

**Virginia Woolf & James Wood: Critics and the Age
(1997-2019)**

I

James Wood

Is James Wood a “generational” talent, an innovator practicing literary criticism at as high a level as has ever been done? With becoming immodesty but without noisesome bravado, he openly aspires to rank among “the greatest writer-critics” the English language has produced: “Johnson, De Quincey, Hazlitt, Coleridge, Emerson, Arnold, Ruskin, Woolf, Lawrence, Eliot, Orwell, Jarrell, Hardwick, Pritchett, Sontag.” Does his reach exceed his grasp?

“Critic” is an inadequate word for what Wood is. “Celebrant,” in the quasi-liturgical sense, seems more like it.

An art critic’s function isn’t limited to reporting—displayed objects’ shapes, colors, sizes, materials, and textures; a good critic also sheds light on how objects (or missing objects) align or misalign with curatorial goals and processes—how those objects are “framed.”

“Exegesis, exodus,” Sterling Brown says, “whatever dey calls it” isn’t the only function a critic fulfills. Sometimes, Wood says, criticism means telling a good story about the story you’re telling. A literary critic like Wood provides an “aesthetically responsible account” of the work in question, judges that work in relation to other books in an author’s oeuvre, the historical or other context from which that author or work arises.

Wood’s own tastes and temperament have been characterized as “eccentric.” “Ecumenical” is a better word. Wood is likewise criticized for his “narrow” range of interests. Yet, the wide-ranging *Serious Noticing* ticks off all the essayistic boxes in terms of classic themes and categories: death, whether of parents or other family members; diatribe; growing up and going away; music criticism; portraiture, self-portraiture and profiles; and reading and writing.

In the essay “A Critic’s Manifesto,” Daniel Mendelsohn draws the curtain back on what gets reviewed where by whom. A literary career made up of pieces first appearing periodically and later collected between hard covers has only so much to do with a writer’s tastes and temperament. Much depends on venue, audience and occasion as well as on the precarious supply chain. Writers propose. Editors dispose. For the *Times Literary Supplement* Woolf reviewed some awful books. For *Good Housekeeping* she reviewed some great ones. (Woolf was a very relenting housekeeper, each drawer of her shockingly untidy home

office—where she wrote, standing up, seven days a week, ten or twelve hours a day, eleven months a year—crammed with rejection slips, random jottings on the backs of envelopes, fountain-pen revisions in longhand to typed drafts of articles, short stories, lectures, book-length manuscripts, all at varying stages of incompleteness.)

Around the turn of the 20th century, some of the essays collected in Du Bois' *Souls of Black Folk* originally appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Today, a journalist emailing well-crafted pitches to large-circulation monthlies like that would be lucky to receive a personalized rejection slip, in the form of an apology, stating that too many good books are vying for too little space in ever fewer features pages decimated by declining ad revenues. To have collected between 1997 and 2019 twenty-eight essays as “scrupulous, painstaking and detailed” as those in *Serious Noticing* is no small feat, and “represents an act of political resistance,” carries “moral resistance in every sentence.”

The prosecution charges Wood's essays are “apolitical,” that Wood's essays are apolitical. Which is in itself highly political. Literary politics is about perceived asymmetries of power—power of access to media coverage, who wants it, who's thought to control it from editorial offices at *The New Republic* or the *London Review of Books*—whose novel is or is not getting reviewed much less short-listed or long-listed for the Booker Prize.

A [half-week's pay] [\$750] essay-review isn't always a party manifesto. Wood doesn't view each and every artifact under consideration through a rigidly deconstructionist lens just because his father-in-law went to school with Jacques Derrida. So, why should a reader expect Wood's essay on *Tess* to yield the same political insight of “Orwell's Very English Revolution”? There's room in criticism for both E.M. Forster and James Wood, for both *Aspects of the Novel* and *Serious Noticing*. “There is room in a novel for storytelling,” Virginia Woolf discovered, room “for tragedy, for criticism and information and philosophy.” The same holds true for an essay.

