

INTRODUCTION

by TERENCE HOLLIDAY

In her own introduction to *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf has written:

“Books are the flowers or fruit stuck here or there on a tree which has its roots deep down in the earth of our earliest life, of our first experiences. But . . . to tell the reader anything that his own imagination and insight have not already discovered would need not a page or two of preface but a volume or two of autobiography.”

It may be hoped that such a volume or two may be forthcoming from Mrs. Woolf whose own roots are deep in the tradition of English letters; and it may not be impertinent to survey briefly here certain biographical material concerning her which is to-day available in any adequate library of reference.

Among the more eminent Victorians, Sir Leslie Stephen—Mrs. Woolf's father—stands as a figure both typical and striking, sharing with his peers a deep passion for the art of letters and an immense

INTRODUCTION

capacity for hard work. The educational routine of Eton, King's College (London) and Trinity Hall (Cambridge) preceded his taking of holy orders. There followed tutorial duties, and a conventional preliminary volume, *Sketches from Cambridge by a Don*. The reading of Mill, Comte and Spencer then led him to abandon his Christian position, and he joined the forces of philosophical radicalism and liberal reform whose head was Mill. Always as strenuous at play as at work, Stephen was one of the most enthusiastic and indomitable of English mountaineers; he filled the office of President of the Alpine Club, 1865-69, at about which time his superabundant energies overflowed into the editorship of the *Alpine Journal*. The formidable record of his literary labors includes the following: *Studies of a Biographer*, four volumes; *Hours in a Library* and *The English Utilitarians*, three volumes each; *History of English Thought in the XVIII Century* and *Social Rights and Duties*, each in two volumes. The one-volume works include *Essays on Free-Thinking and Plain Speaking*, *An Agnostic's Apology and Other Essays* and *The Science of Ethics*. For John Morley's *English Men of Letters Series* Stephen wrote the volumes on Hobbes, Pope, Swift, Samuel Johnson and George Eliot, finding time nevertheless to edit the works of Thackeray in twenty-four

INTRODUCTION

volumes, Richardson in twelve and Fielding in ten. A keen politician and violent partisan of the radical-liberal persuasion, Stephen was one of the few influential Englishmen to side with the North during our Civil War struggle. Wholeheartedly and militantly anti-Slavery, he visited our north-eastern seaboard in 1863; on his return to England he launched his attack on the *London Times*, a pamphlet of immense vigor and polemical skill that had a profound effect on English opinion, and remains an important document of the conflict.

Leslie Stephen's major work, *The Dictionary of National Biography*, remains to be mentioned. This prodigious enterprise was planned, inaugurated and one-third completed by Stephen, who contributed three hundred and twenty articles before retiring in favor of his sub-editor, Sidney Lee. He received honorary degrees from Oxford, Cambridge, Edinburgh and Harvard, and his knighthood was conferred during the ceremonies attendant on the coronation of Edward VII.

The major mystery of this dynamic, crowded career is how time was found for matrimony; but a few years after the untimely death of his first wife, who was a daughter of Thackeray, Leslie Stephen married the noted beauty Julia Duckworth who bore him four children: Virginia, Vanessa, Adrian

INTRODUCTION

and Julian. The family's time was divided between the London house in Hyde Park Gate and a summer home on the coast of Cornwall near St. Ives. Among the guests and visitors who were also intimate friends of the family may be named our own Lowell and Dr. Holmes, Hardy, Meredith, Stevenson, Ruskin and John Morley. Lowell, ever mindful of the more graceful amenities, produced some charming verses on the occasion of Virginia's birth. In such a household, scant attention was given to the common Victorian and Edwardian conventions in the matter of breeding and educating children; no formal schooling was imposed upon the young Virginia who was allowed the unrestricted freedom of her father's magnificent library from the moment when she had first learned to read. This delight in reading combined with full opportunity for the widest possible indulgence resulted in the early flowering of a fastidious critical faculty, and was soon followed by the appearance of a series of essays in the columns of the *London Times* Literary Supplement.

In 1912, Virginia Stephen married Leonard Woolf who had returned to London after a period in the British Civil Service of Ceylon, and whose interests were about equally divided among the art of letters proper, economics, and the labor movement. In 1917, they began a joint enterprise, the Hogarth

INTRODUCTION

Press. The earliest productions under this imprint were modest, hand-set pamphlets by authors who were then young, obscure, or both, such as T. S. Eliot, Katherine Mansfield, E. M. Forster and Mrs. Woolf herself. Vanessa Stephen, the painter, who had married the aesthete and art critic Clive Bell, lent the distinction of her draughtsmanship to decorations, illustrations and dust-covers for later volumes.

