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Hermione Lee's The Novels of Virginia Woolf [Book Review]

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The weakest part of the book is the end, where the author measures Unamuno's fictional creations against his yardstick of heroism. (Not one of them, incidentally, ever reaches truly heroic proportions. Ouimette shows quite clearly and convincingly how Unamuno, the creator, is incapable of allowing his characters, his creations, to scale these great heights.) Unfortunately, this highly useful and generally significant study degenerates, at times, into a recitation of figures in a catalogue. Characters like Augusto Pérez, Manuel Bueno, Alejandro Gómez, la tía Tula, and others certainly deserve study, and the author does present us with new, important insights into their being, but does an exhaustive classification of truly minor and, to tell the truth, eminently forgettable characters add to his, or our, comprehension of them? I would have welcomed a fuller discussion of an Abel Sánchez, for example, and, had they been omitted, would never have missed the Silvestre Carrascos, Juan-Marías, and don Catalinos of his minor fiction.

In spite of these reservations, I heartily recommend *Reason Aflame*. It is a valuable book, one that illuminates a hitherto little-examined aspect of the anguished Spaniard. When more books of this quality are published, perhaps then we will have succeeded at long last in capturing Unamuno.

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The Novels of Virginia Woolf: Fact and Vision. By ALICE VAN BUREN KELLEY. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1973. vii + 279 pp. \$8.95.

The Novels of Virginia Woolf: Fact and Vision is valuable because it edges us closer to an understanding of Virginia Woolf's response to life. Alice van Buren Kelley draws on Woolf's own use of the terms "fact" and "vision" and explores this dichotomy in her novels. According to Kelley, Woolf's factual world includes "the world of solid objects," "the world of social actions," and "the world of intellect," in which we find those who try "to force an order on the unordered and unconnected beings" about them and those who devote themselves "to a search for truth without illusion." The world of vision, on the other hand, involves a "sense of boundlessness" which pervades the lives of those attuned to this world and which "also reveals itself in patterns outside the individual life, in patterns of history, of a certain sort of immortality, and in the pattern of accumulated moments of vision." "Within the world of fact," Kelley adds, "identity is that which distinguishes one, separates one, from others," whereas "identity in the world of vision is unity, merging, a combining of all things" (pp. 3-4). But fact and vision are nonetheless interdependent: "Fact needs vision to help it transcend the limits of objective, physical truth. Vision needs fact as the solid base from which to leap into unity"

(p. 5). Kelley claims that all of Woolf's novels present "the duality of fact and vision" and that "each one emphasizes a different aspect of this relationship or offers some new insight into the reconciliation of the two":

Her early novels tend to stress the isolation, the aimlessness, of modern people while offering the balance of fact and vision as a possible cure for this condition. Those written in the middle of her career put less emphasis on generalized separation of individuals in order to give greater care to refining the vision and better defining the factual world. Her last three novels work toward a final vision that, in the face of facts, can offer solace to a world threatened by chaos and disaster. (p. 6)

After introducing her terms, Kelley devotes a chapter to each of Woolf's novels. Much of what she says is perceptive. Particularly illuminating are her discussions of *Night and Day* and *The Waves* and, to a lesser extent, *The Voyage Out*. Periodically, one is troubled by the limitations involved in her use of the terms "fact" and "vision" to discuss the dualism inherent in the novels. The meaning of "fact" shifts too often and is allowed to include too much—for instance, Sir William Bradshaw's concept of proportion and Miss Kilman's obsession with conversion. Sometimes, too, she associates certain characters totally with fact when they obviously have alliances with vision, among them Mrs. Flanders, Augustus Carmichael, and Percival. At times she even distorts her interpretation of the novels in strange ways to accommodate the terms. I felt this happening to some extent in the *Mrs. Dalloway* chapter but especially in her discussion of *Jacob's Room*, which is the weakest part of her book.

I enjoyed Kelley's detailed analyses of the novels, yet I was repeatedly disturbed by how limited they are in scope. She excludes all biographical material, and she fails to point out the interconnections between Woolf's sensitivity to "fact" and "vision" and her experiences as a manic-depressive. Also, Kelley seems to have little or no feminist consciousness to bring to material written very much with a feminist consciousness. There is decidedly something missing in the way she discusses Terence and Rachel's skepticism about marriage, Katharine Hilbery's resistance to her mother, Clara Durrant's plight, and Lily Briscoe's resistance to Mrs. Ramsay's efforts to have her marry, and, more generally, in the way she speaks of marriage. Kelley likewise fails to detect Woolf's awareness of the link between patriarchal societies and the growth of fascism and how that awareness underlies *The Years* and *Between the Acts*. Missing too are the links that should have been made between Woolf's interest in "fact" and "vision" and her aesthetics. Indeed, throughout, Kelley seems a bit blind to the significance of what she so carefully describes.

However, we do glean from Kelley's work, to a rewarding extent, the enormous importance to Woolf of what she sometimes called "vision." Vision

involves a sense of ecstasy which is discovered by experiencing life intensely, by exploring to its fullest the experience of the moment. In her interest in the moment of vision, Woolf follows in the footsteps of such predecessors as Laurence Sterne, Walter Pater, and the Impressionists. To experience ecstasy via art, sex, or love, via the unexpected revelation of pattern or symbolic meaning, or simply via gaiety made her feel "in love" with life. For Woolf these moments of ecstasy made life worth living. To understand this is extremely important, and Kelley helps us understand it.

