

VIRGINIA WOOLF: ART AND SEXUALITY

BY HAROLD FROMM

Since the publication in 1941 of her last novel, *Between the Acts*, Virginia Woolf's reputation has undergone radical transformation. At first characterized as "experimental" and treated from an esthetic vantage point, her novels received serious, if somewhat limited, examinations as literary productions, while a view prevailed of her as a rather precious Bohemian associated with slightly disreputable characters from Bloomsbury. But even as late as the sixties, when *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*—and by some, *The Waves*—were considered major works, she herself was not regarded as one of the major figures of 20th-century literature, and as recently as 1975 the *Norton Anthology* did not consider her a "major author." Still, with the gradual appearance in the sixties of Leonard Woolf's five-volume autobiography and the emergence of women's and gay liberation movements, Woolf's reputation began to grow, rapidly accelerating after the publication in 1972 of Quentin Bell's biography and the many reminiscences and biographical essays which began to flood the market shortly thereafter.

As an intrinsically interesting personality, as a figure of sociological interest, as a writer who seemed to have some measure of importance in literary history, and as an embodiment of a number of unconventionalities currently becoming conventionalized, Woolf has become virtually a cult celebrity. But if she is now regarded as a Major Literary Figure, it is more the case of a Major Figure who also happens to be Literary than a Literary Figure who happens to be Major. Indeed, her current status may turn out to have been achieved at a high price once her fortuitous enmeshment with present ob-

sessions has had its day. For she now occupies the position with the ruling intelligentsia that Herman Hesse occupied during the late sixties with the student revolution. And so we see again a principally polemical use being made of a literary figure, this time with grossly disproportionate emphasis being placed on her life and its adaptability to current political-psychological programs. Nor is close scrutiny required to realize that most of the attention these days falls upon peripheral works by and about her: *A Room of One's Own*, *Three Guineas*, *The Years*, *A Writer's Diary*, Bell's biography, Nicolson's *Portrait of a Marriage*, Woolf's letters and now her journals, as well as *Moments of Being*, an admittedly striking collection of previously unpublished autobiographical essays by Woolf herself. Far from being seen these days as an eccentric from Bloomsbury, a highbrow grafted away from her ancestral upper-middle-class roots, she is widely regarded as a patrician intellectual, a strong-minded and determined professional, and a somewhat sexually ambiguous feminist. Even her bouts with madness have served as a wound that can be shared with today's educated and psychologically sensitized middle class.

Among the extraordinary quantity of writings about Bloomsbury that have recently pressed her into eminence can be found a number of journals and newsletters devoted exclusively to Woolf and her circle, founded in the main by women who are apt to be feminists and who frequently (though by no means always) indulge themselves in minute worryings of the details of Woolf's life, visiting Monks House, rifling through her papers, rubbing elbows with Quentin Bell, and then descending from this Parnassus to write reminiscences of tiresome inconsequence. With the widespread changes in social roles now being undergone by educated and academic women, their experiences in or with psychoanalysis, the availability of alternate sexual lifestyles, the possibility of escape from domesticity, the commonplaceness of divorce, and the earning of their own living, there is very strong identification with and admiration for Woolf in much of current female

writing about her, an identification intensified by Woolf's own psychological and sexual problems. This phenomenon can be seen in such books as Nancy Bazin's *Virginia Woolf and the Androgynous Mind*, Jane Novak's *The Razor Edge of Balance*, and Joanne Trautmann's *Jessamy Brides*, to mention a few. One of the most startling of essays, "Mrs. Virginia Woolf," by Cynthia Ozick, appeared several years ago in *Commentary* and castigated Leonard Woolf as a tyrannical and repressive husband who was virtually an anti-Semite. For now, at any rate, this essay would seem to represent the limits of appropriation.

With so much of Woolf's current status derived from extra-literary valuations, one finds that despite some recent signs of shifting here and there the novels still tend to be seen as they have been for a long time. In other words, the *literary* identity of the novels has not changed a great deal, but a reshuffling of their importance has resulted from those examinations which appropriate them as feminism, mythopoetic thought, polemics for androgyny, attacks on the social system, etc.

