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