

Glimpses into the Lives of the Obscure

—A Study of Virginia Woolf's Critical Essays—

By

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Received, May 30, 1967

The six volumes of critical essays left us by Virginia Woolf illustrate the logical powers of this author which have been found to be at work in her novels. She is not a systematic critic, however, preoccupied by the nature and structure of works of art, and the tone of her appraisal of the works of the great writers of the past is more or less impressionistic. This and the conversational tone which is felt throughout gives rise to the illusion that such an activity may be within the powers of a common reader inexperienced in the rules about literature. Yet as we follow her discussions we come to realize that her judgments, her impressions are far from platitudes, that she is always original in her ideas and has shown to us in each of her critical essays, a fresh angle, a new vantage point from which to view or approach the writer or work in question. We are made to feel as if we were given access to a short cut in our approach to these works of art which may prove to be useful in our future experience with other works and writers. Her views which come straight from her heart and mind and have been formed through her own experiences as an artist make the tone of her voice sound true and full of meaning. Even if these sketches, done in a few and light strokes of the brush, do not give a complete picture of the subject dealt with, we feel that the essential thing about it is always conveyed to us.

The subjects for her discussion do not seem to have been selected on any definite lines or principles. Their number moreover is small, but this does not mean that her scope is limited. In fact, we are at times under the illusion that we have here everything under the sun so far as literature is concerned when we consider the variety of the subjects included. As we learn of her sympathetic appraisal of authors like Defoe who appear to us almost alien to her in temperament and method, the way she points out the one essential thing about the works so large in breadth and depth as those of the great Russian writers, and her grasp of the significance that the Greek classics have for us of the modern age, we come to feel all the more that her interest is a wide one, and her taste, as has been pointed out by critics, a catholic one. This 'catholicity of taste'¹⁾ is felt still more strongly when we come across in her collections titles bearing names which are quite unfamiliar to us who live outside England, some of which, we imagine, are quite as unfamiliar to the present-day Englishman. Considering the number of pages devoted to the lives and writings of these obscure people, we feel that her

1) *Virginia Woolf*, David Daiches, Norfolk, 1942, p. 139.

interest in them is such as has been shown by no other writer of her age or of the past. Virginia Woolf herself has given the title "The Lives of the Obscure" to only two of these essays, but there are many others which can be considered to be her other comments on the lives of the obscure.

As she has pointed out, the histories of the great "resound with drums and trumpets", and "their broadsheets reverberate with meditations upon death and reflections upon the immortality of the soul. Our best chance of finding them off their guard and so becoming at ease with them is to seek out those unambitious men who haunt the outskirts of famous gatherings, listening, observing, sometimes, taking a note in a book."¹⁾ This is what she does in her essays on the obscure; she seeks out people who haunt the outskirts of the famous, some who trod in the immediate shadows of the great and others who were removed from them in varying degrees. These are the writers whose works are to be found in the obscure corners of the British Museum, or in printed volumes retrieved "from the shelves of country gentlemen inheriting more books than their wives like to dust,"²⁾ and are of interest now only to the curious readers who have the assiduity to inquire into the dim sideways of literature. They include the poets, novelists, and essayists who lurk in the background to the brilliant stage on which the great cut figures, and due to the nature of their achievement cannot claim everlasting fame or glory. They include also the obscure figures of the past who, with no intention of being read by posterity, have left behind letters, memoirs, diaries, which are of importance, Mrs. Woolf seems to tell us, when considered in the light of the role they play in the history of literature and of the people. When, in her study of the letters left by the Pastons in *The Pastons and Chaucer* which record the innumerable and insignificant trivialities of daily life, Mrs. Woolf sees "why Chaucer wrote not *Lear* or *Romeo and Juliet*, but the *Canterbury Tales*,"³⁾ why in the most ordinary words and simplest feelings he wrote about the ordinary people doing ordinary things, we are made to feel the importance of the part played by these writers in contributing to the literary climate of those days. Also when, in commenting on the letters of Dorothy Osborne who lived in a bare season of English literature, she says that they break the silence and reveal the depths of the mind "without effort or emphasis,"⁴⁾ and admires the powers of observation and wit which were later to take shape in *Pride and Prejudice*, we are made to feel that these are the ones who have bridged the gaps in the history of literature and have carried on in their hidden and unconscious ways its tradition.

These people are not all obscure in the strict sense of the word for they include people like Beau Brummell who, with his dandyism, cut a conspicuous figure in his time and whose name was pronounced by Byron "with a mingled emotion of respect and jealousy,"⁵⁾ or Mary Wollstonecraft, the author of the eloquent and daring books on the rights of woman whose relation-

1) *The Common Reader*, Second Series, London, 1948, p. 10.

2) *The Common Reader*, First Series, London, 1951, p. 146.