Can't criticize Wood for lack of “chops.” Langston and others accuse Baldwin of “overwriting and over-poeticizing.” In comparison, Wood sometimes seems to be “underwriting,” if only because that type of droll lends toward understatement rather than antic comedy. Stylistically, Wood is transparent. Whereas Randall Jarrell's *Poetry and the Age* can sound like a back-translation from English into German and back into English again. Wood's fearlessly aphoristic as Gore Vidal. His essays are less “rowdy with anecdote” than those of *United States: Essays, 1952-1992*, is all.

Whatever the verdict, Wood proves beyond a reasonable doubt that our pre-digital generation—essayists ranging from 45 to 70, those born between the Cold War and the Vietnam, within living memory of *Topeka v. Brown*, 1960s counterculture, The Troubles in Northern Ireland, the assassinations of JFK, Malcolm X, MLK or RFK—our generation has produced ourselves a Man of Letters.

II

Virginia Woolf

“Virginia Woolf’s Mysticism” is among the best essays in *Serious Noticing*. Nothing about Woolf’s greatness is mysterious. Yet, cult myths envelop her. Myth One concerns the “difficulty” of Woolf’s writing. What’s problematic is that those left cold by her literary criticism worship the fiction while the others remain unresponsive to the novels those essays alone made possible. Woolf’s writing seems pretty straightforward. It’s her personal life, Myth Two, perpetuated by movies like *Orlando*, *Carrington* and *The Hours*, that gets complicated. Myth Three depicts Virginia Woolf as a victim of patriarchy. Woolf remains vital to the intelligent self-interest of writers both male (E.M. Forster) and female (Marguerite Yourcenar) precisely because she transcends cult status, as both woman and woman of letters. What Woolf really needs is de-mystification, a glimpse behind the false starts and stops, an unveiling of what her friend Tom Eliot called the androgynous “mind in the masterpiece”.

Hermione Lee’s biography takes a holistic view: who Virginia Woolf was, why and what she wrote and even how she died are inseparable from where and when she lived; the letters, diary entries, book reviews and fiction all cross-fertilize each other; each diamond facet of her psyche—masculinity or femininity, sociability or alienation, granite solidity or rainbow iridescence—is just a single aspect of the prismatically flawed woman who she was.

How did Woolf become creator of a body of work greater than the sum of its parts? She apprenticed as a book reviewer. Before she turned 15 Woolf started a diary. In that diary she compiled immoderate booklists and reading notes. At 22, Woolf published her review of a William Dean Howells novel, her first. She transformed from night school teacher into literary journalist, reviewing as and when they appeared *The Golden Bowl* and other works by Henry James, Joseph Conrad, Thomas Hardy and many others. Then she journeyed to the “dark places,” reviewing as fast as Constance Garnett could translate them major Russian novelists and short-story writers. Wood argues two phases in Woolf’s work, before and after she discovered Chekhov. Until her death in 1941 she reviewed for *The New Republic* and the *Times Literary Supplement*—the “Major Journal” she called it—dropping whatever else she was working on to meet their deadlines. Far from peripheral, these essays first collected in the *Common Reader* series and eventually in the 6-volume *Essays of Virginia Woolf* are central to her overall body of work, both the fiction, which now seems more accessible than it once did, and the nonfiction, which now seems nowhere near as facile as it pretended to be.

Feminist literary theory is as helpful to an understanding of a married bisexual like Woolf as queer theory is to an understanding of a twice-married bisexual like Countée. Woolf’s mother aspired to a literary career of her own, but was worn down by childrearing, by do-gooding. Woolf remained ambivalent toward her father, even after his death, despising him one moment, admiring him the next. Was he a tyrant, self-centered, prone to temper

tantrums, gluttonous for compliments? Sure. But he also named as her godfather James Russell Lowell, American ambassador to Great Britain. As Thackeray's former-son-in-law, Sir Leslie Stephen just assumed his daughter would grow up to be a writer. To typecast Woolf in the role of victim violates her sovereignty.

