Chapter IV:

Outside the Magic Circle

Autobiography of Virginia Foster Durr
Virginia Foster Durr's *Outside the Magic Circle* is different from all the other five autobiographies reviewed before. Its difference lies in the fact that this is the only autobiography which was not "written" by its author: it is a transcription from an oral discourse. It therefore exemplifies beautifully the modern concept of the autobiographical genre. It subverts the long-held definition of the author of an autobiography being the person who "held the pen". Authorship and identity are in fact two of the main topics on which criticism of autobiography has focused. For there is a fine line dividing the autobiographical novel and the autobiography proper. Critics have reached the consensus that though both these forms may have an admixture of fact and fiction, the former may legitimately be termed as fiction and the latter as non-fiction. The difference lies in the identity posited among author, narrator and protagonist.

One of the most important names in autobiographical research, the French critic Philippe Lejeune, considers the title page—previously overlooked—as an integral part of the text. On the basis of the title page Lejeune could identify a textual criterion by which to distinguish between autobiography and fiction, namely the identity of the proper name shared by the author, the narrator and the protagonist. Lejeune was well on his way to establishing a reader-based poetics of
autobiography when he shifted the focus of the genre from the intention of the author to the evidence of that intention present in the text. That is, a text could be read as "autobiography" if the author stated that it was a factual piece of work in the title page itself.

The tricky problem of authorship in an autobiography can best be demonstrated in the case of a collaborative autobiography. Adopting a sociological perspective, Lejeune shows the cultural relativity of a concept like that of the author when it comes to collaborative autobiography. The notion of the person who "held the pen" has been widely received as a prominent component of the identity of the classic autobiographer; and most of the individuals studied by critics and scholars so far have been writers. In a collaborative autobiography however the fact that someone has written the text does not necessarily determine that individual as its "author" in the published product. In the case of the ghost-written autobiography, for example, the writer rarely claims that strategic place reserved for the author's signature, which becomes in effect an attribute of the featured subject whose fame or notoriety claims the attention of the public. By contrast, in the case of the autobiography of an unknown individual gathered by a journalist or oral historian working in the field, the writer proclaims authorship in the signature as a guarantee that the subject has "written nothing" and this avowal
in turn functions as a guarantee of the product's authenticity, that "what has been written is a faithful image of what the subject said."¹

Outside the Magic Circle is also a kind of oral history. "A kind of" because Outside the Magic Circle will be classified as a piece of literature and not as a historical text. The editor of the autobiography herself acknowledges the difference when she says in the "Editor's Note": "Virginia's autobiography is the story of these times, places and people. Because Virginia has an uncanny memory for details, the story is remarkably accurate. But the importance of this work lies not in the accurate presentation of historical events; professional historians are trained to make those presentations. The importance of Virginia's story is her personal perception of the times, places and people that she has known."² Many times a personal perspective can totally be at variance with the official version of a historical event, and often it is the emotionally truer version.

Outside the Magic Circle is the result of the efforts of the Southern Oral History Programme (SOHP) at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. In 1975, its Director, Jacquelyn Hall, made arrangements to tape a series of interviews with Virginia. That study, funded in part by the Rockefeller Foundation, was designed to produce a collection of oral memoirs of Southern women who were active in public life between 1920 and 1960.
In the "Editor's Note" of Outside the Magic Circle, Hollinger F. Barnard reveals that Virginia had long been urged by her friends to write her autobiography because she and her husband Cliff had been close witnesses to the New Deal and McCarthy era. But it was Studs Terkel, a pioneer in oral history, who suggested that she *tell* her story instead of writing it. One does not know why he thought this would be better, for a transcription of an oral discourse is subject to several reviews and therefore the story comes to the reader thrice removed. Lejeune was alive to the complexities of such an encounter and though he was talking about oral historians in the context of ethnographic studies (i.e. where the subject is illiterate and the interviewer is from the dominant class) the problems he highlights can be found in any oral history encounter.

