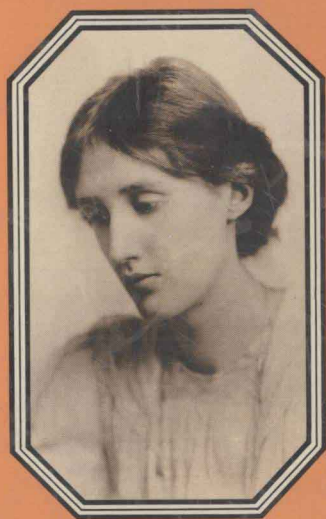


# VIRGINIA WOOLF

DRAMATIC NOVELIST



JANE WHEARE

# Virginia Woolf: Dramatic Novelist

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Jane Wheare

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MACMILLAN  
PRESS

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*To my mother and father*

though Turgenev could have said with Marianna  
' . . . I suffer for all the oppressed, the poor, the  
wretched in Russia,' it was for the good of the cause,  
just as it was for the good of his art, not to expatiate,  
not to explain.

(Virginia Woolf, 'The Novels of Turgenev',  
*Collected Essays*, I, 252)

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J.W.

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# List of Abbreviations

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<i>A Room</i>	<i>A Room of One's Own</i> (London: The Hogarth Press, 1929)
CE	<i>Collected Essays</i> , 4 vols (London: The Hogarth Press, 1966)
CSF	<i>The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf</i> , ed. Susan Dick (London: The Hogarth Press, 1985)
CW	<i>Contemporary Writers</i> , ed. Jean Guiget (London: The Hogarth Press, 1965)
<i>Diary</i>	<i>The Diary of Virginia Woolf</i> , ed. Anne Olivier Bell, 5 vols (London: The Hogarth Press, 1977–84)
<i>Letters</i>	<i>The Letters of Virginia Woolf</i> , ed. Nigel Nicolson, 6 vols (London: The Hogarth Press, 1975–80)
MHP	<i>The Virginia Woolf Manuscripts (Monks House Papers)</i> (Brighton: Harvester, 1985)

# 1

## Introduction

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### (a) INTRODUCTORY: WOOLF – EXPERIMENTAL OR 'DRAMATIC' NOVELIST?

Existing criticism of Woolf tends to focus upon the experimental approach of her modernist novels, which finds its epitome in the esoteric, metaphorical style of *The Waves*. Her 'dramatic' novels – *The Voyage Out*, *Night and Day* and *The Years* – are often dismissed as unremarkable, the suggestion being that in writing them Woolf was conserving her imaginative energies for subsequent innovative assaults upon traditional fiction.<sup>1</sup> Critics point to a pattern in Woolf's career as a novelist whereby a serious experimental novel would be succeeded by a frivolous or unimportant work in a more conventional mode. David Lodge, for example, argues that, 'The essential line of her literary development may be traced through the following novels: *The Voyage Out* (1915), *Jacob's Room* (1922), *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and *The Waves* (1931) (her other books being, most critics agree, diversions, digressions or regressions from this line).'<sup>2</sup> In the following chapters I hope to modify this view, by emphasising the mastery of Woolf's 'dramatic' novels, and particularly *The Voyage Out* and *The Years*.<sup>3</sup>

That a novel can never lack artifice is an axiom which Woolf repeatedly emphasised. The method of her own experimental fiction – and especially *The Waves* – serves to draw attention to the element of illusion involved when a reader finds a novel 'natural' or 'realistic'. Like Proust, Woolf is extremely interested in the process whereby the reader accepts as 'true to life' those narrative conventions with which he or she is familiar. Her modernist novels pose questions about the nature of fiction, both through specific characters, such as Bernard in *The Waves* and Lily in *To the Lighthouse*, and also (implicitly) through their formal and stylistic experimentalism. In reading a novel as abstruse as *The Waves* one cannot

help but ask questions about narrative method, and particularly about the process whereby 'realist' novelists encourage us to 'believe in' their fictional world and characters. *The Waves* – with, for example, Joyce's *Ulysses*, Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* or Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* – is an essentially self-conscious work; it draws attention to its own artificiality and in so doing it makes statements about the novel. In its stylised 'discussion' of the problems facing the novelist or biographer and of the illusions implicit in their art *The Waves* complements Woolf's literary criticism. It constitutes both an attack on those writers who seem to adopt established narrative formulae unquestioningly, and a confession that the novelist can never be completely original; one can never wholly divorce oneself from linguistic conventions if one is to communicate with the public at all.<sup>4</sup>

In her 'dramatic' works, on the other hand, far from seeking to draw attention to the presence of artifice in a work of fiction, Woolf exploits the fact that the reader takes such artifice for granted. Whereas in her experimental novels she wishes to emphasise the trickery involved when one writes or reads a work of fiction, in *The Voyage Out*, *Night and Day* and *The Years*, she wishes simply to make use of such tricks.

