THE NOVEL AS AESTHETIC CATEGORY

Appreciation of Virginia Woolf's achievement, both as a theoretician and practitioner of the novel, is enhanced all the more by recognising that her ideas are compatible with those of the greatest twentieth century theoreticians of the genre on the Continent, for example, Jose Ortega Y Gasset, Victor Shklovsky, Roland Barthes and Alain Robbe-Grillet, whose aesthetic thrust is totally anti-mimetic and drives them to plead for an autonomous status for the novel. Even Georg Lukacs considers, on different grounds of course, that fiction can never imitate. Since the novel form has sprung from the epic, there is bound to be some sort of rupture between the values which the hero (whom he calls "problematic") seeks in the world and which the world offers him.¹

In his famous studies, Meditations on Quixote and The Dehumanization of Art and Notes on the Novel, Ortega provides sufficient counter-weight to mimetic theory and holds that art must create its own inner world, quite different and distant from the world of actuality. He also believes that it is only form which gives life and vitality to any art. Shklovsky, the chief among the Russian Formalists of the second and the third decades of this century, ignores political, economic and social causes and their effects on literature and literary theories. Shklovsky's insistence on technique as the sole revelatory of meaning, as expounded in his brilliant essay, "Art as Technique", identifies him
not only with the New Critics but also Ortega. Barthes, who belongs to the school of French Structuralism, places all his critical weight on language as an adequate instrument to effect impersonality in the novel. He argues that it is language that speaks and not the author. He, therefore, naturally, reaches the conclusion that "life can only imitate the book, and the book itself is only a tissue of signs, a lost, infinitely remote imitation." The Russian Formalists and the French Structuralists are one in their opposition to the mimetic and moral interests finding accommodation in a work of art. Robbe-Grillet, whatever his view of 'reality', asserts that since art is invention, there stands no "model" for it to imitate. Art, every time, creates a new world and is, therefore, totally oblivious of any "truth that exists before it."

The aforesaid theoretical formulations, and the Post-Impressionist principle that art could never approximate to the organic, which guided the composition of Virginia Woolf's novels, are valid criteria for judging her stature as a theoretician of the novel. Susanne Langer has confirmed Roger Fry's contention that Post-Impressionist principles are not restricted to painting. Although they necessarily be applied to different ways in the various modes of art, they are valid for all arts. As we study Virginia Woolf's application of them, we are reminded of her contention that novels should be judged as works of art, not as philosophy, sociology or botany.

Many of the values of the nineteen twenties were repudiated in the thirties, and as Quentin Bell observes,
Bloomsbury's ideas too were tragically and radically overtaken by history. The novelists who became famous in this period - Compton Mackenzie, Aldous Huxley, J.B. Priestley, Hugh Walpole, Rose Macaulay, etc. - did not seem to be "carrying forward the revolution which, in 1924, (Virginia Woolf) had believed to be imminent." A reaction, especially right-wing, had set in against her. But we have already noted that she would be the last writer to carry war, politics or trade unionism into the novel. She would never use her medium for conveying ideas and attitudes which are partisan or periodic. She saw something intractable and chaotic in life, and throughout her literary career contrived to wage a self-conscious struggle to have mastery over it. A detached contemplation and a rigidity of form consequently are the principles of her life and art.

Since Arnold Bennett (already quoted) wrote that Virginia Woolf was a failure because her characters were not realistically drawn, critical opinion about her novels has greatly varied. F.R. Leavis, William Troy, M.C. Bradbrook, J.W. Beach, D.J. Enright, D.S. Savage, Marjorie Brace, Sean O'Faolain have toed the Bennett line, and with the exception of O'Faolain, in their fault-finding, have merely repeated each other. Critics like David Daiches, R.L. Chambers, Bernard Blackstone, J.K. Johnstone, Erich Auerbach, Josephine O'Brien Schaefer, Jean Guiguet, Ralph Freedman, A.D. Moody and Allen McLaurin, to select a few, have found plentiful sane and sound things in Virginia Woolf. Their study of themes, structure, patterns, imagery, symbolism, lyricism, and
rhythm has enabled us to see a certain durable aesthetic edifice emerging from her critical and creative work.