In an oral history transcription, the control of the narrator and main protagonist over the narrative weakens. The interviewer and editor become the via media and it is through the sensibilities of these persons that the original story filters down to the reader. The story is thus subject to external editorial control. Lejeune's sociological analysis therefore exposes the role of class in the exercise of power in which the act of writing is necessarily implicated. Foreword to On Autobiography says: "The politics of autobiography is most strikingly displayed in the current vogue of the lives of common people."
collected by journalists and oral historians, lives that gain access to the printed word only through an intermediary belonging to the dominant class that controls the production and consumption of such texts. Lejeune has a lively sense of the ambiguities involved in transactions of this kind, for to the extent that the system of communication in question serves to promote the values and ideology of the dominant class, even the most apparently disinterested ethnographic project may not be free of the taint of exploitation. A collaboration ostensibly devoted to the preservation of autobiographical data that might otherwise perish may nonetheless entail a fundamental condescension that possesses the potential for voyeurism and violation.\(^3\)

Although what Eakin says about the ethnographic encounter may not strictly apply to Virginia Foster Durr (for she considers herself of the dominant class), the essence of his observation still holds true. The fact that *Outside the Magic Circle* was the result of a programme and the fact that it was partly financed by the Rockefeller Foundation are truths that cannot be overlooked. Although it is true that Virginia is no illiterate peasant who can be manipulated to vocalise the interviewer's ideological sympathies, it is also true that an interview can be conducted to elicit expected responses and that leading questions can give rise to the desired answer.
One has to therefore keep in mind the role played by the interviewer, the editor and the Director of SOHP while reading *Outside the Magic Circle*. The Self of the autobiographer that emerges may be different in this case from the Self that would have emerged had it been a text "written" by the author. Whether it would have been truer is debatable, for the authenticity of the Virginia Foster Durr interviews can be verified by going through the tapes stored in the archives of the SOHP. Perhaps Hollinger F. Barnard is aware of the problems involved in a transcription, for she is painstaking in her "Editor's Note" in enumerating the archival data.

Thus, how a reader approaches a work depends upon whether it is classified as fact or fiction. In the case of a non-fiction genre like autobiography, the reader-response is further altered by the information provided by the title page. Where *Outside the Magic Circle* is concerned, the first name is of course that of the main protagonist of the narration, Virginia Foster Durr herself. Then comes the name of the Editor, Hollinger F. Bernard, whose job it was to transcribe the interview tapes and edit and arrange them in the form that the reader has finally received. Then comes the name of the man who was responsible for recording Virginia's story as an oral discourse rather than as written text - Studs Terkel. Absent from the title page but equally important in the production of the book are the
names of the two interviewers - Jacquelyn Hall and Sue Thrasher -- Director and co-Director of the Institute for Southern Studies. These two important people have erased their presence from the body of the text and have described their encounter with Virginia in glowing, egalitarian terms that mask the power relations implicit in the proceedings. Subtly but quite surely it is the two interviewers who set the tone of the book and not the main protagonist herself. In the words of the interviewers: "The interview's chief theme was Virginia's attempt to come to terms with the social and psychological forces that made her who she is. She approached our conversation with painful honesty; the interview at times became an exhausting emotional and intellectual engagement with the past. Virginia is a consummate storyteller. Each character in the drama of her life was fully realised in the telling; each theme was interwoven in a complex pattern of significance. She was what every practitioner of oral history hopes for: a source of vivid historical detail and a master of historical interpretation." (xvii)

The editor herself, as though mindful of the critical and sceptical gaze of the reader upon her, has been scrupulous in describing the modus operandi she applied in crafting a book from a stack of interview tapes: "I have pieced the various interview materials together into a whole that is, by and large, chronological; some of the
chapters on the Washington years are more thematic than chronological. I have deleted interview questions and comments, reduced twice and thrice-told tales to the one best telling, culled most of the rhetorical traces of cultural speech, and added phrases when necessary to tie paragraphs together or to identify someone Virginia has mentioned." As a precautionary measure she ends the paragraph with the following line: "Virginia has worked closely in this effort, especially in correcting names and adding details." (xviii)

The last paragraph in the "Editor's Note" reveals Barnard's awareness of the power-dynamics involved in a work of this sort: "It is Virginia herself, of course, who has contributed most to this book, both in living the life and telling the story. She is her own best biographer. I only hope that we have not edited out the twinkle in her eye and the hearty chuckle freely given. The reader who fails to see the twinkle and hear the chuckle will miss too much." (xix)