One of the greatest impediments to a just literary reevaluation of Woolf's novels has been, even from the earliest years, the objection that they are lacking in sexuality, deficient in earthy vitality, that they are precious and rather weak in the kind of human interest that *is* present in her contemporaries, Joyce and Proust. There is nothing in Woolf's novels, her denigrators might remark, that quite corresponds in its impact to Stephen Dedalus picking his nose or Leopold Bloom masturbating. Despite the contemporary agreement, at least in theory, that literary "realism" is a convention as "artificial" as any other, the imputed absence of such an impact has cost Woolf a lot. If you scratch even a sophisticated contemporary reader, it would seem, you are bound to find a die-hard representationalist under the skin. Mimeticism still reigns supreme. For all of the involutedness and stylization of Joyce, he is felt to be a "realist" after all.

This representational bias against Woolf's supposed sex-

lessness has actually increased and been afforded greater currency as a result of Bell's biography, with its insistent emphasis on Woolf's "aetherial" character and her low sexual energies as a person. Instead of subjecting to investigation what can be meant by the term "sexuality" when it is used in connection with fiction, the reviewers of Bell's biography fixed upon Woolf's sex life, particularly the harm that supposedly was wrought by George Duckworth's erotic displays towards his half-sisters Virginia and Vanessa. Virginia Woolf alludes very unfavorably in later life to George's behavior and, in *Moments of Being*, to Gerald Duckworth's pettings as well, but the assumption that her coldness as a person and the "sexlessness" of her novels can be traced to all of this is both rash and absurd, especially since Vanessa received similar treatment and developed very differently. Surely the seeds of their sexuality were sown long before their experiences with the Duckworths. As it turns out, there is nothing Bell tells us that can account for the causes of Woolf's sexual "coolness." But once given the rash and dramatic conclusions of the reviewers of his book, it was not very difficult to move along to the conclusion that Virginia Woolf was basically a sexless person and (as if more were needed) that *that* is why her fiction itself is so sexless. Bell wrote: "Vanessa, Leonard and, I think, Virginia herself were inclined to blame George Duckworth. George certainly had left Virginia with a deep aversion to lust; but perhaps he did no more than inflame a deeper wound and confirm Virginia in her disposition to shrink from the crudities of sex, a disposition which resulted from some profound and perhaps congenital inhibition [*i.e.*, Bell knows nothing about the whole matter.]. I think that the erotic element in her personality was faint and tenuous." As for Virginia's relationship with her husband, Bell admits that beyond her coolness, he does not know the extent of their sexual activities. In a letter, shortly after their marriage, Virginia writes, "but certainly I find the climax immensely exaggerated," and Bell alludes to her subsequently as "frigid."

II

If one were to try to be as accurate as possible, there would not be a great deal that one could say with any degree of certainty about Virginia Woolf's sexuality as a flesh and blood person. To derive support from Bell's limited and sometimes self-contradictory and flimsy generalizations for the view that Woolf's novels lack sexuality is to go rather far. Indeed, a large-scaled attack is mounted against Bell's weakness in this area by Ellen Hawkes Rogat ["The Virgin in the Bell Biography," *Twentieth Century Literature*, XX, 2, April 1974], who concludes:

When Bell and others insist on the insubstantial quality of Woolf's novels, they are stubbornly demanding a wider domain of reference. They still insist on conventional definitions of what constitutes "reality" in fiction, even when Woolf rejected "the plausible and preposterous formulas which are supposed to represent the whole of our human adventure." Bell has sanctioned this attitude by equating the supposedly narrow sphere of her novels with her sexuality. Preoccupied with her virginity and frigidity, careless about his language, and willing to believe that her writing reflects sexual neurosis, Bell fails to understand that she "wrote as a woman, but as a woman who has forgotten that she is a woman, so that her pages were full of that curious sexual quality which comes only when sex is unconscious of itself" [quotations are from Woolf's essays]. She called this "the first great lesson" for a woman writer. Bell should have been similarly instructed; instead, his biography suffers from that tiresome sexual quality which comes from unconscious, but nevertheless predominant, stereotypes of femininity.