Sean O'Faolain makes a more serious adverse criticism by questioning whether any literature can be in health and vigour without some form of faith, which he defines as "any feeling for life or any way of seeing life which is coherent, persistent, inclusive and forceful enough to give organic form to the totality of a writer's work." He adds that "form and meaning... or form and faith... are very close to one another", and that "form is a descent of the Holy Ghost on the soul ready to receive it. It is an epiphany, a manifestation, a showing-forth, a tongue of fire, after which the apostle can speak 'in diverse tongues the wonderful works of God.'" He feels that Virginia Woolf was unable to deduce 'an insight, a group of ideas' from her experience of life.... She never constructed her faith. She never achieved form.

O'Faolain is criticising Virginia Woolf because she has not had a theistic perspective which would enable her to write with a high-flown passion. But, as we have seen in the preceding chapters, a firmly-held faith of her own she certainly had. It was a matter of principle with her that the author's beliefs should not obtrude in a piece of literature. She wanted to keep her faith below the surface in her work so that a reader could only infer it. Her faith, in fact, runs as an undercurrent and not as a surge. She religiously believed that "philosophy" must be "consumed in a novel."
Joan Bennett deduces ample evidence from the novels of Virginia Woolf to show that she valued integrity, compassion, courage, disinterestedness, individual freedom, mutual forbearance and respect. In addition to these qualities, we see in her novels a tension between certain polarities, both of which are held to action and contemplation: love of life and perception of life's horror; awareness of life's magnificence and of its ugliness and chaos. To illustrate, if Clarissa Dalloway loves life, Septimus Warren Smith fears it, if Percival is action, Neville is contemplation. Virginia Woolf's faith, or philosophical position, if one wishes to term it as such, was that of humanism, which she considers an adequate foundation for the writing of good novels, and for that matter, for all the branches of literature. But whether it wins universal consent and support is another matter. Among the problems, which Virginia Woolf faced, was not the lack of faith, but the difficulty that moral universalities and fixed standards no longer held sway. Her work shows without ambiguity that she was sensitively aware of this problem, and a part of her experimentation was only a search for a solution to it. To criticise her, therefore, for wanting things about the value of which she was not at all sure is unjust.

The most significant novelists of the time were James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, Aldous Huxley and Virginia Woolf; and there is no denying the fact that all the four suffer from a limitation in their range of experience. Joyce concerned himself only with the cultural negatives of the age. Huxley saw human behaviour as mainly conditioned by the body, and
Lawrence saw sexual fulfilment as the purpose and consummation of life, with the result that both of them dealt inadequately with other important aspects of life including what R.L. Chambers calls the noble qualities of "courage, justice, disinterested affection, unselfishness and even self-sacrifice." Virginia Woolf is not limited ideologically, but there is certainly a narrowness of range in her, which she herself would have been the first to accept. Her stress always falls on the less tangible of the human issues, for instance, the tension between the world and the individual spirit. Her comment on Jane Austen regarding her limitations has the overtones of allusion to herself:

She knew exactly what her powers were, and what material they were fitted to deal with as material should be dealt with by a writer whose standard of finality was high. There were impressions that lay outside her province; emotions that by no stretch or artifice could be properly coated and covered by her own resources.

But only the very greatest writers have a large range, and to portray it requires a large canvas, like the tragedies of Shakespeare or the novels of Dickens. Shakespeare's and Dickens's large literary structures have as their basis the accepted beliefs of their times which Virginia Woolf lacks.

In spite of her limitations, Virginia Woolf is among the greatest writers of the twentieth century who have made substantial contribution to the structure and the subject matter of the novel. The charge of highbrow or ivory-tower aesthete levelled against her is as trite as it is unjust. Her aesthetic credo draws a dividing line between life and art and she believes that detachment from the immediate and daily occurrences of life is necessary for the health and
longevity of art. Wilhelm Worringer emphasises that "the impulse to imitation, this elemental need of man, stands outside aesthetics proper and that, in principle, its gratification has nothing to do with art." We have already dwelt on the aesthetic reorientation that the age of Virginia Woolf underwent and the way her work became its product. What is now required is a readjustment of our critical standards towards both. Moreover, Virginia Woolf is not the only novelist who is said to be limited. Critics have found even Dickens and Henry James seriously limited in the range of their experience. What is important is, whether a writer possesses a profound understanding of the life around him? Virginia Woolf does it in abundant measure; and not only that, she is fully able to extrapolate that understanding in a remarkable way in her work. She may not be in the great tradition of the English novelists and the scope of her novels may not be mighty enough to put her in a class with Dickens or James, yet her work certainly constitutes a major artistic achievement.