3) *ibid.*, p. 37.

4) *The Common Reader*, Second Series, p. 62.

5) *ibid.*, p. 156.

ship with Godwin was a celebrated fact, or Dorothy Wordsworth whose life, "a trinity"¹⁾ with Nature and her celebrated brother, is well known to the students of literature. For the most part, however, these people are obscure to the world at large, and have been found off their guard, through their diaries, letters, memoirs, or even notes that they have left in the margin of the books that they read. With such humble material at hand, Mrs. Woolf has succeeded, as she has done with the greater figures and their writings, in imparting to us the sense that pleasure and benefit can be derived through our acquaintance with them too if viewed in the proper perspective.

As in her criticism of the great writers of the past, Virginia Woolf does not assess each of these writings in the light of some general principles. She illustrates briefly and suggestively the strength or weakness of a work, the attractions, the oddities, or the sufferings of a personality as revealed through these writings, or the mood of the age that yielded such figures. Some of the sketches are purely biographical, and appear as if they were fast-moving short stories woven out of her imagination. The reader then loses sight of the writings that must have supplied the details and formed the basis for the sketches. She moves freely from historical criticism to aesthetic criticism, and the reader is at first at a loss what to make of the purpose of the sketches of such obscure writers. As the reader passes, however, from one sketch to another, out of what at first sight seemed a heterogeneous collection of impressions and insights, there gradually seem to emerge, if not a definite standard for judgment, evidences of a certain direction in the interest of our author. We become aware of some aspects of life and of human nature that she seems to be fascinated in. We become aware of them, not only because we have already seen them given full treatment in her novels, but also because she sees them in varying degrees in the writings of these people, and often refers to them directly or indirectly. Having thus found our bearing in the sea of her insights and impressions, we feel more at ease in these surroundings, and then come to anticipate the enjoyment of another of such reading.

Foremost among these points of interest for our author seems to be the complex nature of the individual human beings as she finds revealed through these writings. As a writer whose attention can never for long be distracted from the intricate workings of the mind, Virginia Woolf is always on the lookout for signs in the writings of the past that indicate the presence of a human being like ourselves, a being that could be decent and even dignified, but also that "quarrelled and was tiresome and ridiculous and struggled and failed and had a face like ours - a changing, a variable, a human face."²⁾ These signs she finds in abundance in the letters and memoirs left by men and women, who, whatever their station in life, had each their ups and downs of life, or in the correspondence between interesting people like Mrs. Carlyle and Geraldine Jewsbury, interesting for the nature of friendship that could exist between two such contradictory personalities, or in bits of writings left by people quite out of the ordinary,

1) *The Common Reader*, Second Series, p. 169.

2) *ibid.*, p. 23.

like the midget of high birth, Laetitia Pilkington who, due to unfortunate circumstances and to her own failings, gradually descended in the social scale. The enjoyment that can be had in reading Virginia Woolf's account of these people is such as can be experienced by reading a story, not the psychological novel, but the old-fashioned story done in bold outlines with breath-taking movement. It is not, however, only the fast moving drama of these lives that absorbs us; it is at the same time the author's ability to make us see the complexity of human nature that is reflected in the conduct of these people and their writings.

This awareness occasionally makes itself felt more strongly than elsewhere when she points out clearly, as in her account of Gabriel Harvey of *The Strange Elizabethans*, the two sides of a face that a man involuntarily shows to the world. This man who lived in an age when prose was almost incapable of making people talk simply and naturally about ordinary things enlightens us, unconsciously, on some of these small facts of life, and shows us what, behind the poet, scholar, and statesman he aspired to be, he at the same time was, a man in flesh and blood. The bulk of this man's writings, Mrs. Woolf informs us, like his letters to his friend Spenser upon poetry, is made up of amplifications and repetitions, which "are for the benefit of the slow and sensual ear which loves to dally over sense and luxuriate in sound."¹⁾ It is, however, not for the benefit of the modern man who requires speed and directness of speech in order to arrive at the meaning. Harvey's eloquence, "windy, wordy, voluminous, and obsolete"²⁾ leads us nowhere, she points out, and we cannot hope to "come to grips with these Elizabethans." These amplifications and repetitions are what characterize Harvey, the man who seemed as capable of greatness as any of his friends; these are the features of the face he showed to the world. Virginia Woolf, happily, discovers that Harvey has left behind other writings which show the expression on the face to change as "it changes so seldom upon the face of the Elizabethan."³⁾ That is, the notes which he was in the habit of making in the margins of his books as he read expose "another Harvey behind the superficial Harvey, shading with doubt and despondency"⁴⁾ the man who failed to be a statesman, a poet, or scholar, in fact, in everything that he undertook. This latter self, this shady side of the face of a complex character is what our author is most interested in. It is this private self that she has made it her special task to bring into relief, although in a much more intensive way, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and her other novels, that she has found it a pleasure to point out in the writings of the greater figures of the past.