Before legitimate use can be made of biography to bolster literary criticism, one needs to ask what is the relationship between an artist's life and an artist's work. And immediately that such a question is raised, we are faced with the dilemma that there is no consistently observable and reliable equation between life and art. For every artist whose work bears a

close and obvious relationship to his life we can find another whose work does not. For every Emily Dickinson, who wrote shocking little poems for a spinsterly recluse, we can discover a Norman Mailer, who writes just the kind of novels one would expect him to write. For every artist who reviews his life in art, there is another who lives it in art. Because an artist need not deal at all with his own visible experiences in the world, the data recordable in a biography may have little in common with the data expressed in art. And if art, like dreams, uses a language of image and metaphor in which anything can be made to stand for anything, no reliable mediation may ever be achieved between life and art. There are indeed cases—perhaps George Eliot's is one—in which the germinal experiences of the artist's life are clearly visible and lived through once again in the works. But there are other artists, and I think Virginia Woolf is one of them, who do not in any substantial way write about their visible lives, even if the data they employ can be shown to derive from their apparent milieu.

Thus it is far from clear after reading about Woolf's "sexless" life what we are to make of "sexless" as an adjective used to describe the novels. If what is meant by the charge were nothing more than the absence of overt lovemaking, then perhaps one could agree that the novels are "sexless." But more than this is usually intended: the complaint is that these works lack certain vital juices and are the productions of a virtually disembodied spirit. And it is this complaint that one cannot take seriously. For it is only from the point of view of the traditional "realistic" novel that Woolf's novels are seen as wanting in sexuality. In the language of the "realistic" novel, "sexual" means that basic sexual acts, like kissing, take place. But Woolf, in rejecting the language of the traditional novel, was concerned with forging a new set of signs and symbols. As Lily, the painter, observes in *To the Lighthouse*, "A mother and child might be reduced to a shadow without irreverence." In other words, art requires the establishment of equivalences, and new schools of art must establish new

equivalents. Whereas in an earlier work of fiction a kiss might stand for relations between sexes, in a new fiction as in a new psychology, another image might serve the same function. Thus, a boat sailing down a stream, once it is taken as an image of sexual intercourse, could take the place of a kiss as a representation of human sexual relations, serving as a more appropriate image for a more lyrical and non-representational mode of art. Why not, for instance, "Look how the willow shoots its fine sprays into the air! Look how through them a boat passes, filled with indolent, with unconscious, with powerful young men"? This is the usual method of poetry—and more and more it has come to be employed in fiction. (The passage, as a matter of fact, from *The Waves*, is an instance of Neville's sexual fantasies.) Once such an allowance has been made—that fiction is free to establish new languages of equivalence—the charge of Virginia Woolf's sexlessness as a writer begins to crumble.

To settle once and for all this ubiquitous issue is a fairly straightforward matter, and it can be settled by clearing up what one means by "sexual" and then by examining the fiction itself. I have already dismissed as too narrow the equation of sexual with conventional erotic phenomena and, indeed, the general usage of the word in the present century is not customarily confined to so narrow a sense. "Sexual" is generally used to refer to the entire affective life in all its variations and permutations. We say, for example, that the nature of the lesson in Ionesco's play *The Lesson* is sexual, and we mean that the conversation between the professor and his student conveys, by its form but not by its literal meanings, the progress of a sexual violation, and in the same dramatist's play *Jack, or the Submission* we describe the conversation between Jack and Roberta as sexual because its rhythms suggest those of an orgasm, with the effect reinforced by imagery that is erotically evocative.

Here, then, I am prepared to demonstrate that far from having a "deep aversion to lust" and a "disposition to shrink from the crudities of sex" (by which Bell means sex itself), Vir-

ginia Woolf produced fiction that is among the most effectively sexual that we have. And by examining so early a work as *Jacob's Room* we can see that this erotic timbre is present in what were to become the most characteristic elements of Woolf's later art.