The statistics released by Leonard Woolf regarding the sale of Virginia Woolf's books after her death reveal that her popularity as a novelist is on the increase. But the increase or decrease in the sale of her books can never measure the value of Virginia Woolf's contribution to the novel. Emphasis on the universality of art and on universally valid artistic principles will not only enhance esteem for her novels and place the evaluation of them on a sound base, but should also assist in judging the relative
merits of her work. This becomes evident if we compare her with H.G.Wells, Arnold Bennett and John Galsworthy on the one hand, and James Joyce, D.H.Lawrence and Aldous Huxley on the other.

Wells's novels were the bestsellers in England. But these eighty odd books are little read nowadays, because there is in them too little of artistic value. They were tracts for the times, not works of art. For Wells, art is a kind of side activity. By contrast, Virginia Woolf took infinite pains with her art, and chose themes of lasting human interest, rather than sociological topics of ephemeral, current interest. "The art of a people", writes T.E.Hulme, "... will run parallel to its philosophy and general world outlook."13 The sense of tragedy that marks every page of Virginia Woolf's novels and the feeling of fright that is found in her characters speak not only of the changes that were occurring in the aesthetic climate of the age but also comment sufficiently on the human condition as a whole.

Wells felt that the disharmony between man and his world could be, and had been, to a greater degree, destroyed by certain favourable conditions created by increased knowledge. His attitude to the world is governed by a kind of optimistic rationalism. Virginia Woolf felt that the gap between man and nature was unbridgable and the mystery existing between the two unfathomable. All things were at best relative and there was, therefore, no cause for a writer to worship man as a hero and to consider his acts as exploits. Nor was art meant to accommodate such mundane
interests. Her characters betray a fear as if space would devour them. Consequently, pessimism seems to enwrap them. Their pessimism, of course, does not lead them to reject but become somewhat indifferent, reserve and shy towards the objects which surround them. The sense of loss of their intimate relationship with the world does give them a certain rigidity, but they remain seeing and feeling human beings. For Wells, the novel was never any privileged medium of literary art to try out abstract forms of narration or presentation. Having exercised his mind over the defective ways of living, Wells by the force of his reformist logic, had to think of possible ways of reconstruction which he projected in novels like The New Machiavelli, and The World of William Clissold.

If the novel with a social purpose reached its peak in Wells, the French novel of data, graph and table found its chief and best spokesman in Bennett. We see him preoccupied with stating the reality, the reality that he chose, of life in the Five Towns towards the close of the nineteenth century. About this time, we also detect Galsworthy huddled in a corner picturing the life inside a philistine family group. Neither Bennett nor Galsworthy drew on the wealth of their inner experience which Joyce and Virginia Woolf were to do heavily later on.

The first World War broke homes and hearts and also changed the course of history. It changed the whole English social landscape leaving deep scars here and wide chasms there; and when it ended, the expanse of period before it
looked too different and strange to seem a part of the same tradition. People and their beliefs and their inheritance of time-tested culture and customs, and institutions as repositories of wisdom and light, suddenly became as much suspect as laughable. The War, Walter Allen writes, "affected everything and everybody. Nothing was as it was before." But Bennett and Galsworthy continued to write as if nothing had happened; as if nobody had changed. Bennett's *Riceyman Steps* and Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga* have been written in total ignorance of the upheaval which had overtaken the English soil and sensibility. Bennett still hung the faded French flower in his lapel and Galsworthy held the dying English trunk in his hands.

