CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY

In an article on *Robinson Crusoe* in *The Common Reader: Second Series*, Virginia Woolf wrote about the reader and the writer of fiction:

"Our first task, and it is often formidable enough, is to master his perspective. Until we know how the novelist orders his world, the ornaments of that world, which the critics press upon us, the adventures of the writer, to which biographers draw attention, are superfluous possessions of which we can make no use."

and Terence Hewet, in *The Voyage Out*, talking to Rachel about his as yet unwritten novels, looks at her "almost severely" and says:

"'Nobody cares. All you read a novel for is to see what sort of person the writer is, and, if you know him, which of his friends he's put in. As for the novel itself, the whole conception, the way one's seen the thing, felt about it, made it stand in relation to other things, not one in a million cares for that.'"

Although the task is "formidable", this little book is an attempt to discover from Virginia Woolf's own novels her "perspective," how she "orders her world", how she sees and feels and composes. In the same volume of essays, writing this time of Meredith, she says:

"Since the first novel is always apt to be an unguarded one, where the author displays his gifts without knowing how to dispose of them to the best advantage, we may do well to open *Richard Feverel* first." [*The Common Reader: Second Series*]

Her own first novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915), hardly seems to bear out the generalization; it is not "unguarded" in this sense, since it leaves the impression of an accomplished purpose. In

Night and Day (1919), which is in some ways richer and more ambitious and in others less satisfying than her first book, the reader has a more immediate sense of gifts not disposed of to the best advantage. But in the light of what was to follow it becomes clear that in neither novel had she wholly found herself. It is not until after the first two novels that we can say, as she says of Meredith's first, that the writer

"has been . . . at great pains to destroy the conventional form of the novel . . . ; he has destroyed all the usual staircases by which we have learnt to climb." [*The Common Reader: Second Series*]

And yet she, no less than Meredith, needed to do this, and partly for similar reasons:

"For what reason, then, has he sacrificed the substantial advantages of realistic common sense—the staircase and the stucco? Because, it becomes clear as we read, he possessed a keen sense not of the complexity of character, but of the splendour of a scene. One after another in this first book he creates a scene to which we can attach abstract names—Youth, The Birth of Love, The Power of Nature. . . . We forget that Richard is Richard and that Lucy is Lucy; they are youth; the world runs molten gold. The writer is a rhapsodist, a poet then; but we have not yet exhausted all the elements in this first novel. . . . The book is cracked through and through with those fissures which come when the author seems to be of twenty minds at the same time. Yet it succeeds in holding miraculously together, not certainly by the depths and originality of its character drawing but by the vigour of its intellectual power and by its lyrical intensity."

[*The Common Reader: Second Series*]

There are immense differences between Virginia Woolf's vision of life and Meredith's; but in the lyricism to which she points there is a similarity, and it will cause her to destroy the mould of the traditional novel as he did and to create a form more remote from traditional prose fiction than any he invented.

In the meanwhile, in her first two books, she takes the basic principles of the novel as she finds them and adapts them to her own vision. Characters are described and then gradually made better known to us by their sayings and doings; they are related to one another by a series of events leading to a climax. Each book is a love story. Yet it is clear that it is not the width and variety of the human comedy, nor the idiosyncrasies of human character, that most interest her. Rather it is the deep and simple human experiences, love, happiness, beauty, loneliness, death. Again and again in these two books what the reader feels is not so much "this man or woman would have felt like that in those circumstances," but rather "Yes, that is how it feels to be in love; to be happy; to be desolate".

"'We don't care for people because of their qualities,' he tried to explain. 'It's just them we care for,'—he struck a match—'just that,' he said, pointing to the flames." [*The Voyage Out*]

Hewet says that to Evelyn Murgatroyd at a certain moment and in a certain scene; it is perfectly appropriate to the circumstances and to the characters; but it transcends them:

"She realized with a great sense of comfort how easily she could talk to Hewet, those thorns or ragged corners which tear the surface of some relationships being smoothed away."
[*The Voyage Out*]

It is Rachel who has this experience; but what it reveals is not her character, it is an aspect of love:

"Very gently and quietly, almost as if it were the blood singing in her veins, or the water of the stream running over stones, Rachel became conscious of a new feeling within her. She wondered for a moment what it was, and then said to herself, with a little surprise at recognizing in her own person so famous a thing:

"'This is happiness, I suppose.' And aloud to Terence she spoke, 'This is happiness.'