III

Although *Jacob's Room* deals directly with Jacob's affairs with various girls (thus satisfying even the most simple-minded sense of "sexual"), the novel's strong sexual ambiance comes not from an explicit handling of sexual relationships but from the quality of the imagery:

After six days of salt, wind, rain, and sun, Jacob Flanders had put on a dinner jacket . . . Even so his neck, wrists, and face were exposed without cover, and his whole person, whether exposed or not, tingled and glowed so as to make even black cloth an imperfect screen. He drew back the great red hand that lay on the table-cloth. Surreptitiously it closed upon slim glasses and curved silver forks. The bones of the cutlets were decorated with pink frills—and yesterday he had gnawn ham from the bone!

This is the characteristic imagery of the novel and if it is not redolent of sexuality, if it is not an attempt to distill, in this case, masculinity and its mysteries, then it is hard to say what its function is intended to be. Or, to use a longer but similar passage:

Very awkward he was. And when they sat upon a plush sofa and let the smoke go up between them and the stage, and heard far off the high-pitched voices and the jolly orchestra breaking in opportunely he was still awkward, only Fanny thought: "What a beautiful voice!" She thought how little he said yet how firm it was. She thought how young men are dignified and aloof, and how unconscious they are, and how quietly one might sit beside Jacob and look at him. And how childlike he would be, come in tired of an evening, she thought, and how majestic; a little overbearing perhaps; "But

I wouldn't give way," she thought. He got up and leant over the barrier. The smoke hung about him.

And for ever the beauty of young men seems to be set in smoke, however lustily they chase footballs, or drive cricket balls, dance, run, or stride along roads. Possibly they are soon to lose it Anyhow, they love silence, and speak beautifully, each word falling like a disc new cut, not a hubble-bubble of small smooth coins such as girls use; and they move decidedly, as if they knew how long to stay and when to go

And isn't it pleasant, Fanny went on thinking, how young men bring out lots of silver coins from their trouser pockets, and look at them, instead of having just so many in a purse?

If one had nothing better to say, one could observe that these are the musings of an Edwardian feminist idealizing her dead brother Thoby, and just this sort of thing is remarked by Herbert Marder in his disappointing book on Virginia Woolf's feminism. But what really seems to need pointing out is that this is writing suffused with sexuality, a product of an ultra-responsive sensibility noting every curve's, every odor's, every sound's visceral impact. It is an attempt to convey the feeling of maleness and femaleness (one of Woolf's obsessions), and it comes closer to recreating that twitch in our psyches that reveals such intuitions to us than the phallic ragings of even some of the best passages in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. It is, in any event, no less sexual than they.

In the long passage quoted above, the reader should observe such words as "awkward," "firm," "unconscious," which are recurrent adjectives connected with the quality of "maleness." In the wonderful scene in which Jacob is seated in the railway carriage with an old woman who fears he will attack her (an erotic episode reflecting the mysteries of the sexes), we read: "She dwelt upon his mouth. The lips were shut. The eyes bent down, since he was reading. All was firm, yet youthful, indifferent, unconscious—as for knocking one down! No, no, no!" At first the woman is disturbed because Jacob is smoking (already established as an erotic act). But after she is drawn to his appearance—she seems a bit inflamed,

in fact—he helps her out of the compartment: “. . . when the train drew into the station, Mr. Flanders burst open the door, and put the lady’s dressing-case out for her, saying, or rather mumbling, ‘Let me’ very shyly: indeed he was rather clumsy about it.” Once again, awkwardness mixed with strength, clumsiness mixed with shyness, indifference and unconsciousness and eyes bent down in reading. It is this mixture of ruthlessness and unconsciousness with intelligence, of slovenliness combined with dignity, which appears in most of the “maleness” passages of the novel. Jacob’s rough hand holding the delicate dinnerware, to recall the passage quoted earlier, exemplifies a method both consistent and effective of conveying male sexuality. We see it again in the passage describing Cambridge undergraduates entering the chapel:

Look, as they pass into service, how airily the gowns blow out, as though nothing dense and corporeal were within. [This is the spirituality and delicacy, the intelligence of maleness.] What sculptured faces, what certainty, authority controlled by piety [a bit mocking], although great boots march under the gowns. [This is male roughness, indifference, unconsciousness.]

