimus Warren Smith she demonstrates a bitter perceptiveness of the psychological damage caused by the war. Septimus was innocent, brave and friendly at the beginning of the war, but at the end of the war he realises that he has survived (indeed, has been promoted), at the expense of his natural human feeling. His death is the outcome of this train of events, and we are given no doubt that it was the inhumanity of the war which was responsible for it.²⁸ This indictment is to be found explicitly stated by an earlier, and very sympathetic, Woolf character - Mrs Ambrose in *The Voyage Out* - in the following remark: '... it seemed to her as wrong to keep sailors as to keep a Zoo, and that as for dying on a battlefield surely it was time we ceased to praise courage.'²⁹ This pacifism is part of Woolf's hostility to patriarchy, and to many of its component institutions.

One such institution was religion, which is criticised both implicitly and explicitly in Virginia Woolf's novels. In *The Waves* Neville disliked the school chapel service, and said 'The brute menaces my liberty, when he prays. Unwarmed by imagination, his words fall cold on

my head like paving-stones, while the gilt cross heaves on his waistcoat. The words of authority are corrupted by those who speak them ...'³⁰ Similar examples of a dislike of religion could be found in any Woolf novel, and in *Mrs Dalloway* there is a particularly strong animosity which is revealed in the hostile characterisation of the religious Miss Kilman. This novel also stresses the connections between religion and other oppressive patriarchal institutions, and it does this through the use of significant juxtaposition and metaphor. Hence an account of the crowd's reaction to possible proximity to a member of the Royal Family leads the author to add 'The spirit of religion was abroad with her eyes bandaged tight and her lips gaping wide.'³¹ Religion is of course hierarchical and inhuman for Virginia Woolf, and is portrayed as the cloak under which crimes of selfishness are committed. Later in the same novel she attacks the sense of 'proportion' advocated by the complacent, middle class psychiatrist, and moves imperceptibly into anti-religious imagery: '... Proportion has a sister less smiling more formidable ... Conversion is her name and she feasts on the wills of the weakly ... shrouds herself in white and walks penitently disguised as brotherly love through factories and parliaments; offers help but desires power; smites out of her way roughly the dissentient, or dissatisfied ...'³² In a more humorous way she frequently conveys her opinions about religion, as when Mrs Ambrose in *The Voyage Out* says of her children that 'So far, owing to enormous care on my part, they think of God as a kind of walrus ...'³³ We should note here that Virginia Woolf's objection was to the specific type of religion (patriarchal Christianity) found in her society, and that she was to some degree amenable to mystical and neo-religious ideas. Woolf was equally hostile to the hierarchical system of academic institutions, and considered these to be serving predominantly male interests. The portrait of Mr Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* shows a man whose distinguished intellectual efforts are won at the expense of his wife's independence; nor is the sacrifice justified, since his philosophy does not finally make sense of the world. Woolf says of his intellect that 'It was a splendid mind. For if thought is like the keyboard of a piano, divided into so many notes, or like the alphabet is ranged in twenty-six letters all in order, then his splendid mind had no sort of difficulty in running over those letters one by one, firmly and accurately, until it had reached, say, the letter Q. He reached Q. Very few people in the whole of England ever reach Q. ... But after Q? What comes next? After Q there are a number of letters the last of which is scarcely visible to mortal eyes, but glimmers red in the distance. Z is only reached once by one man in a generation. Still, if he could reach R it would be something.'³⁴ Virginia Woolf points out that he never does reach R, and concludes drily that he is like the leader of a splendid but doomed expedition whom no-one would blame when '... having ventured to the uttermost, and used his strength wholly' to the last ounce and fallen asleep not much caring if he wakes or not, he now perceives by some pricking in his toes that he lives, and does not on the

whole object to live, but requires sympathy, and whisky, and someone to tell the story of his suffering to at once.³⁵

The light tone in which the subject of academic life is treated here belies a more profound hostility on the author's part. She wrote to Lytton Strachey that she had just visited Cambridge - 'that detestable place. . . perhaps not as bad as I imagine. But when I think of it, I vomit - that's all - a green vomit, which gets into the ink and blisters the paper.'³⁶ This bile is not as intrusive in her work as she suspected, and indeed is often well disguised in her novels. Nevertheless she felt very strongly that the public schools and universities served patriarchal interests, and felt bitter that her own education had been so much less rigorous than that of her brothers.

