

VIRGINIA WOOLF: 1882-1941

SHE was a great lady. In spite of her distinction as a novelist and essayist, and her wit and indignation as a critic, most of Virginia Woolf's friends would agree that as a person she was even more impressive—if one can use that word of so gracious an elegance. She had no touch of pretentious dignity: she was not solemn or sibylline, as I fancy, George Eliot must have been. Virginia Woolf had an inward gravity which was the more noteworthy because she could be gay, pleasantly frivolous, and had always kept that love of mischief which had led her, when she was a girl, to take part with her brother Adrian and his friends in one of the best-known of practical jokes. With one of the party dressed as the Sultan of Zanzibar they succeeded in paying a visit of inspection to the British fleet, where they were received with royal (or Sultanic) honors on the flagship, and left undiscovered.

That sense of fun, that capacity to play the fool Virginia Woolf never lost; and it is an element in her character which is too frequently ignored or forgotten, though it is shown clearly enough to the discerning in "Orlando," in "A Room of One's Own," and even in "Three Guineas." It is very evident, too, in those most delightful of critical essays, "The Common Reader." In the mingling of profound seriousness with a delicate, gay, innocent malice, Virginia Woolf was not unlike Alice Meynell; yet both were extraordinarily patient in dealing with the devotion of followers and admirers, not always discriminating or intelligent. Virginia Woolf, though of a later generation, was more Victorian than Alice Meynell; for there was never quite so concentrated a Victorian—and I do not use that word as a term of abuse—as was shown in the circle of which Leslie Stephens, Virginia's father, was so conspicuous and fine an example.

Virginia Woolf gave some account

of that way of life, its energy, its intellectual honesty, its family pride, its unconscious integrity in "Night and Day," and more obliquely but even more beautifully in "To the Lighthouse." Experimental as is much of her work, bold as it is in its technical innovation, in spirit I think all the novels are sadly, longingly nostalgic. There has, it is true, been a tendency to exaggerate the innovation of her style and technique: the influence of Turgenev, of Chekov, even of Thackeray is more important than has been realized. Even "The Waves" is not so startling a break in the tradition of English fiction as is the later manner of Henry James or the work of that neglected contemporary of Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Richardson.

In nothing was Virginia Woolf more Victorian than in her attitude to the literary life and to literary circles. It was the oddest irony that she should have become—largely through her Cambridge friends—the acknowledged Queen of that coterie known as the Bloomsbury set. Yet she professed complete innocence. "I have friends who live here, and more friends who live elsewhere. Some of them write; most of them do not. And I do not care for 'literary persons' as such."

Only those who did not know her could ever imagine that Virginia Woolf was a coterie-leader. She never was of the Bloomsbury which claimed her, any more than were her close friends, Morgan Forster and Desmond MacCarthy. Insofar as there was such a thing as Bloomsbury it could not be found in those lovely Regency Squares, nor even in the drawing-room of that other great lady, Ottoline Morrell, who encouraged all the rebels in arts and letters, and read with passionate affection the novels of Wilkie Collins; it was an uncharted region in the confused hearts and heads of little men who came to London from many parts of England, the young of that unfor-

tunate generation whom Lytton Strachey and Aldous Huxley taught that it was more noble to look down than to look up.

From that smallness Virginia Woolf was so free that I doubt if she even suspected its existence in others. Her essential nobility made her unwearyingly generous to the work of others; her taste, almost impeccable in its range, was limited, but she never spent time in attacking or depreciating work she thought unimportant or bad. She preferred to praise and encourage those whose work she liked. And here she had her reward, though it was one on which she set little store. No artist of our day, except Max Beerbohm, was so generally acclaimed by fellow-artists. No one that I know of failed to recognize the integrity, the beauty, and the seriousness of her work. She provoked no jealousy nor envy in others: and her fellow-women artists—May Sinclair, Ethel Colburn Mayne (that short-story writer of genius), Stella Benson—were warm in her praise. To those who heard or overheard the more tiresome backstairs squeals and squabbles of the post-war years in the high-pitched cocktail-parties of the intelligentsia, perhaps the tribute paid to Virginia Woolf by the men was more remarkable. Even the shrill little crowd who, a generation earlier, would have flaunted the green carnation, acknowledged the supremacy of Virginia Woolf.