The old world was already tottering on its rickety legs when Virginia Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out*, appeared (1915). The collapse came soon after. This novel questions accepted ideas of 'reality' and calls for a fresh look at people. Lytton Strachey, criticising it, wrote to Virginia Woolf:

> My one criticism is about the conception of it as a whole - which I am doubtful about. As I read I felt that it perhaps lacked the cohesion of a dominating idea - I don't mean in the spirit - but in the action... There seemed such an enormous quantity of things in it that I couldn't help wanting still more. At the end I felt as if it was really only the beginning of an enormous novel, which had been - almost accidently - cut short by the death of Rachel.15

Virginia Woolf replied back:

> What I wanted to do was to give the feeling of a vast tumult of life, as various and disorderly as possible, which should be cut short for a moment by the death, and go on again - and the whole was to have a sort of pattern, and be somehow controlled.16

Virginia Woolf is not content to map the social scene along
well-defined lines, for she does not find life as a solid and unchanging organism. The world of our experience, she believes, is irrational, and one of the functions of art is that of discovering order, law, and necessity from it.

Wells, Bennett and Galsworthy lack a shimmering keenness and a probing curiosity about life. They are not able to have and describe what Elizabeth Drew calls "the vast unspoken experience that goes on in us, both simultaneously with our outer life, and in solitude." Moreover, since their eye is on the immediate, their men and women work, succeed and fail independently of certain absolute values. But art cannot flourish on the philosophy of clothing and textiles or foods and nutrition. "The nature of material is never without a certain influence", writes Hulme. "If they had not been able to use granite, the Egyptians would probably not have carved in the way they did." The raw material, however, does not seem to have any influence on the Edwardian trio. People's aesthetics, politics and economics - their very natures and needs - had undergone a transformation, yet Wells, Bennett and Galsworthy wrote without any regard to this transformation. The medium and the material of their novels do not stand up to the new sensibility nor are they the source of any aesthetic pleasure, being much too dated.

Quentin Bell mentions a very interesting conversation of his with Virginia Woolf which gives an indication of the extent and manner in which she has transmuted the issues of her age into art:
Virginia... ask(ed) me why, in my opinion, things had gone so very wrong with the world during the past few years. I replied with what I suppose was the stock answer of any young socialist: the world economic crisis... was the prime cause; it had bred unemployment, revolution, counter-revolution, economic and political nationalism, hence Communism, Fascism and war... She was frankly amazed, neither agreed nor disagreed, but thought it a very strange explanation. To her, I think, it appeared that the horrible side of the universe, the forces of madness... had got the upper hand again. This to her was something largely independent of the political mechanics of the world. The true answer to all this horror and violence lay in an improvement of one's own moral state; somehow one had to banish anger and the unreason that is bred of anger.19

Virginia Woolf makes the actual symbolic so that it can speak for future as well. She considers that like poetry, painting and music, the novel must enjoy an identity and autonomy of its own, and just as in them the form signifies the content, so should it do in the novel. A.C. Bradley writes: "Just as there is in music not sound on one side and a meaning on the other, but expressive sound, and if you ask what is the meaning you can only answer by pointing to the sounds; just as in painting there is not a meaning plus paint, but a meaning in paint, or significant paint... so in a poem the true content and the true form neither exist nor can be imagined apart."20 Now this inseparability of form and content is possible only because the poet, the painter and the musician (and a novelist like Virginia Woolf) can change their empirical experiences into abstract forms.

In a letter to Hugh Walpole, Virginia Woolf complained: "Lord - how tired I am of being caged with Aldous, Joyce and Lawrence!"21 All the four were rebels of the twentieth century English novel but having almost nothing in common
with each other. The age of rebellion had started with Henry James, Joseph Conrad and Marcel Proust who had challenged the conventional moral pattern of the nineteenth century and the old traditional form of the novel, but Joyce, Lawrence, Huxley and Virginia Woolf, who entered the lists later, were more fanatical and fierce, though in their own ways.

It looks very much an arranged incident that Ezra Pound should have supervised the writing of Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Joyce's *Ulysses* and that both the works should have been published in the year 1922. Comparing the two, it is evident that what Eliot did through poetry, Joyce did through prose. Heavily documented and written in the Naturalist tradition of Flaubert, *Ulysses* is a summa of Dublin life of a single day in June, 1904, but reflects a tragic awareness of the total chaos and loss of order in life itself. Stephen Dadalus, a sensitive young man, is caught in a cultureless and commercial world, and his sojourn in the capital city is a search for order, purpose and belief.