If, broadly speaking, *The Waves* is a novel about the novel, a 'realist' work such as *The Years* is primarily about society. Whereas the experimental fiction belongs with Woolf's literary criticism, the 'dramatic' novels support her works of social comment. Another way of putting this would be to say that *The Waves* supplements 'Modern Fiction', whereas *The Years* illustrates *Three Guineas*. (This is not to deny, however, that in questioning the fictional narratives which we impose upon experience, *The Waves* makes a point not only about the novel but also about society.)

Much of Woolf's literary criticism, like that of her modernist contemporaries, emphasises the role of formal experimentation in fiction. Consequently many critics – amongst them left-wing poets of the 1930s and some feminists in more recent years – have condemned her as an amoral novelist who places technical innovation above social commitment in her writing. This is, however, not only to underrate Woolf's achievement as a modernist, but also to fail to recognise the significance of her 'dramatic' novels, works in which Woolf adopts the 'realist' approach as the most appropriate through which to express her ideas about society *obliquely*.<sup>5</sup> In the 'dramatic' works, Woolf employs a narrative

method familiar to the educated reader, making use of technical devices with which we are so well acquainted that we accept them as 'natural'.<sup>6</sup> In reading the novel, therefore, one responds to the fictional characters as if they were real people, and in so doing becomes extremely receptive to the points of view which Woolf embodies in their narrative. One does not 'believe in' Jinny, Rhoda, Susan, Bernard, Louis and Neville in the way that one believes, for example, in Mary Datchet or William Rodney, our belief in these latter depending on the fact that in depicting them Woolf makes use of many conventional narrative devices.

In *The Waves*, largely through the novelty of her method, Woolf draws attention to the process of narration which one normally takes for granted in reading a 'realist' novel. In *The Voyage Out*, *Night and Day* and *The Years*, on the other hand, she induces the reader – through her use of familiar technical conventions – to 'believe in' her fictional characters, and in so doing, she encourages us at once to sympathise with, and to accept unconsciously, the ideological positions implicit in these novels.

Steve Neale analyses the way in which the 'realist' text may be a powerful vehicle of didacticism in an article in *Screen*.<sup>7</sup> Neale compares two types of anti-semitic film produced in Nazi Germany in the 1930s. The first – *Der ewige Jude* – is a documentary film involving overt propaganda, the second – *Jud Süß* – attacks the Jews more subtly through a 'realist' narrative. What makes the latter more persuasive is that the audience is likely to remain oblivious to the fact that the 'text' encourages specific responses on their part. Catherine Belsey makes a similar point about the novel when she remarks that 'the frequent overt authorial intrusions and generalizations of George Eliot are much easier to resist [than the implicit narrative viewpoint] since they draw attention to themselves as propositions'.<sup>8</sup> Within Woolf's *oeuvre*, *Three Guineas* corresponds approximately to the documentary film, whilst the 'dramatic' novels conform to the 'realist' model.

## (b) THE EXPERIMENTAL NOVELS

### Habit, Perception and the Novel

Being vain, I will broach the subject of beauty – just for a moment – and burst out in ecstasy at your defence of me as a

very ugly writer – which is what I am – but an honest one, driven like a whale to the surface in a snort – such is the effort and anguish to me of finding a phrase (that is saying what I mean) – and then they say I write beautifully! How could I write beautifully when I am always trying to say something that has not been said, and should be said for the first time, exactly.<sup>9</sup>

The emphasis upon the writer's obligation to 'say something that has not been said', which we find in this letter from Woolf to the composer, Ethel Smyth, is typical of early twentieth-century modernist statements, which tend to focus upon the relationship between language, habit and experience.<sup>10</sup> Woolf's own experimental novels, like her criticism, examine the process whereby, in 'ordinary life', the individual's perceptiveness is dulled by habit. She identifies a comparable situation in the domain of art, when the artist's ability to portray experience vividly is limited by his or her acceptance of conventional formal devices and linguistic paradigms. Her concomitant belief that the novel should above all *be novel* is shared by many of her modernist contemporaries, among them Joyce, Dorothy Richardson, Marcel Proust and Gertrude Stein.<sup>11</sup> A commitment to formal and linguistic innovation also dominates the work of many of her contemporaries in related intellectual disciplines. One might single out, for example, the aesthetics of Roger Fry, the formalist criticism of Victor Shlovsky, or the philosophy of Henri Bergson.

