

BRIEF MENTIONS

PHYLLIS ROSE

Woman of Letters: A Life of Virginia Woolf

New York: Oxford University Press, 1978. Pp. 298. \$12.95.

ROGER POOLE

The Unknown Virginia Woolf

Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1978. Pp. 285.

Phyllis Rose in her recent life of Virginia Woolf intends, she says, to place Woolf's works "in a biographical context" (p. viii) and "to redress the biographical emphasis on her illness and suicide by showing the extent to which she took her life into her own hands" (p. xi). Both of these aims are successfully accomplished in the book. In addition, she wants to see Woolf's novels not as "meditations on philosophical themes" but as "personal treatments of vital and immediate problems of identity" (p. xiii). Here, too, the book is largely successful. Much of the early biographical material comes from memoirs Woolf herself wrote, which Rose puts together to follow a chronological pattern until World War I. Biographical material after that is readily available in the recent flood of publications about the Bloomsbury group.

Therefore, for Phyllis Rose the novels become a kind of working out or catharsis of traumatic problems born and encountered in Woolf's childhood in Kensington and with the young men of Bloomsbury. In *The Voyage Out*, according to Rose, we see her liberation from Kensington, and in Hewett and Hirst, Bloomsbury figures who challenge feminine identity. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, she examines the dualism inherent in a society which can perpetrate misdemeanors but never talk about them. It also portrays Lady Ottoline Morrell, her first "great hostess." In *To the Lighthouse* Woolf's parents are resurrected and her involvement with them is explored. The strong thread of feminism found in some of her later work is not for Rose "a change of direction but an intensification and clarification of attitudes developed early in her life" (p. 47). Writing became

a refuge for her, a way of reconciling opposites and "of fitting, let us say, Septimus Warren Smith and Mrs. Dalloway into the same book" (p. 258). Phyllis Rose's book is splendidly written and its argument is sound. We see Woolf, indeed, as involved through her novels in an absorbing search for identity and for a solution to the depressing ambiguities of her early years in Kensington and St. Ives.

Another recent biographical treatment, that of Roger Poole, deals with the life of Virginia Woolf from a somewhat different perspective. Poole believes that the words *madness*, *lunacy*, *insanity* should be withdrawn because Woolf's behavior throughout her life is "explicable in terms of cause and effect" (p. 3). Using primary material such as the novels, *A Writer's Diary*, and *The Collected Essays*, supplemented by Leonard Woolf's autobiography and Quentin Bell's *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, Poole gradually develops the deforming and destructive elements at work in the Woolfs' marriage. Like Phyllis Rose, Poole sees the novels as attempts at divining the cause of and overcoming mental distress, "written to master people and states of mind . . . which had previously mastered her" (p. 3). Like Rose, Poole begins with the traumatic early experiences with Gerald and George Duckworth. He follows these with a chapter called "The Terrors of Engagement" showing the tragic failure of the relationship with Leonard and their honeymoon, described by Leonard as if it were "a boy-scout outing" (p. 52). The marriage of the Woolfs is seen by Poole as one of perpetual conflict rooted in two irreconcilable world views. Poole interprets the novels in the light of these conflicts, from Rachel's in *The Voyage Out* to conflicts between Septimus Smith and Sir William Bradshaw in *Mrs. Dalloway* and those between Bart Oliver and his sister Mrs. Swithin in *Between the Acts*, "opposed mental positions" (p. 237). We see Leonard forcing Virginia to eat, imposing the label "ill" upon her, developing in Virginia "a sense of being perpetually contradicted" (p. 207). One of the later chapters is entitled "Incompatibility," for Leonard, according to Poole, never was able to read between the lines or "between the acts." Poole's re-

interpretation of Virginia Woolf's problems is a convincing one. It is one that has long been implicit in biographies and literary criticism of Woolf, but never expressed so baldly as in this book. It is also one that seems somehow familiar to the reader of Woolf's novels, in which male characters (like Hirst, Richard Dalloway, Mr. Ramsay, or Bart Oliver) are in some ways unsympathetic or insensitive to their female companions and counterparts. If, indeed, as Poole suggests, Virginia Woolf was "a proud spirit," who did not like defeat, we can now understand her suicide. As Poole writes, "The water would receive her with the dignity that she felt she needed, and indeed, deserved" (p. 279).

Margaret Church

CAMILLE R. LA BOSSIÈRE
Joseph Conrad and the Science of Unknowing
 Fredericton, N.B.: York Press,
 1979. Pp. 110.

For nearly a decade Conrad scholarship has been punctuated by assertions that Conrad criticism is "at the end of the tether" and that Conrad is "a writer about whom very little new remains to be said" (see John Feaster, "Conrad and Ford: Criticism at the End of the Tether," *Journal of Modern Literature*, 2 [1972], 417-21; Frederick R. Karl, "Conrad Studies," *Studies in the Novel*, 9 [1977], 326). There is indeed little need for further critical studies that, mechanically and abruptly, chapter by leaden chapter, offer platitudinous readings of the major novels. Yet there is a very serious need for work to be done by versatile scholars who can provide a more thorough comprehension of the phenomenology of Conrad's philosophical outlook and of the substantial portion of Conrad's work that has been neglected due to the imperceptiveness and partiality of previous studies. The author of the volume under present consideration addresses his work to this need as he demonstrates a command of Conrad's works that can be equalled by few scholars and uses this command to articulate a

synthetic presentation of the Conradian metaphysics that may well prove to be definitive.

Past criticism of Conrad's novels has too often wallowed in the platitudes of the Protestant work ethic, affirming comfortingly that Conrad is an "intellectually simple" man who "didn't theorize . . . because his mind was not equipped to do so," that Conrad's talent lies in "reducing the complex to the simple," and that consequently his primary ethical concern is the discovery of "whether or not [a character] is faithful to the community" in order to demonstrate that "Humanity is important; fidelity is the highest virtue," that, indeed, there is "a victory of human solidarity" (see M. C. Bradbrook, *Joseph Conrad: Poland's English Genius* [Cambridge: Univ. Press, 1941], p. 67; Thomas Moser, *Joseph Conrad: Achievement and Decline* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1957], p. 14; Samuel Hynes, "Two Rye Revolutionaries," *Sewanee Review*, 73 [1965], 152; Lee M. Whitehead, "'An Island Is But The Top of a Mountain': Isolation and Solidarity in Conrad's Victory," *L'Epoque Conradienne* [February, 1980], p. 106). A glance at the dates in the above parenthetical note shows that such superficial nonsense continues to be printed right up to the present moment in Conrad studies. And only Conrad himself, commenting to Edward Garnett regarding readers' appreciation of "The End of the Tether," can provide an appropriately informal response: "Touching, tender, noble, moving. . . . Let us spit!" (Letter of 22 December, 1902).

Prof. La Bossière's book takes its place (along with, e.g., E. W. Said's *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* and the opening chapter of J. Hillis Miller's *Poets of Reality*) among the few studies of Conrad's work upon which Conrad would not expectorate. Prof. La Bossière is one of a minority of critics willing to bring to bear upon Conrad's fiction a rigorous understanding of the post-Kantian philosophical context in terms of which Conrad thought and wrote, and which dictates that "Extremes touch" (*A Personal Record*, p. 132), that "facts appraised by reason [have] a mysterious complexity and a dual character" (*Suspense*, p. 38), and that consequently the very men who supposedly are redemptive exemplars (according to the cuspidor mode of critical discourse) in fact are defined by Conrad as hopelessly inadequate: those whose "steadfastness of