The Woolf's home in Bloomsbury quickly became a literary center, repeating the hospitable Stephen pattern of an earlier generation; here were to be met John Maynard Keynes and his Russian wife Lydia Lopokova, Lytton Strachey, Desmond MacCarthy, Mr. Forster, Arthur Waley, Miss V. Sackville-West, Raymond Mortimer and Lord Berners. And to-day among the "Bloomsbury group," of which the Woolf *salon* remains the center, are to be found the most promising and accomplished practitioners of the seven arts native to, or visiting in, London.

Four other works precede *To the Lighthouse* in the chronological list of Mrs. Woolf's fiction: *The Voyage Out*, *Night and Day*, *Jacob's Room*, and *Mrs. Dalloway*. No two are essentially alike, and a careful survey of critical opinion on all reveals a heavy balance of judgment in favor of *To The*

INTRODUCTION

Lighthouse as the most interesting, characteristic and wholly successful novel of the four. Sharing with Joyce a rare skill in the handling of the "stream of consciousness," and with Proust a pre-occupation with the phenomenon of past time in its relation to, and influence on, the present, Mrs. Woolf was immune from the unhappy effects on lesser talents that attended the shattering explosion of *Ulysses* and the inundation that followed the wave after wave of *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu*. Of action in these novels there is comparatively little, of plot almost none at all; a minimum of these classical ingredients is all that is necessary for the presentation of character, the particular ground of Mrs. Woolf's mastery of her medium. Her principal figures are thoughtful, meditative, seldom acting without reference to the past; and their silent soliloquies, their nostalgic emotions, are rendered with a poignant verisimilitude to which the most casual reader is compelled to respond, embodied in a prose as lovely as any that is being written in our time. It is Mrs. Woolf's supreme merit that she is able to apprehend, to sustain, and to convey a series of visions of the mind in action, and to order these into an organic whole such as *To the Lighthouse*. But there is no lack of implicit sympathy, rather a humane warmth in the creation and interplay of

INTRODUCTION

character. "Human relations." The phrase is struck faintly and repeatedly throughout *To the Lighthouse*, never insistently enough to break the delicate thread of the story; always appropriately, to the context, modifying, coloring the reader's consciousness like the distant note of a bell-buoy at sea. The thematic touch has caused a parallel to be drawn between this novel and a formal, musical work; but there is a closer analogy between Mrs. Woolf's method and that of a modern master of painting, Seurat: one may turn casually through the pages of *The Waves*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, read a dozen lines at random on almost any page, and discover a sentence, a phrase, even a word, that will deepen one's perception of a character, a relationship or a scene—only a brush-stroke in itself, yet one that is definitely and illuminatingly related to the entire work.

An additional feature of interest in *To the Lighthouse* is the autobiographical element that pervades it. The action centers upon the large, hospitable summer residence of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay on the western coast of England; the husband is an eminent man of letters, his wife a woman of great beauty. The numerous guests are all literary with the exception of a young woman painter. And the famous interlude, "Time Passes"—which recounts

INTRODUCTION

the gradual decay of the abandoned house and its sudden renovation in preparation for a resumption of the old, happy life—betrays a feeling more profound, an acquaintance more intimate, than even so scrupulous an artist as Mrs. Woolf would be likely to entertain for what was merely a figment of the imagination.

Authoritative opinion on Mrs. Woolf's work in fiction may be found in essays by Mr. Forster, Mr. Mortimer and Mr. MacCarthy; and a minute examination of her method is the subject of M. Florio Delattre's study *Le Roman psychologique de Virginia Woolf*. Mrs. Woolf has herself made more than one venture into the field of criticism. Her taste in the classics ranges from Chaucer, Montaigne and the Elizabethans *passim* through Addison, Swift, Cowper and Defoe; De Quincy, Jane Austen, the Brontës, Hazlitt, Jane Welsh Carlyle, Gissing, Meredith, Hardy and Conrad. Certain of her dicta on current writers are so cogent, concise and suggestive as to justify the emphasis of repetition. Of James Joyce she has written that his work reveals . . . "a desperate man who feels that in order to breathe he must break the windows." Of T. S. Eliot's poetry:

"As I sun myself upon the intense and ravishing beauty of one of his lines, and reflect that I
xii

INTRODUCTION

must make a dizzy and dangerous leap to the next, and so on from line to line, like an acrobat flying precariously from bar to bar, I cry out, I confess, for the old decorums, and envy the indolence of my ancestors who, instead of spinning madly through mid-air, dreamt quietly in the shade with a book."