Harder to argue with in Woolf's case is feminist theory's ongoing discourse with the body, that envelope of sensory input by means of which Woolf experienced the world whose physical beauty she hymned so exquisitely. The auras presaging crippling migraines, anorexia, Woolf's recurring bouts of depression, her complete breakdowns all relate to her eventual suicide. The lanky cricket-playing tree- and rock-climbing tomboy never did outgrow her adolescent cringe before that body-image in the mirror. Her autobiographical writings hint at the sexual trauma of being molested by her older half-brother. Throughout her life, she was famously indifferent to clothes, yet there were debutante appearances to keep up in formal ballrooms, wearing long dresses, with white gloves and satin shoes and with pearls around her neck.

Ten years after the House of Lords passed the Suffrage Bill, Woolf delivered her *Room of One's Own* lectures at Cambridge. Her brothers graduated their father's alma mater as a matter of course; she as a matter of course did not. Woolf may be forgiven for feeling underwhelmed in 1918, for feeling as unconvinced as an African-American born between the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that the Voting Rights Act or the election and re-election of Barack Obama (b. 1961) were synonymous with equal rights and protections. Alex Zwerdling defines feminism as "a comprehensive movement of thought about women's nature and status—legal, educational, psychological, economic, professional, marital and political." The role of women in literature is a theme Woolf returns to again and again, in *Three Guineas* and elsewhere.

Just as Bearden, Du Bois and Ellison all laid claim to both the European and African strains of their American heritage, Woolf's progressive celebration of writers like Austen, the Brontës, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot and others co-exists with her radically conservative admiration for centuries of dead white males who paved women's way, both those her father personally introduced her to whenever they visited the London townhouse or Cornwall summer home—Matthew Arnold, Carlyle, George Meredith, Trollope and Tennyson—as well as those she was set free to discover in book form as she essentially home-schooled in her father's vast uncensored library—Boswell, Sir Thomas Browne, Coleridge, Defoe, De Quincey, Sterne. "They do a great service," she shrugs, "like Roman roads."

Inconvenient truth is, Woolf abhorred the idea that novels of interpersonal relationships were somehow Woman's natural place, like the kitchen. She insists that activism consists as much in writing essays, criticism, biography and history as in signing petitions or stuffing envelopes.

Woolf's early period, 1905-1922, was spent reverse-engineering by way of book reviews narrative solutions to aesthetic problems she knew she'd confront as she went about envisioning the great novels of her middle period, 1922-1932. In Woolf, there *is* no dualism between "creative writing" and criticism, fiction or nonfiction. V.S. Pritchett says Woolf's less successful fiction (*The Years*) can be very pedestrian indeed. Her best nonfiction, on the other hand, "has a wildness in it." *Jacob's Room* ponders the nature of letter-writing; *Orlando* contemplates literary biography. No matter what genre she happens to be working in, meditations on form and method are the one constant in what might otherwise seem the bewildering variety of her work. Much of Woolf's fiction is essayistic, a poetry of "thought and the possibilities of thought." Blurring boundaries between poetry and prose, Woolf is best understood as a writer of what Pritchett calls "imaginative prose." Her overall body of work is very much of a piece.

She and her contemporaries knew they were "on the verge of one of the great ages of English literature." Woolf published *Jacob's Room* in 1922—the year T.S. Eliot's *Wasteland*, Joyce's *Ulysses* and Proust's *Within a Budding Grove* appeared. Her reading spanned the history of the novel since Richardson. She peeped behind the hedgerows of Jane Austen's parsonages; lost herself in philosophical speculation reading *Moby-Dick*; admired Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. She relished the English novel's comic genius but yearned to transcend its "tea-table" vision of life. The furthest thing imaginable from a late Victorian cheerleader, "simple, uncritical, enthusiastic," Woolf wrote that Henry James, a family friend, might say less, suggest more, let one thing stand in for twenty. Between the ages of 40 and 50, she created half a dozen classics of the English language, several of them masterpieces.

To the Lighthouse (1927) is the novel students are most likely to read. Visual thinkers see a triptych in three panels. Music-lovers hear Woolf's Fifth as a sonata-form work in three slow movements. The majority opinion is that *Lighthouse* is possibly the greatest and certainly the most perfect of her middle-period compositions. E.M. Forster dissents. *Lighthouse* was his personal favorite, but he thought *The Waves* (1931) her greatest book.

