

COMMENTS AND REVIEWS

AFTER 'TO THE LIGHTHOUSE.'

BETWEEN THE ACTS, by Virginia Woolf (Hogarth Press, 7/6).

The design of making this book an occasion for reviewing Virginia Woolf's career has had to be abandoned, a war-time casualty; a stop-gap pen has to undertake this note. Yet the book can hardly be reviewed by itself. But for the name on the cover, and the mannerisms associated with that name, no one could have supposed it to be by an author of distinction or achievement. Even its extraordinary vacancy and pointlessness, the apparent absence of concern for any appearance of grasp or point, would not have seemed a case for critical analysis. Knowing it to be by Virginia Woolf, we can say that this is where her famous preoccupation with the essential, with the significant, with 'life' has led.

Here is what she wrote in the essay on 'Modern Fiction' in *The Common Reader*:

'Look within and life, it seems, is very far from being "like this." Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there; so that, if a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style, and perhaps not a single button sewn on as the Bond Street tailors would have it. Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this

unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible?'

She is describing, she says, the preoccupation of 'several young writers among whom Mr. James Joyce is the most notable':

'They attempt to come closer to life, and to preserve more sincerely and exactly what interests and moves them, even if to do so they must discard most of the conventions which are commonly observed by the novelist. Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness.'

Among the younger writers she is thinking of (in May, 1919), there is one upon whom this account throws more light than upon Joyce. In fact we, who have in front of us not only the whole of *Ulysses*, but the whole body of Joyce's work, can say that of *his* aims (though she no doubt learnt something from him) her description conveys a very inadequate and misleading notion. It has, however, an obvious application to her own subsequent work; and even by itself it might prompt us to some questioning.

To talk of the impressions the mind receives (not, we note, 'forms,' the usual verb) as atoms falling upon it might hardly seem matter for comment, in a writer who doesn't parade a psychological apparatus. But when Mrs. Woolf's insistence on this way of putting it—and she does insist—issues in, 'Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern . . .', we can't help asking whether the order in which they fall is likely to be the kind of order that a pattern is. Clearly not, unless the mind has within it a very positive and active bent of interest—so positive and active that, had she been realizing this truth, Mrs. Woolf could hardly have put things as she does. And to achieve the kind of order necessary to a good novel, the mind would have to have not only a strong positive bent of interest, but a kind of interest in the world 'out there' that Mrs. Woolf's injunction to 'look within' for 'life,' among the 'innumerable atoms' of 'impressions,' hardly suggests—suggests the less when

she comes to calling this 'life,' which it is the 'task of the novelist to convey . . . with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible,' a 'luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end.'

Mrs. Woolf's best novel, it is pretty generally agreed, is *To the Lighthouse*; to me, as to others, it is the only good one—the only one in which her talent fulfils itself in a satisfactory achievement. The substance of this novel was provided directly by life—in a more vulgar sense of the word than that given it above: we know enough about Leslie Stephen, the novelist's father, and his family to know that there is a large measure of direct transcription. We can see a clear relation between this fact and the unique success of *To the Lighthouse* among her novels. Mrs. Woolf's decision to have 'no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love-interest or catastrophe in the accepted style' was perhaps to this extent justified, that she hadn't interests rich and active enough to justify what she was rejecting; but neither, we have to conclude, had she interests adequate to the problem of supplying substitutes. By way of eliminating any unduly pejorative suggestions of 'accepted style' we may adduce the Conrad she admired—the great artist whose essential and successful concern was indisputably with that which Mr. Bennett, 'with his magnificent apparatus for catching life,' seemed to miss—'whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality': the contrast brings out how little of human experience—how little of life—comes within Mrs. Woolf's scope.

The envelope enclosing her dramatized sensibilities may be 'semi-transparent'; but it seems to shut out all the ranges of experience accompanying those kinds of preoccupation, volitional and moral, with an external world which are not felt primarily as preoccupation with one's consciousness of it. The preoccupation with intimating 'significance' in fine shades of consciousness, together with the unremitting play of visual imagery, the 'beautiful' writing and the lack of moral interest and interest in action, give the effect of something closely akin to a sophisticated aestheticism. (There is also the Aesthetic brooding wistfulness about the passage of time.)

Weaknesses of this kind (for weaknesses they are, though triumphs may be won out of them) have, we know, their fostering conditions in the relation of the artist to modern society. A sensitive

mind whose main interests are not endorsed by the predominant interests of the world it lives in, and whose talent and professional skill seem to have no real public importance, is naturally apt to cultivate (if this is the right word) the 'bubble of the private consciousness.' Not that Mrs. Woolf hadn't her congenial and applauding social-cultural milieu. She belonged, of course, to the original Bloomsbury, the Bloomsbury of Clive Bell's *Civilisation* and Lytton Strachey's wit (some of her essays are in his cheapest manner, and one can seldom feel quite safe from the communal note). A milieu that so often reminds us of its potency in the work of as distinguished a writer as E. M. Forster must be held accountable for a great deal in the development—or failure to develop—of Virginia Woolf. The general nature of its operation may be seen in the Preface and text of *Orlando*, the work that followed *To the Lighthouse*, and after which the discouraging signs multiplied steadily to the end.

It is proper to conclude so patently un-self-sufficing a commentary by referring the reader to the fuller and very relevant criticism of Virginia Woolf that appeared in *Scrutiny* for June, 1937, and September, 1938.

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A BOOK ON RILKE

RAINER MARIA RILKE, by E. M. Butler (Cambridge, 21/-).

The main issue at stake in most Rilke-criticism is, inevitably, the vexed question of his meaning, his philosophy. And if ever there was a poet who demands scrupulous carefulness, exactitude, and honesty from his interpreters, it is Rilke. One burst of enthusiasm in the wrong place and the account is hopelessly vitiated; and one sudden revulsion occasioned by misreading or oversimplification, and nothing is left of Rilke but a fluently perverse genius *manqué*. Indubitably one cannot obtain much aesthetic pleasure from his work without having come to some sufficiently tenable conclusions about the bare bones of his philosophical theories, but the tendency of most of his critics has been to pad these bones (which are not all that difficult to locate) with the flesh and features of their own pet philosophy. The resultant corpse has little resemblance to the corpus of his poetry.