

NOTES AND REVIEWS

Woolf's Affirmations of Existence: Vijay Kapur's *Virginia Woolf's Vision of Life and Her Search for Significant Form*

One of the refreshing contributions that Vijay Kapur makes to Woolf criticism is her clearheaded appraisal of the lifelong quest for meaning contained in Woolf's fiction,¹ a quest that involved a dynamic interplay between the real, objective, daily and particular world, and the human beings through whose consciousness Woolf sought to define the meaning of life. Woolf's "complex vision of reality that has for long confounded the common readers and intrigued the critics," writes Kapur, can be understood as the result of a dialectical process through which Woolf explored the relationship between "the subject and the object, the apparent and the real, the one and many, identity and diversity, isolation and communion, as they form the dialectic that operates on the levels of thesis and antithesis and tends towards their resolution of synthesis" (p. 9). Note that Kapur writes "tends towards their resolution of synthesis": one very refreshing aspect of her study is that she does not propose her dialectical thesis as a deductive absolute nor her readings as rigidly defined conclusions; rather, her hypotheses are open-ended in a manner appropriate to Woolf's fictional process as she describes it. One of the most disturbing elements in Woolf criticism has been an inappropriately abstract approach based on metaphysical or linguistic concepts so far removed from the kind of experience that is Woolf's subject matter as to seem both distracting and irrelevant. Kapur considers such critical approaches based upon the "belief that there exists *a priori* for a writer an exterior reality and a system of values" and that the writer's "supreme concern is how best he [sic] can express and convey his [sic] concepts," a belief inappropriate to Woolf's open-ended quest for meaning which Kapur sees as a "complex process of exploration and discovery of new aspects of these and also new techniques and devices" (p. 7-8). Woolf makes it perfectly clear in both her fiction and non-fiction that she "never had any philosophical perspective in the ordinary sense of the term," as Kapur puts it, and that a "fixed moral stance" would be contrary to her vision and methods. To approach her work from a set conceptual perspective, thus, would lead one to miss the dynamic approach she took to her subject matter, which was always the daily human experience of delight and sorrow.

Kapur is able to get away from the tedious practice of setting forth a thesis and then devoting one chapter to each novel that characterizes much of Woolf criticism by organizing her chapters thematically and dealing with a variety of novels, sometimes the entire opus, in relation to that theme. She thus returns to her hypothesis concerning an open-ended and dialectical process fiction in chapters focusing on Woolf's theories or writing, her vision of reality, the quest for identity, her manner of facing death, etc. Without getting bogged down in endless quotation and commentary, moreover, she brings into play wide readings in Woolf criticism, both in the abstract studies characterizing the work before the 1970s and in the more recent criticisms that have been able to take advantage of new manuscript drafts and of fresh biographical material. Kapur's readings are thus thoroughly grounded in the considerable range of Woolf criticism written both during her lifetime and after.

¹Vijay Kapur, *Virginia Woolf's Vision of Life and Her Search for Significant Form* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1979). All references are to this edition and will appear in the text.

In my praise of Kapur's work I do not mean to imply that this study is without flaw: the flaws, however, are mainly technical or even typographical—a good many misspellings which seem to involve reversed letters, for example: a blurring of the photo-processed print in places, a quotation and paraphrase from my criticism without a footnote and an attribution to me of a statement that I was citing with dismay from another author!

However Kapur's approach and her success in applying it, refreshingly direct in style, convince me that hers will be a useful volume to introduce the student and the common reader to Woolf's work. There are places where I differ with Kapur's interpretations, as when she agrees with a number of other critics who think that the six characters in *The Waves* are parts of one personality or a collective portrait of one human consciousness. "Taken together," she writes of these characters, "they represent the whole being of man [sic] which involves a number of incompatibles." My difference here is a matter of interpretation: Woolf's concern with how friends interact with each other to reveal deeper aspects of personal self and the meaning of life in community has always seemed to me the basic structure of a novel which provides her fullest exploration of the lives of human beings in interaction. If each character is not a separate person but one of "six responses to life," Woolf is indulging in an abstract and allegorical approach out of line with Kapur's description of her methods elsewhere.