Myth One, that Woolf is a "difficult" writer, persists. Of all the writings in her vast body of work, *The Waves*, admittedly among Woolf's most radically experimental, is probably also her least esoteric. As critic, Wood says "Woolf was always in competition with what she was reviewing." In *Jacob's Room* she was only just learning how to use multiple points of view, to show characters on differing wave-lengths, at cross-purposes with themselves or with each other, characters daydreaming, talking to themselves, silently or aloud. How "to represent the brokenness of the mind's communication with itself," as Wood puts it, to make this "interior monologue" appear unobtrusively natural on the printed page? Working this problem as she drafts *Mrs. Dalloway*, her first middle period masterpiece, Woolf admits in *A Writer's Diary* that *Ulysses* (1922) had already achieved some things she's still struggling with in 1925. But Joyce's genius seems of a lesser kind. "A first-rate writer, I mean," she sneers, "respects writing too much to be doing stunts."

It helps to remember how deeply rooted in domesticity Woolf's writing was. Woolf didn't just "inherit" greatness, like a trust fund, or have it thrust upon her, like chattel slavery. Woolf willed herself to greatness. Her genius was the result of both nurture and nature. And if, in the meantime, she was to continue living in the manner to which she'd grown accustomed, raised in an upper-middle class late Victorian household, she needed money. The sale of a manuscript meant she could finally get that busted water heater fixed. The critical success of *Lighthouse* was gratifying. But it also sold more than any of her previous novels. Which meant she could buy a car for those weekend jaunts to the English countryside.

Add to all that the book reviews, reading books for review, running the increasingly burdensome Hogarth Press and it becomes obvious Woolf spent most of her waking hours either writing or obsessing about writing. Virginia Woolf had literally no time to waste on a book she feared would be "fundamentally unreadable."

Around the time Woolf was writing *The Waves*, novelist Countée Cullen was visiting London. Though resident in Paris, Countée admired the vast cool understatement of London, its dull roar of heavy traffic through narrow streets, which one of Woolf's fictional characters calls a "splendid achievement in its own way." They had a friend in common, a woman keenly interested in Africa, who helped Countée find publication in English journals. Our mutual friend was also an expert on Woolf.

The spectrum of tradition and individual talents is a continuum. What Wood calls "neutered Gissing" realism, modernism and surrealism coexisted simultaneously, both within Georgians like Woolf and between Edwardians like Mr. Bennett and the fictitious Mrs. Brown. Langston was the exception that proves the rule, but young African-Americans looked backward to poets like Sandburg, not forward to modernists like Pound. Skeptical of what Arna called "the whole T.S. Eliot coterie" yet unavoidably influenced, consciously and otherwise, by high modernist activity all over Austria, Germany, Italy, Russia and Spain during its Generation of '27, the Harlem Renaissance was at once a rearguard and vanguard movement.

Based in Paris every summer between 1926 and 1939, Countée lived near and knew Leo and Gertrude Stein, hosts to many "advanced" writers. Countée was steeped in the French he studied at the Sorbonne, and passed on to younger writers like Jimmy. But you won't find a single reference to Mallarmé, Valéry or Proust in Countée's European notebooks or general correspondence, much less to *Jacob's Room*, *To the Lighthouse* or *The Waves*. We know for a fact that Countée slept in a Russell Square boarding house, behind the British Museum, and strolled about Bloomsbury at a time when Woolf was madly revising *A Room of One's Own*.

Creative nonfiction fans can easily imagine Countée when Woolf, who'd just finished writing *Lighthouse*, was conceiving of *The Waves* as a "new kind of play . . . prose yet poetry."

Could imagine Woolf—dismissive as she was of unnecessary obscurantism, obsessing, precisely because *The Waves* lacks conventional moorings of plot on this side and dialogue on that, that it not come off as too “arty” to appeal to conservatives like Cullen, that *The Waves* not seem, as Rebecca West says it seems, like “pre-Raphaelite kitsch” — oblivious of Countée as she takes one of her manic walks round Russell Square while Countée hurries past her on his way to tea with Galsworthy at PEN International, embarrassed for this madwoman with the runs in her stockings, muttering French phrases to herself as she remembers lines from Dostoevsky’s *Idiot*.