Virginia Woolf's novels display an impressive awareness of the inter- relations between the different institutions of patriarchal society. I have already mentioned her hostility to war, to established religion and to the elitist educational system of her time. In addition to this she perceived the exploitative nature of marriage and the family, and the extent to which women's domestic roles precluded their independence. This theme runs consistently through her books, from *The Voyage Out* (1915) to *Between the Acts* (1941), and is particularly strong in *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* and *The Years*. Indeed in the last named novel one character expresses a total hostility - ' . . . it was an abominable system, he thought; family life.'³⁷ It is in the novel *Mrs Dalloway* that we find the clearest exposition of the inherent corruption of patriarchal capitalist society. The assumption is made that men obtain and secure for themselves influential positions and material assets through the systematic exploitation of women and working class men. Hugh Whitbread, a symbol of conventional middle class values and masculine ideology is attacked on precisely these grounds when 'Sally suddenly lost her temper, flared up, and told Hugh that he represented all that was most detestable in British middle class life. She told him that she considered him responsible for the state of "those poor girls in Piccadilly" - Hugh, the perfect gentleman, poor Hugh! - never did a man look more horrified!'³⁸ Recent feminist sociology has confirmed³⁹ that the accusation is a just one and that working class prostitution functions to protect the bourgeois family. Similarly Woolf points very perceptively to the oppression suffered by the working class at the hands of upper middle class professional people - a good example being Septimus Warren Smith (in the same novel), whose death indicts the rich uncaring psychiatrist who neglected him.

Virginia Woolf's novels contain a fundamental criticism of bourgeois patriarchal society, and although the attack is launched mainly from a feminist perspective it encompasses to some degree a left wing critique of the class system. As I demonstrated above, this criticism has not been taken seriously by Woolf's literary critics, despite its continued oblique presence in her novels. In addition to the novels there is the non-

fiction writing, in which the author states her position very clearly. Both *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* provide us with clear accounts of the depth of her hostility to patriarchy, and of her understanding of the exploitative processes by which it is maintained. In *Three Guineas* she explicitly links together the institutions of patriarchal society, moving from war and militarism, through academic, judicial, religious and political hierarchies to an analysis of how such institutions display their power in social ritual.

Primitive though Woolf's sociology may be in comparison with current work, it is none the less impressive for the period in which she was writing. This is also true for her insight into psychological processes, and her rather cynical view of relationships between individuals. This applies especially to her treatment of relationships between the sexes, but is not restricted to these. E. M. Forster observed of the main character in *The Voyage Out* that 'Rachel has lost everything - but she has not swerved from the course honesty marked, she has not jabbered or pretended that human relationships are satisfactory'⁴⁰ - a comment which could well be applied to most of Woolf's characters. One of the major problems of relationships between individuals is simple lack of communication, as is portrayed in an incident in *The Years*. Peggy, at a party, asks a rather deaf man a question which he mishears. In response to what he thought to be her question he begins to tell some amusing stories. Peggy laughs at the absurdity of the situation, and by a fortunate coincidence her laughter occurs when he has just made a joke. She has not been listening to him. 'How many people, she wondered, listen? This "sharing", then, is a bit of a farce. She made herself attend.'⁴¹ This cynicism becomes very much more apparent when Woolf is treating relationships between the sexes, and is present from her earliest work *The Voyage Out* in which one character remarks 'Even the Ambroses whom he admired and respected profoundly - in spite of all the love between them, was not their marriage too a compromise? She gave way to him; she spoilt him; she arranged things for him; she who was all truth to others was not true to her husband, was not true to her friends if they came in conflict with her husband'. It was a strange and piteous flaw in her nature.'⁴² Quentin Bell has pointed to an experience of Virginia Woolf's which may have contributed to this cynicism, as he comments of her father that 'With men his conduct was invariably gentle, considerate and rational. . . . But he needed and expected feminine sympathy' and to obtain it he would create the most dreadful scenes'.⁴³

