Panel Discussion 1

Gillian Beer (Chair), Bernard Bergonzi, John Harvey, Iris Murdoch

GB: I thought we might start by asking each of the three panellists how they find the presence of Virginia Woolf in their own practice as novelists. Is she somebody who can now simply be bypassed? Or is she still a recalcitrant being, a recalcitrant writing, which needs to be circumvented, written through, obliterated, transcribed? I'll start by asking Bernard Bergonzi.

BB: What's the question, Gillian?

GB: Do you still need Virginia Woolf, or can you do without her? [laughter]

BB: Well I did do without her for a long while, I think. That is to say, I read her, a number of her books, when I was quite young—about nineteen or twenty. And then there was a great occlusion of her reputation in the fifties, and she seemed to have pretty well sunk without trace. What is interesting is the way the reputation has come up again so much in the last twenty years, hence this well-attended Centenary Conference.

I suppose I went back to her texts for professional reasons: I found myself lecturing on her, every year on To the Lighthouse—a book which I really came to admire through the process of teaching it. I think we're all familiar with that activity—how books which you take up as a chore, because you have to, you can actually come to respect and admire. Of course it can go the other way too, alas. But I think probably my dealings with Mrs Woolf have been of that critical and professional kind. Insofar as I have written a bit of fiction myself, I don't think there was any presence of Virginia Woolf in it or near it; the sources of that were quite other.

JH: I should likewise say that I hadn't, before writing myself,
enormously read or drawn on Virginia Woolf, though over the years
I have been reading and enjoying her. I should say also, that what I
find myself enjoying more and more is the writing, and the variety of
the writing—including the criticism, and some of the Memoirs,
especially the ‘Sketch of the Past’. Of the fiction, the novel which I
do go back to again and again is the one that I suppose everyone
does, To the Lighthouse.

How one might nowadays be influenced by it I don’t know. One
returns to it I think chiefly to appreciate the art with which it
arranges and focusses the family experience that it is based in. It does
seem to me almost the exemplary novel about a father. I know that
Mr Ramsay isn’t to be assimilated entirely to Leslie Stephen; that
Virginia Woolf leaves out his main achievements and a number of
his good qualities, and exaggerates other features of him and some of
those exaggerated features seem to be ones where his character
especially overlaps with hers. One gathers that the anxiety about
whether or not he’s a failure, with its constant, exorbitant demands
for reassurance and support, and for constant encouragement, was
something which was marked in her as well as in him. And I’d have
thought that for various reasons one would feel that the novel is not
exactly a portrait of—or doesn’t even try to be portrait of—the real
person that her father was. But it is a portrait of, as it were, the
daimon of her father that she’s nurtured inside herself over the years,
which needs to be, in a way, exorcised, negotiated especially. And it
seems to me that what she does in the novel is to negotiate that partly
invented image of her father, about which she has intense, varied
feelings, about which she’s divided, seeking really a right order for
the memories of him, or the images of him, which her imagination
gives her.

I prefer the word ‘order’ to ‘structure’ because I think the right
order is both the right structure and the right sequence. The novel
is a sequence, and one can see that it has worked as a sequence in
bringing her to the right attitude in the way that, along with the
predominantly malign images that you have in the early parts of the
novel, she increasingly finds a place for benign images of him. As, for
instance, when the boat has been becalmed and all the bad passions
of the family seem to be about to burst out; and then the wind fills the
sails and takes the boat forward, without any of the explosions from
Ramsay that have been expected, but instead, simply with his
mysteriously raising his hand very high and then lowering it, as if he
were conducting some secret symphony. Towards the end you do get