Another example of this interest of hers, although not so striking, is found in her commentary on James Woodforde, the parson who was nothing in particular and found, Mrs. Woolf conjectures, relief in conversing with the other self that lived in his diaries, to the extent that the essential part of him would have died had he been forbidden to keep them. He does not unburden his soul in his diary, but there are in it little indiscretions and criticisms which could

1) *The Common Reader*, Second Series, p. 20.

2) *ibid.*, p. 7.

3) *ibid.*, p. 20.

4) *ibid.*, p. 20.

have got him into trouble and hurt the feelings of his friends had they read them. It is these indiscretions and criticisms which occupy only a small part of the sixty-eight volumes, that make them absorbing to our author and significant when viewed in the light of the present day. By pointing them out she directs our attention to this twofold aspect of the individual found in varying degrees in almost all of these obscure writers.

Even when she does not identify this aspect in so many words, we are made conscious of its presence, by her undisguised interest in the lives of personalities with idiosyncrasies much out of keeping with their ranks and positions and the climate of their time, like the Duchess of Newcastle who was the laughing stock of her time and yet is attractive and lovable to us of the present day, or like Dr. Bentley, the great Cambridge scholar who, despite the dignity of the face that he put up to the world, was the most arrogant and quarrelsome of mankind. Whatever the background, whatever the rank and position occupied, Mrs. Woolf seems to say, human beings have the shady side of their character which lies hidden behind great names and rank, behind the more dignified expressions of the heart and mind, and which is bound to make itself felt, against their will, through their conduct and writings.

The vehemence of temper and virulence of language in Dr. Bentley, the man "who should have been steeped in beauty,"¹⁾ the importunity and indiscretion of a child in the Duchess of Newcastle, a lady of rank, the failings that caused the downfall of men like Rev. Dr. Wilkin-son,²⁾ His Majesty's Chaplain of the Savoy, and Captain Jones,³⁾ Captain of His Majesty's third regiment of Guards, all these may have been the object of universal censure in their respective background. The conventions and standards of morality of those days may, as soon as they were exposed to daylight, have promptly dismissed them or smothered them up as unfit for the scrutiny of the respectable people. At times Mrs. Woolf herself appears as if she were about to pass on them a verdict of some sort. She refrains, however, and closes her discussion in tolerance with "besides, all this happened many, many years ago."⁴⁾ It is not her task, or in her temperament to censure these people, as it is not to praise them. She is the observer, not certainly an indifferent and cool observer, but a fascinated observer, who is a poet following the lure of the erratic and lovable personality, and at the same time a philosopher speculating on the outlook of these people. It may be said that Virginia Woolf, in showing to the common reader the oddities and failings of these people with absorbed interest and without prejudice, is viewing them in the light of the present day.

She has said elsewhere that the "insight and blindness of critics vary in every century," that "in 1930 we shall miss a great deal that was obvious in 1655, that we shall see something that the 18th century ignored."⁵⁾ This viewing of the failings of the people of the past with extreme fascination but with no severity of judgment may be called the insight that she

1) *The Common Reader*, First Series, p. 242.

2) *The Death of the Moth*, London, 1947, p. 29.

3) *ibid.*, p. 29.

4) *The Common Reader*, First Series, p. 248.

5) *The Common Reader*, Second Series, p. 40.

of the 20th century applies to the obscure writers of the past. This bringing to light the element of human nature that was always present in the past but was hidden behind the thoughts and emotions of stronger accent, and bringing to bear upon it not a moral interest but an aesthetic interest may be called a discovery of the present that is included in the past.

We have so far seen Mrs. Woolf's keen sense of the present in the past in her commentary on the obscure writers of the past, but at the same time we can find her awareness of the past that is included in the present, or the past that determines the present. After viewing the life of James Woodforde of the *Two Parsons*, the commonplace and contented man who lived at the end of the 18th century, "in one of the breathing spaces in human affairs," she says :

Still, if it is a dream, let us indulge it a moment longer. Let us believe that some things last, and some places and some people are not touched by change. On a fine May morning, with the rooks rising and the hares scampering and the plover calling among the long grass, there is much to encourage the illusion. It is we who change and perish. Parson Woodforde lives. It is the kings and queens who lie in prison. It is the great towns that are ravaged with anarchy and confusion. But the river Wensum still flows ; Mrs. Custance is brought to bed of yet another baby ; there is the first swallow of the year. The spring comes, and summer with its hay and strawberries ; then autumn, when the walnuts are exceptionally fine though the pears are poor ; so we lapse into winter, which is indeed boisterous, but the house, thank God, withstands the storm ; and then again there is the first swallow, and Parson Woodforde takes his greyhounds out a-coursing.¹⁾