At a dinner party where Jacob’s rough hand holds the wine-glass, one of the guests observes: “‘He is extraordinarily awkward,’ she thought, noticing how he fingered his socks. ‘Yet so distinguished looking.’”

Because a large portion of *Jacob’s Room* deals with the life of Cambridge undergraduates, critics have been ready to observe that the scenes at Cambridge, the kind of young men described, their intellectuality, and their mannerisms—all were familiar to a young woman like Virginia Stephen, who was introduced to the Cambridge world by her brother Thoby. Interesting as it is to know this, the novel is not “realistic” and does not attempt to give us a verisimilitudinous representation of Cambridge life. What is vital here is the author’s attempt to recreate the emotional crux, the intuitive center of a particular world of experience. This vital center is

conveyed not through an accurate description of Cambridge topography and customs so much as through images akin to those I have just reviewed. In a scene picturing several undergraduates involved in an intellectual discussion, Jacob is described as sitting "astride a chair [while he] ate dates from a long box." And after another fellow makes an observation, we learn of Jacob that "taking out his penknife, he dug the point of it again and again into a knot in the table, as if affirming that the voice from the fender spoke the truth." The mode of seating and of eating are presented as distinctively male and the repeated stabbings of the knife recall both Peter Walsh and his penknife, from *Mrs. Dalloway*, and Giles Oliver's stomping of the snake in *Between the Acts*. These descriptions came close to musical phrases, making explanations on the part of the author superfluous as far as intuiting the novel is concerned—the reader gets them on the level at which they count. It is because I am making claims for Virginia Woolf that I find it needful to raise to consciousness what is properly appreciated unconsciously.

If the sexual imagery which I have been discussing were to be removed from *Jacob's Room*, the novel would fall apart, not simply because the removal of any materials from a well-wrought artifact would cause it to collapse but because these sexual images are the heart of the book, giving it its distinctive erotic flavor. And I have not bothered to deal at any length with such major elements as the episodes with Florinda, Fanny, and Sandra, nor for that matter the little clever sketches of the Cambridge professors Sopwith and Cowan—or Jacob's friend Bonamy. All pretty sappy. Besides, how shall one understand all of the *talking* that goes on at Cambridge? "Talking, talking, talking—as if everything could be talked—the soul itself slipped through the lips in thin silver discs which dissolve in young men's minds like silver, like moonlight." A passage like this brings to mind Norman Brown's treatment of language as eros in *Life Against Death*. In the context of Cassirer and Wittgenstein's views of language as play, as games, Brown writes: "The element of play

in language is the erotic element; and this erotic element is in essence not genital, but polymorphously perverse." "If, in the history of every child, language is first of all a mode of erotic expression and then later succumbs to the domination of the reality-principle, it follows, or perhaps we should say mirrors, the path taken by the human psyche, namely neurosis. Language will then have to be analyzed as compromise-formation, produced by the conflict of the pleasure-principle and the reality-principle, like any neurotic symptom." And this becomes apparent in Woolf's use of talking at Cambridge as erotic by-play: "Sopwith went on talking; twining stiff fibers of awkward speech—things young men blurted out—plaiting them round his own smooth garland, making the bright side show, the vivid greens, the sharp thorns, manliness." Admittedly, the passage (like many in the novel) is a bit obscure, but one intuits its general sense well enough. The "awkward" speech of the vital and enthusiastic young Cambridge men appeals to the polished and scholarly professor, who weaves their rough fibers around his own "smooth garland" of cultivated articulateness. And what emerges for him is an eroticized experience of "manliness." The whole passage is a sexual one, erotic in the fullest sense, not the expression of a sensibility with an "aversion to lust," but of a sensibility that feels life in erotic terms.

