CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

"Yet if one's an outsider, be an outsider. Only don't for God's sake attitudinise..."

A Writer's Diary  Thursday,
Nov. 9, 1939.
CONCLUSION

It is rather difficult to evaluate and judge the achievement of Virginia Woolf with any finality when the authoritative critical response is divided. David Daiches called her only "the greatest woman novelist of her times".¹ But Phyllis Rose, in her recent literary biography anticipates, "she is well on the way to becoming major".² Erle Asurbach chose Mrs Woolf as a representative of "the realistic novel of the era between two great wars" for "what takes place here in Virginia Woolf's novel is precisely what was attempted everywhere in the works of this kind (although not everywhere with the same insight and mastery)… that is, to put the emphasis on the random occurrence, to exploit not in the service of a planned continuity of action but in itself". He gives the historical and sociological reason for this exploitation of the random moment: "It is precisely the random moment which is comparatively independent of the controversial unstable orders over which men fight and despair; it passes unaffected by them, as daily life. The more it is exploited, the more the elementary things which our lives have in common come to light".³


Marxist critics charge her with ignorance of people outside the aristocratic, bourgeois world. The charge is echoed by one of the denigrators of Virginia Woolf, William Troy, who says that she has written exclusively about one class of people "whose experience is largely vicarious". But the fervent devotee of Marxist ideology, Christopher Ceuldwell, commends her "as an alien faced with and criticizing a collapsing culture". He approves her quarrel with Arnold Bennett on character for she, like Dorothy Richardson and Katherine Mansfield, is an "alien to the emotional formulations of current art which she regards as slick and artificial (cp. Virginia Woolf's criticism of Bennett and Wells)".

The problem of 'novel as poem' has attracted the attention of a number of critics. E.M. Forster who appreciates her "singleness of purpose which will not recur in this country for many years..." calls her "a poet, who wants to write something as near to novel as possible". As such, "Belonging to the..."


world of poetry, but fascinated by another world, she is always stretching out from her enchanted tree and snatching bits from the flux of daily life as they float past, and out of these bits she builds novels. Consistent with this view William Troy finds, "the images that pass through her characters' minds are rarely seized from any particular background of concrete experience." But critics who studied the text closely like Ralph Freedman demonstrated ably how Virginia Woolf textured the thought processes with facts that obtain in the contemporary life. The novel, *The Waves*, which gives a patterned rendition of consciousness, is rooted in facts. One cannot deny the factual basis and the beauty that issues, say, in Louis's impression of the "bottle-green engine, without a neck, all black and thighs, breathing steam", moving "without an effort, of its own momentum like a avalanche by a gentle push."


The novel has gained, not lost, by this incursion of poetry. It serves higher ministrations as the social and spiritual reason of Mrs Woolf was to draw humanity to attend to the "private beauty"—"the beauty of the spring, summer, autumn, the beauty of flowers... beauty which brims... every barrow in Oxford street".  

Since Forster protested against her combining poetry and the novel, he opines that "she could seldom so portray a character that it was remembered afterwards on its own account". Mrs Woolf's endeavour had been to catch Mrs Brown and to make humanity as one against the illimitable universe. It is not appropriate to apply the traditional rationale of characterization to her novels. Despite her preoccupation with a synthesis she was acutely aware that an individual is history and prophecy. Hence she could not help giving character that lives, "remembered afterwards on its own account"—Clarissa, the sensitive society lady; the matter-of-fact, but mysterious Mrs Ramsay; her husband, the professor, who suffers under his professorial stance; the affable, communicative, receptive

9Virginia Woolf, Three Guineas (Penguin, PB) p. 128.
story teller Bernard; Louis, conscious of his humiliations with a kind of ruthless romanticism below his business efficiency; Neville who lives in concentrated inwardness; Jinny who lives for body and the sparkle of life; Susan who confines herself to country rhythm and motherhood; Rhode, the nymph of solitude; above all in Mrs Dalloway, the "agreeable sinner", Peter Walsh and Sally with her simplest egotism, the most open desire to be thought first always. These are not figures on the page.