In like manner, after following the steps and listening to the eloquent voice of Mary Wollstonecraft, who had many theories about the rights of woman, and whose life therefore was bound to be tempestuous, she says that she can "trace her influence even now among the living."²⁾ Here again, if she does not always state her sense of the past in the present as clearly, she is able to pose the problem of a particular man or woman as something universal in significance, and we are made aware that this or that individual and his thoughts and emotions are to be found here and now. In short, we are continually quickened to the sense of the past that has its life in the present. This, we are reminded, has been one of the recurring themes in her novels. Her characters are often made aware of the ghosts of the past that haunt the present, in the form of images of primeval forests and swamps that once occupied the space that is now the center of civilization, or in the form of a personality, like that of Mrs. Ramsay of *To the Lighthouse*, which dominates the memory of others long after her death. For Mrs. Woolf, the past, whether it be of nature or of people, constantly returns to shape the present.

Our sense of the past in the present is awakened not only by her direct statements to that effect such as given above, but also by the perspective that she habitually adopts from which

1) *The Common Reader*, Second Series, p. 100.

2) *ibid.*, p. 159.

to view her object, or what may be better described as a shift in her perspective. A scene or an event in one's life she does not see merely as something standing by itself. For her it epitomizes the entire atmosphere, or modifies what has gone before. To give this effect, she describes the general atmosphere before lighting on a particular scene or event as in the following :

Gently, beautifully, like the clouds of a balmy evening, obscurity once more traverses the sky, an obscurity which is not empty but thick with the star dust of innumerable lives. And suddenly there is a rift in it, and we see a wretched little packetboat pitching off the Irish coast in the middle of the nineteenth century.¹⁾

From the general view our attention is drawn to the particular, which we can now view in the proper perspective. We are made to see the significance of a scene or an event, and its place in the whole design of things, in short, we are made to view it with a poet's eye, as something that is not just then and there but as something universal and everlasting. The shift is not always from the general to particular ; contrast is the method adopted at times. Often we are not aware of any devices being used but are aroused to the significance of her subject by the originality of the manner in which she opens or closes a narrative. To give an instance, her essay on Jack Mytton opens in the following manner :

Are you curious to know what sort of person your neighbour is in a deck-chair on Brighton pier? Watch, then, which column of *The Times* - she has brought it, rolled like a French roll, and it lies on the top of her bag - she reads first. Politics, presumably, or an article upon a temple in Jerusalem? Not a bit of it - she reads the sporting news.²⁾

At first one cannot foresee that she is about to enter into an account of Jack Mytton, the man who lived in the time of George the Fourth and was guided only by his instincts throughout his short life of thirty-eight years, and therefore brought to complete ruin the immense fortune he had inherited. Soon, however, we find that the main purpose of our author is to tell us that the life story of this man, just because of these exhibitions of human nature, is enjoyed now by the Englishman, who having done with the sporting news in the daily paper concentrates his attention next on a book on the life of Jack Mytton. By placing the interest of the modern Englishman in this obscure figure of the past on a level with their interest in sports, she heightens in us the sense of the significance of the life of this man, in short, that he is living in the present. The way she closes a narrative is often just as unexpected and effective. In any case, we find that the key of the success she achieves in this direction lies in her point of view. As she says of Sterne, her freshness, her buoyance, her perpetual power to surprise are the result of these changes in the angle of vision.

Here we are reminded that she has often stressed the necessity for the artist to stand back from the scene immediately before him, and to view it in a broader light, if he wishes to give

1) *The Common Reader*, First Series, p. 150.

2) *The Common Reader*, Second Series, p. 126.

it depth and significance. She admires Sterne when, in the course of his account of the *Sentimental Journey*, "he leads us to the very brink of some deep precipice of the soul," and makes us "snatch one short glance into its depths," and the next moment, whisks us round "to look at the green pastures glowing on the other side."¹ This change in the angle of vision was in itself a daring innovation in Sterne's days, she says, but it is mainly through this change that Virginia Woolf herself achieves the effect she desires in virtually all of her novels. It may be mainly because she misses this in the works of Galsworthy, Bennett, and Wells that she feels that they have disappointed her.

It may be meaningless to consider apart, as has been done, the present found in the past and the past living in the present, for they are but two sides of the same question. Without an awareness of the one, a sense of the other could not be acquired. It may be better to add here, therefore, that in these essays Virginia Woolf, with a humanist's interest, continually arouses us to a sense of our community with these people of the past, and with a poet's perspective, to a sense of something everlasting and universal in their lives. Were it not for her ability to do this effectively, her accounts of these obscure lives, interesting as they are as a portrayal of the drama of life, would not afford us the inspiration as well as the delight that they invariably do.

1) *The Common Reader*, Second Series, p. 83.