"On the heels of her words he answered, 'This is happiness', upon which they guessed that the feeling had sprung in both of them at the same time." [*The Voyage Out*]

Night and Day, with its more complex story and its wider social scene, has at the heart of it this same preoccupation with the universal nature of love and happiness. Mary Datchet and Ralph Denham are walking together fiercely arguing about government, law, the social structure:

"At length they drew breath, let the argument fly into the limbo of other good arguments, and, leaning over a gate, opened their eyes for the first time and looked about them. Their feet tingled with warm blood and their breath rose in steam about them. The bodily exercise made them both feel more direct and less self-conscious than usual, and Mary, indeed, was overcome by a sort of light-headedness which made it seem to her that it mattered very little what happened next. It mattered so little, indeed, that she felt herself on the point of saying to Ralph: 'I love you; I shall never love anybody else. Marry me or leave me—I don't care a straw.' At the moment, however, speech or silence seemed immaterial, and she merely clapped her hands together, and looked at the distant woods with the rust-like bloom on their brown, and the green and blue landscape through the steam of her own breath. It seemed a mere toss up whether she said, 'I love you', or whether she said, 'I love the beech trees', or only 'I love—I love'." [*Night and Day*]

The reader knows Mary Datchet well, and at many points in the book it is her individual character that emerges from her action or her words; but here it is youth and love itself, the fundamental and simple experience of which poets write. Katharine Hilbery and Ralph Denham, on the other hand, are not wholly clear to the reader as individuals even at the end of the

book. The idiosyncrasies that differentiate them from other people are unimportant—when we think of them from this point of view they appear a little misty; what we remember about them are those vivid experiences through which they become conscious of the bonds that unite them. Ralph meets Katharine in the street by chance:

"Thus it came about that he saw Katharine Hilbery coming towards him and looked straight at her, as if she was only an illustration of the argument that was going forward in his mind. In this spirit he noticed the rather set expression in her eyes, and the slight, half-conscious movement of her lips, which, together with her height and the distinction of her dress, made her look as if the scurrying crowd impeded her, and her direction were different from theirs. He noticed this calmly; but suddenly, as he passed her, his hands and knees began to tremble, and his heart beat painfully. She did not see him, and went on repeating to herself some lines which had stuck in her memory: 'It's life that matters, nothing but life—the process of discovering—the everlasting and perpetual process, not the discovery itself at all.' Thus occupied, she did not see Denham, and he had not the courage to stop her. But immediately the whole scene in the Strand wore that curious look of order and purpose which is imparted to the most heterogeneous things when music sounds, and so pleasant was this impression that he was very glad that he had not stopped her, after all. It grew slowly fainter, but lasted until he stood outside the barrister's chambers."

[*Night and Day*]

It is not Ralph and Katharine as individuals that matters here but the experience unveiled in their encounter. Similarly, in the way of the poets and of certain novelists who were also poets, Emily Brontë or Meredith or Hardy, Virginia Woolf evokes in each of these first two books scenes that communicate what it felt like to be young. At certain moments in *Night and Day* Cassandra is not so much Cassandra as youth itself:

"To Cassandra's ears the buzz of voices inside the drawing-room was like the tuning up of the instruments of the orchestra. It seemed to her that there were numbers of people in the room, and that they were strangers, and that they were beautiful and dressed with the greatest distinction, although they proved to be mostly her relations, and the distinction of their clothing was confined, in the eyes of an impartial observer, to the white waistcoat which Rodney wore. But they all rose simultaneously, which was by itself impressive, and they all exclaimed, and shook hands, and she was introduced to Mr Peyton, and the door sprang open, and dinner was announced, and they filed off, William Rodney offering her his slightly bent black arm, as she secretly hoped he would. In short, had the scene been looked at only through her eyes, it must have been described as one of magical brilliancy. The pattern of the soup plates, the stiff folds of the napkins, which rose by the side of each plate in the shape of arum lilies, the long sticks of bread tied with pink ribbon, the silver dishes and the sea-coloured champagne glasses, with the flakes of gold congealed in their stems—all these details, together with a curiously pervasive smell of kid-gloves, contributed to her exhilaration, which must be repressed however, because she was grown-up, and the world held no more for her to marvel at.

"The world held no more for her to marvel at, it is true; but it held other people, and each other person possessed in Cassandra's mind some fragment of what privately she called 'reality'. It was a gift that they would impart if you asked them for it, and thus no dinner party could possibly be dull, and little Mr Peyton on her right and William Rodney on her left were in equal measure endowed with the quality which seemed to her so unmistakable and so precious that the way people neglected to demand it was a constant source of surprise to her. She scarcely knew, indeed, whether she was talking to Mr Peyton or to William Rodney. But to one who, by degrees, assumed the shape of an elderly man with a moustache, she described how she had arrived in London that very afternoon, and how she

had taken a cab and driven through the streets. Mr Peyton, an editor of fifty years, bowed his bald head repeatedly, with apparent understanding. At least, he understood that she was very young and pretty, and saw that she was excited, though he could not gather at once from her words or remember from his own experience what there was to be excited about. 'Were there any buds on the trees?' he asked. 'Which line did she travel by?'" [*Night and Day*]

Rachel, in *The Voyage Out*, has the same unimpaired expectancy; she is, indeed, less of a "character" than Cassandra, less a peculiar, differentiated specimen of humanity, and her experience more constantly represents the quality of youth itself. Sitting next to Richard Dalloway at a meal on the ship:

"Rachel had other questions on the tip of her tongue; or rather one enormous question, which she did not in the least know how to put into words. The talk appeared too airy to admit of it. "'Please tell me—everything.' That was what she wanted to say. He had drawn apart one little chink and showed astonishing treasures. It seemed to her incredible that a man like that should be willing to talk to her. He had sisters and pets and once lived in the country. She stirred her tea round and round; the bubbles which swam and clustered in the cup seemed to her like the union of their minds." [*The Voyage Out*]