Conceivably one might agree with Quentin Bell's remark, "I think that the erotic element in her personality was faint and tenuous," if one were considering Virginia Woolf's personality. But *Jacob's Room* is not her "personality,"—it is her creative work, a novel that does not have to be squeezed very hard to release its erotic juices. Nor is it an exception to the general tenor of the Woolf *opera*, nor characteristic of merely minor passages. Consider the well-known passage describing Clarissa Dalloway's feelings for Sally Seton: ". . . she did undoubtedly then feel what men felt."

Only for a moment; but it was enough. It was a sudden revelation, a tinge like a blush which one tried to check and then, as

it spread, one yielded to its expansion, and rushed to the farthest verge and there quivered and felt the world come closer, swollen with some astonishing significance, some pressure of rapture, which split its thin skin and gushed and poured with an extraordinary alleviation over the cracks and sores! Then, for that moment, she had seen an illumination; a match burning in a crocus; an inner meaning almost expressed. But the close withdrew; the hard softened. It was over—the moment.

This is a surprising passage from an “aetherial,” a “sexless,” a “frigid” writer, who may have found “the climax immensely exaggerated,” but who seems to know quite well the sensibility of orgasms and who evokes one to describe Clarissa’s feeling. It is not simply that she has learned from a sex manual about “swollen” and “gushed” and the “hard softened” but she has conveyed the very quality of sexual experience through lyrical language. A reader for whom this is not a sexual voice requires photographs of barnyard copulations, not literature.

IV

I have tried to suggest that in describing Woolf’s fiction as deficient in eroticism one is using that concept in a sense much narrower than the one in customary use. When Bell writes,

I would go further and suggest that she regarded sex, not so much with horror, as with incomprehension; there was, both in her personality and in her art, a disconcertingly aetherial quality and, when the necessities of literature compel her to consider lust, she either turns away or presents us with something as remote from the gropings and grapplings of the bed as is the flame of a candle from its tallow,

he is thinking of sex in the narrowest of senses, according to which only writers like Lawrence and Miller can be considered as dealing with sexual matters. And his reduction of sex to “lust,” with little or nothing forming a spectrum between

“grapplings” and sexlessness is simply preposterous. His “both in her personality and in her art” is too facile, too easily spoken. There is not so generally such an easy transition from one’s life to one’s art that the two realms can be so unhesitatingly encompassed as Bell has done. Art is not based on the archetypes of daily action. Virginia Woolf’s “aetherial quality” may very well have been present and even striking in her day-to-day life (though one also reads about day-to-day malice and bitchiness in a number of recollections), but it is a large jump to conclude that her books are equally “aetherial.” The locus of her fiction is not to be found in *representations* of daily life but in the *presentation* of life’s energies by means of a lyrical use of language. What various critics have regarded as sexlessness, then, is the relative absence of familiar sexual *events*; but events in general are infrequent in Virginia Woolf’s fiction, and when they do appear they are usually complex metaphors for psychological states. Thus it is not so much sexlessness as eventlessness that characterizes Woolf’s novels, while the *energies* of sex abound.

Although it would distend this discussion too much to explore the sexual qualities of all of Woolf’s novels, it might be well to remind the reader of the extent to which sex figures as a major or a subsidiary force in *Mrs. Dalloway*, where it is pervasive (as “masculine” and “feminine”); in *To the Lighthouse*, where the natures and relationships of the sexes are central; in *The Waves*, where sex is the focus of life for at least three of the characters; in *Orlando*, where it is virtually the subject of the whole work; in *The Years*, where it is pervasive enough to be taken up by current feminists; and in *Between the Acts*, where it is a bright thread in the multi-threaded tapestry of that complex work.

