A NOTE ON VIRGINIA WOOLF

by H. E. BATES

IN England I suppose the four strongest influences on the post Great War novel were Joyce, Lawrence, Hemingway and Virginia Woolf; American literature was impressed by a fifth, Sherwood Anderson, and the deaths of Anderson, Joyce and Virginia Woolf within a few weeks of each other seem to mark the end of an era. In England the death of Anderson was lightly noted ("an American writer of stories and novels, etc."); no one seemed to know how best to summarize the Joyce who had conceived both *Chamber Music* and *Ulysses*, both *Dubliners* and *Finnegan's Wake*; and as one turns over ten or fifteen years of changing impressions of Virginia Woolf, the conclusion gradually forms that all three had some time ago put up the shutters, that the period of their influence, disruptive in the case of Joyce, something of a cult in the case of Virginia Woolf, had already come to an end.

There was a time, in the twenties, when Virginia Woolf was not a writer, but a shrine. The fancy literary trousers of Bloomsbury, of arty country cottages and Chelsea parties, were worn threadbare at the knees from devout genuflections before what seemed to be a highly original altar. To savour the beautifully fastidious, incense-odoured style, to profess a proper affinity with an attitude at once exotic and cruel, passionate and decorative, were the signs of an advanced culture. "The Turkish Delight style," as it was afterwards maliciously called, was taken with great and rather ponderous seriousness. It was, as far as I remember, never parodied, though it cried out for parody as loudly as the dark laughter of Anderson, who was maliciously and joyfully burlesqued (and in reality finished off) in *Torrents of Spring* by Hemingway, who was in actuality parodying himself, quite consciously, as much as Anderson. In England no one brought this corrective attitude of mind to Virginia Woolf, and the cult of talking about her and even of pretending to read her instead of reading her, spread to the fashionable dinner tables of England and America; and it seemed like a malicious accident that in America, at one time, the two best selling books bracketed together at the head of the bookselling tables were *The Waves* and *How to Win Friends and Influence People*.

All this, of course, can hardly be called the fault of the writer herself. She wrote books; the literary fashion of the time brought to them, as they brought to Lawrence, a high and slightly ridiculous sense of devotion that could not help, sooner or later, becoming a form of snobbery. One cold burlesque, one salutary raspberry of honest derision, would have restored proportion; but it never happened. She continued to be taken seriously; and she continued, as Lawrence continued, to take herself seriously. Parody, as in Hemingway's case, was never self-administered.

One key to even the slightest study of Mrs. Woolf is of course her birth and upbringing. The daughter of Sir Leslie Stephen, brought up in an atmosphere in which the leading literary lights were as much taken for granted as the furni-

ture, she could hardly help being the kind of writer she was. Sensibility such as she possessed was bound to be, as with the Sitwells, refined and polished by artistic and intellectual association until it resembled more than anything a diamond, scintillating and quivering with what has been called "spectrum-impressionism," brilliantly reflecting and yet always cutting at life. It is impossible to imagine her writing *Pickwick*, *The Woodlanders*, *Clayhanger* or *A Farewell to Arms*. It is natural for her to have written *The Waves*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Light-house*, and the delightful little *Kew Gardens*. Action, robustness, common touch, characters in the round, ordinariness, were all simply not in her. Life (i.e. of street, factory, pub, home, of the ordinary bloke and the common things) seemed merely a sort of remote accessory to the life going on inside the walls of the room with a view: a life nearer to art than earth, nearer to the toy-mimicry of ballet than the street outside the window. Indeed, it might be said, I think, that her room of one's own, her room with a view, cut her off from nine-tenths of life, leaving her to rarify and decorate the remaining fraction with the luscious colourings of a highly refined private consciousness.

To a writer really interested in his craft it is an absorbing thing to trace the influences that shape other writers, from whom in turn he may have something to learn. And whether Virginia Woolf was fully entitled to the reputation for high originality which she gained is, I think, a little doubtful. Sometimes a writer takes a method, as Hemingway took the methods of Anderson and Gertrude Stein, and gives it some extra touch of appeal it lacks. In this way, I feel, Virginia Woolf took the method of Dorothy Richardson. The Miriam Chronicle, beginning with the beautiful *Pointed Roofs* as far back as 1915, is the force behind *The Waves* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, and the rest. Yet for some reason Dorothy Richardson, in a sense the finer talent, the real innovator of the stream-of-consciousness novel, never remotely approached the position of popular and intelligentzia fame of the woman who succeeded her, and of whose debt to her there can, I think, be no doubt.

"They entered the dark woods by a little well-swept pathway and for a while there was a strip of sky above their heads; but presently the trees grew tall and dense, the sky was shut out, and the trees showered down, so that their topmost leaves trailed in the ripples and the green wedge that lay in the water being made of leaves shifted in leaf-widths as the real leaves shifted. Now there was a shiver of wind—instantly an edge of sky, and they all stood for a moment listening to the tinkling of a little stream."

This passage is composite, and I invite anyone who is interested in derivations and influences to disentangle the sentences of *Pointed Roofs* from those of *Mrs. Dalloway*. The method, the rhythm and the effect are so essentially the same that the passage might satisfactorily pass, I think, as the work of either one writer or another. It may be noted that the date of *Pointed Roofs* is 1915 and that of *Mrs. Dalloway* 1922, so that Miss Richardson had perfected, some years earlier, a style and indeed a whole form of novel-writing for which Virginia Woolf was largely to receive the credit.

By this I do not mean to belittle Virginia Woolf's achievement: only to suggest that it was more derivative than has perhaps been popularly supposed, and further that as a limited achievement it has had, in turn, a limited influence only. She herself said, I think, that she had no hope that the form she had given the novel would be perpetuated. Beauty is not enough; baroque imagery, fastidiousness, fantasy, metaphysics are not enough; and she lived long enough to see the novel in which those virtues were predominant became superseded by a more vigorous and vital form, free of the intellectual post-war neurosis which infected like a nerve plague so many writers of her class, antecedents and generation, a form which was paradoxically far nearer to the mind and heart of the common reader for whom, in one volume, she analysed literature so well.