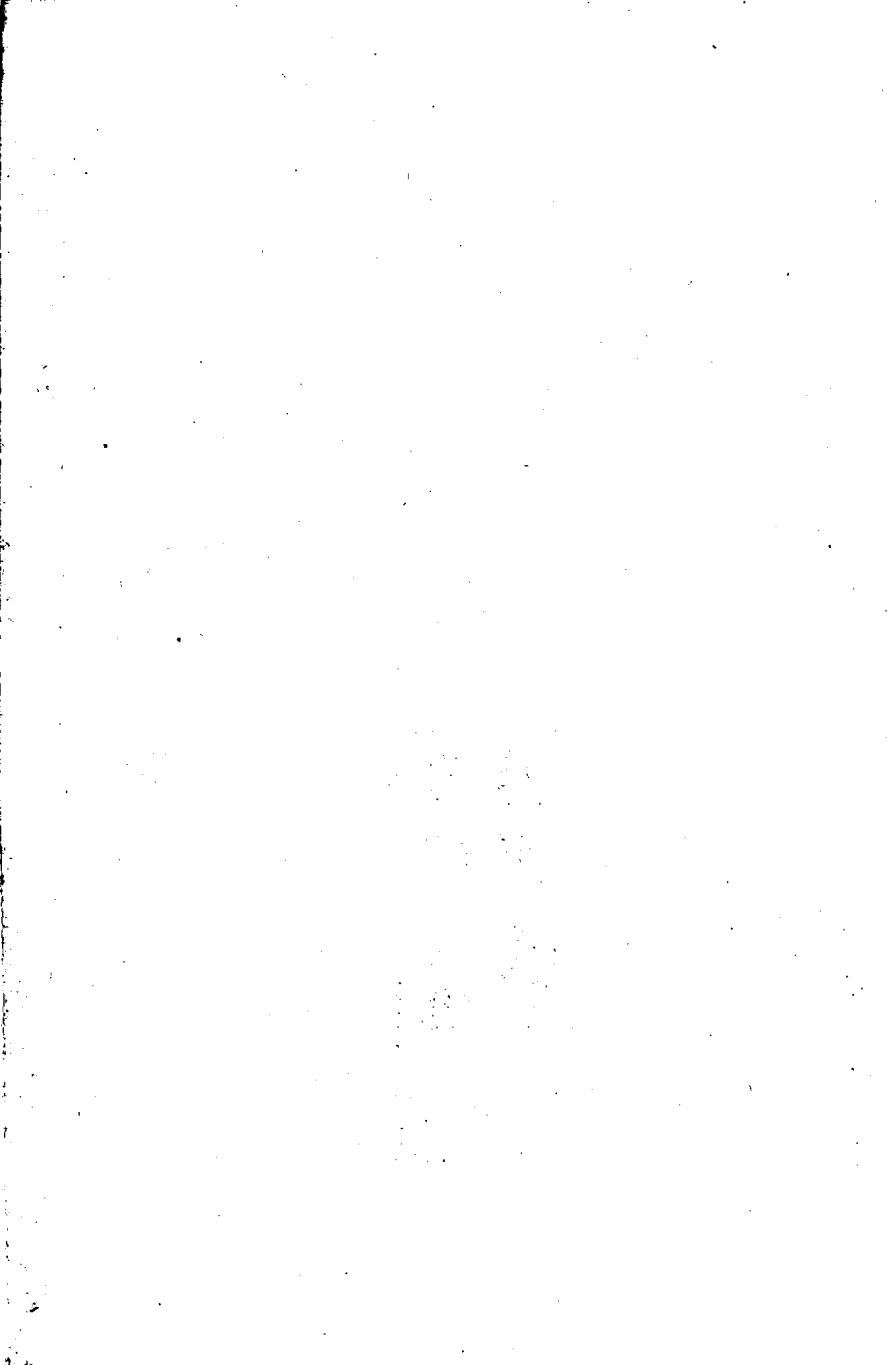
On this note, which blends homage to the modern with a deep regard for "the old decorums," it is appropriate to salute and take leave of this sensitive, original and vital artist, of whom an earlier master, himself both innovator and sound traditionalist, might have said, "There is no excellent beauty that hath not some strangeness in the proportion."