With regard to the homosexuality that is found in most of Woolf’s fiction, it is beyond dispute that a knowledge of the milieu and character of the Bloomsbury Group explains a good deal of the *genesis* of characters and tensions in her works. It is likely that much of the particular sexual stresses in her fiction might not have been there if she had moved among

a different set of men and women, for their presences and lives seem to have provided materials for insight that are not available in everyone's environment. On the other hand, information about genesis sheds little, if any, light on the meaning, the significance, of homosexuality in her novels. Quentin Bell gives us a wealth of information on the environment but none at all on the meaning. The homosexuality that thrived at Cambridge at the beginning of the century was reflected in the creative men and women associated with Bloomsbury. One is impressed (in Bell's account) that the lives of so many of these intellectuals and artists turned out as well as they did and that the suppression forced upon them by society did not destroy their art. Art may be a form of sublimation, but if the emotional life is restricted too much, there may be little left to sublimate. In an age when minority and countercultural points of view were not generally acceptable, the people connected with Bloomsbury did very well indeed, engaging in a much more open and less sinister life style than previous centuries would have exacted. Still, in their art, if we consider Forster and Strachey as representative, less openness was possible, at least if the artist intended to appeal to a general audience of the educated. And so the sublimations and transformations that we associate with artists like Michelangelo and Pater had not yet been rendered obsolete (nor had they yet been made supererogatory in Albee or Auden). Still, under the circumstances, Bloomsbury did rather well.

Virginia Woolf, however, was not among those creative people who have had to disguise their real sensibilities. Despite her living among such a polymorphous group, despite her intimacy with such an extraordinary trio as the Strachey-Carrington-Partridge ménage, she was not really one of them. As Quentin Bell suggests, her daily life might well have been relatively "aetherial," and even the much whispered-about infatuations that she had with a number of women (the most celebrated of which involved Vita Sackville-West, transfigured in *Orlando*) seem to have been fairly tame. But although her sexuality may not have exhibited itself vigorously

in her personal relationships, her erotic sensibility took in everything going on around her—in Bloomsbury and elsewhere—and found a mirror for it all in her own psyche. The results of such a life are remarkable, even though they have scarcely hitherto been observed: she was able to embody a wide range of sexual feeling and behavior in her novels, ranging from the conventional to the homosexual, and she was bold enough to do this decades before a radical shift in society had made it not merely possible but fashionable to do so. While Forster and Strachey concealed what society might have regarded as perversion, and the supposedly bold Lawrence pretended (to himself above all) to disapprove of such stuff, Virginia Woolf was expressing her sensibility quite freely. While the homosexuality that appears in literature in the early part of the century was usually disguised or disapproved of by the author, Virginia Woolf dealt with it as matter-of-factly as the more approved forms of sexuality. Thus, the “gropings and grapplings of the bed” as handled by the noiser and more sexually celebrated writers now seem not quite so impressive as they once did. In the light of later knowledge, such writers as Lawrence, Hemingway, and Mailer (to cite a few) seem sullied by dishonest pretensions (if lack of self-knowledge can be regarded as a form of dishonesty), while Woolf, as a voice for sexuality, seems completely authentic. She was not subject to either a compulsive treatment (e.g., *Maurice*) or a disguised treatment (e.g., Wilde’s *Salome*, especially in Kate Millett’s brilliant discussion of this play in *Sexual Politics*) of homosexuality in her fiction because she was not herself, in any meaningful sense, homosexual. On the other hand, that she had a polymorphous sensibility can be seen not only from her open and authentic-sounding accounts of homosexuality but from her equally authentic accounts of male and female feeling. She herself had that androgynous mind which she talks about so eloquently in *A Room of One’s Own*, and it enabled her to produce a body of creative work whose sympathies are extremely broad, however narrow the range of her fiction may be. Her literary to-

nality and timbre are the counterpart in prose of the musical sensibility of Gabriel Fauré, refined, elegant, muted, interior, while also passionate, quivering. Elegance and sensuousness, impressionism and sexuality, are not mutually exclusive. The interior life has its own range of excitements, whose colorations differ from those found in the art of a Wagner or a Lawrence. Thus, in place of the gropings and grapplings of the bed, Woolf has given us, in her explorations of the nervous qualities of the psyche, a picture of sexuality before it becomes phenomena! She has given us sexuality as that "jar on the nerves" that lies behind phenomena.