This is not to say that being a transcription from an oral discourse makes Outside the Magic Circle any less of an authentic document. A study of the book in fact widens the horizon of the autobiographical genre. It acknowledges the presence of different rhetorical strategies. Virginia's witty interviews demonstrate a life-long practice of the anecdote as an art form. By including oral history autobiographies in their area of study, critics like Philippe Lejeune
have expanded the frontiers of the study of autobiography from a
narrowly literary to a broadly social and cultural context. The control
of the protagonist is limited and in fact disappears after the interviews
have been conducted. Adelaide Blasquez, an oral historian who wrote
the autobiography of a French peasant named Gaston Lucas told
Lejeune that in the context of the book, what the living Gaston has to
say is without value; he does not exist in himself, for it is the written
Gaston that counts, an individual who has acquired, thanks to her art,
the consistency and truth of a character in a novel.

So, though outwardly an autobiography "written" by the main
protagonist and a transcription from an oral discourse may appear to
be similar, there are far-reaching differences between the two. It is
undeniable that the onus of responsibility on the editor of an oral
history is much more than on a writer who is writing his/her own life.
Since the work is being approached as part of a sociological study, it
blurs the line between Literature and History. The pressure to give
precise factual data is therefore much more upon an oral historian.
While a person writing his/her own life is free to embellish the story
with his/her version of truth, the information given in an oral history
is more likely to be precise simply because it is subject to cross-
checking due to the several people involved in the project. However,
even an oral history transcription can at best be called only a
"version" of truth. For, there can be various interpretations of history depending upon who is documenting it.

In Outside the Magic Circle too the political scenario that emerges is Virginia's interpretation. One cannot forget that Outside the Magic Circle is the result of an Oral History Programme. Therefore, Virginia as a person is not as important as her role of being the representative of her group. The narrative of Outside the Magic Circle thus focuses more on Virginia's public life rather than her own personal travails and tribulations.

The usual dichotomy of the Public/Private theme that one tends to apply to conventional autobiographies, therefore, does not hold true here. The lack of private details in Outside the Magic Circle does not necessarily reflect upon Virginia as a person. The modern reader of autobiography is schooled to associate private revelations in an autobiography with confessions of an intimate nature -- affairs, addictions, binges and purges. Arlyn Diamond has this to say about this obsession of, what she calls, a "culture addicted to the People magazine ":"The concept of 'truthfulness' is central to the way we generally discuss autobiography, unreflectingly equating truth with the acknowledgement of suppressed desires or unacceptable behaviours. In this, we are the heirs of Tristram Shandy and Freud and Lytton Stratchey." 4
Thus, the loss of Virginia's much cherished son at the age of three is also discussed in terms of her public life: "That spring (1938) our son had died. He had appendicitis and the doctors didn't diagnose it correctly. We took him to the hospital, but his appendix burst. Penicillin was unknown in those days and he died. He was only three. I was terribly depressed, and the La Follette hearings diverted me.

Then I got interested in them and I learned a great deal. I would go in every morning with Cliff and come back with him. It was an exciting summer, and it did take my mind off my little boy's death, at least during the day." (108)

The death is just glossed over and Virginia talks about it only in terms of how it made her more and more involved in public life than ever before. In this respect Outside the Magic Circle is more a public testimonial than a private revelation.

The editor in the first paragraph of the "Editor's Note" says it best: "Her autobiography is much more than a family history."

Virginia Foster Durr herself is very aware of her connectedness to society. She regards herself as representative of a way of life, of a particular generation. Her original title for the autobiography was — The Emancipation of Pure White Womanhood. In a sense, this work is Virginia Foster Durr's own Emancipation Proclamation.
However, the present title—Outside the Magic Circle—is more suitable for the book, because Virginia Foster Durr stepped outside the "magic circle " at many levels. Geographically she stepped out of the deeply provincial and clannish South and went North with her husband. The chapter divisions also draw attention to her geographical distance from her origins. The book is divided into four sections. The section headings state the place and the duration of Virginia Foster Durr's stay. The autobiography is thus typically systematic in giving the spatial and chronological progress of Virginia Foster Durr's life. However, let us take a closer look at the section headings:

