

be condemning myself, but his condemnatory conclusion disturbs me for to have written it Jameson must not see himself as a political intellectual caught up in words, or see that he too represents an ideology which has in its turn entered "the field of force of the real social world." Here, too, we find a "terrible innocence," at the heart of a book which seems so sophisticated.

Reed Way Dasenbrock

CAROL SHIELDS

Happenstance

Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson,
1980. Pp. 216. \$14.95

If you think of recent fiction as serial items in the chronicles of neurosis and despair among the fouled up lifestyles of the middle classes, then Carol Shields latest work comes as a minority report on a seemingly foreign country. It recounts the experiences of Jack Bowman, an academic historian living in the Elm Park suburb of Chicago, during the week his wife Brenda is away with her quilts at a craft show in Philadelphia. A variety of crises, major and minor, fill out Jack's week; his closest friend Bernie Koltz splits up with his wife and comes to stay with him; his father, a devotee of self-improvement books, following the precepts of *Living Adventurously*, tries Turkish coffee and makes phone calls at odd hours; his neighbour, Larry Carpenter, tries unsuccessfully to commit suicide; his son Rob decides not to eat for a week; a huge snowstorm hits the city; his secretary indicates that she has conducted exciting sexual acts with him in her fantasies. Jack accommodates this mosaic of events without feeling obliged to indulge in the main event of so much modern fiction—the dark night of the soul. The ingredients for it are there threaded through the book, vague intimations of his loss of faith, rambling speculations on the nature of history, fears that a rival scholar has jumped the gun by publishing a monograph in precisely the area on which he has, halfheartedly, spent years of research. But in the varying pressures of his week, though doubts filter through his head and his habit of mind is characterized

by wry self-mockery, he has no melodramatic propensity to make a meal of disaster. He is sustained by minor pleasures, fleeting insights and a basic sense that his relationships are secure and will endure. So this is a book about what used to be called the silent majority, about coping or muddling through with some sense of dignity intact. In all of her work Shields has indicated that the small ceremonies of life that sustain a texture of decency are worth observing and maintaining. Legions of American writers have documented the superficialities of habit, the vulnerability of our lives to crisis, presenting characters who plunge into lonely alienation and yield themselves up to maudlin whining about the meaninglessness of it all. Shields gives us several characters whose lives are coming unraveled yet she places her emphasis on the way they find strengths within themselves and the way others come to their aid in knitting back together the fabric of relatively stable, ongoing existence. Jack Bowman sees himself as a little colorless but he can regard his own failures and those of his friends as being within an acceptable, normal range. He has not burdened himself with all kinds of expectations that he cannot fulfill, and so he is not completely mired in navel gazing. He is not the best father, son, husband or friend in the world, but he is good enough to accept the responsibility of helping those who come to him in trouble. Shields has no interest in grandiose, heroic gestures, rather she is concerned to demonstrate that adulthood requires flexibility, a certain stoical persistence, and a realization that wisdom is a cumulative process not a destination to be plunged towards at others' expense.

The structure of the novel weaves about in time recalling fragments of childhood, early courtship, the development of friendships, the evolving relationship to parents. Many of these passages seem to be over-elaborate, pointless meanderings, until we realize how they help to create our sense of ease with the solid and unspectacular central figure. Jack's parents appear to be dull in the ordinariness of their routines until we sense the generosity of their undemanding love. Shields fortunately ensures that her characters never seem to be smugly complacent for she endows each of them with a touch of altruism and a practicality that avoids self-congratulation. The clarity of her prose style, the flexibility of tone, the aptness of her descriptive passages bring us into a close and sympathetic engagement with her characters. Quilt making is an

occupation relevant to the style of the book. In the middle of a snowstorm Jack decides to walk the ten miles home from his downtown office and Chicago becomes the white quilt on which the pattern of his life is worked out. Fragments of memory, observation, chance encounters, sudden impulses, fears and momentary pleasures are sewn together. It is an endeavor neither heroic nor mock-heroic. It has the quality of Bloomsday without all the formidable literary machinery. Dostoevsky gave us fools and grotesques trying to survive in the spiritual desert of the modern world. Following in his footsteps Saul Bellow and others have given us a tribe of isolates tacking along the coasts of despair. The underground man and the antihero have had a long innings. Shields suggests that they often give us a false image of society. She has concentrated on people whose lives usually go unrecorded in history. They came together by happenstance and with the recognition that in modest determination they can help to shoulder each other's burdens.

Anthony S. Brennan

MARIA DIBATTISTA

Virginia Woolf's Major Novels: The Fables of Anon

New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980. Pp. 252.

MICHAEL ROSENTHAL

Virginia Woolf

New York: Columbia University Press, 1979. Pp. 270.

The need for a book like Maria DiBattista's has long been felt by serious readers of Virginia Woolf. Too much has been written in terms of the personal and psychological syndrome, too little about Woolf's "narrative identity." DiBattista redresses this imbalance, seeing that Mrs. Woolf's *impersonality* springs from a "fable of androgyny and a philosophy of anonymity." She goes on to demonstrate her thesis in each of the major novels, starting with *Mrs. Dalloway* where she feels that the creative mind effectively absents itself from the novel it was creating, thus providing the reader with an "insubstantial narrator."

To the Lighthouse is viewed by DiBattista as Mrs. Woolf's interpretation of her own family romance, her mother and her father, as "a parable of creation, a fable of knowledge." It becomes an artistic "rite de passage" as Lily, victimized like Virginia Woolf by a "tyrannical . . . yet beloved old man" finishes her painting and "a vision of renovated order" as James reaches the lighthouse at the tiller of his father's boat.

Furthermore, *Orlando* may be seen either as satiric fiction pursuing the aim of general improvement or as psychological fiction describing the quest for integration, an allegory of the "multiple selves composing the modern ego." The anonymous poet in *The Waves*, according to DiBattista, makes reason of it all. Anon expresses the common thought and feeling, and at the same time speaks in one fluid style, *on an*, as DiBattista points out, meaning "in one or together." The larger movements of "historical and natural order" subsume in *The Waves* the singular movements of *one* life.

In *Between the Acts*, DiBattista sees reenacted in the relation of Isa and Giles "that primeval war between man and woman." And in Miss La Trobe's obsession with "getting things up" a Nietzschean *self-forgetfulness*. She is the Woolfian artist who becomes "slave of her audience," and her triumph is in her realization of "art as gift, mere gift, free gift."

DiBattista's work successfully traces the "vanishing of the writing 'I'" in the major works of Virginia Woolf. It is a book worth reading not only for its important insights into the Woolfian method and for its refreshing point of view, but for its own technical virtues and for its grace of style, especially appropriate to a discussion of the novels of Virginia Woolf.

Michael Rosenthal's *Virginia Woolf* also eschews personal and psychological critical norms. Like DiBattista's study, it is a useful and well written discussion of Woolf's novels, presenting them from the point of view of the "primacy of form." Introductory chapters on the life and on Bloomsbury serve as background for the critical material to follow, although in the author's own words, they make "no claim to original research." This reviewer wonders if they are essential to Rosenthal's argument, reviewing as they do, well-known facts of Woolf's environment and appearing thereby somewhat extraneous to the critical posture of the book as a whole.