The same theme recurs in more depth in *To the Lighthouse*, where Mrs Ramsay comments to herself that 'human relations, how flawed they are, how despicable, how self-seeking at their best.'⁴⁴ Her train of thought is continued by Lily Briscoe, who adds that '... the worst ... were between men and women. Inevitably these were extremely insincere'⁴⁵ It is clear that this criticism of relationships between the sexes rests on an aversion to traditional definitions of sex roles. Relatively frequently in Virginia

Woolf's work we find examples of characters whose sexual identity is ambiguous. In *The Voyage Out* Evelyn approves of Terence because 'there's something of a woman in him', and Mrs Dalloway says of her husband 'He's a man and woman as well.'⁴⁶ The most extreme example of this is found in *Orlando*, where the protagonist flouts all the conventions of sexual characterisation by changing sex and engaging in bi-sexual conduct. Woolf's characters do not as a rule observe the conventions in these matters, for men cry, women learn mathematics, and both sexes admit attraction to others of their sex.

Woolf herself wrote that '... the public and the private worlds are inseparably connected; . . . the tyrannies and servilities of the one are the tyrannies and servilities of the other,'⁴⁷ and in her non-fiction work she demonstrated her hostility to the patriarchal structure which determined and corrupted relationships between men and women. The argument of *A Room of One's Own* (that women need financial independence if they are to write fiction) is pushed much further in her later work *Three Guineas*, where Woolf outlines the militaristic and hierarchical nature of patriarchal society. In this book she presents a radical feminist case, despite her own reluctance to use the word.⁴⁸ Running through the ideas in this book we find them to be strikingly radical. Woolf argues that women have a right to earn their own living, and that this is consistently denied them in practice and only recently permissible in theory. The entire educational and scientific systems militate against their being able to exercise this right. The concept of indirect power or influence, as held to apply to the case of women, reduces them to a prostitution relationship with men. Women have no capital and no power, are discriminated against in employment, and in the home are unwaged workers. They should, Woolf argues demand wages for domestic and childrearing work, and should reject the ritual (decorations, degrees, etc.) of a society from which they have gained nothing. It is very hard to reconcile this stated political position, which as I have argued above is clearly implied in the content of the novels, with the critical literature described at the outset of this discussion. It seems hardly possible that Leavis can write, influencing a generation of critics, that Virginia Woolf's writing '... seems to shut out all the ranges of experience accompanying those kinds of preoccupation, volitional and moral, with an external world which are not felt primarily as preoccupation with one's consciousness of it.'⁴⁹

It is with relief, therefore, that we turn to the more recent work on Virginia Woolf in which her feminism and radical social criticism is explored. In this context we may note that Kaplan, in her *Feminine Consciousness in the Modern British Novel*, stresses the radical and anti-authoritarian attitudes that Woolf shared with other women writers from Dorothy Richardson to Doris Lessing,⁵⁰ Leaska's study of *To the Lighthouse* first raised the possibility that the figure of Mrs Ramsay was not one that Virginia Woolf admired, and the point is pressed home in Heilbrun's important work on androgyny in Woolf's fiction:- '...it is only

in groping our way through the clouds of sentiment and misplaced , biographical information that we are able to discover Mrs Ramsay, far from androgynous or complete, to be as one-sided and as life-denying as her husband. Readers have seldom been clear as to whether her son and daughter reach the lighthouse because her spirit has survived her death or because her death has liberated her children.⁵² Heilbrun argues, after Millett, that Woolf's reputation as a feminist has suffered from the repressive sexual counter-revolution of the period following 1930 and continuing until around 1960. Certainly it is interesting to look at the production of Woolf criticism in these terms, since if we take works specifically concerned with the theme of feminism and sexual politics we find that for everyone Heilbrun published there will be a large batch of hostile or misguided interpretations. Batchelor, for example, claims that Virginia Woolf found feminism 'aesthetically unacceptable' 'and that it is hardly ever present in her work; instead she is concerned with womanhood', which the writer obviously finds more acceptable himself.⁵³ In different ways Marder, Naremore and Bazin, in recent works on Woolf⁵⁴ all reduce her world view to a sexual polarisation which she herself explicitly opposed. On the theme of feminism in Virginia Woolf we are left with a very small number of works which provide illuminating discussion - such as Holtby(1934) and Heilbrun - and a great deal of prejudice. Not all of this prejudice is anti-feminist in origin, as can be seen from Hennig's virulent attack on the male members of Virginia Woolf's family,⁵⁵ which she makes in order to establish Woolf as a feminist lesbian. It is relatively rarely that one comes across an interpretation of Virginia Woolf, such as the one offered by Richter,⁵⁶ in which a balanced discussion of these topics occurs in the general context of the work. .;