Part 1—Birmingham, 1903 to 1933
Part 2—Washington, DC, 1933 to 1949
Part 3—Denver, 1950 to 1951
Part 4—Montgomery, 1951 to 1976

One notices that Virginia Foster Durr's journey began from the South, she went North to Washington and Denver, but finally came back to Montgomery and her home state of Alabama. Geographically, she came back to the point from where she started and thus completed the circle. The geographical distance from her home state from 1933 to 1951 gave her a perspective on the problems of the South. But unlike her sister and brother-in-law, the Hugo Blacks, she returned to her roots and did not leave the circle
unfinished. She came back to the South with a widened outlook. However, unlike the Hugo Blacks who stayed on in the North, Virginia Foster Durr, by returning to the South, faced its problems without losing touch with its ground realities. Socially, she stepped out of the close circle of the privileged society she was born in. Her stint at the North made her more aware of the inequalities rampant in traditional Southern society. She could not then flow with the tide. She had to rebel and question the status quo. In the process she had to give up the privileges of her charmed circle. Her protective cocoon of age-old traditions and outmoded norms was broken. Her only reward was a truly examined life and a world she would never have known.

The geographical chapter divisions are thus significant because Virginia Foster Durr became aware of her limited vision and narrow lifestyle only when she went to Washington, away from her familiar surroundings. This geographical distancing wrought an intellectual and emotional change in Virginia Foster Durr. And though later she would physically return to the location of her origins it would be with an altered mindset. The patriarchal hold of men over women, of whites over blacks, of the masters over the slaves, of the rich over the poor, was re-examined by Virginia Foster Durr precisely because she
became aware of the inequalities by refusing to be circumscribed by a circle—be it geographical, social or biological.

The chapter divisions within the major sections point to the gradual but eventually complete merging of Virginia Foster Durr's private and public lives. The chapter headings in the first section almost exclusively point to the private life of Virginia Foster Durr. But from the second section onwards the chapter headings indicate the public life of Virginia Foster Durr. By refusing to be circumscribed by the limited roles of "wife" and "mother" and by stepping out of the enclosure of the four walls of her house, Virginia Foster Durr wrought a public life for herself and thus carved an identity that was independent from her husband's. It was an autonomous existence, but one that was in harmony with that of her husband's. Her public and private lives were thus closely linked.

This autobiographical narrative inhabits the uneasy realm where the personal and social merge into and confront each other. Having chosen to work in an unsatisfactory world, Virginia Foster Durr steps outside the magic circle of social acceptance, the space assigned to her by family and society. In so doing she begins to question the dominant values and beliefs about individual merit and the naturalness of the assigned categories of race, class and gender which define the circle. The comfortable divisions between "public" and
"private" which American culture everywhere reinforces no longer works for her, as what she does and who she is become entangled.

Actually, the fact that Outside the Magic Circle was part of an Oral History Programme frees Virginia Foster Durr of combating an awkward dilemma that most women autobiography writers are familiar with-- the dilemma of how best to justify this act of autobiography - writing. Most women justify the autobiographical act by denying charges of egotism and bringing forth altruistic reasons, for example, the transmission of a message that will be of benefit to mankind. The writers submerge the personal in some "larger" purposes in order to become the vehicle for conveying a message about history. So, while the Personal is Political in the case of almost all autobiographies, in the case of an autobiography that is part of an Oral History Programme, it is even more so. While a writer who is "writing" her autobiography herself does have some private moments (because the targeted audience is invisible) an autobiographer who is "telling" her life to an interviewer has absolutely no privacy (because the interviewer is tangible and there). That is, while the former is gazing at a mirror in public, the latter is gazing at a mirror under the constant scrutiny of the public. This realisation does alter the narration and tone of an autobiography. Even a subject as bold and outspoken as Virginia experienced the vulnerability of such a public
Virginia's only request was that she select the interviewer so that she would not be telling her life-story to a stranger."(xvi)

While any autobiographer, especially women autobiographers, would like to convince the reader that writing an autobiography is not an act of self-indulgence but goes beyond it; for the subject of an Oral History Programme an autobiography can never become an act of self-indulgence. The individual is not important in herself, but in what she stands for. As Arlyn Diamond says: "As producers and consumers of our own and other's memories we are all shaped by our experiences of domination and resistance as we have lived them in our society. This is a hard and necessary lesson for Americans, seduced as we all have been by the pervasive rhetoric of individualism. As feminist scholars I believe we ought constantly to be learning and teaching it, as I have tried to do here. Any individual's past is also history; the world we experience separately is also social. Our conscious interventions in its activities are our politics as well as our scholarship." 5