Woolf has often been linked with Proust through the argument that the novels of each reflect Bergson's ideas on time and memory.<sup>12</sup> Although this approach has recently been discredited, there *is* a connection to be made between the three writers. What they have in common, and, indeed, share with a good many of their modernist contemporaries, is a belief in the limitations of conventional language as a medium for expressing the individual's unique experience.

Bergson's philosophy embraces Saussure's idea that languages 'do not simply name existing categories, they articulate their own'.<sup>13</sup> He argues that the scope of our language is determined by practical considerations. Since our use of language is governed by questions of economy, or ease of communication, our linguistic categories necessarily involve a simplification of sense-perception. It is Bergson's belief that the generalising tendency of language actually serves to mask experience, rather than to elucidate it. The

obvious problem which he faces, as a philosopher, however, is that of communicating his own perceptions through the medium of that very language whose deficiencies he deplors. (Karin Stephen emphasises this point in her study of Bergson when she remarks that 'the intellectual activity by which we formulate general laws can only work among abstractions, and in order to explain a fact we are obliged to substitute for it either a class or word or other symbol'.<sup>14</sup> It is Bergson's view that the role of the philosopher, unlike that of the scientist, should be to examine experience not from the practical, but from the speculative point of view.

May not the task of philosophy [he asks] be to bring us back to a fuller perception of reality by a certain displacement of our attention? What would be required would be to turn our attention *away* from the practically interesting aspect of the universe in order to turn it *back* to what, from a practical point of view, is useless. And this conversion of attention would be philosophy itself.<sup>15</sup>

Bergson's notion of the philosopher can be linked with Roger Fry's idea of the artist. Fry suggests that the distinctive feature of a work of art is that it serves no practical purpose. Consequently, our perception of it is different in kind from our impressions of objects which have a purely functional status in our lives. In his 'Essay in Aesthetics' Fry argues that implicit in normal perception is a continuous process of unconscious selection. This theory can be illustrated, he maintains, by observing a street scene reflected in a mirror:

It then, at once, takes on the visionary quality, and we become true spectators, not selecting what we will see, but seeing everything equally, and thereby we come to notice a number of appearances and relations of appearances, which would have escaped our vision before, owing to that perpetual economising by selection of what impressions we will assimilate, which in life we perform by unconscious processes.<sup>16</sup>

When a scene is reflected in this way we remain aloof from it, rather as we stand outside a striking work of art, and because we do not participate in it, our perception of it is less partial. Both

Roger Fry and Bergson argue that one's response to experience is sharpened when one lays aside practical considerations:

In actual life the normal person really only reads the labels as it were on the objects around him and troubles no further. Almost all the things which are useful in any way put on more or less this cap of invisibility. It is only when an object exists in our lives for no other purpose than to be seen that we really look at it, as for instance at a China ornament or a precious stone, and towards such even the most normal person adopts to some extent the artistic attitude of pure vision abstracted from necessity.<sup>17</sup>

For Roger Fry, then, the mark of a work of art is not its resemblance to, but its distinction from 'real life'. Its value lies in its power not to stimulate, but to subvert, habitual modes of perceiving.<sup>18</sup>

At the time when Roger Fry was formulating his ideas on art in England, surprisingly similar arguments were being put forward by the Russian literary critic, Victor Shklovsky. In his essay on 'Art as Technique', the Formalist critic suggests that one should assess a work of art in terms of its power to make familiar experience strange, and thereby to intensify our response to it. Shklovsky, like Roger Fry, equates this process of defamiliarisation with formal innovation.<sup>19</sup> In the language of poetry, he argues, 'we find material obviously created to remove the automatism of perception. . . . A work is created "artistically" so that its perception is impeded and the greatest possible effect is produced through the slowness of the perception.'<sup>20</sup>