Mrs Woolf offers some 'flat, two dimensional portraits' if they can be called so-- Sir John who had laid down the law and liked a well dressed woman; Hugh Whitbread, that "barber's block" with his "upholstered body", dim, and blind "past everything except self esteem and comfort" whom we hate but remember; the pathetic Mrs Dempster who gave "Roses, her figure, her feet too", having been the wife of a drunkard; the cheery, chatty Dr Holmes; the serious imposer of his will, William Bradshaw with his "rather worn" face-- are some of the portraits that should live as long as the acquisitive society would last.

Some critics point out certain other inadequacies
of the method. Herbert J Muller argues that Mrs Woolf "flits" about the subject, "throws a flashing light from many angles, darts in to capture bright bits of truth; but by the nature of the method, she never comes to grips with a situation. She does not confront steadily a deep emotion or really plunge into it."11 Same opinion was expressed by Forster: "She would not plunge."12 These were opinions before the publication of Quentin Bell's Biography which told the world how much of carbon dioxide she breathed and emitted only oxygen. Her bouts of madness gainsey the assertion that she never could come to grips with a situation, nor did she confront a deep emotion steadily. Forster himself paid a tribute to her civilized and sane approach to the subject of madness: "She pared the edges off this particular malady, she tied it down to being a malady, and robbed it of the evil magic it has acquired through timid or careless thinking; here is one of the gifts to thank her for."13


12 Modern British Fiction, p. 383.

13 Ibid., p. 380.
C.P. Snow observed that the method, "the essence of which was "to represent brute experience through the moments of sensations" resulted in the sacrifice of "reflection", "moral awareness" and "investigatory intelligence". He adds that "that was altogether too big a price to pay" and he declares that the experimental novel "died from starvation because its intake of human stuff was so low". To say that "reflection" and "investigatory intelligence" are sacrificed may be setting aside as false the impression she made on great intellectuals of the time like Stephen Spender who appreciates in Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Hemingway, "the sensibility which can enable one to think about what one is thinking, while one is thinking it". Regarding the sacrifice of moral awareness she would answer with Bernard: "Some people go to priest; others to poetry; I to my friends, I to my own heart, I to seek among phrases and fragments something unbroken... (p.89)". As Igar Webb summed up,


her novels could be called "an effort to dramatize the alienation from sensuous experience, and the cost in human happiness, that an infinitization of the ego brings about. ... For Virginia Woolf the ego is a blinder which excludes not the numinous reality of God but the sensuous reality in which her characters live".16

Regarding the low intake of human stuff one would ponder how would she have come to terms with life had she been given the freedom Tolstoy had been given? When one has something good, naturally one would hope for better and the best. But what she attempted was to give "a view of the infinite possibilities of the art" and life, and reminded us" that there is no limit to the horizon".17

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Against this critical background we put in the foreground our claims on the achievement of Virginia Woolf. It is often stated truth that imagination interpolates the space for its sense of continuity


17 'Modern Fiction', The Common Reader, First Series, p. 194.
while the stubborn fact resists it. Therefore, the realist in Virginia Woolf gives the ordinariness that is sane to the point of prosiness through the realistic plot. Then she pitches her tent in the minds of characters which would like to be alive making patterns out of little contacts they make with others or outside world of the inanimate. They call them experiences for affirmation which is a daily necessity and deception. To wit, look at Mrs Ramsay; "not as oneself did one rest for ever, in her experience (she accomplished here something dexterous with her needles)." The artist, Mrs Woolf, seeks in these 'daily miracles', the 'matches struck in the dark', a continuity that confirms the need to live, and stimulates the hope of immortality. In the wake of this exploration into human consciousness, with catgut reasoning that tethers itself to the granite rock of fact, she tests, which convention and which formulations of thought and of feeling sustain human spirit and which do not. As a consequence she reimagines the past, and shows that the traditional attitudes (to beauty, honour, family) are elaborations on little contacts with reality.

18 *To the Lighthouse* (Penguin, PB), p. 73.
She patterns and structures the novels so as to show "human beings not always in their relations to each other, but in their relations to reality, and the sky, too, and the trees or whatever may be in themselves". She endeavours to erase the inner lie which ego formulates for some inner need under a social creed, and highlights the spirit that is un-circumscribed which gropes alone and in communion with others and outside, towards a form to express and realise itself.

Prose fiction gains by her subject which is poetic for there is a vital compromise between realistic plot and expressionistic continuity. Her prose fiction issues from belief, a mystic belief, that "a river, ... flowed past, invisibly around the corner, down the street, and took people and eddied them along". The narrative consciousness that governs each novel, as such, goes in and out of characters and notes the things outside through them or impersonally and is like a sea. As it nets in

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19 *A Room of One's Own*, p. 171.