As a final quibble I must take exception to Kapur's use of masculine gender as normative, not only semantically, as when she introduces Woolf's opus as concerned with "the nature of man," but even more substantially, as when she asserts that "Sally Seton's revolutionary zeal and dare-devil unconventional approach to life represent Clarissa's repressed traits of masculinity" (p. 105). Again, the idea that one character represents something in another dallies with the Jungian concept of projection in a manner that seems unsuitable to Woolf's concept of character; more crucially, in this instance, the gender rigid semantics lead to gender rigidity of a broader sort in the assumption that revolutionary zeal and daredevil behavior cannot characterize a fully feminine person.

Having taken all of these quibbles into account, however, I find that I value Kapur's study highly, especially for her perspective on an important area in evaluating Woolf, the question of her relationship with the modern or (as it is fashionably termed at present) the modernistic movement in art and literature. In their definitive volume on modernism, Bradbury and McFarlane place Woolf within the movement for her aesthetic experimentation, her way of moving "beyond historical necessity to worlds of coherence" which are "inner worlds," transcending the traumas and poverty of human history.² Although it is certainly true that Woolf's work provides an excellent instance of the experimental movement in modern fiction, often interestingly parallel to the post-Impressionist and other modern movements in art, Bradbury and McFarlane fall into the anti-subjective trap which first became popular during the 1930s, accusing Woolf of being politically irrelevant, as if her consideration of the way people's minds work meant that she was unconcerned with the way their consciousnesses interact with history. It is always amazing, considering the straight-forward antimilitarism and clear-eyed assessment of both fascism and sexism that characterized Woolf's political writing, to find well-educated commentators perennially deploring her disinterest in political history. Kapur puts us straight on this matter in an interesting way. Having reminded us of the violent disruptions death brought to her personal life and war to her life in history, in a penultimate chapter entitled "In Defiance of Death: Creative Illusions" Kapur re-

²Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, "The Name and Nature of Modernism," in *Modernism*, eds. M. Bradbury and J. McFarlane (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), p. 25.

minds us that Woolf's entire writing career was devoted to wrestling with the relationship between everyday experience and the experience of our century of total war. The signal difference, in my opinion, between Woolf's attitude to human life and that of many "modernists," consists of the fact that, in the face of her devastating personal and political experiences, she continually transcended nihilism in an affirmation of life.

In Kapur's hypothesis Woolf's interest in the particular moment, in the solid particularity of everyday life, derives from a dialectical juxtaposition of this dailyness with the abyss, with sudden death, premature sexual invasion, total war, and her own periodic bouts with insanity. The individual deaths that marked her biography and the public deaths that marked her lifetime were thus always present to Woolf's consciousness, constituting one pole of the "reality" she is so often accused of ignoring. In the face of this world created for war and for men which was the context of her life experiences, her affirmation of life seems especially courageous, a celebration of existence quite different from nihilism, though responsive to a "social canopy" only thinly veiling rape, violence, and military terror. Kapur's recognition that Woolf produced novel after novel affirming "a fundamental belief that there is a pattern underlying this universe" identifies the essential achievement of Woolf's opus, and her study provides a welcome reassessment of Woolf's role not only as an experimentalist in modern literature but as a quester able to transcend the despair coloring so much of the literature produced by less intrepid writers. "She remained to the end a humanist as well as a great artist," Kapur concludes, "It is with the 'vision' of a human being that she looks 'in the heart of darkness, in the fields of night,' and discovers the value and meaning of existence from experiences which are universal and primordial" (p. 165).

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Why Is the Collected Orwell Not the Complete Orwell?

The debate around George Orwell has continued steadily through the years since his death. A close look at this critical debate reveals that a number of set ideas about the author and his work have predetermined the course of discussion. The early critics of Orwell, often his personal friends and acquaintances,¹ wrote their studies without the knowledge of Orwell's complete oeuvre. Their judgments remained influential for all the criticism that was to follow. The conclusions were based on Orwell's major works and not on the whole body of his writing.

The situation changed when the late Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus published *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell* in 1968. The Secker & Warburg edition was followed within two years by the Pelican edition. This suggests that there was a need for more information about the man. Only then was it possible to look at Orwell's work as a whole. Or was it?

¹Tom Hopkinson, *George Orwell* (London: Longmans, 1953); Laurence Brander, *George Orwell* (London: Longmans, 1954); Richard Rees, *George Orwell: Fugitive from the Camp of Victory* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1961); George Woodcock, *The Crystal Spirit* (Boston: Little/Brown, 1966).