

REVIEW AND COMMENT

Virginia Woolf: Educated Man's Daughter

London.

Two books have appeared recently over here, whose popularity is an index of middle-class interest in the questions of war and peace as they affect women—Eric Linklater's novel, *The Impregnable Women*, and Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas*. There is nothing at all in common between these two writers except their subject. Linklater is the tough, middle-brow satirist, the author of *Don Juan in America*, who has achieved popularity because his satire goes deep enough to tickle but not deep enough to wound; he wields the bludgeon lustily enough at times, but his blows are aimed scrupulously at the protected parts of his opponent's anatomy, and so the public receives the impression that it's all a game and may the best man win and thank God it's a clean fight with no hitting below the belt. Virginia Woolf, on the other hand, is a serious and in many ways admirable writer, even though—as another English critic has lately put it—the sounds of the real world are muted through her writings into a delicate, distant hum, as though heard through the whorls of a seashell. It is, I think, a mistake on the part of our more bellicose left critics to dismiss her sort as "wallowing in a bog of subjectivism"; to put it at the lowest possible estimate, her "subjectivism" has helped to enlarge the scope of the novel; her characters, certainly, are drawn from a tiny section of the people, and no attempt is made to relate them, save by implication, with society as a whole; but this goes equally for Jane Austen.

The Impregnable Women need not detain us long. Borrowing a leaf from Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* (or, some might say, issuing a cheap edition of it), Linklater imagines the European war having broken out and settled down into a stalemate. Certain female pioneers put their heads together and finally persuade the women of the country that the only way to get peace is to withhold their favors from the men until the poor dears, in desperation, are compelled to stop their silly quarreling. The book begins seriously and effectively. But, after the pick of the lovelies have barricaded themselves in Edinburgh Castle (the seat of government has been transferred to Edinburgh), the whole thing becomes more and more unreal and flippant and finally degenerates into a regular romp. Satire of this kind is dangerous, because it throws a smoke-screen in front of the real issues involved. "Look here, chaps," it seems to say, "what are you

making such a fuss about? War's very terrible and all that, of course; but it's your own fault for being so stupid and pugnacious; just let the girls stop going to bed with you for a bit, and you'd soon change your tune." To be morally effective, satire must always place the folly and littleness and injustice of man against the background of his own potential greatness. Otherwise, like those popular handbooks of science which stress man's insignificance in the enormous universe of time and space, it is in danger of destroying the nerve for action, of breeding the state of mind which says, "Oh, what's the use? It's all the same in a hundred light-years."

Virginia Woolf, though she allows herself some ironic by-play, does not romp with her subject. The blurb of *Three Guineas* runs as follows: "Mrs. Woolf received three separate requests for a guinea. One was from the treasurer of a society who asked her opinion as to how to prevent war and for a subscription to his society for the preservation of peace and of civil and intellectual liberty. One was from the treasurer of a women's college, and the other from the treasurer of a society for obtaining employment for professional women. The book is an attempt to trace the connection between the three requests, and to discover upon what terms the three guineas should be given." As a result of this book, Mrs. Woolf has been hailed by at least one London paper as in the tradition of the great English pamphleteers. Let us see how she goes about her work.

In the first place—and this exemplifies the great virtue of our liberal writers—she defines her own position very clearly and does not pretend to speak for anyone but that small section of the people she represents, the liberal-minded intelligentsia. She approaches her subject as, in her own phrase, "the educated man's daughter": the phrase is intended to remind us that, until twenty years ago, there was no such thing as the "professional woman," and, in consequence, the influence of women upon politics and "affairs" was necessarily an indirect one, confined to the salon, the boudoir, and the bed. She sees as clearly as any Marxist that economics lay at the root of this disability; that, until it was possible for a woman to throw off the economic domination of the male by earning her own living, she could never hope to play more than a courtesan's part, at most, in public affairs. Mrs. Woolf points delicately

the paradox that women achieved this new influence and independence through the process of assisting men in that very activity which most of all they should deplore: it was not women's suffrage but the Great War which threw open the professions to women. And she suggests, with considerable justice, that it was first and foremost the wish to escape from male domination that drove the "educated man's daughter" into those feverish wartime activities: "So profound was her unconscious loathing for the education of the private house with its cruelty, its poverty, its hypocrisy, its immorality, its inanity that she would undertake any task however mental . . . that enabled her to escape. Thus consciously she desired 'our splendid empire'; unconsciously she desired our splendid war."