That supremacy was acknowledged partly, I think, because she was so essentially a feminine author. And her feminism was of the sound, old-fashioned Victorian kind—the kind to which Elizabeth Barrett witnessed when she left Father and Marylebone for Robert Browning and Italy; the kind of feminism which takes its stand on the inexpugnable thesis that a woman has a right, a duty, to claim certain privileges precisely because she is a woman. In "A Room of One's Own," Virginia Woolf has put the case unanswerably. There are slips in that essay and worse ones in "Three Guineas." More men than Virginia guessed, have written in circumstances as apparently inappropriate as those enjoyed by Miss Austen in the family parlor. What matters in the book is the simple assertion that it is bad for the race, for culture, for domestic decency, for the arts to ask any woman to put up with a lower standard of living because she is a woman. The truth of that simple statement is not affected by the fact that more men than Virginia Woolf admitted have sacrificed themselves to women.

I have called her work nostalgic. As I recall the novels from "The Voyage

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Man Ray—Harper's Bazaar
Virginia Woolf

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Mr. Wilson's Case

SIR:—If Deborah Higbee Hogarth [SRL, March 29] will look on page 134 of "Crusader in Crinoline," she will see that I have placed the Lyman Beecher house in Cincinnati correctly at the corner of Gilbert Avenue and Foraker Street. My misstatement of the address occurred in a publicity item the information for which I supplied offhand a year after I had visited Cincinnati.

In that city I heard a number of times of a movement, or at any rate an agitation on the part of individuals and club groups, to buy the Beecher house for a public memorial, on the mistaken theory that Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote "Uncle Tom's Cabin" there. One of my informants was Miss Eleanor S. Wilby, librarian of the Ohio Historical and Philosophical Society.

The Beecher house on Walnut Hills was built in 1833 (not 1832) and was not occupied by Dr. Beecher until the end of 1833 or early part of 1834. Harriet Beecher remained down in Cincinnati, boarding near her sister's school, where she taught classes of girls. When her bridegroom left for Europe in the spring of 1836, young Mrs. Stowe returned to her father's roof and remained there until Professor Stowe's return in January, 1837. Meanwhile, in September, 1836, she had given birth to twin girls, her oldest children. Two or three years later Lane Theological Seminary built for Professor Stowe a faculty house, which he and his family occupied until they left Cincinnati in 1850.

When Mrs. Stowe revisited Cincinnati in 1873, she was quite capable of conveying to the owner of the old Beecher house the pleasing information that she had written some of her "Uncle Tom" sketches there, while her children played about her feet, for she was fond of dramatizing her past life with little regard for the facts. Actually such a story is preposterous, since the only children she had in that house were but four months old when she left it.

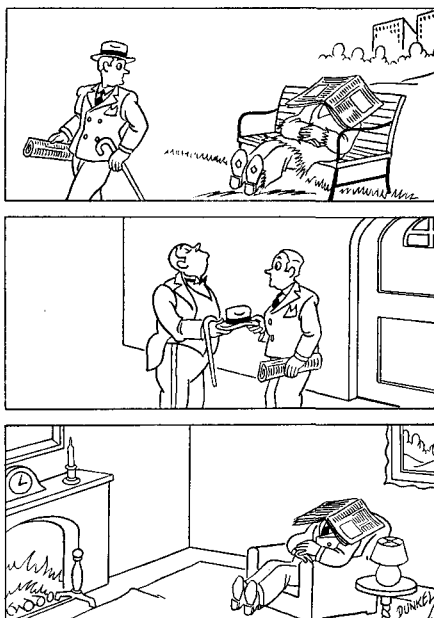
The truth is that in 1836 "Uncle Tom's Cabin" was not yet even a gleam in Mrs. Stowe's eye, and it was hardly a gleam when she started to write it in March, 1851, for she extemporized the story as she went along. So far as I can discover, the only previous writing she had done on the theme of slavery was a short story called "Uncle Sam's Emancipation," and this tale contained little or no propaganda for Abolition.