It was the desire to discredit the association between the novel and 'ordinary life', and hence to break down the equation between the habitual in art and the 'natural' (or 'real'), which led Woolf to emphasise the poetic quality of her own experimental fiction.<sup>21</sup> The argument of Woolf's modernist novels, and the formal devices which they employ, support Shklovsky's theory of defamiliarisation. In this respect they resemble Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* and Richardson's *Pilgrimage*. In all these novels formal innovation is accompanied by 'discussion' of conventional patterns in language and behaviour, and the tendency of such patterns to dull the individual's perceptiveness. All three writers associate mere imitation in art with the numbing effects of habit in life. In

discussing, for example, his first train journey to Balbec, Proust's narrator emphasises the limitations of a life which, being habitual, is necessarily 'unconscious':

As a rule it is with our being reduced to a minimum that we live; most of our faculties lie dormant because they can rely upon Habit, which knows what there is to be done and has no need of their services. But on this morning of travel, the interruption of the routine of my existence, the unfamiliar place and time, had made their presence indispensable. My habits, which were sedentary and not matutinal, for once were missing, and all my faculties came hurrying to take their place, vying with one another in their zeal, rising, each of them, like waves, to the same unaccustomed level, from the basest to the most exalted, from breath, appetite, the circulation of my blood to receptivity and imagination.<sup>22</sup>

On the one hand, 'we are animals. We are not always aware by any means; we breathe, eat, sleep automatically'.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, an event such as a journey may temporarily transform habitual living into conscious perception. Marcel's description of the effect of travel upon the individual's perceptiveness is echoed throughout Woolf's writing, notably in the diaries.<sup>24</sup> It is dramatised in *To the Lighthouse* at the moment in the third section when Lily Briscoe, coming out into the garden, remarks upon 'the unreality of the early morning hour. It was a way things had sometimes, she thought . . . they became unreal. So coming back from a journey, or after an illness, before habits had spun themselves across the surface, one felt that same unreality, which was so startling; felt something emerge. Life was most vivid then.'<sup>25</sup> Proust, Woolf and Richardson all argue that such a transformation may also be effected by a striking and original work of art. In Woolf's novel it is Lily Briscoe, in Proust's the artist Elstir, who acts upon the belief that art should serve to lift the veil of habitual perception and lay bare that which is strange, exciting, and indeed terrifying, in experience. At the opposite pole, in Proust's novel, the figures of M. and Mme Cottard represent a tendency in the 'consumer' to resist innovation in art. Like Bergson, Proust's Marcel suggests that it is in disregarding established categories of perception that the individual appreciates more fully the essence



of his own experience. It is this 'honesty' of purpose which he identifies and admires in the work of the artist, Elstir:

The effort made by Elstir to strip himself, when face to face with reality, of every intellectual notion, was all the more admirable in that this man who made himself deliberately ignorant before sitting down to paint, forgot everything that he knew in his honesty of purpose (for what one knows does not belong to oneself), had in fact an exceptionally cultivated mind.<sup>26</sup>

Lily Briscoe shares Elstir's determination to empty his mind of existing styles in art. She resists, for example, a temptation to imitate the popular artist Mr Paunceforte, with his particular combination of pastel shades. Since for Lily the 'jacmanna [is] bright violet; the wall staring white' these are the colours she attempts to capture in her picture.<sup>27</sup>

Both Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* and Woolf's experimental fiction make use of the visual arts to illustrate a theory of the novel. (The link between Post-Impressionist art and modernist fiction has often been made.) The artist who rejects familiar precedents in painting corresponds to the novelist who deliberately subverts existing narrative patterns.<sup>28</sup> Proust, like Shklovsky, equates value in life and art with the process of defamiliarisation. Where such a process is absent, life can have no meaning or worth.<sup>29</sup>

### Experimental Novelists

The emphasis upon the importance of undermining habitual modes of perception, to be found in the critical writing of Bergson, Fry and Shklovsky, and of Proust, Richardson and Woolf, is put into practice in the novels of these latter through specific technical devices.

Proust, for example, experiments with various techniques which at once enable him to avoid a straightforward chronological sequence and to emphasise the arbitrary nature of accepted narrative forms. It is perhaps not surprising that *A la recherche du temps perdu* has affinities with Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, a work described by Shklovsky and his fellow-critics as 'the most typical [that is, perfect] novel in world literature'.<sup>30</sup> Woolf connects Proust and Sterne through two separate remarks describing the technique of