So far, so good; and Mrs. Woolf is prepared to go further. She is prepared to recognize the relative helplessness of these middle-class professional women, in spite of their new-found independence: "Not only are we incomparably weaker than the men of our own class; we are weaker than the women of the working class. If the working women of the country were to say: 'If you go to war, we will refuse to make munitions or to help in the production of goods,' the difficulties of warmaking would be seriously increased. But if all the daughters of educated men were to down tools tomorrow, nothing essential either to the life or to the warmaking of the community would be embarrassed. Our class is the weakest of all the classes in the state. We have no weapon with which to enforce our will." Exactly. And what should follow? Surely it should follow that, if such women wish to stop war, they should join up with those working women who, she admits, really have a weapon with which to enforce their will; they should ally themselves, either by joining a Socialist political party or by pressing for a progressive popular front, with that working-class movement which alone can give force and direction to the peace-will to the middle class.

But no. Though she has handed herself the material for making this conclusion, Mrs. Woolf does not make it. Let us try to discover the reasons why she, and presumably that small but not uninfluential body of women she represents, still refuse to draw this conclusion. And let us consider afterwards the reasons she herself gives for hesitating even to promise active support to a society

which aims at the prevention of war. First, when in the extract quoted above she says, "Our class is the weakest of all classes in the state," I get the impression that she is referring not so much to the professional middle class as to the women of that class with the accent on *women*. She is thinking throughout her essay, not in terms of class antagonism, but of sex antagonism. War, dictatorship, economic oppression fail—comparatively speaking—to get her goat; but, when she begins to speak about the stupidity and arrogance of the male sex in their dealings with women, then a militant gleam appears in that blue, impartial, ice-queen's eye of hers, and the fur starts flying. Though she admits an economic cause of women's helplessness, she does not seem to feel in her bones the economic basis of society. Secondly, therefore, she places too little stress upon the economic root of war, too much stress upon man's individual pugnacity, possessiveness, competitiveness, etc. From this attitude it follows in turn that she looks upon war as War pure and simple, making no distinction between men who fight for their own freedom and men who compel others to fight for their own profits. Until that distinction is made, until the *primary* economic basis of class society and war is realized, the "educated man's daughter" will not understand the necessity of making common cause with the working women who have in their hands a powerful weapon against capitalist war.

Mrs. Woolf, though, not merely fails to envisage this possibility. She will give no more assistance than one guinea to a society, composed of professional people, which aims to preserve peace and intellectual liberty. What are her reasons? She has just consigned the word "feminist" to the flames; yet feminism seems to remain her chief argument. "Dif-

ferent we are, as facts have proved, both in sex and in education. And it is from that difference . . . that our help can come, if help we can, to protect liberty, to prevent war. But if we . . . become active members of your society, it would seem that we must lose that difference and therefore sacrifice that help." Or again, on another tack, ". . . is there not something in the conglomeration of people into societies that releases what is most selfish and violent, least rational and humane in the individuals themselves?" Society, Mrs. Woolf argues, has been harsh to women in the past; therefore let them avoid anything in the nature of a society. Surely there is something very illogical here—and a strong whiff of intransigent feminism mingled with the laughing gas of liberal anarchism.

On the next page Mrs. Woolf is compelled to modify her position. Now it is, let us have nothing to do with a *male* society, let the daughters of educated men form an "Outsiders' Society" of their own, "working in their own class—how indeed can they work in any other? (!)—and by their own methods for liberty, equality, and peace." What are their methods to be? They must refuse to fight, to make munitions, to nurse the wounded; they must "maintain an attitude of complete indifference" towards their belligerent brothers; they must analyze their own unregenerate feelings of "patriotism" in the light of reason, history, property, law. This analysis will convince the "educated man's daughter" that "her sex and class has very little to thank England for in the past; not much to thank England for in the present; while the security of her person in the future is highly dubious." She will conclude that "in fact, as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world." An admirable

conclusion, so far as it goes; but why does it have to stop at this feminine isolationism? Does the educated man's daughter have to remain an "outsider"?

We say, no. We say that it is an important task for the working-class movement in every country to draw such women into its ranks; to direct their hatred of dictatorship, so finely expressed by Mrs. Woolf, away from the mere hatred of male domination into the channels where it may be most practically effective; to convince them that their peace activities will be most valuably undertaken in cooperation with their brothers, not in sex-isolation from them; to change, above all, Mrs. Woolf's "as a woman I have no country" into "as a worker, as a lover of equality and justice, as a hater of sham and tyranny, I have no country, I want no country, my country is the whole world."

C. DAY LEWIS.

Two Studies of Anti-Semitism

WHERE NOW, LITTLE JEW?, by Magnus Hermansson. Bonnier. \$2.50.

THE NEW POLAND AND THE JEWS, by Simon Segal. Lee Furman. \$2.00.

MR. HERMANSSON'S is a very offensive book; it is only my duty as a reviewer that drove me to read it through. There is such a deal of nonsense in it that one is reminded of Stalin's wittily impatient comment, "Paper will put up with anything that is written on it."

In essence, and stated as objectively as I can, his thesis is this: The cause of Jew-