Virginia Woolf's interest in feminism and bi-sexuality has perhaps led to a rather simple view of her life and work (as with Sylvia Plath, she is held to be one of the women's movement's 'martyrs'). How then can we reconcile the two views of Virginia Woolf propounded by the critics (upper class twit versus radical feminist) with each other and the works themselves? The answer to this problem lies partly in an account of the ideological factors influencing the judgments of literary critics at various historical periods, and partly in the inconsistencies to be found in Virginia Woolf's work, Taking the first item it is important to observe the way sex and class prejudices are played off against each other. As an example I could quote an article about Woolf which appeared in *Scrutiny* in 1932, written by a female English Literature don, M. C. Bradbrook. The writer complains that Woolf's heroines are too dependent and ingenuous, and that they don't engage in intelligent thinking - which they regard as a masculine activity. Also she objects to the structure and tone of *A Room of One's Own*, as she feels '... it prevents Mrs Woolf from committing the indelicacy of putting a case or the possibility of her being accused of waving any kind of banner. She concludes that 'To demand

"thinking" from Mrs Woolf is clearly illegitimate: but such a deliberate repudiation of it and such a smoke screen of feminine charm is surely to be deprecated. Mrs Woolf has preserved her extraordinary fineness and delicacy of perception at the cost of some cerebral etiolation.⁵⁷ This accusation stems directly from the ideological position found among *Scrutiny* contributors, to which Virginia Woolf was opposed. Not only were they anti-feminist (for example Q. D. Leavis reviewed *Three Guineas* in *Scrutiny*, suggesting that 'The position then with regard to further female emancipation seems to be that the onus is on women to prove that they are going to be able to justify it, and that it will not vitally dislocate (what it has already seriously disturbed - and no responsible person can regard that without uneasiness) the framework of our culture. . . Certainly there is no longer any use in this field of speculation for the non-specialist like Mrs Woolf';⁵⁸ they were opposed to Woolf on more general artistic and political grounds.

Scrutiny propounded a cultural elitism and conservatism which was to be disseminated hierarchically from English Literature departments in universities (preferably Cambridge). It took the form of supporting the great tradition of bourgeois realism, and condemning other types of writing. In this it is clear that Woolf was totally antipathetic in both her literary technique and her political views to the *Scrutiny* view of literature. Empson sums up the objection to Woolf by quoting her view that '... the great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations matches struck unexpectedly in the dark.' To which his own response is that '... it is the business of art to provide candelabra, to aggregate its matches into a light house of many candlepower.'⁵⁹ In this he asks Woolf to be a realist writer, which she clearly could never be, and it is a combination of her radical politics and modernist style which makes her so unacceptable to the highly influential *Scrutiny* stream of criticism. Many of the quotations given at the beginning of this article reiterate the objections of the Scrutineers.

Marxist literary critics have in a parallel manner written off Virginia Woolf's work as decadent, bourgeois, introspective and limited in historical materialist understanding. Again Woolf has suffered particularly in not espousing a realist style, since the early English Marxists were impressed by socialist realism and critical judgments were handed down with little re-evaluation (prior to developments in the theory of ideology and discourse). The decade in which Virginia Woolf's reputation might have been consolidated (the 30s) saw an upsurge of interest, through *Left Review* and the publication of much Marxist writing, in the experience ordinary working class people as the legitimate subject matter of fiction. Despite the fact that Woolf identifies in her writing with the underprivileged and uneducated of her characters (such as Septimus Warren Smith), rather than with the successful bourgeoisie there is sufficient surface concern with middle class intellectual life for a negative judgement to have been made. This, I would argue, results

mainly from a superficial reading which pays little attention to the profound social criticism in her work and over-emphasises the bourgeois life style which is ironically presented in them. In this context Michelene Wandor has pointed out⁶⁰ that for the English Marxists a critical breakthrough was achieved when the importance of 'being determines consciousness' was realised. The recognition that consciousness was not autonomous (as Scrutiny and the tradition conservative criticism had always assumed), but was shaped and determined by material conditions, was a crucial one. It is one, as I tried to show above, that Virginia Woolf made in both her fiction and non-fiction writing from her earliest works.