If in conjunction with Kelley's book we read the accounts by Woolf's friends in *Recollections of Virginia Woolf* (London, 1972), edited by Joan Russell Noble, we see the connection between Woolf's personality and her writing that Kelley does not make. Cited in Noble's book are Quentin Bell's statement that Woolf was "perpetually trembling on the edge of ecstasy" (p. 140) and Clive Bell's observation that she made others feel "that the temperature of life was several degrees higher than [they] had supposed." Bell's children found her "fun" to be with and hence "enjoyed beyond anything a visit from Virginia" (p. 73). Barbara Bagenal stresses Woolf's "enormous sense of gaiety" (p. 153). Elizabeth Bowen recalls her as "a creature of laughter and movement" and notes that "her power in conveying enjoyment was extraordinary" (p. 49). Also stressed in these accounts is Woolf's curiosity, her intense questioning of others about their lives. The enthusiasm with which she responded to life obviously made possible the sense of ecstasy, the quest for vision that we find in her novels.

The recollections of Woolf's effervescence in Noble's book give us a different picture of Woolf's personality than does the often depressed tone of her writings in her diary. Hopefully, we shall be able to hold the many facets of her personality in our minds simultaneously so that we may move closer to re-creating the whole person. Unfortunately, Kelley oversimplifies Woolf's view of life when she overstresses the hopeful and optimistic elements in it. She denies that the underside of ecstasy, depression, is increasingly present in the novels.

Kelley is overoptimistic even in her discussion of Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out*. In contrast to what Kelley says, Rachel Vinrace does not reconcile fact and vision; her death is an escape, not a victory. As the lines from *Comus* indicate, Rachel cannot cope with the "fact" of sex. Then again, in discussing Part 2 of *To the Lighthouse*, Kelley takes the destructive facts too lightly. She misses the irony inherent in the way the deaths of Mrs. Ramsay, Prue, and Andrew are announced parenthetically. True, pattern and hope are still there, but one should not underestimate the force of Mr. Ramsay's way of seeing. Likewise, Kelley overestimates the consolation offered to Woolf by the pattern in history and culture depicted in *Between the Acts*. In Kelley's statement that "Love, beauty, art, and faith have been revealed as the unchanging forces that reconcile men's differences and keep the vision alive

in a world that is ever threatened by war, disease, and death" (p. 249), there is a kind of naïveté that is not inherent in Woolf. Certainly, the consolation of pattern is there, but Woolf clings to it in a desperate fashion. She fears the annihilation of the civilization which makes possible the rhythmic renewal of great periods of "love, beauty, and art." Life annihilated—whether of an individual or a society—cuts off the formation of the design. I do not think that Woolf's last three books offer "solace to a world threatened by chaos and disaster" (p. 6). Indeed, the hope to be found in Isa's primitive interaction with Giles at the end of *Between the Acts* is a poor substitute for her sense of being in love when she thinks of Rupert Haines. The possibility of feeling real love again parallels the possibility of the androgynous society. Isa's frustration during the day and her way of carrying on the routine of daily life despite her underlying unhappiness parallel the plodding along that Woolf did, "like a doomed mouse, nibbling at my daily page," while the presence of Hitler's army on the Rhine threatened the advent of World War II (*A Writer's Diary*, March 13, 1936). Both situations leave a lot to be desired and do not offer much "hope." I do not agree with Kelley that Woolf's final novel "intimates that the pattern will never be destroyed and that even the most disparate lives, the most ominous clouds of the future, will be absorbed into the infinite, the visionary whole" (p. 250).

Woolf's novels lead us to appreciate the sacredness of gaiety, art, love, revelation, beauty, and friendship. They teach us about the effort involved in reconciling fact with vision. Kelley's close readings and interpretations of the novels help us to see these qualities of Woolf's fiction. Kelley is right, too, in giving us a sense of Woolf's movement from attempts to reconcile fact and vision in the personal lives depicted in her early novels to the sensitivity to pattern in history and culture in her final novel. Midway, one might add, is her interest in pattern in art and life in *To the Lighthouse*. One only wishes that Kelley had more often seen the significance of what she conveys and made more of the links for us. But despite its limitations, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf: Fact and Vision* is definitely worthwhile reading. Compared to Harvena Richter's *Virginia Woolf: The Inward Voyage*, James Naremore's *World Without a Self: Virginia Woolf and the Novel*, and Allen McLaurin's *Virginia Woolf: The Echoes Enslaved*, this work deals more with what Woolf was trying to say than with how she was trying to say it. Along with the older critical works by Jean Guiguet (*Virginia Woolf and Her Works*) and Josephine Schaefer (*The Three-Fold Nature of Reality in the Novels of Virginia Woolf*), Kelley gets at much that is important in Woolf's writing. She plants in our minds seeds of thought and sends us back to Woolf's novels with a greater understanding of what they are all about.

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