In the case of Virginia Foster Durr, her personal life seems to be intricately enmeshed with her social life -- at least her post-Seminary Hill days. She talks of her early forays into public life (before her serious activism began) quite flippantly. Her public life occurred, she implies, quite by accident. She liked the pomp and ceremony of being
ushered in to the hearings; she missed the excitement of Washington in suburban Seminary Hill and therefore accompanied Cliff to the hearings every morning; she wanted a diversion from her private sorrows; she had a best friend who was interested in law; her sister introduced her socially to the New Deal big-wigs; she was much impressed by Mrs Eleanor Roosevelt's personality and decided to join the Women's Division of the Democratic Movement etc. These are the many reasons that Virginia gives for her entry into active public life. It was not the stirring of any strong ideological feeling that led her into it, but reasons quite frivolous. In this respect, Virginia is quite sympathetic to the young woman she had been. She sees things in perspective and makes excuses for her youthful follies, while at the same time being totally frank.

The portraits she paints of her husband, her sister, her brother-in-law, her parents and her in-laws are frank as well. The mutual love and respect that Virginia and Cliff shared is apparent in Outside the Magic Circle. They were a devoted couple and partners in the truest sense of the word. They had the same goals and the same beliefs and they shared a terrific rapport. While she never underestimates her husband's influence in the development of her personality and beliefs, she lets the readers know obliquely that she was a woman with independent views and was not merely the echo of her husband. In
fact, she would have us believe that she was the more vocal and outspoken of the two and that they both grew up together, maturity-wise. In Chapter 6, while talking of her early days in Seminary Hill, she describes the visit of an old Southern acquaintance, Clarke Foreman, to their home. Clarke held radical views and had hired a Black person as his secretary. During the dinner at the Durrs', he and Virginia got into an argument over the race issue: "Clarke said, 'You are just a white Southern, bigoted, prejudiced, provincial girl.' I got furious and said, 'You are going back on all the traditions of the South. You, a Howell of Georgia, going back on all of it. What do you think of the Civil War? What did we stand for?' White supremacy of course... Cliff thought pretty much the same way as I did, but didn’t holler about it. I hate to say it, but we had both been surrounded by these beliefs since infancy and we didn’t question them. We had both been raised by black women whom we had adored and trusted and on whom our lives depended. Yet, at the same time, we were brought up to think that all black people were inferior. So we had acquired a double vision of blacks which I am sure contributed somewhat to our later change in point of view."(104). Her next sentence is revealing: "By this time I was beginning to enlarge my circle of friends and my ideas".
By Chapter 17, Virginia's ideas have undergone such a drastic change that she is totally at odds with the beliefs of her family. She says in Chapter 17: "Cliff's family would say, 'Well, you know, if he hadn't married Virginia he wouldn't have changed.' In the same chapter she says: "Cliff hadn't changed as much on the racial issue as I had, during the years we were in Washington. He hadn't had the same experiences I had. He thought segregation was wrong, but he had never come in contact with the race issue the way I had because he had worked in Washington on a high level."(251). Once Virginia's ideas underwent a change, there was no way she was going to keep quiet about it. She was passionate and forthright with her views.

Virginia's bold and frank portrayals of people and events put things in perspective. Perhaps one important contribution of Outside the Magic Circle is the presentation of the race-issue from a Southerner's point of view, albeit a Southerner who did a stint in the North and had a change of heart about the racial issue. Outside the Magic Circle does not carry a tone of moral righteousness against people who happen to hold a different point of view. Since she herself grew up in an atmosphere of white supremacy, she is tolerant about people who continue to hold such old-fashioned beliefs. Social conditioning, she implies, takes time to change. Thus her father, a typical Southern gentleman, is a "traditionalist"; her mother is "a child
of her times", her mother-in-law "was a beautiful woman. She had been a great beauty in her youth, and she was a true Southern lady. She believed in the Civil War and she believed the black people were our responsibility. She also believed in segregation. In fact, she was just about most typical Southern lady of the old school you can possibly imagine. She did not approve of my ideas at all."(241).

