

Eric Warner, ed.

*VIRGINIA WOOLF: A CENTENARY PERSPECTIVE*

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Reviewed by Ethel F. Cornwell

In September 1982 a Virginia Woolf Centenary Conference was held at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge. *Virginia Woolf: A Centenary Perspective* presents the seven papers delivered at the conference and a transcript of the two panel discussions which followed. According to Eric Warner, who organized the conference and edited the present text, the purpose of the meeting was not only to commemorate a great artist's birth, but "to see Virginia Woolf in a centenary perspective, exploring how she appears to us now," and to focus on "the novels wherein her permanent reputation is likely to rest" (p. 4)—a welcome change from the all-too-frequent tendency of recent critics to focus on peripheral matters rather than on the works themselves.

The leadoff paper, "A Burning Glass: Reflection in Virginia Woolf," was one of the most interesting. In it Hermione Lee focuses on "the habitual, almost involuntary yoking together in her work of glass, reflectors, and fire" (p. 16) to indicate moments of acute perception or creative intensity, and convincingly demonstrates the way in which these images link Virginia Woolf to the Romantic Poets, particularly in their unity of subject and object. (One good example would be Mrs. Ramsey looking at the lighthouse beam until she became what she looked at.)

Another noteworthy contribution was Ian Gregor's "Virginia Woolf and her Reader." Basing his discussion for the most part on *To The Lighthouse*, Professor Gregor examines the process of reading, then demonstrates the way in which Virginia Woolf invites the reader to participate in the creation of meaning, to become, as she put it, her "accomplice," her "fellow-worker" (see p. 50). According to Professor Gregor, Virginia Woolf's best period would be that "characterised by *Mrs Dalloway*, where the reader is free to explore the resonances between Septimus and Clarissa, and *To the Lighthouse*, where the reader can see Mrs. Ramsey for herself, and then meditate upon her different significance in relation to Mr. Ramsey and Lily Briscoe. Both novels define and create gaps which the reader can inhabit with pleasure." (p. 53).

Most interesting of all was T. E. Apter's "Self-Defense and Self-Knowledge: The Function of Vanity and Friendship in Virginia Woolf." Professor Apter examines various novels and stories in terms of "the paradoxes and conflicts surrounding the secrecy of our self-knowledge and the necessity of a shared identity" (p. 84), treating vanity as a form of self-protection, and friendship as a groping toward shared identity. As "The New Dress" exemplifies so well, "the paradox and danger of the party" (so often a focus of attention in Woolf's works) is that although it is where one meets "those people who complete one," it is also "where the vacillations of identity may become confusing and exhausting, thus stimulating vanity as a defense" (p. 89). But as Bernard demonstrates in *The Waves*, one compensation for the inevitable struggle between one's sense of himself and others' view of him is sharpened perceptions (see p. 97).

Some of the other papers, however, are less than successful, such as Professor Bayley's attempt to establish Woolf's apprentice novel, *The Voyage Out*, as her best work—a judgment Virginia Woolf would have disagreed with violently since it negates everything she worked for, ignoring her unique contributions to the technique of the novel, and the works which best exemplify those techniques.

In fact, despite Eric Warner's valiant attempt to bring the panel discussions back to the stated purposes of the conference, I must agree with Roger Poole's protest that, overall, lecturers and panelists seemed "more concerned to bury Caesar than to praise him" (p. 158).

Still, the collection of essays and discussions provides some valuable insights, as well as an interesting record of the conference for Virginia Woolf scholars who were unable to attend.