In this matter of polymorphousness, Virginia Woolf's life does not provide a key to her fiction (just as her "aetherial" daily character does not lead us to a view of her fiction as "sexless"). Rather, the contrary: a knowledge of her creative work makes it possible for us to understand what her mundane experience ultimately meant to her, an understanding which, nevertheless, remains of only secondary importance. Her esteem for the sexual variety in the Bloomsbury circle is reborn in her novels and made more general and abstract in *A Room of One's Own*. The androgyny that she so admired was a quality of mind that she took for granted as desirable, one of which she had seen admirable embodiments and one that she wished more generally to prevail among humanity at large. But Virginia Woolf did not lead a particularly repressed life as the result of being a woman, so it cannot therefore be inferred that her hopes for the androgynous mind sprang from personal grief. It is not a case of personal pleading and, indeed, there is very little in her works that can be thought of as pleading at all. She is not in the main concerned with the political range of action available to women in the mundane world so much as she is concerned with the general enlargement of consciousness. This interest in consciousness rather than action is what she is about when she writes of the response of women to contemporary male novelists (in *A Room of One's Own*): "Do what she will a woman cannot find in them that fountain of perpetual life which the critics assure

her is there. It is not only that they celebrate male virtues, enforce male values and describe the world of men; it is that the emotion with which these books are permeated is to a woman incomprehensible."

While scattered insights about Virginia Woolf's representations of sexuality in her fiction have appeared over the years in critical writings about her, the prevailing attitude had been the one we have seen in Quentin Bell. Although we can no longer accept this point of view, we can, with the materials obtained from Bell's book and, even more importantly, those we obtain from Woolf's writings themselves, be in a position to understand things reasonably well; and such an understanding must conclude that however "aetherial" her daily life and however restrained her sexual activities, Virginia Woolf was an extraordinarily sentient person who was fully aware through firsthand feelings of her own of the nature and complexity of the sensual life. She may have had an innocence of the world (though I myself don't believe it), but she by no means had an innocence of the intuitive life. Without direct and fully enacted experiences of her own in the day-to-day world, her extra-sensitive artist's faculties enabled her nevertheless to present in her art a deep and broad spectrum of human sensuality, extrapolated from her own observations and nourished by her humanness. That it is presented in an "impressionistic" rather than a "realistic" manner does not make it any the less deep an exploration. With a wide and complicated scene of life taking place around her, however narrow the social circle in which she lived, she was fully apprised of as much of reality as most artists are vouchsafed.

Like Emily Dickinson, whose life was ten times more narrow, Virginia Woolf reveals in her art a sophisticated and worldly psyche, whatever the limitations of the experience of the body which maintained that psyche. And in her presentations of sexuality, she has gone far beyond the conventional conceptions of both the sexual and the emotional life. Lawrence's famous remark in *Lady Chatterley*, "The root of sanity

is in the balls," once regarded as so outré, seems now somewhat narrowly Kiplingesque, with Mellors' therapeutic screwing of Connie little more than a sexualized version of "The White Man's Burden." And the rich, broad palette of the emotions experienced in Mailer is rendered curiously ineffective by the author's own inability to come to terms with it. In Virginia Woolf's fiction there is presentation rather than struggle. The author is not trying to persuade either her audience or herself of the validity of a program that she herself does not quite believe. The struggle and aggression in the work of writers like Lawrence and Mailer are aspects of an attempt to establish an identity by forcing and wresting the raw materials of reality into a shape that is pleasing to their inchoate selves. The very violence of the struggle betrays the desperateness of their personal need, and their incessant preaching conceals imperfectly a hope that, like Amphion, they will succeed in moving stones to assume a shape that serves their turn. In Virginia Woolf this absence of visible struggle, this paucity of action and wrenching events, may lead inattentive or presuppositional readers to experience her art as "sexless." But the presentation of sex by Virginia Woolf is closer to noumenal than phenomenal. It is a presentation that reveals through lyric imagery that "jar on the nerves" before it becomes phenomenal, before it is seen as "masculine" or "feminine." As a writer she deals with nerves rather than organs. Clearly, our previous assessments of the sexuality of Virginia Woolf's novels have employed too coarse a sieve.