Virginia is forgiving of such people because she feels that they are as they are because they did not get the opportunity to move out of their narrow circles. Her opinion is that their horizons have remained limited because they lacked the opportunity to see new people, new places and new ideas. In short, they have not stepped "outside the circle." In this respect, **Outside the Magic Circle** is a sympathetic portrayal of the South. Virginia speaks from an insider's point of view, but an insider who has stepped out and can see and judge things from a distance. She feels rooted to her soil, her origins: "Cliff tried to explain to Mr.Hentoff the difficulty of a Southerner who loved the South and his home and family and who did not want to be cast in the guise of being critical, of being self-righteous. Cliff would always say, 'I was exactly like them, like the Southerners who oppose integration. I just happened to have more opportunity to see the big world. If I'd stayed here in Montgomery, I'd probably still be thinking exactly like the rest of them.' He was always trying to make it plain to
the newspapermen that he wasn’t criticising the Southern people, that their beliefs were due to their background." (313). In Chapter 9, Virginia says: "My family and Cliff's had come over here in the early 1700s and had fought in the Revolutionary War. We had a sense -- which I still have--that we owned the country. This may be an arrogant way to feel. I own it. It's mine. There may be things that make me mad and that I want to change, but it's my country. In other words, you felt you had a solid base. You didn't have a feeling of floating in mid-air." (168). She ends her autobiography too with the same sentiment: "In spite of the hard times we've had, I've always felt that I've been in the group that ran the country. It's very difficult to explain without sounding snobbish, but I've always felt I belonged to the ruling class."(334). This is an important revelation because it is a pointer towards the strong sense of Self that Virginia possessed and goes a long way in explaining her personality, her immense self-confidence and self-assurance. She had nothing to gain and everything to lose by stepping out of this privileged position. But perhaps it was her very feeling of rootedness and ownership that lent her the courage to stand by her beliefs. If blacks or lesbians or communists are forced to define themselves in opposition to the given condition, then people who are not any of the above are forced to define themselves in relation to those conditions in which they too
participate, by an act of denial: "You can't imagine the contradictions in my life, the total contradictions. At the same time that I was surrounded by lovely, decent black people, I would go to see Birth of a Nation and believe that the Klan was noble and beautiful." (44). As Arlyn Diamond says: "To read autobiography is to understand that it is embedded in the realm of the social, for the whites, heterosexuals, the well-off, the physically able, anyone within the magic circle, since the privilege is as real as the oppression which enables it. It may be that for us what is most powerfully repressed is not the Freudian unconscious but what might be termed the Marxist conscious, the acknowledgement of the determining role of social life." 

Virginia and Cliff are in fact the unsung heroes of the South who fought for democratic rights and equality for all. And this fight they carried out while living in the deep South. As Virginia says in Chapter 20: "Cliff and I had been on the front-line (of the segregation issue) for about ten years, and this man (Reverend Coffin) was making us feel that we were just sorry Southern segregationists because we refused to have the black dependants to our house for a drink. We ran into that quite a bit with some of our Northern sympathisers, but they always got on the airplane to go back home, where they were perfectly safe." (302).
Even while talking about Hugo Black, her brother-in-law, who later became a Senator in Washington and who was an ardent desegregationist, she is respectful but very frank: "Hugo believed that segregation was wrong and he was willing to take the blows he knew he would get from his fellow Southerners, but he was also protected by the fact that he lived in Washington and was on the Supreme Court and was making a handsome salary and had a chauffeur and a messenger and a beautiful house in Alexandria. In Washington he was a great hero. It was only when he came to Alabama that he got the full force of what we lived with all the time." (307).

Virginia also describes the personal price that her daughters had to pay for their parents' activism: "There was no violence that I can recall when the schools first integrated. The black children were very brave. They were heroes in their own community, whereas my children like Tilla and Lulah, were anything but heroes. They were pariahs and outcasts for being the nieces of Hugo Black and the daughters of Virginia and Clifford Durr." (276).