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TO THE
LIGHTHOUSE

BY

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

TERENCE HOLLIDAY

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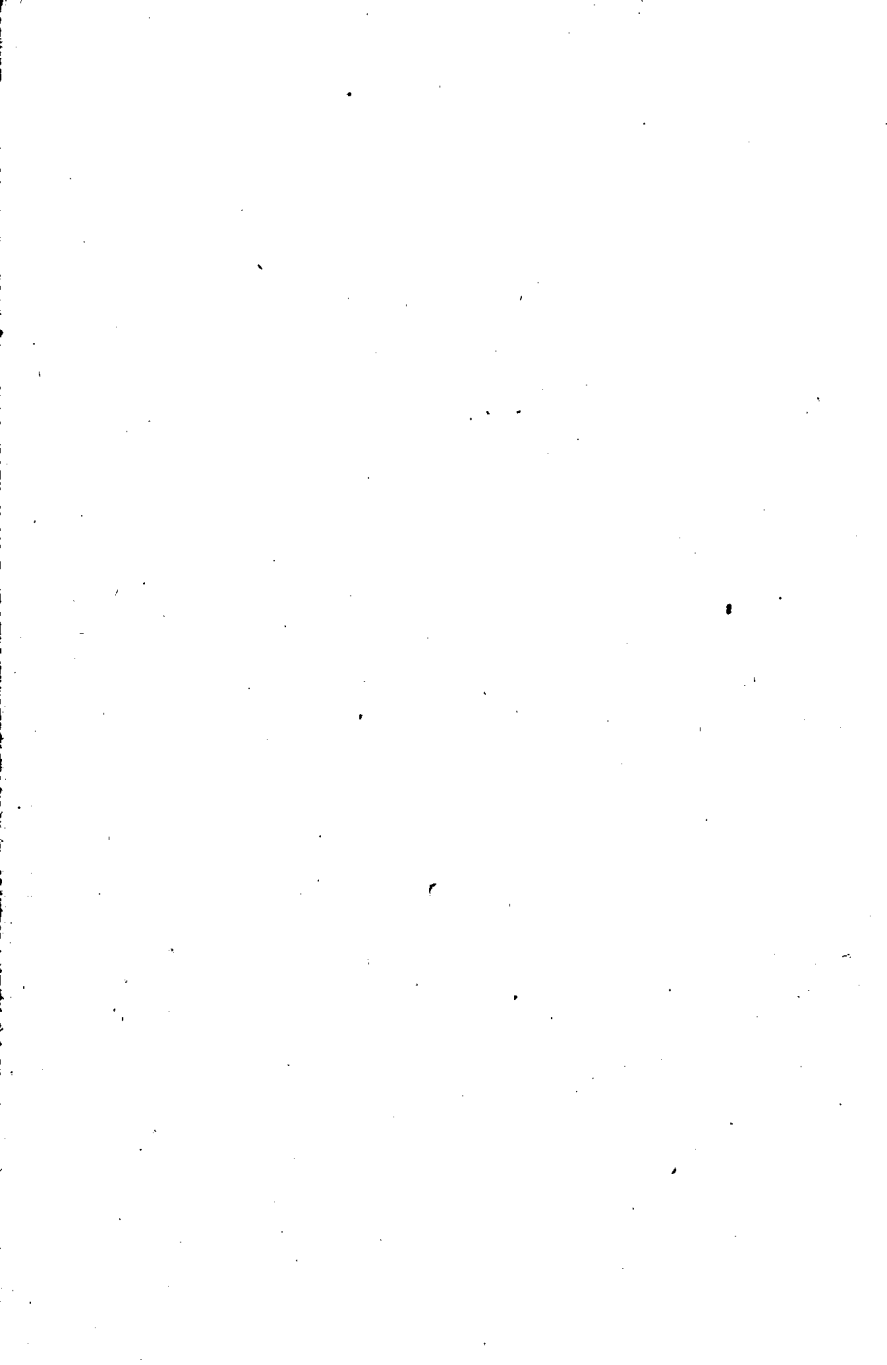
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Contents

- I. THE WINDOW 7
- II. TIME PASSES 187
- III. THE LIGHTHOUSE 215



The Window