FORREST WILSON.

Weston, Conn.

Pessimism vs. Cynicism

SIR:—Though I find myself in complete sympathy with Mr. Van Wyck Brooks's opposition to the destructive



drive behind so much of our modern literature, expressed in his excellent "Fashions in Defeatism" [SRL, March 22]. I think his case may be strengthened somewhat by a comment in the margin of his page. For by confusing "pessimism" and "cynicism" at the outset, using the terms interchangeably, he inadvertently condemns the greatest literature of the past along with the least of our present. It may be entirely just to say: "It seems as if our writers passively wallowed in misery, calling it fate"; but how much more apt the phrase is with reference to Shakespearean tragedy, or Greek drama, or Russian fiction! John Donne wrote in the 17th century: "Let him (Man) be a world, and him self will be the land, and misery the sea. His misery, as the sea, swells above all the hills, and reaches to the remotest parts of this earth, Man." This is merely the orthodox literary picture of the state of mankind, inhabiting this well-known Vale of Tears, as it has been expressed in literature since long before "Ecclesiastes," as it has been recognized and identified by the great minds of a past that goes back to the limit of human memory. Donne was not referring to the world of Faulkner and Farrell and Dos Passos.

Perhaps the most unadulterated and relentless expression of the pessimistic view occurs in "Moby Dick." Never for a moment does Melville allow it to be doubted that man is doomed to destruction, for all his valiance, by the evil outside him, that Ahab is fated, in the end, to be torn and consumed by that white symbol of everlasting evil which he vainly seeks to overcome. Is this not pessimism, is it not wallowing in misery and calling it fate? But it is not ugly, and it is not ugly precisely because it is the opposite of cynicism. Ahab, the doomed man, is yet the hero of "Moby Dick";

it is his example, not the whale's, which is held up to us for our emulation and approval. We have *more* courage, *more* strength, *more* pride and sense of power, for the example he has given us. We are not weakened and depressed, but rather purged and exalted by this recognition of the challenge that man faces in this world.

Pessimism, when it is creative, shows man what he is up against in this world, and thus prepares him to meet it. Cynicism identifies him with the evil and thus dissuades him from opposing it. The one purges us of fear by openly naming the enemy while distinguishing us; the other disarms us by destroying the confidence we have in our own distinction. Surely Mr. Brooks did not intend to fell a long and uniquely honorable literary tradition with the same blow that he directed against its current bastard.

LOUIS J. HALLE, JR.

New York City.

Switalski on Mikolajczak

SIR:—In the last line of Oliver La Farge's fine poem, "Draft Names Drawn" [SRL, March 8], he asks: "How do you pronounce Mikolajczak?" The answer is "Me-ko-lie-cha(1)k," except that the "o" is similar to that in "orb," while the barred "l" sound approximates the English "w".

Before the present war this name was most common in the western Polish provinces of Poznan and Pomorze, which have now been "reincorporated" into the German Reich. It derives from "Mikolaj" (Nicholas).

Far from being as formidable as the words appear to Anglo-Saxons, Polish pronunciation is not difficult. Unlike English, letter combinations can only be pronounced one way and the accent is always on the penult. "Sz" is pronounced like the German "sch." "Rz" and "z," as in Zeromski, are like the French "j". "Dz" before "i" sounds like our "j", while the Polish "j" is like our "y". As in German, "w" is used for the English "v" or "ff" sound. Thus the "wl" in Reymont's name "Wladyslaw" is not unlike the "fl" in "flash." Actually, the most difficult thing for an American to master in Polish is the rolling of the "r" and that is a characteristic not confined to Slavonic languages.

JOHN SWITALSKI.

Chicago, Illinois.

Erratum

In a letter to the editor, in last week's issue, by Frank Jewett Mather, Jr., concerning Sherwood Anderson's election to the Institute, Paul Elmer More's name was printed as Paul Elmer Ware. The editors deeply regret the error.