After this has been said and accepted, we do feel exasperated by Joyce's histrionics and egotism exhibited at full length in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. Virginia Woolf's rating of him, first high and then low, may be eccentric and less reliable, but great literature surely cannot be founded on mere brothel excreta, bar-room jokes, pun and parody. The flush of curiosity over, Joyce ceases to be the novelist of common readers, and is hurriedly passed on to research scholars. Joyce is greater and more
varied than Virginia Woolf in the use of stream of consciousness technique, but his production is much less than hers in weight and variety; and whatever his intent, he remains essentially a novelist of drift. In his attempt to fertilise the novel with other art forms, he overfertilised it and left it dead. This always is the outcome when a writer's work springs simply out of contention and mockery of the live issues of his age. If Ulysses is local, Finnegans Wake is loquacious. Milton and Yeats also lived and wrote in periods of cultural strain, but Paradise Lost and The Second Coming do not sing of drift and do not take recourse to parody.

D.H. Lawrence was a novelist of great originality and force. He believed that modern English society was hurrying to disaster because it had been alienated from the primary sources of life. Man could be saved, he thought, if he let himself be guided by instinct rather than intellect. His writing has a piercing urgency and his characters, though repressed, possess virility - qualities difficult to find in combination in any novelist of his time. But his anti-intellectualism was merely a pose, for we witness in his novels a clash of cultures (Sons and Lovers) and the process of integration and disintegration at work (The Rainbow) which can only be explained in terms of reason and logic. He was an intellectual voluntarily given away to primitivism.

But it is not for these postures that we berate Lawrence. He was too impatient a writer to have objective
interest in character and situation, and the very force of his genius made him so uneven that he missed the idea of form in the novel. He raised the slogan, "Novel for My Sake", but mercifully no one heeded it. Lawrence shirks analysis of motive and conduct and avoids encounter with the blind forces of the inner world except sex; and if he had not been at such great freedom to treat this subject in his novels, he would have been mistaken for a late Victorian or an early Edwardian. *Sons and Lovers* is a traditional realistic, autobiographical novel and *The Rainbow*, saturated in the actual, is a family chronicle. Even if his poor education and ill-health have nothing to do with the lack of form in his novels, his strange beliefs, and reliance on his cult of blood certainly are responsible for the placement of undigested material in them. His angry rejoinder to Bennett who criticised him for the absence of shape in his work is a proof of his disregard for the game of art. He lacked artistic conscience in that he sacrificed aesthetic claims for his mission as a prophet. Moreover, his characters are incapable of self judgement. Anthony Burgess comments:

Lawrence was reacting against liberalism, science, materialism, against a civilization that was turning bad, mechanical and repressive, and he sought a new faith in the natural instincts of men and women. It is this passionate affirmation of the life of the body and the emotions that gives distinction to work which is stylistically often slipshod, formless, repetitive. Lawrence accepts life not with his brain but with his loins and bowels, and he rejects the squalid emasculation of 'civilized' existence with a hatred so thorough-going as to seem morbid.

With greater intelligence, ideas and discipline, Aldous Huxley presents a sharp contrast with his colleagues.
he is most ascetic and satirical. The world of his novels is nightmarish and disgusting; and if his characters cannot escape from it, it is because they have been tied to stakes. The body for him is of no great importance and can be caged and conditioned and bent and broken in any way one likes it.

Virginia Woolf recorded in her Diary: "I have a horror of the Aldous novel: that must be avoided.... ideas are sticky things: won't coalesce: hold up the creative, subconscious faculty." In fact, Huxley is not a novelist in the sense Virginia Woolf or Lawrence is. He is not concerned with story, plot, characterisation or any thematic patterning of his books. He is a writer of long and short essays for which he has plenty of ideas supplied by excessive research and application of sciences. If his prophecy in the Brave New World has come true, it does not make the world he creates less harsh and fearful. It still remains inhabitable; and if one is not able to destroy it, one does turn one's back on it. Perhaps this is what Huxley himself desired.