It may be argued that Woolf was in many respects a writer of great interest to Marxists of the period, but that the value of her ideas was not realised by them. This is partly because she adopted the anti-realist, modernist style which Lukacs and other Marxist critics objected to, and partly because her political Radicalism is implied rather than belaboured in the novels themselves. Also one may suspect that her strong feminism was the reason for her work being systematically denigrated from a Marxist point of view. The possibility of a socialist feminism has only arisen since theoretical advances in our understanding of the position of women in the capitalist economy were made, and until then there was a distinct tendency to polarise and stress the differences between Marxist and feminist points of view.

Thus it would appear that for different reasons Virginia Woolf has been denigrated from both the right and the left of the literary critical spectrum. In both cases we can observe a hostility to her modernist style and it is worth noting that the true radical nature of modernism has only been appreciated outside England.⁶¹ Also in a general sense it can be said that Virginia Woolf has suffered from the anti-feminism of the male critical establishment (as well as of male left wing critics), and that her reputation has suffered from allegations of triviality, domesticatedness and so on. There are, however, other reasons why Virginia Woolf's critical reputation is an ambiguous one, and these lie within the author herself. In her work we find reflected the contradictions which she experienced within herself, and which she never satisfactorily resolved. Thus if we look again at the characterisation of Mrs Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* we can see that she was a compelling figure, that she commanded love and admiration from the author; nevertheless her values were pernicious. It is of course generally true that no individual can by sheer force of intellect and will power totally emancipate him or herself from the emotional make-up which upbringing and environment have inculcated. To a degree Virginia Woolf, like many of us, had to accept that her personality and emotions had been formed by ideologies which she deplored. The resultant conflict is not resolved in her work, as I have demonstrated elsewhere.⁶²

One could make a case here for the particular difficulties attached to the position of women. Virginia Woolf, in company with Simone de

Beauvoir and others, commented on the difficulties encountered in trying to free her writing from the inhibitions created by a sexually repressive childhood. In *Three Guineas* she digresses from her argument that women should eschew patriotism, in order to say:- 'And if, when reason has had its say, still some obstinate emotion remains, some love of England dropped into a child's ears by the cawing of rooks in an elm tree, by the splash of waves on a beach, or by English voices murmuring nursery rhymes, this drop of pure, if irrational, emotion she will make serve her to give England first what she desires of peace and freedom for the whole world.'⁶¹ Obstinate, irrational emotion was to infiltrate Virginia Woolf's work at the expense of consistency in her literary and political theories. In her novels she failed to achieve her androgynous ideal, and we find many elements of mysticism and privatisation which are discordant with the political feminism underlying the books. This obstinate, irrational emotion was her own, although by no means her worst, enemy.

1. J. L. Edel; *The Psychological Novel, 1900-1950*, Hart Davis, London, 1961. P.127
2. *ibid.* p. 131
3. *ibid.* p. 133
4. J. Rosenberg; *Dorothy Richardson, The Genius They Forgot* Duckworth, London, 1973. p. 168-9
5. J. Guiguet; *Virginia Woolf and her Works*, Hogarth, London, 1965. p. 244
6. *ibid.*
7. E. Auerbach; *Mimesis The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Princeton U.P., 1971.
8. E. Hardwick; *Seduction and Betrayal, Women and Literature*, Weidenfeld, London, 1974. p. 134
9. W. Allen; *The English Novel*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1965. p. 347-351.
10. See N. Annan; 'The Intellectual Aristocracy', in Plumb, J. H. (ed) *Studies in Social History*, Longman, London, 1955. p. 243~287
11. M. Bradbury; *The Social Context of Modern English Literature*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1971.
12. M. Bradbury; 'The Novel in the 1920S' in Bergonzi, B (ed) *The Twentieth Century*, (Vol 7, Sphere History of English Literature), Sphere, London, 1970. p. 191
13. *ibid.* p.201
14. Edel; *op. cit.* P.133
15. F. Delettre; *Le Roman Psychologique de Virginia Woolf*: Librairie Philosophique, Paris, 1932. p. 226-7 (Trans. MB)
16. Allen; *op. cit.* p. 347ff
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