20 *A Room of One's Own*, p. 144.
experience with an elemental view of things and people, nothing comes to it amis. Everything is proper stuff of fiction.

Commenting on her style R.L. Chambers writes: "This sea of consciousness has no sea-wall or gryne or pier or break water, of wood or masonry into whose joints or crevices the critical finger cannot pry to test the construction. Indeed there appears to be no construction, only the natural fluidity, of the sea washing upon the beach".20

This sea of authorial consciousness passes into the hearts and minds of men and women until the characters themselves are drenched in it. For example;

Going and coming, beckoning, signalling, so the light and shadow, which now made the wall grey, now the bananas bright yellow, seemed to Septimus Warren Smith lying on the sofa in the sitting-room, watching the watery gold glow and fade with astonishing sensibility of some live creature on the roses, on the wall-paper. Outside the trees dragged their leaves like nets through the depths of the air; the sound of water was in the room, and through the

waves came voice of birds singing. Every
power poured its treasures on his head, and
his head lay there on the back of the sofa,
as he had seen his head lie when he was
bathing, floating, on the top of the waves,
while far away on shore he heard dogs barking...

This is Septimus's consciousness eager to merge with
the fluidity.

With this elemental view she is preoccupied
with the question of how far human beings are able to
get 'outside' themselves, liberate the self from the
acquisitive impulses and to what extent are their for-
mulations of thoughts and of feelings shaped by the
solitary and cooperative imagination and action. In
short, if the 'creator's talent and ambition' of an
individual is given a chance with a minimum need of con-
ventions, is her concern. In Jacob's Room six friends
determine to find truth in solitude and companionship,
in vain. The six friends are to wait until the milieu
and the moment coincide and history makes the bliss
of companionship possible. That happens in The Waves.
The hierarchical divisions, censored intercourse and
ideal relationships isolate the young men in Jacob's

21 Mrs Dalloway, (pp. 153-154).
Room. The young Jacob tries to rebel against everything that formalizes, deadens and kills, but unconsciously he carries in him the dead weight of hoary conventions. In *The Waves* men and women are given an opportunity to communicate, thanks to the gradual admission of women into society and socialism, as they are able to break the futile conventions, and come to realise how little 'the human apparatus' is to apprehend the universe. The artist realises that through the cooperation of his friends he is able to rouse himself from the divisive force of his social and artistic modes and to look forward to a millennium of harmony and peace through new ways of existence and comprehension. The old chronicle technique with a difference is used in both *Jacob's Room* and *The Waves*. The former chronicles one man's life; the latter, a generation, as represented by six characters. The mode of chronicle itself undergoes a change. It becomes the chronicle of the 'moments of being' of the spirit on its onward march.

*Mrs Dalloway* demonstrates in all its ramifications the inner core of possession which leaves the well-meaning lady and the ideally roused budding poet hopeless.
The nightmare of history drives the latter to helpless suicide. Since human spirit works according to a rhythm, these unfortunate souls are found whirling in the pool of dated conventional rhythms suffering the agony of jealousy and alienation. The pattern of the book exhibits a 'cheerless-go-round' from which the characters try to escape, working up an extraordinary excitement. To the Lighthouse dramatises the what and wherefore of male aggression and female submission, its unfortunate consequences to the spirit. In all the four novels the writer's sympathy is for children and the young, and her anger is directed against the elders who cannot will to destroy the traditional mores though they realise them to be obsolete.

The trend in Woolf criticism now, as Ralph Freedman points out, is that Mrs Woolf's role as "a highly accomplished writer of poetic prose" is taken for granted and the critics are focussing upon her "socio-political stance which they find equally innovative". He maintains she has been a "symbol for much more far-reaching revision of contemporary society as a whole". 22

This is a point of view which is very close to the concerns of the foregoing argument relating to 'Outsiderism' sketched by Mrs Woolf in her *Three Guineas*. We have to grant that Mrs Woolf was far ahead of time in her 'ideas'. It is but appropriate that this side of her achievement should become a matter for increasing critical interest. The revival of Virginia Woolf would be incomplete without a proper appreciation, among other things, of her 'ideas'.