And, like Cassandra, Rachel experiences the irrational excitement or intoxication of self-discovery:

"The vision of her own personality, of herself as a real everlasting thing, different from anything else, unmergeable, like the sea or the wind, flashed into Rachel's mind, and she became profoundly excited at the thought of living." [*The Voyage Out*]

In these first two books the moments which remain most memorable are those in which we become aware of those deeper levels of experience where human beings are alike, rather than of the inexhaustible variety of human character. In the pro-

foundly moving scenes at the end of *The Voyage Out*, what we know about Terence or Rachel or Helen or Hirst as individuals matters little compared with our sense of the capacity for suffering they have in common with ourselves. Because, in *The Voyage Out*, the characters are removed from the common-place world of everyday duties and pleasures, on the ship and then on the island, this lyrical content is less interrupted. The book, though in some ways narrower than *Night and Day* and less rich in promise, is more successfully integrated.

The traditional, story-telling form of the novel allows scope for those moments of heightened consciousness in which superficial differences of character are submerged beneath the tide of feeling. But it is not only in these lyrical scenes that Virginia Woolf's individual perspective is manifest in her first two novels. Beside these moments of heightened consciousness are other human experiences of which she has a peculiar understanding. In her later books, indeed, romantic, passionate love is seldom in the foreground. She is more frequently occupied with the fruit that sometimes ripens from that seed, the relation between friends or between husband and wife. It is shown here in the relations between Mr and Mrs Dalloway, between Mr and Mrs Ambrose or between Mr and Mrs Hilbery; between each pair there is a community of mind which does not require speech or explanation:

"They both laughed, thinking the same things, so that there was no need to compare their impressions." [*The Voyage Out*]

That is Mr and Mrs Dalloway, alone together after their first encounter with the Ambroses and the Vinraces. Or the writer introduces a scene between Mr and Mrs Ambrose:

"When two people have been married for years they seem to become unconscious of each other's bodily presence so that they

move as if alone, speak aloud things which they do not expect to be answered, and in general seem to experience all the comfort of solitude without its loneliness." [*The Voyage Out*]

Terence Hewet has observed this secret understanding between married people, and, when he discovers that his feeling for Rachel is love, he recoils from its consequences because he has resented the exclusiveness of married love:

"He instantly decided that he did not want to marry any one. Partly because he was irritated by Rachel the idea of marriage irritated him. It immediately suggested the picture of two people sitting alone over the fire; the man was reading, the woman sewing. There was a second picture. He saw a man jump up, say good night, leave the company and hasten away with the quiet secret look of one who is stealing to certain happiness. Both these pictures were very unpleasant, and even more so was a third picture, of husband and wife and friend; and the married people glancing at each other as though they were content to let something pass unquestioned, being themselves possessed of the deeper truth." [*The Voyage Out*]

The later books show much more fully the gradual development of such relationships and the art of living whereby they are created. But the genius of Mrs Ramsay (*To the Lighthouse*) is foreshadowed in certain scenes where Clarissa disposes of the physical discomforts that irritate Richard when he first comes on board ship; or where Helen soothes and mocks Ridley's scholarly vanity; or where Mrs Hilbery, deliciously vague and inconsequent though she is, unravels the tangles that have accumulated round her husband in her absence. The continuity of love, its ebb and flow through a lifetime, will be a more frequent theme in the later novels than the moments of crisis; in the long run affection and devotion interest Virginia Woolf more than passion.

It is discernible, even in these first two novels, that what Virginia Woolf most clearly perceives, is what the experience

of living feels like to the people she creates. Inevitably that will depend upon their circumstances, upon the time, the place, the position in an economic and social structure in which they find themselves. The moral, social, economic and religious problems which play so large a part in the novels of the nineteenth century are important in her books too, but we are made aware of them only as they colour the world for the people she presents and form part of what life feels like to them. At the beginning of *The Voyage Out*, before England is left behind we are shown the effect of some of them upon the mind of Helen Ambrose:

"She knew how to read the people who were passing her; there were the rich who were running to and from each other's houses at this hour; there were the bigoted workers driving in a straight line to their offices; there were the poor who were unhappy and rightly malignant. Already, though there was sunlight in the haze, tattered old men and women were nodding off to sleep upon the seats. When one gave up seeing the beauty that clothed things, this was the skeleton beneath." [*The Voyage Out*]

Social and economic conditions affect the Dalloways in a different fashion. They represent a type whose way of living is contrasted with the more contemplative way of scholars or artists represented by the Ambroses and their friends—people who translate Pindar, or read philosophy, enjoy music, or write poetry. In their circle Richard Dalloway feels a need to justify himself:

"'We politicians doubtless seem to you' (he grasped somehow that Helen was representative of the arts) 'a gross commonplace set of people; but we see both sides, we may be clumsy, but we do our best to get a grasp of things. Now your artists find things in a mess, shrug their shoulders, turn aside to their visions—which I grant may be very beautiful—and leave things in a mess. Now that seems to me evading one's responsibilities. Besides we aren't all born with the artistic faculty.'" [*The Voyage Out*]