Early Reviews

Many students, and many critics, have admitted to finding Virginia Woolf’s fiction difficult to read. The reason for this is quite clear in the first reviews of *To the Lighthouse*, anthologised in Beja’s *Casebook* (1970) and in Majumdar and McLaurin’s *Virginia Woolf: The Critical Heritage* (1975). Repeatedly, the reviewers comment on the novel’s unfamiliar form, and decide it must represent an attempt to portray aspects of life not normally portrayed in novels.

The anonymous *Times Literary Supplement* review (Beja, 1970, pp. 73–6; Majumdar and McLaurin, 1975, pp. 193–5) praises the novel’s design, but says it has no plot and its characters are indistinct. It supposes the real subject must therefore be abstract, perhaps to do with a meaning underlying events. The other review quoted in both anthologies, the American Conrad Aiken’s from *Dial* (Beja, 1970, pp. 76–80; Majumdar and McLaurin, 1975, pp. 205–8), confesses irritation with the technical complexity, but then praises the form as a better-than-usual way of representing rather regrettaably old-fashioned life and values.

Three reviews quoted only in *The Critical Heritage* similarly see the form as a way of representing something abstract. Kronenberger (pp. 195–8) and Edwin Muir (pp. 209–10) especially praise ‘Time Passes’ for its poetic representation of time; and Orlo Williams (pp. 201–5) discusses all Woolf’s novels so far as attempts to embody her own personal vision, thinks this can be better achieved in poetry.
than in novels, but also thinks *To the Lighthouse*, being unlike a novel with a story, comes near to it.

Two assumptions dominate these reviews. One is the belief that any novel portrays, represents, things that exist outside it, that even existed before it was written. The other is the idea that the form and style of a novel are designed by the novelist to give the best possible representation of those things the novel is ‘about’.

*To the Lighthouse* appeared unusual in its form. The reviewers therefore assumed that it was not representing usual things, that its overt account of family life couldn’t really be the point. They posited something more abstract as the object of representation, though they varied as to what that abstract might be.

Any reader who makes the same assumptions immediately makes the novel seem difficult. This is partly because the ‘meaning’ of the novel is defined as elusive, as non-obvious. But it is also because the real interest of the reader is at once repressed. That interest is the actual experience of reading an unusual, a surprising, novel. But the attention is turned away from the experience of reading and towards an elusive goal, the attainment of a clear and fixed interpretation. What happens to the reader while reading is buried beneath the effort to label the novel correctly.

**Virginia Woolf’s Discussion of Modern Novels**

These same assumptions, and their attendant difficulties, have dominated much discussion of *To the Lighthouse* until quite recently. They are unfortunately reinforced by some of Virginia Woolf’s own critical essays.

Virginia Woolf was as famous as an essayist as she was as a novelist when *To the Lighthouse* was published in 1927. Two essays, *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown*, published in 1924, and ‘Modern Fiction’ published in her collection of essays *The Common Reader* in 1925, have repeatedly been cited as manifestos for her generation of novelists. Taken together, they are seen to proclaim a confrontation between the modernists, or ‘Georgians’, and the ‘Edwardians’, repres-