For the force and clarity with which he propounds his ideas, Huxley is unmistakably near to H.G.Wells. Huxley lived, for sometime, on the periphery of Bloomsbury and enjoyed the friendship of many of its members; and under their influence, made some experiments in his fiction, especially in Point Counter Point. But, as J.B.Priestley remarks, "the distinction of his mind and the quality of his writing cannot conceal the fact that his novels are made, not really created, and the further fact that he is concerned with ideas and not with persons."
One more novelist - E.M. Forster - must be added to our discussion to complete the contemporary scene. Forster was established as a novelist much before Virginia Woolf had brought out anything. He was a writer who stood very close to Virginia Woolf in temperament but distant from her in technique. Though Kew Gardens and The Mark on the Wall had received his overwhelming praise and To the Lighthouse remained his favourite to the end, he felt totally out of sympathy with Virginia Woolf's experiments. Her handling of time and psychological probings were out of his comprehension and appreciation. On her part, Virginia Woolf found Forster handicapped in his approach to the novel by a sort of ambivalence, and felt that he had strayed from his real position. It might be proper to say about him that intellectually and morally he was a Bloomsburian, but aesthetically a Victorian. In her article, "Novels of E.M. Forster", Virginia Woolf wrote:

Mr. Forster is a novelist, that is to say, who sees his people in close contact with their surroundings. And therefore the colour and constitution of the year 1905 affect him far more than any year in the calendar could affect the romantic Meredith or the poetic Hardy. But we discover as we turn the page that observation is not an end in itself; it is rather the goad, the gadfly driving Mr. Forster to provide a refuge from this misery, an escape from this meanness. Hence we arrive at that balance of forces which plays so large a part in the structure of Mr. Forster's novels. 25

She also questioned Forster's attitude when he had been unfair to Henry James in his critical work, Aspects of the Novel, and had arbitrarily dismissed the claims of art as opposed to those of what he called "life". Compared with Virginia Woolf, Forster is a minor novelist. His imagination is not as varied and his invention is not as rich as hers. The world he draws and the men and women who live in it
are wrapped in melodrama and seem artificial; and we smell some inadequacy in them.

After Virginia Woolf, fiction takes on an entirely different aspect, for she converts all the material and moral values into aesthetic attitudes. Indeed, every writer draws from life what he believes to be authentic and what he thinks he can mould into shape to express his beliefs. Reflected in Virginia Woolf's experience, life was change, process and becoming. But art provided a platform of stability on which life could repose free from fear of these transient states. Virginia Woolf made real efforts to give the English Novel an artistically viable form. Her spontaneity may be studied, her lyricism may be sentimental, her universe may be walled, but everything has a pattern. Life is renewed through art. So the world must lose its familiar identity. In her novels, we enter a fantastic world, but a world secured by human spirit and aesthetic urges. Her lasting contribution lies in that she released the novel from its subsidiary functions of entertainment and education and conferred on it the full status of an aesthetic category.

Many novelists, such as, Rosamond Lehmann, Elizabeth Bowen and Lawrence Durrell are directly in the Virginia Woolf line. Joyce Cary's *Prisoner of Grace* and *Except the Lord* are predominantly concerned with individual human relationships. Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* is anti-heroic. L.P.Hartley's *The Go-Between* shows extreme concern for
form. These are some of the features dear to Virginia Woolf. The novels of William Golding, Graham Greene, Angus Wilson and Iris Murdoch make full use of symbolism and try to see what lies beyond immediate character and situation; and if Samuel Beckett may be said to have received no inspiration from Virginia Woolf, he has certainly travelled to the shrines of Proust and Joyce. But even if there were none to pay allegiance to Virginia Woolf it would hardly be of any significance. Her work forms a very important part of the English novel and the value of her aesthetic escalations lies in the fact that the novel will never be what it was before her. Generations of novelists have assimilated her influence in the manner that they consider it not their belaboured acquisition, but their original gift.

Virginia Woolf alone among her powerful contemporaries tried consistently, and succeeded triumphantly, to give the novel an autonomous structure matching that of the more respectable arts of painting and music. Hers was an aesthetic theory; and an aesthetic theory never becomes dated: it survives as a permanent modification of the aesthetic consciousness of the succeeding ages. When the Post-Romantic age saw a swing back to Classicism, it was merely a mechanical movement of the pendulum. History repeats itself, but always at a different level.

REFERENCES


16. The Question of Things Happening, p. 82.

23. *Diary*, p.239.