In the last chapter Virginia talks bitterly about the awful, insulting treatment she got at the hands of a classroom-full of twenty-five young black boys and girls: "That class in Tuskegee was, in a way, the most painful moment of my life, because I felt that they didn't give a damn about all I'd worked so hard for." (330). So
Virginia got no thanks from the blacks as well for fighting for desegregation.

Virginia in fact felt cast out from the communities of white Southerners, the white Northerners, the Blacks. She also fell outside the mould of the typical upper-class woman. The eloquent title of her autobiography points to the deliberate position she took.

Born in a well-off family with an old plantation and a long line of Confederate ancestors she possessed many of the conventional attributes for conventional success—beauty, intelligence, drive, energy. But since success would also have meant docilely entering a world in which inequality was woven into the social fabric, she chose to enact her commitments to justice by leading an unconventional life and stepping out of the magic circle of family and friends. For this she paid the price. There are rewards for acquiescing in injustice as well as costs for resisting.

In fact as one reads Outside the Magic Circle to its conclusion, one realises that for Virginia the line between the public and private has blurred. It is difficult to apply the usual demarcation between Public and Private selves that one uses for a conventional autobiography. Virginia has paid the price (willingly) in her private life for her public role as a Civil Rights activist. She says towards the end of her autobiography: "My children as they reached young
adulthood, would sometimes say that they wished I had stayed at home and baked brownies as other mothers did. But what good were brownies in a society that tolerated poverty and denied people the education to enable them to get out of poverty? What good were brownies in a society that denied people the right to vote?" (337)

Because Virginia is not as important in herself as what she stands for, the text too draws our attention away from her with elements like extended character sketches of people she encountered, the socio-economic Southern history, the journalistic accounts of crimes and trials. Formally, the consequence is a text which often seems to have more in common with a collage than with a self-portrait. To intervene in history, after all, is knowingly to situate one's own life within it.

Outside the Magic Circle is written with a position that we would identify as feminist. Virginia clarifies that there were no personal compulsions for her to turn into a feminist. It was the state she found the average woman in that compelled her to turn into one: "I had a good husband, so I don’t personally have passionate feelings about the way Southern girls were treated and the position I was in as a young girl. It was supposed to be bad for you to be smart and to go to college, because men liked dumb women." (126)
Virginia implies in her autobiography that her turning into a feminist was a natural fall-out of her work for the Civil Rights Movement, it was a natural progression. She regards all these issues as inter-related. She regards feminism as part of a broader network concerned with Civil Liberties: "One effort leads to another. I believe that the struggle of blacks against segregation led to the women's movement. The women who took part in that struggle for black emancipation began to realise that they weren't very well emancipated either." (331).

She also says: "I keep telling the women today, if you are just going to work for women's rights, you're not going to get anywhere. You have to work for the rights of other people too. The same is true for civil rights. As long as you work just for the rights of Negroes, you aren't going to get anywhere. You have to appeal to people on a broader basis than just sectarian rights of groups. As I see it, the discrimination against Negroes and women was all part of the exploitation of human beings by other human beings." (131)

Arlyn Diamond, talking of the women who participated in the American Civil Rights Movement says that they are "still not celebrated in the way that male leaders were and are, but their presence, the generosity and courage and tenacity of Ella Baker and Virginia Foster Durr and Fanny Lou Hamer and Mrs Amos and all the
other "movement mamas" gave birth to modern feminism, and their role in the human and civil rights struggle has yet to be written."

Virginia however, denies herself any position of privilege. In an act of self-effacement characteristic of women autobiographers who identified themselves completely with an ideology, she seeks to play down her own personal contribution: "I never even thought about what role I was playing. I was just trying to get the next thing done, whether it meant getting out a brief or getting the next meal on, just trying to get through the next thing that had to be done."(337)

Such a modest end to a remarkably eventful life story however does not blind the reader of Outside the Magic Circle to the fact that this is the autobiography of an exceptional woman who chose to tread the path less taken.
NOTES


2 Hollinger F. Barnard, "Editor's Note" to Virginia Foster Durr, Outside the Magic Circle (Tuskegee: University of Alabama Press, 1986) xvi. All quotations are taken from this edition. Page numbers are given in the body of the text.


5 Ibid. 218.

6 Ibid. 224.

7 Ibid. 230.