The Waves is a 9-part fantasia, dramatic soliloquies for antiphonal sextet, doesn’t demand but does reward repeated readings. In the wake of “Time Passes,” the slow, central development section of *To the Lighthouse*, the leap from *Jacob’s Room* to *The Waves* seems less quantum to us than it would have to Countée. Djuna Barnes published *Nightwood* in 1936, so *The Waves* in retrospect seems very much of its time. Its internal logic is more musical than textual, but apart from that there’s really nothing “difficult” about it. The writing is almost solicitous in its consideration for the common reader. Woolf wrote as clearly and simply as the demands of her material would allow. “Woolf failed from time to time,” says Wood, who calls *The Waves* a qualified success. What’s striking about *The Waves*, 90 years after its publication, is its lucidity. Think of it, Stephen Spender says, as a “prose poem.” You either like it or you don’t, but what’s not to “get”?

What does Wood mean by “mysticism”? Kirlian photography is a scientific technique that captures coronal imagery, the electrical discharge enveloping all things, animate and inanimate. Woolf’s decades-long struggle as novelist was to color-map the near-visible spectrum of consciousness surrounding all beings from birth to death. Literary ambition ran in her family, but so did manic-depression and other psychiatric disorders like schizophrenia. Woolf experienced her first breakdown as a teenager, after her mother died, and another around her father’s death. Publication of her first review coincided both with her becoming an orphan and her first attempt at suicide, aged 22, by jumping out a window. Around the outbreak of World War I and publication of *The Voyage Out*, Woolf overdosed on barbiturates. She’d begun hallucinating.

Reading Shakespeare’s plays, Woolf was struck by the speed and power of English. In Shakespeare, poetry particles supercharge in gaseous, blank-verse atmospheres. Lines fork off the page. Lightning strikes the sky. Clouds flash ground-strikes. Such conventional imagery Woolf might have jotted down in any one of her 30 volumes of handwritten diaries, and gone about her business. These visions were frighteningly different.

These visions were real. Birds sang Greek choruses from trees. Bertie, “King Edward VII, “was using the foulest possible language among [the] azaleas.” Woolf sensed these disconnects from ordinary “reality,” increasing both in frequency and intensity, were “partly mystical.” Woolf advantaged such “moments of seeing,” when it was revealed that “the whole world is a work of art,” and made them bedrock in her writing until finally, destroyed

by voices, she could go on no longer.

Unfolding like Bloomsday over the course of a 24-hour period, *Dalloway*, hallucinatory yet precisely controlled, is the recreation of Woolf's mental breakdowns and attempted suicide. A World War I veteran, Septimus Warren Smith, suffers after-effects of shell-shock, as it was called, or post-traumatic stress disorder, as we call it now. Haunted by "visions, the faces, the voices of the dead," Smith is shown "sitting alone on the [park bench], in his shabby overcoat, his legs crossed, staring, talking aloud," jotting revelations about the life eternal on the backs of envelopes. In terms of sheer design, *Dalloway* is a breakthrough.

Twelve non-numbered sections structure as rhythmic motifs—Big Ben's "lead circles" rippling the London air. What lends this book its power of suggestion is what caused Woolf her greatest difficulty: its basis in lived experience of mental illness. In cinema, an equivalent of what Wood calls "the picture it gives of a mind in emergency, at the very limits of coherence," is Catherine Deneuve in Roman Polanski's *Repulsion*. In fiction, the novels of New Zealand's Janet Frame, *Scented Gardens for the Blind* or *State of Siege*, come to mind.

For 10 years," Woolf had experimented with the liminality between states of consciousness—waking/dreaming, sanity/insanity in short stories like "Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street. *The Waves* may be greater and *To the Lighthouse* more perfect, but *Mrs. Dalloway*—a masterpiece of "sympathetic insanity," that first classic of her middle period—is the novel that reveals how Virginia Woolf became Virginia Woolf.